



Life Cycle in the Beliefs of the Atoni Pah Meto People

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Abstract: *Cultural diversity in Indonesia acts as a catalyst for tolerance and the formation of a diverse society with values rooted in religion, local wisdom, and cultural heritage. However, the low level of spiritual understanding and inadequate cultural integration in East Nusa Tenggara have triggered the emergence of cases that disregard the human life cycle, such as the prevalence of abortion and suicide, as well as social and economic pressures that undermine the mental well-being of the community. Previous research delved into the local wisdom of the Timorese community, the historical aspects of the Timorese culture, and the Toit Ulan Ritual in Central Amanuban. This study focuses on the beliefs of Atoni Pah Meto in the Banamas Neonsaet (East Amanuban), exploring its cultural heritage and local beliefs. It aims to understand the impact of ceremonies on each life stage from the perspective of their local wisdom that contributing to the preservation of the community's mental well-being. Utilizing qualitative methods and a phenomenological approach involving community leaders, the study employs observation, interviews, and documentation, with subsequent data reduction, presentation, and verification. Findings highlight that life-cycle ceremonies reflect values of familial bonds, cooperation, and harmony with nature. Marriage and funeral processes involve family roles in maintaining spirituality and warding off spiritual disturbances. Despite the influence of formal religion, traces of traditional beliefs persist, shaping a unique identity that harmonizes cultural heritage and religion. The research underscores the importance of preserving and understanding this cultural richness for the sustainability and harmony of the Atoni Pah Meto in the East Amanuban.*

Key words: *East Amanuban, Ceremony, Life Cycle, Local Wisdom, Atoni Pah Meto.*

Introduction

Indonesia is a diverse nation, comprised of various religions and cultures.¹ The religious diversity extends beyond officially recognized religions to encompass local beliefs, often referred to as “local wisdom.”² These local beliefs emerge as a result of the cultural diversity present in the country.

¹ Steven Drakeley, *The History of Indonesia* (Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 1.

² Aksa dan Nurhayati, “Moderasi Beragama Berbasis Budaya Dan Kearifan Lokal Pada Masyarakat Donggo Di Bima,” *Harmoni: Journal Multicultural and Multireligious* 19, no. 2 (2020): 339; dan Siti Komariah Rezky Juniarsih Nur, Dadan Wildan, “Kekuatan Budaya Lokal: Menjelajahi 3S (Sipakatau, Sipakalebbi, Dan Sipakainge”) Sebagai Simbol Kearifan Lokal,” *MIMESIS* 4, no. 2 (2023): 167, <http://www.journal2.uad.ac.id/index.php/mimesis/article/view/8105>.

Cultural diversity exerts a significant influence on shaping the diverse societal structure of Indonesia, a heritage that continues to be preserved.³ Firstly, through comprehension and tolerance, diversity plays a pivotal role in fostering mutual appreciation among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds⁴. It means that, by facilitating the exchange of ideas and traditions, diversity not only stimulates tolerance, but also diminishes prejudices, opens opportunities for meaningful dialogue, and strengthens a sense of unity within the community. Secondly, in the context of creativity and innovation, cultural diversity creates a fertile environment for the emergence of novel ideas. Cultural exchanges shape a dynamic society that is responsive to global developments.⁵ It shows local knowledge contributes to providing a new perspective that can help communities develop a more humane way of life.⁶

On the other hand, negative impacts of cultural diversity need to be addressed to maximize its benefits. Conflicts and miscommunications may arise in the absence of understanding or disagreement regarding cultural differences.⁷ Therefore, effective diversity management, encompassing awareness, education, and open dialogue, is important.⁸ Additionally, the risks of discrimination and prejudice need to be mitigated through preventative measures and justice-centered approaches. Integration challenges must be proactively addressed by creating inclusive strategies that facilitate the integration of diverse communities without compromising their cultural identities.⁹ Thus, collective awareness and efforts in managing cultural diversity can lead to a stronger, more creative, and inclusive society.

The establishment of societal structures and local beliefs constitutes a legacy of religion and culture, playing a central role in shaping the identity and stability of a community. Firstly, religion often provides a framework of values and ethics that guide societal behavior, establishing moral norms and promoting a sense of responsibility and social obligation.¹⁰ Religious practices also have the potential to strengthen social solidarity and offer ethical guidelines for interacting with others.¹¹

³ Nasywa Aliyah K., Putri Ichtari D.W., Riyandhita Putri O., Viola Shafina, Zinnatun Nisa, dan Bambang Sri Wibowo, "Penelitian Budaya Suku Timor," *Journal of Economics, Business, Management, Accounting and Social Sciences (JEBMASS)* 1, no. 3 (2023): 123.

⁴ Afnan Fuadi, *Keragaman Dalam Dinamika Sosial Budaya: Kompetensi Sosial Kultural Perekat Bangsa* (Yogyakarta: Deepublish Publisher, 2020), V.

⁵ Eko A. Meinarno, Bambang Widiyanto, dan Rizka Halida, *Manusia Dalam Kebudayaan Dan Masyarakat: Pendekatan Antropologi Dan Sosiologi* (Jakarta Selatan: Salemba Humanika, 2023), 14.

⁶ Elvy Maria Manurung, Yohanes Slamet Purwadi, and Ignatius Bambang Sugiharto, "Memahami Konstruksi Nalar Epistemologi Etnik: Sebuah Kajian Filosofis," *Jurnal Ledalero* 21, no. 1 (June 25, 2022): 84, <http://ejurnal.iftkledalero.ac.id/index.php/JLe/article/view/258>.

⁷ R Kuserdyana, "Pengertian Budaya, Lintas Budaya, Dan Teori Yang Melandasi Lintas Budaya," *Modul: Pemahaman Lintas Budaya* (2020): 1.

