



Ethnotheological Studies on the Substance of Folk Religion as Local Theology among the Dani Ethnic Group in Baliem Village, Papua: Towards a Contextual Ministry

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Abstract

This study investigates the interplay between the folk religion of the Dani people in Baliem Village, Papua, and its potential to inform a local theology that supports contextual ministry. By applying an ethnotheological framework, the research examines how Dani cultural and religious beliefs—particularly those enshrined in the *Nabelan-Kabelan* and *Naruekul* mythologies—can serve as a foundation for contextual evangelism. Through qualitative methods, including ethnographic fieldwork and content analysis of relevant literature, this study identifies key elements of Dani folk religion that either hinder or facilitate the integration of Christian teachings within Dani society. The findings highlight the intricate relationship between indigenous spirituality and Christian ethics, suggesting that a contextualised approach to ministry is crucial for effective evangelism among the Dani people. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for the development of contextual ministry strategies that engage with the Dani's cultural and theological worldview.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menyelidiki interaksi antara agama rakyat masyarakat Dani di Desa Baliem, Papua, dan potensinya untuk membentuk teologi lokal yang mendukung pelayanan kontekstual. Dengan menerapkan kerangka etnoteologi, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana keyakinan budaya dan agama Dani—terutama yang tertuang dalam mitologi Nabelan-Kabelan dan Naruekul—dapat dijadikan dasar bagi evangelisasi kontekstual. Melalui metode kualitatif, termasuk pekerjaan lapangan etnografis dan analisis konten literatur yang relevan, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi elemen-elemen utama dari agama rakyat Dani yang dapat menghambat atau memfasilitasi integrasi ajaran Kristen dalam masyarakat Dani. Temuan-temuan ini menyoroti hubungan rumit antara spiritualitas adat dan etika Kristen, yang menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan kontekstual dalam pelayanan sangat penting untuk evangelisasi yang efektif di kalangan masyarakat Dani. Artikel ini ditutup dengan rekomendasi pengembangan strategi pelayanan kontekstual yang melibatkan pandangan dunia budaya dan teologis masyarakat Dani.

A. INTRODUCTION

The Dani people, an indigenous ethnic group residing in Baliem Valley, Papua, are known for their deeply embedded cultural and religious beliefs that shape their social structure and ethical behavior. Central to the Dani worldview are the mythological narratives of Nabelan-Kabelan and Naruekul, which serve as foundational elements of their belief system. These myths are not merely folkloric tales but form a theological framework that influences daily life, moral decisions, and spiritual practices. Despite the widespread adoption of Christianity, the Dani people maintain a syncretic religious identity, where traditional animistic and occult elements persist, often alongside Christian doctrines. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for contextual evangelism, a process that seeks to communicate the Gospel in a way that resonates with local cultural and spiritual realities.

This study investigates the complex interaction between the traditional religious beliefs of the Dani people and the Christian faith, aiming to explore how contextual ministry can address these challenges. The key issue under investigation is the extent to which animistic influences embedded in Dani mythology impact ethical behavior and spiritual practices, particularly given the widespread Christian identity within the community. The research aims to identify ways in which the Gospel can be effectively communicated, taking into account the deep-rooted cultural values and the ethical dilemmas arising from the persistence of traditional beliefs. The goal is to explore potential avenues for "re-evangelization," where Christian teachings are integrated into the Dani cultural context while promoting a Christian lifestyle that aligns with biblical ethics.

To achieve these objectives, the research adopts a qualitative approach, including a review of relevant literature, field observations, and interviews with local community members, including church leaders and catechists. This methodology provides valuable insights into the interplay between Dani cultural practices and Christian ethical teachings, thereby laying the groundwork for the development of a contextualized evangelistic

strategy.

The findings of this study highlight the significant role that traditional myths, such as those of Nabelan-Kabelan and Naruekul, continue to play in shaping the ethical and spiritual practices of the Dani people. These myths, which include animistic and occult elements, present a barrier to the full realization of Christian ethics within the community. The study suggests that a model of "transformation" or reculturation, as proposed by Hiebert (1994), could offer a pathway for integrating the Gospel with Dani cultural values. This model involves a process of rejecting incompatible elements, critically reinterpreting neutral aspects, and affirming values that align with biblical teachings.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of addressing the spiritual warfare dimension within the Dani worldview, where ancestral spirits and cosmic forces are central to their understanding of the world. This offers a potential theological bridge to discuss biblical themes of spiritual conflict, such as those found in Ephesians 6:12, and to develop pastoral strategies that confront the syncretic practices and ethical ambiguities present within the community.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the understanding of how contextual evangelism can be applied in the case of the Dani people, offering a model for addressing both cultural and spiritual challenges. By fostering a local theology that is both culturally sensitive and doctrinally faithful, this study provides a framework for more effective ministry in Papua and other indigenous contexts. Further research and practical applications are essential for refining this approach and ensuring that the Gospel is communicated in ways that respect and transform local belief systems.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the intersection of the traditional religious beliefs of the Dani people and Christian ethics, with a particular focus on the application of contextual evangelism. To comprehensively explore this interaction, the research integrates multiple methods, including an extensive literature review and ethnographic field observations.

The literature review serves as the foundational theoretical framework for this research, offering insights into the dynamics of contextual theology and ethnotheology. Key works in the field, including the models of critical contextualisation and re-culturation proposed by Hiebert (1994) and Bevans and Schroeder (2004), inform the analysis of how the Gospel can be effectively communicated within the Dani cultural context. This review examines the syncretic tendencies of Dani religious practices, particularly the continuing influence of traditional mythologies such as Nabelan-Kabelan and Naruekul, and how these myths interact with Christian ethical teachings.

Field observations were conducted within the Baliem Valley, the home of the Dani people, to gain an in-depth understanding of their religious and cultural practices. This ethnographic approach allowed researchers to directly engage with the Dani community, participating in daily activities and rituals to observe the practical implications of their belief system. Particular attention was given to how traditional religious practices, deeply rooted in animism and the veneration of ancestral spirits, continue to shape moral decisions, social structures, and the worldview of the Dani people. These observations highlighted the persistence of syncretism, where Christian beliefs are intertwined with indigenous practices, revealing both the challenges and opportunities for meaningful evangelistic engagement.

