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Niut Sa'e as Consolation in the Light of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Abstract
This article examines consolation and hope in the Niut Sa'e tradition of the Dawan community in North Central Timor in the light of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Niut Sa'e is understood as a cultural experience in which a deceased person is believed to appear through a living person and deliver messages to the family. The study employs Stephen B. Bevans's contextual theology, particularly the anthropological and praxis models, to bring cultural experience into dialogue with Christian faith. The findings indicate that Niut Sa'e functions as a symbolic space where families express grief, longing, regret, and unresolved relational issues. Meanwhile, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 grounds Christian consolation in the death and resurrection of Christ and the hope of being with the Lord. The dialogue between the two perspectives is critical and contextual, not a theological identification or substitution.

Keywords: Niut Sa'e, Consolation, Hope, Contextual Theology, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Introduction

Death is a universal human experience, but the meaning given to loss is shaped by the language, rites, social relationships, and horizons of belief within a culture.[1] Contemporary studies of grief show that mourning rites help families express loss, receive communal support, maintain a symbolic bond with the deceased, and reorder life after death.[2] In Timorese society, including the Dawan or *Atoni Pah Meto* people, the experience of death is also related to the relationships among human beings, family, ancestors, and the cosmological order.[3] Death rites therefore function not only as ceremonial practices but also as cultural means of interpreting loss and sustaining the continuity of social and spiritual relationships.[4]

This dimension is reflected in the worldview of the *Atoni Pah Meto* which, as Afi and Banamtuan show in their study of the *Poitan Liana* rite, situates human life within its

[1]Hoang Le et al., "Mourning Rituals Impact Grief Outcomes in East and Southeast Asia: A Mixed-Methods Review," Death Studies 49 (2025): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2025.2561079.

[2]Jacques Cherblanc et al., "Rituals in Grief: Why Meaning Matters More Than Numbers," Journal of Loss and Trauma 30, no. 6 (2025): 871–892, https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2025.2471816.

[3]Kristian E. Y. M. Afi dan Maglon F. Banamtuan, "Kajian Sosio-Historis tentang Pandangan Dunia Atoni Pah Meto dalam Ritus Poitan Liana," Paradigma: Jurnal Kajian Budaya 10, no. 1 (2020): 49–58, https://doi.org/10.17510/paradigma.v10i1.335.

[4]Susana de Matos Viegas, "The Co-Presence of Ancestors and Their Reburials among the Fataluku (Timor-Leste)," Indonesia 107 (2019): 55–73, https://doi.org/10.1353/ind.2019.0004.

connection to the social and cosmic order. Kinship relations, the role of the *Atoin Amaf*, and belief in *Uis Neno*, *Uis Pah*, and the ancestors are expressed through ritual action and symbols.[5] Within this cultural framework, death can be understood not merely as the end of an individual life but as an event that affects family and community relationships and demands a process of interpreting and reordering those relationships.

One practice worth examining in the context of Dawan bereavement is *Niut Sa'e*, namely the experience of a deceased person being present through someone who is still living and delivering a message to the family. This experience may relate to unresolved matters, kinship relations, or the family's need for clarity and calm in facing loss. This study does not aim to prove or deny the possibility of literal communication between the deceased and the living, but to understand *Niut Sa'e* as a cultural and symbolic experience on the basis of the meanings given by the people who practice it. Herein lies the problem to be examined: how does *Niut Sa'e* function as a practice of consolation in the experience of grief, and how can its meaning be critically placed in dialogue with theological perspectives on death, consolation, and hope? This question matters so that the study does not stop at describing a tradition but can also assess its pastoral meaning, its possible contribution to the care of grieving families, and the limits of its interpretation in the light of Christian faith.

Research on Dawan death rites shows that mourning practices have a broader dimension than the mere expression of sorrow. Studies of *kulut kaet* show that death laments in Dawan society relate to the expression of loss, honor for the deceased, and the social and religious dimensions of communal life. For this reason, the experience of death in Dawan society cannot be separated from the relationships among individuals, family, community, and the beliefs inherited in the culture.[6] This perspective is important for research on *Niut Sa'e*, since it shows that the experience of death in Dawan society has relational and communal dimensions that can become an entry point for understanding the meaning of consolation.