⁸ Rianti Setyawasih, Yongker Baali, Tobari, Adi Ekopriyono, Johni S. Pasaribu, Anis Anshari Mas'ud, Abdurohim, Nicholas Simarmata, Asmawati Ashari, dan Yuliana Mose, *Manajemen Sumber Daya Manusia Global* (Padang: PT Global Eksekutif Teknologi, 2023), 27.

⁹ Maya Djawa, "Peranan Penghibur Orang Sakit (POS) Pribumi Dalam Mengembangkan Pendidikan Yang Membebaskan Bagi Anak-Anak Pribumi Di Timor," in *Pendidikan Inklusif Di Era Merdeka Belajar* (Jawa Timur: KBM Indonesia, 2023), 229.

¹⁰ Gregor Neonbasu, *Citra Manusia Berbudaya: Sebuah Monografi Tentang Timor Dalam Perspektif Melanesia* (Jakarta: Antara Publishing, 2017), 257.

¹¹ Yuda D. Hawu Haba dan Maria R. A. Pada, "Sejarah Dan Dampak Kehadiran Jemaat Glorya Tuatuka Bagi Masyarakat Sekitarnya," *Phronesis: Jurnal teologi dan Misi* 5, no. 1 (2022): 38.

In addition, local beliefs, including cultural traditions, are rooted in ancestral heritage and reflect respected values within a particular society.¹² These beliefs play a key role in preserving cultural identity, nurturing language, and safeguarding traditional practices.¹³ Establishing societal structures based on these religious and cultural values can foster a sense of continuity and cohesion, strengthen social bonds, and provide the foundation of trust and stability necessary for the sustainability of community life.

Preserving this religious and cultural heritage not only helps communities understand their origins and identity, but also enriches spiritual life, laying a solid foundation for social and economic development. It is here that theology grows, namely contextual theology or inculturation, a theology that grows out of the context and human life experiences.¹⁴

Spiritual life is not only obtained through worship practices in church, but also through daily interactions with local culture and traditions. Doing theology in a multicultural society is not limited to the church building, but to the world, including the social order of the community. In this context, a dialogue occurs between the Gospel and the reality of the community and its culture.¹⁵

In East Nusa Tenggara Province (NTT), the increasing cases of abortion and suicide indicate a decline in spiritual and cultural values in community life. This phenomenon has occurred several times. For example, in June 2021, an abortion case shocked the South-Central Timor region with the discovery of a dead fetus.¹⁶ Kompas also reported a previous case on October 23, 2023. A student from the Kupang Health Polytechnic, with the initials AL (26) from East Sumba, jumped from the Liliba Bridge in Kupang City. The victim was a third-year nursing student. She invited her parents from Sumba under the pretext of attending her graduation ceremony. However, in reality, she had not yet graduated because she had unfinished tasks and was threatened with expulsion from campus.¹⁷ Another case occurred in January 2025, where a man on Rote Island took his own life, allegedly due to economic pressure related to local culture (Lamak, 2025). Furthermore, in December 2023, a student in Kupang was found dead with a rope around his neck in an empty house, just two hours before his graduation ceremony. This is in line with Rahman's opinion that psychological problems and socio-cultural understanding are factors that influence the tendency to commit suicide.¹⁸ These cases indicate that social and economic pressures, as well as a lack of spiritual and cultural understanding, can contribute to such tragic actions.

Therefore, it is essential to strengthen spiritual values through culture in the community as a preventive measure and mental development. Valuing religious and cultural heritage is key to achieving a

¹² Harun Yermia Natonis, Jarusman Pasaribu, Anita A. Hege Udju, Maya Djawa, Yorhans S. Lopis, dan Roby Kause, "Sosialisasi Budaya Manonob Sebagai Kearifan Lokal Pembalajaran Pendidikan Agama Kristen," *CARADDE: Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat* 6, no. 2 (2023): 339.

¹³ Yuda D. Hawu Haba, *Injil Dan Jingitui: Menelusuri Jejak Kekristenan Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Kepercayaan Jingitui Di Pulau Sabu Raijua, Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur-Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2023), 30–31.

¹⁴ Georg Ludwig Kirchberger, "Teologi Inkulturasi Dalam Sejarah Gereja Dan Dewasa Ini Di Flores, Indonesia," *Jurnal Ledalero* 22, no. 1 (June 22, 2023): 98, <http://ejurnal.iftkledalero.ac.id/index.php/JLe/article/view/342>.

¹⁵ Puplius Meinrad Buru, "Berteologi Dalam Konteks Indonesia Yang Multikultural," *Jurnal Ledalero* 19, no. 1 (July 3, 2020): 74, <http://ejurnal.stfkledalero.ac.id/index.php/JLe/article/view/197>.

¹⁶ Endra Kurniawan, "Mahasiswi Di NTT Aborsi Kandungan 8 Bulan, Kasus Terbongkar Berawal Penemuan Potongan Tubuh Janin," *Tribunnews.Com*, last modified 2021, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.tribunnews.com/>.

¹⁷ Kornelis Kewa Ama, "Tiga Mahasiswa Di NTT Bunuh Diri Pada Periode Oktober 2023," *Kompas* (Kupang, 2023), <https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2023/10/31/tiga-mahasiswa-di-ntt-bunuh-diri-periode-oktober-2023>.

¹⁸ Puspa Rahayu Utami Rahman, "Kecerdasan Emosional Dan Penyesuaian Sosial," *Psychophedia Jurnal Psikologi Universitas Buana Perjuangan Karawang* 5, no. 28–36 (2021).

harmonious balance between progress and tradition, ensuring the continued existence and sustainability of communities rooted in their unique religious and cultural wealth.