By combining these methods, the study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which the Dani people navigate their faith, integrating elements of indigenous spirituality with

Christianity. The data derived from both the literature review and field observations are analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns in the intersection of Dani cultural values and Christian ethics. This thematic analysis not only contributes to understanding the ethical challenges the Dani face but also informs the development of contextual evangelistic strategies that are sensitive to their cultural context while remaining faithful to biblical teachings.

Together, these methodological approaches provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the Dani people's cultural and spiritual dynamics, offering valuable insights into the possibilities for effective contextual ministry.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dani People and Their Worldview

The Dani people, also known as the Balim, are an indigenous ethnic group residing in the Baliem Valley, situated in the Central Highlands of Papua, Indonesia. They are part of a larger Melanesian cultural sphere, and the Baliem Valley, also referred to as the Baliem Grand Valley, is home to several tribes, including the Dani, Lani, Yali, and others. Although these groups share geographical proximity, the Dani people refer to themselves as the "Hubula" or "Balim," rather than the name "Dani," which was introduced by outsiders (Frans Lieshout, 2009). The term "Dani" was coined during the 1920s by anthropologists and has been a subject of controversy among the Dani themselves (Susanto-Sunario, 1994). In this study, the term "Dani" will be used to refer to the community of people living in the Baliem Valley for the sake of simplicity.

The Dani worldview, particularly as it is expressed in their mythology, is rooted in animism and occult practices. These beliefs continue to significantly influence the social, moral, and ethical frameworks of the Dani people. This paper focuses on the implications of this traditional worldview for the Christian faith that has been proclaimed in the Baliem Valley since 1954, especially in terms of ethical practices and the integration of local values with Christian teachings.

The Influence of Traditional Beliefs on Dani Ethics

Christianity was introduced to the Dani people through various missionary efforts beginning in 1954. The Gospel was initially embraced by the Dani, leading to the establishment of Christian communities and churches such as the Christian and Missionary Alliance (Gereja Kemah Injil) and the Catholic Church. Over time, however, it became evident that the Dani people's embrace of Christianity was not deeply rooted in their cultural values. Instead, Christianity was often perceived in nominal terms, with many Dani people identifying as Christian but continuing to practice traditional beliefs, a phenomenon often referred to as syncretism.

A significant challenge in the contextualization of the Gospel lies in the Dani people's understanding of key Christian concepts, particularly the notion of "eternal life." This concept, central to Christian theology, does not have a direct equivalent in the Dani belief system, where the afterlife is often conceived in terms of ancestral spirits and rituals rather than salvation through Christ. The lack of a shared framework for understanding eternal life has led to the rise of "Christians in name only," individuals who may identify as Christian but whose lives do not reflect the ethical demands of the Gospel.

This disjunction between Christian teachings and traditional Dani values has led to moral and ethical inconsistencies. Many Dani Christians continue to adhere to traditional practices, including ancestor worship, spirit veneration, and rituals that have significant implications for their ethical decision-making. These practices are often in conflict with Christian teachings, leading to a duality in the Dani people's faith and behavior.

The persistence of traditional religious practices, such as those seen in the Nabelan-Kabelan and Naruekul mythologies, contributes to a form of syncretism where Christian doctrine is integrated with local beliefs. This has resulted in ethical behaviors that reflect pagan values rather than the transformative ethical teachings of Christ. For example, moral decisions within the Dani community are still strongly influenced by animistic beliefs and ancestral spirits, which often take precedence over Christian ethical guidelines.

The Papuan Paradox and Its Ethical Implications

The situation in Papua, particularly in the Baliem Valley, presents what sociologist Max Weber (1971) termed the "Papuan Paradox." Despite the Christianization of the region,

many Papuan communities, including the Dani people, continue to experience poverty, social unrest, and a lack of development. This paradox is not limited to material conditions but also extends to spiritual life. Despite the proclamation of the Gospel, the fruit of the Spirit is rarely evident in the everyday lives of Christians, including the Dani. This lack of visible transformation raises significant questions about the depth of the Gospel's impact on the ethical behavior of the Dani people.

Weber's thesis on the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1971) argued that Protestant Christian ethics played a crucial role in the economic and social development of Western societies. In contrast, the lack of a corresponding Christian ethical framework in Papua, despite over fifty years of evangelization, has hindered economic growth and social progress. The Dani people, despite their Christian faith, remain poor and socially static, largely due to a lack of engagement with Christian ethics in their daily lives. The Gospel's message of transformation has not yet deeply permeated the Dani's ethical practices, contributing to a continuation of traditional practices and a lack of material progress.

The Need for Contextualized Evangelism

This study advocates for a re-evaluation of evangelistic efforts among the Dani people, with a particular focus on the need for contextualized Gospel preaching. The Gospel must be communicated in a way that resonates with the Dani's cultural values and worldview, rather than merely presenting a Westernised version of Christianity. The Dani people's beliefs in the afterlife, spirits, and ancestral worship must be acknowledged and engaged with in a manner that allows the Gospel to be truly transformative.

Contextual evangelism should not merely aim at surface-level conversion but should strive for a deeper engagement with the Dani's ethical framework. This means addressing the ethical implications of their traditional beliefs and offering a Christian alternative that is rooted in the teachings of Scripture. By recognising the value of Dani cultural identity and integrating the Gospel within that context, a more profound and lasting transformation can take place.

The Dani people of Papua present a unique case for the study of contextual evangelism and ethnotheology. Despite the long history of Christianisation in the region, the Dani people's traditional religious beliefs continue to shape their worldview and ethical behaviour. The Gospel has not yet taken root in a way that fully transforms their ethical

practices, leading to a situation where many Dani Christians live lives that reflect both Christian and traditional values. This study calls for a renewed approach to evangelism in the Baliem Valley—one that respects and engages with the Dani's cultural values while offering the transformative power of the Gospel. Through such an approach, it is hoped that the Dani people can experience a deep, genuine faith that reflects the ethical teachings of Christ and leads to tangible societal transformation.