Besides research on the Dawan, studies in contextual theology provide a foundation for efforts to bring cultural experience and Christian faith together. Bevans regards human context and culture as an important element in the process of doing theology. Theology is not born in a vacuum but always confronts concrete human experience and must take into account the context in which faith is lived.[7] In the Indonesian context, this approach opens the possibility of reading cultural practices seriously without immediately rejecting them or accepting them uncritically. Research on contextual theology and culture in Indonesia also shows that dialogue among local traditions, the experience of the community, and Christian faith can become a space for

[5]Afi dan Banamtuan, "Kajian Sosio-Historis," 50.

[6]Rudolof Jibrael Isu et al., "The Religious Meaning of 'Kulut Kaet' (Mourning Lament) in Dawan Ethnic in Nusa Village in East Nusa Tenggara: An Ethnographic Perspective Study," E-Link Journal 12, no. 1 (2025): 95–102, https://doi.org/10.30736/ej.v12i01.1252.

[7]Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, ed. rev. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

formulating more contextual theological understandings. Nugroho and Pramono, for example, show how cultural practices in the context of death can be read through Bevans' contextual theology models and placed in dialogue with Christian faith.[8]

Nevertheless, the research on the Dawan and the research on contextual theology mentioned above still leave room for further development. The study by Afi and Banamtuan mainly explains the worldview of the *Atoni Pah Meto* through the *Poitan Liana* rite, while the study of *kulut kaet* gives attention to the expression of grief in Dawan death traditions. Meanwhile, studies in contextual theology mostly discuss the general relationship between culture and Christian faith. There is thus still room to bring together more specifically the *Niut Sa'e* tradition, the experience of consolation and hope in death, and the biblical witness concerning death and Christian hope. This *gap* is the starting point of this study.

This problem becomes all the more important when *Niut Sa'e* is placed in the context of the life of Dawan Christians. A church living in the midst of society does not face people who experience death without a cultural background. Grieving Christian families bring with them the language, symbols, memories, kinship relations, and cultural practices that have shaped how they understand death. Theological reflection on death therefore cannot be content with repeating the doctrine of life after death but must listen to how the people concretely experience loss within their culture. From the perspective of contextual theology, culture can become a context that is listened to and critically analyzed in the process of reflecting on faith, while Scripture and the Christian tradition retain a normative function in that process.[9] The study of Dayak Tunjung cosmology, for example, shows how a local worldview can be placed in dialogue with Christian doctrine through Bevans' synthetic model without erasing the distinctiveness of either source.[10]

It is within this framework that 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 becomes important. This pericope arose from the anxiety of the Thessalonian congregation concerning believers who had died. Paul does not ignore the experience of grief but directs it toward a hope rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Believers who have died are not regarded as standing outside God's work of salvation. Rather, Paul affirms their resurrection in Christ and the

[8]Y. Nugroho dan T. Pramono, "Pendekatan Kontekstual terhadap Tradisi Peringatan Kematian dalam Pelayanan Pastoral di Gereja Gladagsari, Boyolali," *Immanuel: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 7, no. 1 (2026), https://doi.org/10.46305/im.v7i1.608.

[9]Ebenhaizer I Nuban Timo dan Bobby Kurnia Putrawan, "The Bible in Contextual Theological Work in Indonesia," Quaerens: Journal of Theology and Christianity Studies 3, no. 1 (2021): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.46362/quaerens.v3i1.24

[10]Yohanes Damianus, "Dayak Tunjung Cosmology and the Theology of Communio Sanctorum: An Exploration of Contextual Theology in Synthetic Model of Stephen B. Bevans," *International Journal of Indonesian Philosophy & Theology* 1, no. 1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.47043/ijipth.v1i1.5.

fellowship of believers with the Lord. The consolation in this passage is therefore not built on a denial of sorrow but on an eschatological hope centered on Christ.[11]

This is evident especially at the close of the pericope, where Paul asks the congregation to "comfort one another" with words about this hope. Consolation in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 thus has both a theological and a pastoral dimension. Consolation does not mean eliminating the experience of loss but providing a faith perspective on death so that grief does not end in despair. Christian hope is built on the conviction that Christ died and rose again and that those who are in Christ will share in the life that God has promised.[12]