In 2021, Metropoly Merlin J. Liubana and Ibrahim Nenohai published a qualitative descriptive study titled “Local Wisdom Elements of the Atoni Pah Meto Community in the Legend of Oepunu” in the *Journal Onoma* Vol. 7, No. 2. This research documents the local wisdom of the Atoni Pah Meto community through the analysis of the Oepunu legend, emphasizing elements such as group solidarity, prophetic knowledge, and clan identity.¹⁹

In 2002, Moses Kollo and Diana Rohi conducted research on the “History of the Formation of Kefetoran Bani-Bani in Timor in 1936,” published in the *Ciencias Journal*, Volume 5, No. 1, January 2022. The study aimed to comprehend the establishment of Kefetoran Bani-Bani in the former area of Tunbesi Village, Io Kufeu District, Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, utilizing primary and secondary data along with historical methods. Kollo and Rohi found that factors such as the formation of traditional community unity, the influence of Dutch governance, the growth of Bani-Bani descendants, and aspects of public service at that time influenced the emergence of Kefetoran Bani-Bani in Timor.²⁰

The recent study by Malkisedek Taneo, Fransina A. Ndoen, and Orifen Taopan explores the “Toit Ulan Ritual in Baki Village, Amanuban Tengah District, South Central Timor Regency.” Published in the *Journal of History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, December 2023, the research reveals the society’s response to crop failure in Baki Village and elucidates the process, function, meaning, and values of the Toit Ulan Ritual for the society. Conducted in Baki Village, Amanuban Tengah District, South Central Timor Regency, the study employed qualitative data analysis techniques, uncovering the society’s belief in the ritual’s ability to bring rain and highlighting the stages of implementation and the religious values embedded in the ritual.²¹

This study aims to investigate how the implementation of ceremonies and specific practices during key life stages, such as pregnancy, birth, marriage, and death, is believed to influence the avoidance of life challenges and difficulties among followers of tribal religious beliefs in East Amanuban. Values such as mutual assistance, tolerance, social care, honesty, justice, togetherness, and respect for ancestors and cultural heritage can strengthen cultural identity and help address social problems. However, the low level of spiritual understanding and inadequate cultural integration in East Nusa Tenggara have triggered detrimental cases, such as abortion and suicide, as well as increased social and economic pressures that undermine the mental well-being of the community. Therefore, it is essential to integrate these cultural values into daily life to create a more harmonious and prosperous society.

This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach proposed by John W. Creswell,²² in which the researcher explores and describes the personal experiences and perspectives of individuals

¹⁹ Merlin J. Liubana dan Ibrahim Nenohai Metropoly, “Unsur Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Atoni Pah Meto Dalam Legenda Oepunu,” *Onoma* 7, no. 2 (2021).

²⁰ Moses Kollo dan Diana Rohi, “Sejarah Terbentuknya Kefetoran Bani-Bani Di Timor Tahun 1936,” *Ciencias: Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengembangan Pendidikan* 5, no. 1 (2022), <https://ejournal.upg45ntt.ac.id/index.php/ciencias/index>.

²¹ Malkisedek Taneo, Fransina A. Ndoen, dan Orifen Taopan, “Ritual Toit Ulan Pada Masyarakat Desa Baki Kecamatan Amanuban Tengah Kabupaten Timor Tengah Selatan,” *Jurnal Sejarah* 20, no. 2 (2023).

²² John W. Creswell, *Qualitative, Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Second. (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, Inc., 2007), 57–59.

regarding a particular phenomenon, as shared by the participants themselves.²³ This research was conducted in East Amanuban by involving traditional leaders and community figures as sources, consisting of 16 informants, namely Aleta Neno, Asis Nubatonis, Cornelis Selan, Daniel NenotEk, Daniel Taneo, Joni Fallo, Marthen Fallo A, Marthen Fallo B, Silas NenotEk, Timotius Taneo, Yakobus Fallo, Yonas Liunima, Yoseph Sete, Yulius Banamtuan, and Yusak Nenobais. The researcher identified and studied the culture practiced by a group of people called the Atoni Pah Meto community in a specific region at a particular time (synchronic) and narrated the phenomena experienced by the community.²⁴ The research methodology included observation, interviews, and documentation conducted in 2017, where the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, observed community phenomena, and analyzed stories about these phenomena. Data analysis includes data reduction, data presentation, and data verification.²⁵ The phenomenological analysis model uses a hermeneutic phenomenological approach that focuses on life experiences and interprets "texts" or meanings or life experiences. The research process consists of six steps: (1) *Epoche* (bracketing), (2) Reduction, (3) Textural Description, (4) Integrating and Presenting the Essence, (5) Interpreting, and (6) Reflecting on the Interpretation.²⁶

Findings and Discussion

Human Life Cycle According to Atoni Pah Meto in East Amanuban

Followers of tribal religious beliefs believe that throughout their journey in this world, they encounter not only moments of happiness, but also challenges and difficulties, stemming from interactions with the physical environment and the unseen spiritual realm. To mitigate the negative impacts of these challenges, individuals strive to initiate each life stage with specific practices and ceremonies,²⁷ commencing from one's time in the mother's womb, through the birthing process, marriage, and culminating in the end of one's life.²⁸ In the study conducted within the Atoni Pah Meto community in East Amanuban, several ceremonies comprise the life cycle of the local people.

The Neot Hafot Neu Aput Amonit Ceremony

According to the beliefs of tribal religion practitioners, the inception of life occurs when the fetus is in the mother's womb. In a simple ceremony known as "neot hafot neu aput amonit" (protective ritual for the unborn), prayers are offered for the pregnant mother and the one-month-old fetus, accompanied by

²³ John W. Creswell; David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: Sage Publications, Inc., 2023), 291.

²⁴ Ibid., 51–52.

²⁵ Sugiyono, *Metode Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, R Dan D* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2017), 246.

²⁶ Creswell, *Qualitative, Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*; Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, Second. (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

²⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Culture* (Yale University Press, 2016), 1.