Introduction to the Dani Ethnic Group's Understanding of God

The Dani people, native to the Baliem Valley in Papua, possess a worldview that is deeply intertwined with animistic beliefs. These beliefs centre on the concept of God, whom they perceive as an abstract cosmic force rather than a personal deity. Known as Walhowak or Nyopase Kain, God in Dani culture is not understood as an individual being or entity but as an absolute reality that manifests through various symbols in nature, such as mountains, trees, caves, and sacred objects like *kaneke*, *hareken*, and *su kepu*. This abstract view of God is aligned with traditional Melanesian animistic practices, where the divine is inseparable from the natural world and is mediated through symbols rather than direct personification (Susanto-Sunario, 1994, 20; Alua, 2006, 12).

In Dani society, these sacred objects and places are believed to embody the divine presence. God is not seen as a personal entity with whom one can have a relationship in the way that the Christian understanding of God would suggest. Instead, God's influence is felt through these symbols, which represent divine power and serve as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms. The Dani's perception of God, therefore, is closer to the ancient Greek notion of *ἄγνωστος θεός* (*agnostos theos*), or the "unknown God" (Acts 17:23), suggesting a concept of God that is impersonal and abstract.

The Role of Rituals and Symbols in Dani Spiritual Life

In Dani spiritual practices, rituals play a pivotal role in maintaining balance and harmony within the community and the environment. The Dani do not view rituals as means of appeasing a personal deity; rather, they are designed to restore social and natural equilibrium. The performance of these rituals is closely tied to their animistic belief that all things—be they human, animal, or plant—are interconnected within a cosmic order. Rituals such as *nesok aii* (to maintain balance with humans, animals, plants, and the universe) and

agat wesa (for soil fertility and crop harvest) reflect this belief in the interconnectedness of the universe. Additionally, practices such as wako (rituals for combating illness) and syilo (specific prohibitions) demonstrate the Dani's focus on maintaining societal and natural harmony rather than focusing on personal sin in relation to a deity (Alua, 2006, 12).

These rituals are not seen as acts of atonement or as ways to reconcile with a divine entity but as means of restoring balance within the community and the natural world. For instance, sacrifices, such as the offering of pigs (referred to as Wam), are performed to restore social harmony after perceived disruptions caused by deviant behaviors. The ritualistic offerings and symbolic acts are intended to restore order rather than to seek forgiveness from a personal god. In this sense, ethical behavior is measured by the degree to which it maintains or disrupts the natural and social order, rather than by adherence to divine commands or moral law.

Ethical Implications of the Dani's Animistic Worldview

The Dani's animistic worldview carries significant implications for their ethical framework. Unlike in theistic religions where sin is viewed as an offense against a personal God, in Dani belief, unethical behavior is seen as a disturbance to the cosmic balance. In this context, actions such as theft, adultery, or even laziness are not directly linked to offending a divine being but are seen as acts that disrupt the harmony between humans and their environment. These actions are addressed not through personal repentance before a deity but through ritual practices aimed at restoring equilibrium within the community and nature.

The lack of a personal God in Dani's worldview means that their ethical concerns are not driven by personal accountability to a deity. Instead, their ethical behaviour is primarily concerned with maintaining peace, balance, and harmony within their community and in relation to the natural world. Unethical actions such as murder, theft, or tribal warfare are considered problematic in so far as they disturb this balance, rather than being viewed as sins against a personal God. This reflects a moral system that is heavily focused on social cohesion and environmental balance, rather than on personal salvation or divine judgment.

The Dani people's concept of sin is also different from the Christian understanding. In Dani culture, sin is not inherently seen as a moral failure or an offence against God. Rather, it is viewed as a disruption of harmony within the community or with nature. The

performance of reconciliation rituals—such as the sacrifice of a pig—is aimed at restoring social balance rather than at appeasing a wrathful God. This approach to sin and reconciliation, based on restoring balance rather than seeking divine forgiveness, highlights a significant divergence from Christian ethical teachings, which focus on repentance and atonement in relation to a personal God.

Contextualising the Gospel for the Dani People

The Dani people's unique animistic worldview presents significant challenges for the contextualisation of the Gospel. In traditional Christian teachings, God is understood as a personal deity who is intimately involved in the lives of believers and who requires personal accountability for sin. However, for the Dani, God is seen as an abstract, impersonal force, and their ethical framework is rooted in the restoration of balance rather than personal repentance or accountability to a deity. As a result, the Dani may struggle to fully comprehend Christian concepts such as sin, redemption, and eternal life, as these ideas do not easily align with their traditional beliefs.

The challenge for Christian ministry among the Dani people is to present the Gospel in a way that engages with their cultural worldview. Traditional missionary approaches, which have often focused on the proclamation of abstract theological concepts, may not resonate deeply with the Dani's understanding of God and morality. Instead, a more contextualized approach is needed, one that speaks to the Dani's deep sense of interconnectedness with the natural world and their emphasis on social harmony. This approach would not only respect their cultural values but also seek to illuminate how the Gospel can bring true reconciliation—not just with a personal God, but with the entire created order.

The Dani people's animistic worldview presents a unique theological and ethical framework that challenges traditional Christian understandings of God and sin. By perceiving God as an abstract cosmic force, rather than a personal deity, the Dani's approach to ethics is focused on maintaining balance and harmony within their community and environment. This understanding of morality, while rooted in their cultural context, presents both challenges and opportunities for the contextualisation of the Gospel. In order to effectively engage the Dani people with the Christian message, it is essential to approach

their beliefs with sensitivity and respect, offering a Gospel that speaks to their cultural values while introducing the transformative power of the personal God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Through contextualized ministry that honours the Dani's cultural understanding of God and ethics, it is hoped that a deeper, more lasting faith in Christ can take root, leading to a transformation not only in individual lives but also in the broader community and natural world. As the Gospel continues to spread among the Dani people, it will hopefully bring about a reconciliation that encompasses both spiritual and ethical transformation, fostering a society that reflects the Kingdom of God in all aspects of life.