At this point there is an important space for dialogue between *Niut Sa'e* and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. At the level of human experience, both confront the problem of loss, longing for the deceased, the need for consolation, and the search for meaning in the midst of death. *Niut Sa'e* can serve as a cultural space for families to express longing, convey messages, recall their relationship with the deceased, and resolve relational issues that remain unfinished. Meanwhile, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 offers consolation grounded in faith in Christ, the resurrection, and the hope of being together with the Lord. Yet the two cannot simply be equated. The consolation in *Niut Sa'e* is rooted in the structure of cultural meaning of the Dawan people, whereas Paul's consolation is rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ. The dialogue undertaken in this study is therefore not an attempt to force similarities but to read the possible points of convergence together with their theological limits.

It is precisely this difference that makes dialogue important. *Niut Sa'e* can raise questions about how human beings experience loss, how the relationship with the deceased is understood, and how families find space to work through sorrow. Conversely, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 provides a theological horizon for consolation and hope centered on Christ. Thus the local tradition is not set up as a substitute for the Gospel, and the biblical text is not used to erase the cultural experience of the people. The two are placed in critical dialogue so that human experience within culture can be listened to, while Christian faith provides a theological orientation toward that experience.

On the basis of this background, this study poses the question: How can consolation and hope in the *Niut Sa'e* tradition of the Dawan people in North Central Timor Regency be reflected upon in the light of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18? The question is directed at three main foci: first, to understand the meaning of *Niut Sa'e* in the Dawan experience of death; second, to identify the dimensions of consolation and hope present in that tradition; and third, to reflect on that meaning in the light of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. This study does not intend to determine whether the people's beliefs about the presence of the deceased are true or false but seeks to

[11]Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 164.

[12]Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 164-181.

understand the meaning and function of that experience in the life of the grieving family. Accordingly, this study argues that *Niut Sa'e* can be read as a cultural space in which families work through loss, longing, memory, and relationships, while 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 provides the horizon of Christian consolation and hope rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ. The dialogue between the two is expected to open space for theological reflection that honors the richness of Dawan culture while preserving the distinctiveness of Christian hope.

Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a contextual theology approach to understand the meaning and function of the *Niut Sa'e* tradition in Dawan society and to place it in dialogue with Christian consolation and hope in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. The contextual theology approach was chosen because this study aims not only to describe a cultural phenomenon but also to undertake theological reflection that connects the concrete experience of the people with the witness of Christian faith. Specifically, this study draws on two of Stephen B. Bevans' models of contextual theology, namely the anthropological model and the praxis model. The anthropological model is used to understand *Niut Sa'e* from within the world of meaning of the Dawan people, placing culture as a source of human experience that must be listened to in the process of doing theology. The praxis model is used to connect the experience of grief, reconciliation, and the restoration of relationships in *Niut Sa'e* with critical reflection on the Christian witness concerning death, resurrection, and hope in Christ.

The data sources of this study consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data are the biblical text, especially 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, which provides the theological basis for understanding Christian consolation and hope in the face of death. The secondary data include literature on the worldview and culture of the *Atoni Pah Meto*, death traditions and the phenomenon of *Niut Sa'e*, the contextual theology of Stephen B. Bevans, and the biblical studies of Gordon D. Fee and Charles A. Wanamaker on 1 Thessalonians. Data were collected through a telephone interview with Mr. Aloysius Binsasi, a customary elder in the village of Oesena who has extensive knowledge of *Niut Sa'e*, and through library research, namely reading, identifying, and analyzing various written sources relevant to the focus of the study. This technique enables the researcher to examine in depth and comprehensively such key concepts as *Niut Sa'e*, grief, consolation, hope, the resurrection of Christ, and life with the Lord.