²⁸ Nor Kholis Swandi, "Siklus Hidup Dalam Agama Lokal: Studi Komparasi Ajaran Selingkar Hidup Kaharingan Dan Gawe Urip-Gawe Pati Islam Wetu Telu" (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2019), 31; Junus E.E. Inabuy, "Hutan-Jemaat: Hutan Komunitas Beriman Suatu Ajakan Pencarian," in *Gereja Eksistensial: Paradigma Berteologi Secara Kontekstual Di Bumi Indonesia*, ed. Isakh A. Hendrik Fredrik Y.A. Doeka (Kupang; Jakarta: UKAW, BPK Gunung Mulia, 2022), 123.

the sacrificial offering of a live pig (with its blood dropped on the sacred stones, *tola' hau le'u – faut le'u*). Simultaneously, pregnant women receive the “tusit” service, involving the application of a chewed candlenut mixture on the mother’s abdomen to facilitate a safe delivery. The “atusit” or traditional midwife skillfully positions the fetus, placing it on the right side (*ne'u*) for a desired male child or on the left (*'li*) for a desired female child.²⁹ During this ritual, the husband utters the following prayer:

Table 1. Husband’s Prayer

Terms	Meaning
<i>Nai' bei' et Uis Neno human matan</i>	<i>The grandparents (ancestral spirits) are positioned before the Sky God (God Father)</i>
<i>Muneo muhafo sufa' ka'uf</i>	<i>Protect the unborn descendant in this mother’s womb.</i>
<i>Henati' sufa' ka'uf, naspet ma nablia'</i>	<i>May the fetus of this generation grow in good health.</i>

Source: Authors Data, 2020

During pregnancy in East Amanuban, mothers are prohibited from engaging in peculiar or negative behaviors, known as “nisan,” as it is believed that the baby might bear the consequences, affecting the child’s growth and behavior at birth. Additionally, mothers take precautions such as carrying protective items like horn combs or knives to ward off evil spirits, referred to as “Nitu,” ensuring the safety of the unborn baby. The expectant mother, along with her husband and entire family, eagerly anticipates the moment with hope, eagerly awaiting the safe delivery.

The Poitan Anah Ceremony

The “Poitan Anah” ceremony is a ritual meant for welcoming and introducing the child. The period of childbirth is critical for both the mother and the newborn. In case of difficulties during delivery, a ritual called “naketi” is performed, where the struggling mother must acknowledge and disclose any undesirable behavior. When the baby is born safely, the family joyfully welcomes the newborn. The birth of the child is regarded as the most precious blessing from the Almighty Creator. The child is regarded as a “sufa' ka'uf,” meaning a beautiful bud, cherished within the family. The child is affectionately called “noni mnatu,” signifying pure gold and the most valuable in the eyes of the family, as the heir of the lineage.

The birth of the baby is celebrated, and the umbilical cord is cut, with the placenta hung on a kesambi tree branch by the father or a trusted close family member. This symbolizes the soaring imagination reaching towards the cosmos. Consequently, a song is created: “usapi tun tanoeb, munoebe neu au luan,”

²⁹ Yulius Banamtuan, “Wawancara” (Kupang, 2017); Andrew Mc William, *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life, A Study of Place and Precedence in South West Timor* (KITLV Press, 2002), 250.

meaning ‘the unseen wind, always present with a main and eternal role, blows the shoots or branches of the kesambi tree towards the beloved birthplace village.’

Upon the father’s return, he brings a banyan branch, planting it at the corner of the baby’s sleeping place, symbolizing the infant’s initial connection with the natural environment. The shade of the banyan tree, significant for tribal religious practitioners, serves as a cooling shelter, expressing the wish “nunu ‘neo manikin” for the Creator’s protection over the baby. Simultaneously, the baby is given a name previously prepared by the parents, chosen from the ancestral names “beif/na’if” (grandmother/grandfather), commonly known as “kan nitu” (a name selected from the ancestral names). The name may be changed later if the child continually cries or experiences health issues, as the initially given name may not be favored by the ancestors, thus affecting the child’s well-being.

According to tradition, the mother and her baby reside in a round house for only four days. The mother and baby rest on a bamboo bed (*hal se’it*) near a perpetually lit hearth for warmth and rejuvenation, providing vitality and life spirit.³⁰ The mother’s brother enters the house, placing the hearth beneath the bedding. Subsequently, women assisting the mother take over, while the mother’s brother plants a mortar and positions a pestle outside the round house, symbolizing that the mother will consume half-cooked boiling corn (*jagung bose*, a Timorese specialty) and traditional medicine pounded with the pestle in the mortar. The pestle symbolizes the husband, and the mortar represents the wife, with the husband figuratively not stepping over the firewood’s end.

As dawn breaks on the fourth day, the entire family engages in “olen” or a coordinated poetic chant, expressing praise and seeking protection from Uis Neno (Sky God), particularly for the baby. On this fourth day, the mother and the baby are welcomed and introduced from within the “Ume kbubu” (round house) in a ceremony called “poitan anah” (bringing the baby out of the round house to be welcomed and introduced to extended family). All necessary ceremony materials, such as betel leaves, areca nut, tobacco, rice, coconut, chicken, pig, and other necessities, are prepared.

At that moment, the mother carries “lo’e” (four betel palm sticks pierced with banyan leaves) and two boxes, each containing rice and corn. Meanwhile, the baby, covered with a used blanket from the father, is cradled by a close family member. This symbolizes the natural coolness in the four cardinal directions provided by the banyan leaves, accompanied by provisions of rice and corn, signifying the father’s responsibility for protecting the baby as they enter the outside world. Accompanied by a representative of “Amaf Amahonit” (the father), the entire group moves from inside the house towards the front door, where the “Am uf” (baby’s uncle) poses questions answered by the representative of “Amaf Amahonit” as follows:

³⁰ Wens John Rumung, *Misteri Kehidupan Suku Boti* (Kupang: Yayasan Boti Indonesia, 1998), 19.