Introduction to Dani Ethnic Group's Mythological Worldview on Life

The Dani ethnic group of Papua holds deep convictions regarding the continuation, protection, and maintenance of life, values which permeate their religious and cultural practices. These values centre around the concepts of sustaining life, preserving peace, and fostering harmonious relationships among humans, nature, and the divine. As Agus Alua (2006) contends, the Melanesian people's entire existence revolves around the perpetual renewal of life, protected from the forces that threaten it. Central to this worldview is the belief in the interconnectedness of humans with all elements of the cosmos: plants, animals, stones, rivers, and ancestral spirits.

The Dani's cultural emphasis on "life" transcends mere survival, incorporating an inherent belief in eternal life and hope for transformation. This belief is closely linked with the messianic expectations known as "cargoism" (cargo cult), as articulated by Benny Giay (1986). The cargo cult reflects the Dani people's deep desire for social, economic, and environmental change, including the return of ancestors or prophets bringing blessings that would restore peace and prosperity. The Dani mythology surrounding this concept is expressed through two pivotal myths: the Nabelan–Kabelan myth and the Naruekul myth.

One of the key myths within the Dani worldview is the Nabelan–Kabelan legend, often referred to as Nabutal–Habutal or Nanggonok-Kanggonok. This myth narrates a time when humans experienced eternal life in a state of peace, harmony, and prosperity. However, the ideal state was marred by conflicts and divisions, leading to the loss of this harmony. The Dani people interpret these divisions as a form of "relational sin" that severed the harmonious bonds between humans, the environment, and the divine.

The myth presents the symbolism of a snake and a bird, each representing different aspects of human existence. The bird, despite its longevity, could not achieve immortality, whereas the snake, although shedding its skin, could potentially restore eternal life. The Dani people view this myth as a symbol of their desire for the restoration of a "Garden of Eden" – a utopian existence where peace, prosperity, and harmony are fully realized. The belief in the eventual arrival of a transformative event, referred to as Nabelan–Kabelan, underscores the Dani people's aspiration to return to an ideal state. This hope is encapsulated in the proverb *Yogotak hubuluk motok hanorogo*, meaning "tomorrow will be better than today," which signifies a belief in a brighter future through transformation.

In addition to the Nabelan–Kabelan myth, the Naruekul myth provides another lens through which the Dani people conceptualize eternal life. Naruekul was an exceptional individual who, after living a life of renown, was tragically killed by his community. His death, however, did not mark the end of his existence. According to the myth, Naruekul reappeared to those who had witnessed his death, delivering a profound message that transformed the community's understanding of life, death, and continuity.

Naruekul's resurrection and his message of unity and communal responsibility were seen as divine acts. His body, dismembered and distributed among the people, became a sacred object symbolizing life and the continuation of their lineage. As Agus Alua (2006) notes, Naruekul's body parts, such as the sacred stones and the red sugarcane, became revered objects representing the continuity of life and spiritual power. The narrative of Naruekul's death and resurrection parallels the broader Dani understanding of eternal life, emphasizing not just the hope for an ideal world, but the belief in a divine figure who bridges the gap between death and the promise of new life.

Naruekul's myth thus signals a shift in the Dani people's theological understanding. Rather than solely focusing on the restoration of an idealized past, the myth introduces a divine figure whose sacrificial death becomes the foundation for a new era. This shift aligns with the Dani people's messianic hopes, encapsulated in the "cargo cult" belief, where the divine figure's suffering and promise for renewal offer hope for a restored and harmonious future.

The Dani Mythologies and Their Implications for Contextual Ministry

The myths of the Dani people, especially the Nabelan–Kabelan and Naruekul myths,

offer valuable insights into the folk religion and local theology of the Dani ethnic group. These myths not only reflect the Dani people's deep spiritual convictions about life, death, and renewal but also serve as a foundation for their understanding of eternal life. Through these stories, the Dani people express a longing for restoration, transformation, and the fulfillment of divine promises.

From a theological perspective, these myths present an opportunity for contextual ministry, particularly in understanding how the gospel might engage with indigenous beliefs and hopes. The Dani people's mythologies of resurrection and renewal align with the Christian concept of eternal life and the transformative power of Christ's resurrection. However, contextualizing the gospel within the framework of Dani mythologies requires sensitivity to the cultural and theological nuances of their worldview. As such, the Dani people's folk religion provides fertile ground for developing a local theology that bridges traditional beliefs with Christian teachings, fostering a ministry that is both relevant and transformative.

In conclusion, the Dani people's rich mythology offers an important avenue for theological reflection, one that emphasizes life, renewal, and the hope of transformation. Their myths, when understood in a Christian context, provide a powerful framework for contextual ministry, underscoring the universal human quest for meaning, peace, and eternal life.

Ethical Challenges in Interpreting the Dani Tribe's Mythological Views on Life

The ethical dilemmas stemming from the Dani people's mythological worldview are closely tied to their understanding of "life" and "death," especially in the context of the Nabelan–Kabelan myth. Central to this myth is the concept of "old skin replaced with new skin," which the Dani have historically interpreted as a promise of immediate transformation, both in the temporal and spiritual realms. This interpretation has led to various crises, especially when the Christian missionaries arrived in the region. As part of their evangelistic efforts, missionaries preached the Gospel of eternal life, which the Dani misunderstood as a means to fulfil the promise of Nabelan–Kabelan through baptism. The Dani, influenced by their mythological understanding, believed that the arrival of missionaries would herald the resurrection of their ancestors, and in some cases, they even sought to resurrect recently deceased individuals through baptism, hoping to bring about the change described in their myths (Alua, 2006, p. 104).