Data analysis was carried out in several interrelated stages. First, the researcher describes the world of meaning of the Dawan people and the *Niut Sa'e* tradition on the basis of anthropological and cultural literature. Second, the researcher analyzes the function of *Niut Sa'e* as a space for working through grief and restoring relationships within the family. Third, the researcher interprets 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 theologically and pastorally in order to understand the basis of Christian consolation and hope. Fourth, the researcher compares the points of convergence and difference between *Niut Sa'e* and the biblical text through critical dialogue. Fifth, the researcher formulates a contextual theological synthesis that can serve as a basis for the pastoral care of Christians in the Dawan cultural context. Through these stages,

this study does not aim to prove or deny the supernatural reality in *Niut Sa'e* but to analyze the meaning and function that the people give to the experience and to place it in dialogue with Christian faith.

Findings and Discussion

Niut Sa'e as a Practice of Consolation in the Death Tradition of the Dawan People

Niut Sa'e in the World of Meaning of the Dawan People

Niut Sa'e must first be understood from within the world of meaning of the people who practice it. In the context of the *Atoni Pah Meto*, human life does not stand apart from social relationships, nature, the ancestors, and supernatural reality. The study by Afi and Banamtuan on the worldview of the *Atoni Pah Meto* shows that the life of the community is understood in relation to *Uis Neno*, *Uis Pah*, the ancestors, and the social and cosmic order.[13] Human experience is thus situated not only in empirical space but also in a network of relationships that connects human beings with a reality that transcends them.

This framework is important for reading *Niut Sa'e*. The practice cannot be adequately understood merely as a phenomenon concerning the deceased or as the question of whether communication with the deceased actually occurs. The more relevant question for this study is: what does the experience of *Niut Sa'e* mean for families facing death? In this context, *Niut Sa'e* can be understood as a symbolic experience that the community interprets as the presence of the deceased through someone who is still living. Through this experience, certain messages are conveyed to the family, especially concerning family relationships, affection, apologies, unresolved matters, responsibilities, or farewell messages.[14]

This kind of reading accords with the anthropological approach of Stephen B. Bevans. The anthropological model places human experience and culture as an important element in the process of doing theology. For Bevans, contextual theology should not merely bring a theological formulation from outside and apply it to a culture but must attend to the experience of human beings living in a particular social and cultural context.[15] Accordingly, *Niut Sa'e* must first be listened to as part of the concrete experience of the Dawan people before a theological judgment is made.

Within this framework, *Niut Sa'e* has a strong relational dimension. The message attributed to the deceased concerns not only the relationship between the deceased individual and the living individual but is often related to relationships among families. Apologies, matters of property, conflicts among relatives, unresolved responsibilities, and expressions of love show that death can reopen relational issues that went unresolved during life. Thus the

[13]Afi dan Banamtuan, "Kajian Sosio-Historis," 50.

[14]Aloysius Binsasi, wawancara oleh penulis melalui telepon, September 2026.

[15]Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 25.

experience of *Niut Sa'e* can function as a symbolic space for articulating what had previously gone unspoken.

This dimension is important because consolation does not always come in the form of advice or words of encouragement. Consolation can occur when the bereaved are given space to express loss, longing, regret, and even unresolved matters with the deceased. In such a context, *Niut Sa'e* can be understood as one of the ways in which the community culturally gives form to the experience of grief. The practice does not remove death and does not automatically erase sorrow, but it provides a symbolic space for the family to work through the experience of loss.

Niut Sa'e as a Space for Processing Grief

From the perspective of consolation, what matters most in *Niut Sa'e* is not the practice's capacity to provide information about the condition of the deceased, but the relational and emotional function that emerges within the experience. When a family receives a message understood to come from the deceased, they gain an opportunity to express things that may not have been said while the person was still alive. For this reason, the experience can become a space for articulating longing, love, regret, apology, and acceptance of the reality of loss.

One experience that shows the function of *Niut Sa'e* as a space for processing grief concerns the death of Servasius Talan in Faenono, Oesena village. In the account told by Aloysius Binsasi, after Servasius Talan died, a *Niut Sa'e* experience arose that the family understood as the presence of the deceased and the delivery of a message from him. The message concerned family relationships that had previously been troubled. Servasius was understood to be reminding his family not to leave their relationships with their brothers and sisters and other kin in a state of unreconciled conflict. The message was then received not only as an expression about the deceased, but also as a reminder to the living family members to attend again to relationships that had been fractured.[16] This example shows that *Niut Sa'e* can become a space of symbolic encounter that enables a family to face again emotional and relational experiences that had previously remained unresolved.