Table 2. Questions and Answers on The Poitan Anah Ceremony

Question from <i>Am Uf</i>	Answer from <i>Amaf Amahonit</i>
<i>Omenam mu'ko me</i> <i>yo..... leko.</i> (Where did it come from, dear), this shows the origin of the descendants	<i>Omenam u' ko Lunu ma Simo</i> (<i>We have come from Lunu - Simo</i>) (Each clan/several clans that have one account (same pet name), come from the same rocky hill, have the same origins)
<i>Omenam mek sa' ooo,</i> <i>leko</i> (Have you come and brought what ?)	<i>Omenam ek ike suti</i> (<i>We have come and brought a thread spinning tool, if the baby is a girl</i>) ("Ike" is a kind of slender piong, a place where the twisted thread is wrapped around; "suti" is a disk made of coconut shell, a place filled with kitchen ash so that the ike can rotate so that the twisted thread can be wrapped around it) or <i>Omenam ek auni suni/benas - tofa</i> (<i>We have come and brought a spear and kelewang/machete, and temblor if the person greeted is a baby boy</i>) (<i>Auni = spear; suni = kelewang; benas = machete; tofa = temilang</i>)

Source: Authors Data, 2020

The table suggests the baby's pursuit of independent living, striving for a complete life physically and spiritually. The celebration, marked by betel leaf offerings, prioritizes seniority during a communal feast accompanied by artistic performances. Following this, the mother is allowed to descend from the bamboo bed (*hal se'it*) and take a warm bath (*onen oe maputu ai malala*). The baby remains in the "*hal se'it*" for forty nights, ensuring the mother's recovery and the baby's safety, with prayers for strength and well-being ³¹.

³¹ Banamtuan, "Wawancara"; William, *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life, A Study of Place and Precedence in South West Timor*, 254.

For 40 days, observances include the mother refraining from frequent exits from the round house and consuming only half-cooked corn bouse, while the husband avoids stepping over the remains of the hearthwood in the round house, extending these practices for a specific period.

After the forty nights, a purification prayer is conducted inside the round house. White ash mounds (auf muti') from the hearth beneath the "hal se'it" are carried out through a prayer called "onen kon auf muti'," and simultaneously, the mortar (esu') and pestle (hanu') are arranged, signifying the mother's freedom to consume various foods, with hopes for the baby's growth into childhood and adolescence towards adulthood.

The Na' Lefi Ceremony

In the "poitan anah" ceremony at four days old, a crucial aspect is the questioning and answering regarding what the baby brings, reflecting the infant's spirit and determination for future development. For a boy, the response includes bringing "auni ma suni" (spear and machete) or "benas ma tofa" (knife and tembilang). If it is a girl, the answer involves bringing "ike ma suti" (spinning tool for thread). After forty days and the "onen kon auf muti'" ash-carrying prayer, it is perceived that the baby has passed a critical period. At this stage, the "na'lefi" ceremony is performed, releasing negative ties and strengthening the determination to build life by attaching white thread units with or without a muti seed, placed on the wrists, ankles, and neck of the baby.³² The *na'lefi* ritual basically purports to grant the blessing for the child, so that the child would grow strong in faith, diligent in farming and in raising livestock, skillful in weaving and in other activities useful for a better future.

The Coming-of-Age and Youth Ceremonies

For the followers of local religions, one of the responsibilities of the parents is to prepare their children so as to be responsible for their own future. Several ceremonies are worth noting in this regard. The first is *nabe' sonet – meput*. Each matured daughter, preparing for marriage, is expected to possess the skills to manage various aspects of the household life. This includes spinning thread by the fireside while receiving guidance, especially from her mother, regarding duties, prohibitions, and various pieces of advice.³³ The daughter must be proficient in weaving, skilled in basketry and various handicrafts, exhibit mature behavior, and only then is she allowed to enter married life to avoid bringing shame to the family. As for sons, they are required to have a house, be capable of gardening and storing harvests, raise livestock, exhibit mature behavior (*neka mnais*), and so on, before getting married.

The second is *Anfut*. "Anfut" is a circumcision ceremony involving the tying of a male's genital skin with horsehair (tail) until the skin is evenly cut and falls off. This ritual, performed by an "afutus" (circumciser) on adult men, aims to enable healthy and respectable sexual activity, preventing societal shame and ensuring the well-being of their descendants. There is a belief that uncircumcised men may face social ostracism, be considered impure, and struggle to find a good match, emphasizing the cultural

³² William, *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life, A Study of Place and Precedence in South West Timor*, 251; P. Middelkoop, *Curse – Retribution – Enmity* (Amsterdam, 1960), 66.

³³ Daniel Taneo, "Wawancara" (Kupang, 2017).

importance of this practice. For those circumcised after marriage, the event is referred to as “na mof mau fukaf” (dropping a small piece of the cut cloth).

The third ceremony is *Fon Nisin*. “Fon Nisin” is a tooth filing ceremony performed by a tooth-filing specialist, known as “afon-nisif,” regardless of gender. The purpose is to align and beautify the teeth, signifying adulthood, readiness for marriage, and, for young men, having undergone circumcision.

Marriage

Marriage is a profoundly personal expression of love and an inevitable transition from adolescence to family life, representing a fundamental aspect of every individual’s journey toward adulthood.³⁴ Beyond procreation, it is a constant effort to build familial bonds and gain recognition within the broader society.³⁵ Marriage also aims to elevate social status while upholding ancestral mandates closely tied to beliefs in the Creator.³⁶

In the “Banamas Neonsaet” families of East Amanuban, an individual is considered ready for marriage at the age of 17-18 or older. A woman is deemed suitable for marriage when she is seen as capable of bearing offspring and managing a *Banamas* household effectively, while a man is deemed eligible when he can provide for a family and take on the responsibilities of a household head. Traditionally, marriage within the same clan or family is prohibited as it is considered unethical.