A more profound ethical issue arose when the Dani misinterpreted "old skin replaced with new skin" as a transformation into "white skin," a concept they linked to the appearance of the Western missionaries. This misunderstanding created the belief that the material wealth and lifestyle of the missionaries were divine gifts that would soon be bestowed upon the Dani as a fulfilment of their cargo cult expectations (Wenda & Wenda, 2009, pp. 45-47). This led to widespread misunderstandings about the Gospel and its true meaning, ultimately resulting in mass conversions to Christianity, albeit driven by an erroneous understanding of faith. As Jennifer Bensley aptly observed, the Dani Christian community was often characterised as "card-carrying Christians," which speaks to the outward expression of faith but with little depth in understanding its theological significance (Bensley, pp. 91-95).

This misinterpretation of Christian faith through the lens of the Nabelan–Kabelan myth has also contributed to the Dani community's passive approach to life. The belief in an immediate or magical transformation has fostered a sense of complacency and dependency, with many Dani people awaiting divine intervention rather than engaging in the hard work required for self-sustenance. This is particularly evident in the agricultural life of the Balim people, who, despite having access to fertile land and abundant natural resources, fail to use them effectively due to a lack of motivation and a somewhat static lifestyle (Scheunemann, 2006, pp. 191-192). This stands in stark contrast to Max Weber's *Verstehen* thesis, which links Christian ethics to economic activity. Weber argues that a Christian worldview encourages industriousness, resulting in active participation in economic growth (Weber, 1971). In the case of the Dani people, however, this link between faith and industriousness seems to be absent, as evidenced by their poverty and underdevelopment.

Parallel ethical issues arise in the context of the Naruekul myth, particularly in the sacred reverence of Naruekul's dismembered body parts, known as *kaneke*. The *kaneke*, originally regarded as sacred relics of Naruekul's body, have become symbols of power and superiority among certain clans within the Dani community. These objects, once meant to embody a spiritual legacy, have evolved into idols, representing both personal and group status. The belief in *kaneke* has transformed it into a form of occult power, with some groups using it to assert dominance over others. This development is particularly problematic in the context of Christian ministry, as the *kaneke* is often associated with spiritism and occult practices, which conflict with Christian teachings (Alua, 2006, pp. 36-

38).

The myth of Naruekul and the reverence for his dismembered body have also influenced the division of missionary territories and church presence among the Dani people. The notion of *kaneke* as a form of spiritual power has led to territorial claims, where each community seeks to establish its supremacy, sometimes resulting in inter-church rivalries. This division, rooted in the mythology of *kaneke* and the Dani community's system of territorial living (*silimo*), complicates efforts to establish a unified Christian presence. The Christian Dani community often overlooks the spiritual implications of these practices, as they are influenced by ancestral beliefs in spiritism and occultism, which are subtly intertwined with their Christian identity.

Despite these challenges, the Dani people's cultural values and myths provide a potential pathway for contextualising the Gospel. By acknowledging and addressing these ethical dilemmas, there is an opportunity to guide the Dani people towards a deeper understanding of the Kingdom of God, one that incorporates their cultural heritage while aligning with Christian principles. The journey towards contextual ministry involves reinterpreting their myths and beliefs in light of the Gospel, providing a foundation for a more authentic and ethically grounded Christian faith within the Dani community. Through this process, the Dani people can be guided towards a Christian ethic that encourages active participation in the work of God's Kingdom, promoting not only spiritual transformation but also social and economic development in the Baliem Valley.

By addressing these ethical concerns, the Gospel can be proclaimed in a way that respects the Dani people's worldview while offering a deeper, more meaningful engagement with their cultural and religious traditions. This approach seeks to move beyond surface-level conversion and instead foster a truly transformative relationship with God, one that is rooted in both faith and works, as exemplified in Christian ethics.

Furthermore, an additional ethical dilemma arises from the Dani people's difficulty in reconciling their traditional worldview with the teachings of the Christian faith. While the Dani hold deep reverence for their ancestors and their spiritual practices, the introduction of Christianity often leads to a perceived clash between ancestral customs and the teachings of the Bible. The challenge lies not only in the conversion process itself but in the ongoing process of integrating Christian teachings into the Dani's cultural context. Many Dani individuals, while professing Christian faith, continue to hold on to certain cultural practices,

such as ancestral veneration, which may contradict the core teachings of Christianity. This creates a duality in their beliefs and practices, often leading to confusion and ethical tension within the community, especially as they attempt to live in alignment with Christian principles while maintaining a connection to their traditional spirituality.

Moreover, the Dani people's ongoing struggles with poverty, despite the arrival of Christian missionaries and the Gospel, reveal deeper ethical concerns about the social impact of mission work. While the missionaries' spiritual message has undeniably reached the Dani, the socio-economic transformation expected by both missionaries and the Dani community has not been fully realized. The misalignment between the gospel message of spiritual salvation and the tangible, material improvements in the lives of the Dani has caused disillusionment for some. The notion that faith should lead to immediate material prosperity, a belief often associated with the cargo cults, remains a significant challenge for effective ministry. To address this, it is crucial to focus on holistic ministry that goes beyond evangelism and includes practical support for economic empowerment, fostering community development, and enhancing the Dani people's agency in improving their living conditions. This approach would ensure that the ethical mission of the church in the Baliem Valley addresses not only the spiritual but also the socio-economic needs of the community.

The Cultural Framework of the Dani Ethnic in Baliem Village: A Reflection of Local Theology

The Dani ethnic group, particularly within the context of Baliem Village in Papua, demonstrates a profound connection between their cultural values and their folk religious practices. Central to understanding these practices is the concept of **silimo**, the traditional residential layout, which encapsulates not only physical spaces but also spiritual and communal ideals that shape their worldview. The silimo is a square-shaped courtyard, comprising men's houses (honai or pilamo), women's houses (eweai or ebeai), kitchens (hunila), pigpens (wamaila), and shared spaces for cooking and communal interaction. This arrangement facilitates everyday interactions that reflect the social values and theological underpinnings of the Dani people, wherein the values of **openness**, **inclusivity**, and **community** are paramount (Mansoben, 1994, 120; Alua, 2006, 44-46).

The Dani people understand life as a continuous process of welcoming others. Their cultural principle, **ikuni-akuni hinakmouphogo**, reflects an overarching theological ethic

of hospitality, which is rooted in their folk religion and reflected in their daily actions. The act of greeting others with the term **netaiken**—"you are part of my heart"—is a manifestation of their inclusive spirituality. Furthermore, the Dani people's practices embody **communal sharing**, symbolised by the belief that food is not a personal possession but a shared gift: **"this is our food"** (yimeke timeke nekarek meke). This concept of **shared meals** is not only a social ritual but a theological expression that counteracts the individualistic tendencies of modern society, affirming the presence of others as a divine blessing (Alua, 2006, 50).

Dani's Folk Religion as Local Theology

In Dani culture, the principle of **openness** extends beyond mere hospitality to a more profound theological stance. It represents an inclusivity that transcends human boundaries, including welcoming enemies seeking refuge. The traditional **silimo** layout encourages this openness, which reflects a deeper understanding of God's creation, where every individual, regardless of their background or conflict, is part of the larger divine plan. This openness, however, is not without its challenges, as the Dani people are increasingly confronted with the polarising effects of social and political changes. In their worldview, which is deeply influenced by their folk religion, the act of welcoming others is seen as an act of divine grace. Yet, the encroachment of external influences has led to an evolving tension between the traditional openness and the need for identity preservation within a changing social and political landscape.

The shared value of **learning and teaching** within the silimo also reflects the Dani people's folk religion, where spiritual and practical wisdom are passed from one generation to the next. The homes in which learning takes place—honai for the men and eweai for the women—serve as spaces for transmitting not just cultural practices but also theological knowledge. The Dani people's understanding of God and the world is not abstract but is grounded in practical skills, such as farming, hunting, and raising livestock, all of which carry spiritual significance. These teachings, passed down through generations, are integral to their folk religion, which aligns with a **theology of community**, where the individual is

only meaningful in relation to others.

The **communal deliberation** held within the honai is another practice that reflects their folk theology. These discussions serve not only as a means for conflict resolution but as a theological act, where community decisions are seen as expressions of divine will. The Dani people's respect for their leaders—**ap kain**, who are seen as spiritual guides—further highlights the connection between leadership, spiritual guidance, and community harmony. Leaders who embody openness and wisdom are regarded as divine instruments, facilitating both the community's cohesion and their theological understanding (Yelipele, 2008, 45).

Cultural and Religious Transformations: A Struggle for Identity

The Dani people's theology is not static. It evolves in response to external influences, particularly the political and social changes that have impacted their interaction with other ethnic groups, especially the **Melayu people**. While they remain deeply committed to their traditional cultural values and folk religion, these values are increasingly being challenged by external forces. The tension between their traditional values and the realities of modern life—especially in relation to their identity as **Melanesians/Papuan people**—has led to a situation where openness and inclusivity are increasingly restricted to their community. The shift towards a more exclusive stance on identity is a theological response to the perceived threat of cultural erosion.

Yet, the Dani people's theology remains remarkably resilient, as they navigate the complexities of social and political change. Their folk religion, deeply embedded in their cultural practices, continues to provide a framework for understanding these changes, and their theological response remains centered on the communal and relational aspects of their faith. Even as the Dani people face challenges in maintaining their traditional values, their theology offers a context in which they can engage with change while maintaining their identity. This tension between cultural preservation and theological adaptation illustrates the dynamic nature of folk religion as a form of local theology, responding to both internal and external pressures.

The Dani ethnic group in Baliem Village presents a unique case study in **ethnotheology**, where their folk religion is intricately intertwined with their cultural practices and communal life. The values of openness, hospitality, and shared community are theological expressions that reflect their understanding of God's will and their place in

the world. However, as the Dani people face the realities of external influences, these values are being challenged, leading to a theological tension that reflects broader social and political dynamics. This ongoing dialogue between tradition and change highlights the need for a contextual ministry that understands the complex interplay between culture, theology, and identity in the lives of the Dani people.

The Gospel and its Cultural Transformation within the Dani Context

The concept of the Gospel, as articulated in Scripture, carries the profound message of redemption and salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to Yakob Tomatala, the term "Gospel" is derived from the Greek word *euaggelion* (εὐαγγέλιον), meaning "good news" or "message of joy," which refers to the divine message of Jesus Christ's redemptive work. Tomatala's definition of evangelism emphasizes the proclamation of Christ's message in the power of the Holy Spirit, leading sinners to repentance, salvation, and discipleship (Tomatala, 2007, 17-19).

When it comes to the Dani people of Papua, the concept of evangelism must be contextualized. Contextual evangelism, as highlighted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:18-23, requires the careful proclamation of the Gospel in alignment with the cultural practices and understandings of the Dani community. The challenge here lies not only in preaching the Gospel but in ensuring that it is heard and understood within the framework of the Dani worldview, without distorting its theological essence. This process of integrating the Gospel with local culture calls for a nuanced approach, which both respects and transforms traditional beliefs in a way that faithfully reflects Christian doctrine.

The Dani Cultural Values and the Integration of the Gospel

The Dani people, residing in Baliem Valley, Papua, hold deeply rooted cultural beliefs that offer opportunities for evangelistic engagement. Central to Dani cultural identity is their belief in messianic figures and concepts of salvation, particularly within the mythologies of Nabelan-Kabelan and Naruekul. These myths embody a longing for transformation and deliverance, which creates an openness to new cultural influences, including the Christian Gospel. The Dani anticipate an ideal, peaceful future, symbolized by the replacement of old skin with new skin in the Nabelan-Kabelan mythology, and a messianic figure who promises salvation, akin to the role of Naruekul.