The following is the process of marriage from courtship to marriage bond. Initially, young individuals engage through an intermediary named “Atalus” or “Nete” before formal engagement. If the response is positive, they meet with betel leaves (*mamat*) for discussions at the bride’s home, using them as a communication tool. Despite initial criticism, Atalus/Nete’s role gains appreciation after successfully uniting both sides. The subsequent stage involves the groom’s family revealing the “ok totis” (proposal box) and gifts as a gesture of respect to the bride’s family. The gift’s value is unspecified, but it reflects the appreciation for the girl. After “ok totis” acceptance, a symbolic blanket and a prohibition sign follow. This event, called “tanais uab,” confirms the witnessed agreement by both families’ parents. Following this, the families negotiate the wedding’s timing and cost, usually becoming a shared responsibility.

The engagement ceremony involves the exchange of betel nut containers, symbolizing a bond that may take the form of one or five thousand Indonesian rupiahs. Following this, the groom’s family performs “nahe’ na’ benon, kabin talfei” as part of the traditional wedding ceremony, expressing respect and remembrance for the sacrifices made by the mother and the critically born baby, referred to as “oe maputu’ ai malala’.” The spread of a mat serves as an open space for betel nut, expressing gratitude to the bride’s family, with the amount left unspecified and dependent on the sincerity of the groom’s family. The bride’s family reciprocates with a gift that may not be equivalent, reflecting the philosophy that the critical challenges of childbirth apply not only to daughters, but also to sons.

³⁴ Shilphy A. Oktavia, *Motivasi Belajar Dalam Perkembangan Remaja* (Yogyakarta: Deepublish, 2020), 1.

³⁵ Dwikasih Wardani Eva Klara, dan Ajeng Agrita, *Sosiologi Keluarga: Bahan Ajar Dan Pembelajaran MSDM* (Jakarta Timur: UNJ Press, 2020), 59.

³⁶ Endang Supriatna, “Upacara Seba Pada Masyarakat Baduy,” *Patanjala: Jurnal Penelitian Sejarah dan Budaya* 4, no. 3 (2012): 488, <http://ejournalpatanjala.kemdikbud.go.id/patanjala/index.php/patanjala/article/view/160>.

The bride's family may provide a dowry to the bride, known as "na ike ma na suti," which includes items for economic ventures, household furnishings, land, or animals. At times, the "oe maputu' ai malala" ceremony can be postponed for a specific period, with the consequence of delaying the bestowal of dowry to the bride.

Next is the "kaus nono" ceremony, symbolizing that the married woman will unite with her husband's family for a lifetime. The groom's family seeks permission through a spokesperson and places the "oko mama" (betel nut box) as a symbolic request to detach the bride's family. The bride's family accepts the request by lifting a woven cloth as a sign of lowering the bride's family status, then the groom's family drapes the woven cloth over their heads and together they proceed to the husband's residence (*tel nobif*). At the agreed-upon time, the bride's family follows the couple to their residence, bringing and presenting dowry items as a sign of strengthening familial ties for generations to come.

There are several types of marriage among the Atoni Pah Meto people. The first one is *eloping*. Despite deep spiritual connections, parental disapproval may force a couple into elopement, seen as disrespectful (called "in nao nok fai mes okan" and "atoin abakat"). Reconciliation involves restoring honor through mutual understanding within brotherhood's framework for generational continuity. The second one is *forced marriage*. If a secret relationship leads to pregnancy or is discovered without pregnancy, the couple is urged or even forced into marriage. This situation, known as "asu ma' bibi" (dog catches goat), is traditionally resolved within familial bonds.

In case of adultery and divorce among the Atoni Meto', particularly in "Banamas Neonsaet" (East Amanuban), there are two resolutions that must be taken. Firstly, "mae kaes" (enduring shame), involves the husband's patient acceptance, restoring his honor through a fine, typically a large animal, emphasizing reputation. Secondly, "mae meto" (headshake), leads to divorce, possible murder, and penalties. Divorce deprives a husband of shared property and custody of children. A similar situation occurs if a wife leaves and remarries. Children born outside marriage are called "an koti," inheriting the mother's family, irrespective of gender, with equal rights.

Healing Ceremony

The healing ceremony among the Atoni Pah Meto people follows the *palolit otenaus* method. "Otenaus" means curing by grasping a spear. If the back of the nail of the right thumb touches the top of the spearhead, the answer is found. Sickness can result from various causes, such as diseases, bewitchment, or violating ancestral values. Illness caused by sorcery can be cured by a "Mnane" knowledgeable in medicine and capable of uttering incantations to ward off sorcery. If the illness stems from violating ancestral wishes, it can be revealed through the "otenaus" method (grasping the spear), involving questions while touching the spear's post. The obtained answers help determine the cause of the illness; and with an offering to Uis Neno (God Father), peace and healing are hoped for the sick.

Death Ceremony

Death is an inevitability in the journey of every individual. In the life cycle of Atoin Meto, particularly in “Banamas Neonsaet” (East Amanuban District), there are two types of death, namely, natural death (*maet bi ume nanan*) and unnatural death (*maet mone’ or maet maputu’*). Natural deaths result from illnesses, while unnatural deaths include accidents, homicides, or suicides. The following is the execution of death ceremonies.

The first is the ceremony for a natural death. The bond of marriage is closely intertwined with death ceremonies. The expanding family ties through marital alliances acknowledge the role of uncles (*atoin amaf*) with their recognized existence and strong influence. When someone passes away, swift notification is conveyed to *atoin amaf* and all elders (*mnasi-mnasi*) by the younger generation. The announcement of mourning is described with the term *tapoitana haef* (sending a message), which conveys the news traditionally (*amnek hanaf*) to various family groups, both male and female descendants. Depending on the social status of the deceased and the specific figure designated to communicate the death, certain elders are trusted as *amnek hanaf* (message bearers). Particularly in the village vicinity, news of death is often announced by blowing a trumpet (*fu’ to’is*) and the mournful sound of lamentation that echoes as far as it can be heard.