These cultural motifs present a fertile ground for contextualizing the Christian message. By reinterpreting the Nabelan-Kabelan and Naruekul myths through a biblical lens, it is possible to align their themes with the teachings of the Gospel. For instance, the concept of “old skin replaced with new skin” can be reframed as a biblical understanding of the new creation in Christ, as described in 2 Corinthians 5:17. Similarly, the hope for eternal life and resurrection in the Naruekul mythology aligns with the Christian doctrine of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Acts 16:31).

However, while there are parallels, it is important to avoid the syncretistic blending of the Gospel with traditional animistic beliefs. The Dani must be educated that the power of transformation, represented in their myths by living creatures or supernatural forces, does not lie within the natural world but in the work of the Holy Spirit. Deculturation is thus a crucial step in the evangelistic process, wherein elements of the traditional Dani worldview that conflict with Christian teachings—such as the worship of ancestral spirits and reliance on occult practices—are addressed and redefined in light of the Gospel.

Spiritual Warfare and the Ethical Implications of the Gospel

A significant aspect of contextual evangelism among the Dani people is engaging in spiritual warfare. The Dani’s beliefs in spirits and supernatural forces that govern their worldviews require a theological response that confronts these forces. As stated in John 10:10, the Gospel proclaims that the work of Jesus Christ is to give life and freedom from the powers of darkness. The message of the cross, with its substitutionary atonement for human sin (John 1:29; Ephesians 1:7), is central to this process of liberation. The Dani must understand that the ancestral spirits they venerate are not benign but are actually forces of evil that seek to deceive and destroy. Therefore, evangelism must focus not only on the proclamation of the Gospel but also on spiritual transformation, where the Holy Spirit breaks the bondage of sin and idolatry.

The importance of the ethical implications of the Gospel cannot be overstated. As believers are freed from the power of sin, they are called to live out new ethical standards that reflect the character of Christ. The Dani people, whose society values communal living and shared responsibility, can find in the Gospel a transformation of their ethical worldview. Christian ethics, as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), should manifest in the community’s daily life, including work, honesty, and relational harmony. The Gospel calls for

the Dani people to embrace a new way of living, grounded in the grace and power of Jesus Christ, which enhances their traditional values of community and mutual support.

The Role of Evangelism in the Dani Cultural Context

To effectively introduce the Gospel to the Dani people, a contextualized approach is essential. As suggested by Tomatala (2007, 41-42), evangelists can use familiar cultural terms such as *Walhowak* (the Dani term for the Almighty God) to convey the message of the Gospel. However, this approach requires a shift in meaning, where the term *Walhowak* is redefined in the context of Christian revelation, particularly as it refers to Jesus Christ, the incarnate God who came to save humanity. Similarly, the figure of Naruekul, who is both human and divine in Dani mythology, can be reinterpreted in the Gospel context as a type of Christ, who embodies both divinity and humanity and whose death and resurrection bring about salvation and the new covenant.

The incarnational approach to evangelism, as seen in the example of Naruekul, emphasizes that the messenger must not only communicate the Gospel but also live it out. The evangelist's life should reflect the character of Christ—integrity, credibility, and trustworthiness—so that the Gospel message is credible and relatable to the Dani people. The evangelist, in essence, becomes a living example of the Gospel, showing how Christian ethics can transform individuals and communities.

A Vision for Transformative Ministry

The integration of the Gospel within the Dani cultural context represents both a challenge and an opportunity for transformative ministry. By contextualizing the message of salvation within the framework of Dani cultural values—while addressing the spiritual warfare and ethical implications of the Gospel—the Dani people can experience true transformation. This process involves a delicate balance of respecting cultural identity while offering a new, redemptive framework through the power of the Gospel.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Dani people will be able to leave behind their old ways and embrace the new life that comes from being united with Christ. As they grow in their faith, the Dani church will reflect the ethical teachings of the Gospel, living in community, sharing resources, and working together for the glory of God. Ultimately, this ministry will bring about not just spiritual transformation but also social change, fostering

peace, unity, and ethical living among the Dani people.

In conclusion, the contextualization of the Gospel within the cultural landscape of the Dani people is essential for the establishment of a thriving Christian community. By aligning the Gospel with their cultural expectations and addressing the spiritual and ethical challenges they face, the Dani people can be empowered to live out their faith in a way that is both authentic to their cultural identity and transformative through the power of Jesus Christ.

A Vision for Contetual Ministry

The Dani people of Papua, also known as the Balim society, have a rich and complex cultural heritage, which includes mythologies that express a profound sense of messianic and salvific hope. Among the most significant of these are the *Nabelan-Kabelan* and *Naruekul* myths. These narratives, deeply embedded in Dani culture, reflect a longing for divine intervention, transformation, and the promise of a peaceful and prosperous future. In their worldview, the *Nabelan-Kabelan* myth portrays the replacement of the old skin with new skin as a symbol of hope for renewal and eternal life. Similarly, the *Naruekul* myth presents a figure who embodies both divine and human characteristics, one who dies and is resurrected, offering salvation and a new covenant to the people.

These mythologies create an opportunity for contextual evangelism within the Dani community. Contextual evangelism refers to the process of communicating the Gospel within the framework of a particular culture, with a focus on ensuring that the message is both faithful to biblical truths and culturally relevant. For the Dani, this involves engaging with their indigenous beliefs and practices in such a way that the Gospel message is not only heard but is meaningfully integrated into their existing cultural values.

One of the central challenges of contextual evangelism among the Dani people lies in the task of reinterpreting their indigenous mythologies in light of the Gospel. The *Nabelan-Kabelan* myth, which speaks of transformation through the exchange of old skin for new skin, can be understood in the context of the biblical doctrine of the new creation in Christ. As stated in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" This doctrine aligns closely with the Dani's longing for renewal and transformation, providing a pathway for communicating the Gospel message of salvation as both a spiritual and existential transformation.

Similarly, the *Naruekul* myth, which portrays a figure that is both human and divine, who dies and is resurrected, mirrors the core narrative of the Christian Gospel. The figure of Jesus Christ, who is both fully divine and fully human, who died for the sins of humanity and was resurrected on the third day, is central to the Christian message of salvation. By engaging with the *Naruekul* myth, contextual evangelism can present Jesus Christ as the true *Naruekul*, the fulfilment of the hope for a divine saviour who brings eternal life and a new covenant.

However, the process of integrating the Gospel into Dani culture is not merely about drawing parallels between the indigenous myths and Christian theology. It also involves a transformation of the ethical values and practices that underpin Dani society. The Gospel calls for the establishment of new ethical norms that reflect the character of Christ, which is a radical departure from the traditional ethical frameworks shaped by animism and spiritism in Dani culture. For instance, the Dani people's belief in ancestral spirits, which plays a significant role in their rituals and social practices, must be reinterpreted through the lens of the Gospel. The biblical teaching that Christ has triumphed over the powers of darkness and that believers are to worship the one true God, rejecting all forms of idolatry and occult practices, challenges the Dani's long-standing belief in ancestral spirits and supernatural forces.

Therefore, contextual evangelism must also involve a process of deculturation, in which elements of the Dani's animistic and occult beliefs are replaced with biblical truth. This includes confronting the reverence for sacred objects, such as *kaneke*, which have historically been seen as powerful and divine, but are now understood as symbols of idolatry and spiritual darkness. The Gospel calls for the Dani people to recognise that true transformation and eternal life come not through the worship of spirits or the use of sacred objects, but through faith in Jesus Christ, who alone has the power to transform and renew.

In addition to confronting spiritual darkness, contextual evangelism must foster a new ethical paradigm among the Dani people. This new paradigm is grounded in the teachings of Jesus Christ, who calls His followers to live according to the principles of love, honesty, hard work, and integrity. The Dani's cultural values of communal living, generosity, and respect for others can be harmonised with Christian teachings, providing a foundation for the development of a Christian ethical system that is both biblically sound and culturally relevant.

Moreover, the work of contextual evangelism involves a process of reculturation, where the Dani people are encouraged to embrace the cultural values that align with the teachings of the Gospel, while discarding practices that contradict biblical principles. This can be achieved through the use of culturally sensitive models, such as the *incarnational model* and *cultural adaptation model*, which allow the Gospel message to be communicated in a way that respects Dani culture while maintaining the integrity of the Christian faith. For instance, the term *Walhowak*, which refers to the Almighty God in Dani culture, can be used to introduce Jesus Christ, emphasising His role as the one true God who became human to redeem humanity.

In conclusion, contextual evangelism among the Dani people requires a nuanced and sensitive approach that integrates the Gospel with the Dani's cultural values and beliefs. It involves not only reinterpreting indigenous myths in light of the Gospel but also engaging in the process of ethical transformation, where the Dani people are encouraged to adopt new ethical norms that reflect the character of Christ. This process of cultural transformation will enable the Dani to experience the full power of the Gospel, leading to spiritual renewal, ethical living, and the establishment of a Christian community that reflects the glory of God and the values of His Kingdom.

D. CONCLUSION

The exploration of folk religion among the Dani ethnic group in Baliem Valley reveals the profound interplay between myth, identity, and ethical orientation within a unique cultural-theological landscape. Central to their cosmological narrative are the traditional myths of *Nabelan-Kabelan* and *Naruekul*, which continue to shape the collective consciousness and moral imagination of the community. These mythic frameworks, while deeply rooted in local heritage, present both challenges and openings for transformative theological engagement.

The challenge arises from the persistence of animistic and occultic worldviews, which exert significant influence on personal and communal ethics. These inherited beliefs, though often coexisting with formal Christian affiliation, contribute to an internal dissonance that limits the full appropriation of Gospel values. The mere presence of Christian identity markers has not necessarily led to a deep reformation of moral behaviour in accordance with biblical ethics, indicating the presence of a theological vacuum that requires careful and contextual

pastoral response.

At the same time, these indigenous narratives hold untapped potential for contextual ministry. They serve as cultural entry points through which the Gospel can be communicated not as a foreign imposition, but as a fulfilment of the community's deepest longings and existential questions. In this regard, the role of the contextual minister is not only to proclaim but also to embody the message of redemption within the contours of Dani cultural life. Through a model of incarnational presence, ministry becomes a living testimony, inviting transformation through relationship and authenticity rather than abstraction.

In moving towards a contextual theology, the process must involve more than adaptation; it requires a critical and discerning transformation of culture. Elements within the Dani myths that point towards truth, justice, and communal well-being may be preserved and reinterpreted in light of the Gospel. Conversely, those aspects that reinforce fear, domination, or spiritual bondage must be confronted and reoriented. This process, often described as reculturation, allows for the preservation of cultural identity while enabling the emergence of a new ethical and spiritual framework centred on the redemptive work of Christ.

One particularly urgent aspect in this transformation is the issue of spiritual conflict. For the Dani people, spiritual realities are not mere metaphors but integral to their worldview. Therefore, any meaningful ethical formation must engage these spiritual dimensions with clarity and conviction. Confronting the unseen forces believed to govern aspects of life must be part of the ethical reformation of the community, integrated with a holistic vision of liberation and peace.

This study, while offering a focused theological reflection on the ethical dimensions of Dani folk religion, acknowledges its boundaries. The analysis remains primarily within the frame of moral theology and does not explore the broader systematic or liturgical implications of contextual ministry in Papua. Nevertheless, it opens the way for further interdisciplinary dialogue and ethnographic-theological research, which may enrich the understanding of how local cultures can both challenge and enrich the practice of Christian faith.

In summary, the journey towards a contextualised ministry among the Dani is not a simplistic task of cultural translation, but a dynamic and ongoing negotiation between revelation and tradition, faith and worldview, Gospel and myth. It demands a ministry

rooted in humility, spiritual discernment, and cultural empathy—seeking not the erasure of identity, but its redemption through the incarnate and transformative presence of Christ within the heart of the Dani people.

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