If the deceased is a parent, the eldest son acts as the organizer or caretaker (*suistuaf*) overseeing all funeral arrangements. In the case of a deceased child, the father naturally assumes the role of *suistuaf*. The arrival of *atoin amaf* is eagerly awaited as they play a crucial role in negotiating various aspects, including driving in the stake as a sign to commence grave digging. During the burial, “*atoin amaf*” wields a hammer and drives nails into the coffin, receiving disproportionate rewards as he is entitled to the head taken. Throughout the process, family members from various lineages form a procession (*lanan*), mourning with sorrowful cries and contributing livestock and food items.

After the funeral, a grand feast is held, lasting up to seven days for prominent figures. If the post-funeral celebration cannot be held immediately, it may occur later multiple times – forty nights, four months, or four years. Occasionally, it may encompass several deceased individuals (spouse, siblings) who passed away more than four years ago. In 1949,³⁷ a feast commemorating four years since the death of a grandfather and grandmother took place in the village of Sanaplo, Ketemukungan Noe Olas, now part of the Kaeneno Village, Fautmolo District. It reflects the tribal religion adherents' belief in clearing the path for the ancestors' spirits. A significant number of cattle and water buffalo, as well as pigs, were sacrificed during the grand feast. The water buffalo had been raised locally for a long time, while the cattle were introduced and raised in Timor in 1912.³⁸ The remarkable sacrifices, unproductive activities, wastefulness, and unseen pressures led to accelerated impoverishment of the people.³⁹ This situation began to be recognized, especially by a few Protestant Christian missionaries. During that period, in the “Banamas Neonsaet”, the society comprised both tribal religion followers and some Protestant Christians.

³⁷ Taneo, “Wawancara.”

³⁸ DEPDIBUD, *Sejarah Daerah Nusa Tenggara Timur* (Jakarta, 1984), 23.

³⁹ William, *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life, A Study of Place and Precedence in South West Timor*, 279.

Missionaries aimed to simplify the feast gradually, curbing excesses over an extended period. While the church gained independence on October 31, 1947, as the Evangelical Christian Church of Timor (GMT) within the Protestant Church in Indonesia, substantial simplification efforts required more time. The Spiritual Awakening Movement of Protestant Christianity in early September 1965⁴⁰ and the New Order government structure in early 1966, following the quashing of the September 30, 1965/PKI Movement, significantly assisted the feast's simplification. This was further facilitated by the presence of the Catholic Church around 1963 and Islam in East Amanuban around 1967 (where bodies were immediately buried on the day of death).

The second type of death ceremony is meant for unnatural death (*maet mone' or maet maputu'*). Unnatural deaths (*maet mone'*), such as murder or suicide, involve cooling the body outside, led by a ritual expert (*ammane*) with mantras and medicine (*le'u*) for spiritual potential. This expedited ritual includes planting banana and young sugarcane stems near the grave to ensure the spirit of the deceased (*maet mone'*) does not disturb the community.

The Atoni Pa Meto people believe that the spirit of the deceased dying by an unnatural death can disturb the community, as can be seen in the following story. In July 1963, after burying an unnatural death (gunshot victim) in Neonsae village (now Nunuhkniti Village), Taneo and his father walked along the Noepom River at night. Gong sounds and faint cries echoed. Strange footsteps, like six feet (three people), and the unseen third person's hand movements were felt closely behind. This eerie experience continued until they reached their home in Senu' village (now Pisan Village).⁴¹ This atmosphere ushered them into the mystical realm, a subsystem that is present in nearly all religions and religious systems to fulfill humans' desire to experience and feel emotions in union with God. This mystical realm is believed to be unattainable by ordinary human reasoning.⁴² Indeed, they returned home carrying raw beef, a gift from the funeral feast, weighing around two kilograms. According to ancient beliefs, bringing raw meat from the funeral procession would keep the deceased's spirit accompanying the group. Demons (*nitu*) had the opportunity to transform into the spirits of the unnatural dead just to disturb. With unwavering faith, they remained calm until arriving home with a sense of comfort.

In contemporary life, such beliefs have significantly weakened with the introduction of Christianity and the increasing Christian population in East Amanuban, followed by Catholicism in 1963 and Islam in 1967. Currently, it is widely accepted that individuals who die unnaturally will be buried according to their respective religions, regardless of where and how they passed away. Nevertheless, it does not imply that these beliefs from ancient times have completely vanished.⁴³ There are still pregnant women who, when traveling at night, always carry nails (pierced into their hair buns) or knives to avoid disturbances from *Kuntilanak* or evil spirits (*nitu*). If infants cry incessantly, especially at night, they still burn cow or buffalo horns or bones with the belief that it will ward off disturbances from evil spirits (*nitu*).

⁴⁰ Taneo, "Wawancara."

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Dendy Sugono, "Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia-Pusat Bahasa" (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2014), 660.

⁴³ William, *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life, A Study of Place and Precedence in South West Timor*, 283.

Life Cycle According to the Atoni Pah Meto's Belief

The Atoni Pah Meto believes that a structured life cycle influences the comfort and security of individuals within the community. The community's life cycle, as outlined sequentially above, includes "neot hafot neu aput amonit," the poitan anah" ceremony, the "na' lefi" ceremony (installing "muti"), coming-of-age ceremonies, marriage, and funeral rites. These rites are perpetually experienced by the people of the East Amanuban society, culminating ultimately in the belief in "Uis Neno" (the Creator) upon death.

The traditional ceremony of "neot hafot neu aput amonit" holds a distinctive significance in the beliefs of the East Amanuban society. This ceremony expresses care and concern for the protection and well-being of pregnant women and unborn babies through prayers, sacrificial offerings, and prohibitions against harmful behaviors. Additionally, the ceremony reflects a profound reverence for human life from its inception, as well as an awareness of the spiritual influence on the well-being of unborn babies. The involvement of family members and traditional midwives demonstrates solidarity in this customary ceremony, highlighting deep-seated beliefs in the importance of life, well-being, and spiritual safety within the family.

The "poitan anah" ceremony signifies the formal introduction of a new child into the culture of East Amanuban. Symbolisms such as the cutting of the umbilical cord express reverence for life. Through this ceremony, the community ensures the spiritual and physical well-being of the baby while strengthening familial bonds. It reflects the importance of a balanced relationship between humans and nature in nurturing children as the most precious blessings.

The "na' lefi" ceremony holds significant importance in the culture of East Amanuban, symbolizing the severance of negative bonds and the bolstering of a child's spirit to construct a good future. The placement of "muti" bracelets on the wrists, ankles, and neck of the infant embodies blessings for steadfast faith, hard work, and skills necessary for adult life. In the beliefs of the East Amanuban society, this ceremony is crucial for ensuring spiritual protection and success in the child's life, while also reinforcing familial ties and cultural identity.

The ceremonies during youth in the life of East Amanuban society carry profound significance in preparing for adulthood, particularly concerning marriage and household life. The "nabe' sonnet" emphasizes the importance of skills and readiness in managing household affairs for young women, while "anfut" and "fon nisin" underscore aspects of personal health and cleanliness, as well as physical and mental preparedness for adult roles. These rites are crucial for instilling responsibility, independence, and readiness in assuming adult roles, while also reinforcing the traditional values necessary for family and community life.

The marriage ceremony in the East Amanuban society holds significant meaning in strengthening familial bonds, gaining recognition within society, and upholding ancestral trust while maintaining harmonious relations with "Uis Neno." Through elaborate processes rich in symbolism and tradition, marriage signifies a transition from adolescence to adulthood, where individuals are expected to embrace responsibilities as responsible family members. This underscores the formation of a strong cultural identity,

the reinforcement of intrafamily relationships, and the reaffirmation of traditional values that serve as the foundation for family and communal life.

The funeral ceremony in the East Amanuban community holds profound significance in understanding the cycle of life and the interconnectedness between worldly existence and the spiritual realm. Through this process, the community honors and celebrates the life that has passed, strengthens family ties, and believes in the spiritual journey of the departed soul. This represents the preservation of rich traditions and culture, the reinforcement of social bonds among community members, and a deeper understanding of the meaning of life and death. Despite the influence of other religions, the belief in ancient traditions continues to imbue color and strength into everyday life in the East Amanuban society.

The traditional ceremonies within the life cycle of the East Amanuban society embody values of unity, reverence for life, and spiritual interconnectedness. From the protection of pregnant mothers to funeral rituals, these traditions strengthen familial and cultural bonds, while preserving an understanding of the significance of life and death within the community. “Uis Neno” bestows a tranquil life upon those who adhere to the proper customary practices of the life cycle in the East Amanuban society. Those who stay true to these customs will be blessed with blessings bestowed by “Uis Neno.”

As social beings, humans need to understand the life cycle well in various aspects of life, including resource management, learning and adaptation, and ecosystem balance. By understanding the life cycle, we can optimize resource use, minimize negative environmental impacts, and maintain ecosystem balance. This also contributes to maintaining community mental well-being, as understanding the life cycle allows us to appreciate life more and address social inequality issues, such as suicide and abortion, often caused by a lack of appreciation for life and the ability to cope with difficulties.

In other words, the human life cycle demonstrates its existence as a whole and gifted creation of God, with good conditions from the beginning. Therefore, respecting the life cycle is essential, where every stage of life must be maintained without interruption to preserve human values. Appreciation for the life cycle significantly contributes to individual and community mental well-being, creating an environment that supports emotional, social, and spiritual development. Conversely, neglecting or breaking the chain of life can lead to increased social problems, including cases that disregard life, such as abortion and suicide.

Thus, maintaining the continuity of the life cycle is a form of adherence to moral and spiritual values and becomes a fundamental strategy in building a mentally and socially prosperous community. Human life stage ceremonies have deep cultural, social, and spiritual values but can also have negative aspects, such as gender inequality, harmful health practices using unhygienic tools, social oppression, negative perceptions of death due to prolonged grief and extravagant spending, and environmental impacts. Therefore, criticism of these ceremonies is necessary to improve or adapt these practices to be more inclusive, sustainable, and suitable for the present time, without denying the existing positive values.

Conclusion

This research reveals that Atoni Pah Meto’s people in East Amanuban conduct various ceremonies and rituals throughout life stages, from pregnancy to childbirth, aiming to protect infants from life challenges. Ceremonies like “neot hafot neu aput amonit,” “poitan anah,” and “na’ lefi” pay special attention to spiritual protection and the severance of negative bonds for infants. In youth, the “nabe’ sonet

– meput” ceremony prepares young men and women with practical skills and responsibilities in households before marriage. Marriage ceremonies, involving customary norms and family cooperation, mark a significant transition from adolescence to the family stage. The traditional healing system “otenaus” and death rituals influenced by religion create a strong foundation for a balanced family life, blending cultural heritage and religious values. This writing contributes to enriching the understanding of the traditions and culture of the Atoni Pah Meto community in East Amanuban, which can help maintain the community's mental well-being. By providing insights into cultural values, the role of beliefs, appreciation for cultural diversity, and the importance of preserving traditions, it can increase awareness, tolerance, and preservation of local culture. It can contribute to maintaining the community's mental well-being by strengthening cultural identity, reducing stress and anxiety, and enhancing self-confidence and community cohesion.

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