Consolation, therefore, is not identical with erasing grief. Rather, grief is given a place to be expressed and processed. The family is not forced to forget the deceased quickly, but is given space to reorder their relationship with the memories, love, and shared experiences of that person. In this context, the *Niut Sa'e* experience can function as a symbolic medium that helps the family make meaning of the loss. Consolation takes place through the process of expressing what is still held within the relationship, not through the removal of the experience of loss.

This function has a social dimension. When the message that emerges concerns family conflict, an apology, the division of responsibilities, or unresolved matters, the *Niut Sa'e*

[16]Binsasi, wawancara.

experience can prompt family members to face again relationships marked by tension. In such cases, a message understood to come from the deceased can become a trigger for the family to hold conversations, ask forgiveness, settle disputes, or restore relationships. Thus, the consoling value of *Niut Sa'e* does not stop at the individual's emotional experience but can continue into reconciliatory action in family life. Consolation in this context is not only psychological but also relational. The restoration of relationships among kin becomes part of the process of facing death.

This reading accords with the understanding that death rituals derive their meaning not merely from the frequency or form of the ritual, but from its capacity to provide space for individuals and communities to make meaning of loss.[2] In the context of *Niut Sa'e*, this meaning becomes evident when the symbolic experience of the presence of the deceased becomes an opportunity for the family to articulate feelings, face unfinished matters, and reorder relationships among kin. Thus, this cultural practice can be read as one cultural mechanism in the process of grief work.

Nevertheless, this reading must be undertaken critically. This study need not claim that the message objectively and truly comes from the deceased. Such a claim exceeds the capacity of this contextual-theological study. What can be analyzed is the meaning the community gives to the experience and the social-relational function that emerges from it. This distinction is important so that the study remains within the academic domain and does not turn into a metaphysical proof.

Within the framework of contextual theology, this position also allows the cultural experience of the community to be treated as data that must be listened to and interpreted critically. A tradition is not immediately accepted as theological truth, but neither is it rejected before the meaning that lives within it is understood. With such an approach, *Niut Sa'e* can be read first of all from the concrete experience of the community and then placed in dialogue with theological reflection on grief, consolation, relationship, and hope. This approach makes the analysis more grounded because theological reflection departs from the praxis of the community's life, not merely from theological concepts imposed from outside.

Accordingly, the answer to the first question of this study can be formulated as follows: *Niut Sa'e* can be understood as a practice of consolation because it provides a symbolic space for grieving families to express longing, love, regret, apology, and farewell messages, and to resolve relational matters that remain unsettled. The consolation that emerges is not primarily the removal of grief, but the provision of space for the family to process loss and to reorder their relationship with the memory of the deceased and with living family members. At this point, the consoling power of *Niut Sa'e* lies not in proof concerning the origin of the message, but in the social and emotional process that occurs when the family makes meaning of the experience of loss and responds to it through conversation, reconciliation, and the restoration of relationships.

Consolation and Hope in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Christian Grief: "That You May Not Grieve as Others Do"

Paul opens this section by saying that he does not want the congregation to be ignorant about those who have died, so that they may not grieve "like the others who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). This statement is important because it shows that Paul does not forbid Christians from grieving. The issue is not whether believers may experience sorrow, but how that grief is understood in the light of the Christian faith.[17]

Wanamaker shows that the problem of believers who have died is closely related to the eschatological hope of the Thessalonian congregation. Their anxiety concerned the position of the dead when the Lord comes again. Paul's response is therefore directed at explaining that believers who have died do not lose their share in the salvation that will be revealed at the Lord's coming.[18]

This gives 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 a strongly pastoral character. Paul does not offer an eschatological explanation merely to satisfy the congregation's curiosity, but to provide a basis for consolation. Knowledge about the future has a pastoral function because it changes the way the community faces death in the present.[19]

Thus, there is an important difference between the grief portrayed in 1 Thessalonians and the view that believers must not be sad. Paul continues to acknowledge the reality of loss. What is distinguished is grief accompanied by hope from grief that has no horizon of hope. Christian consolation is therefore not a denial of the sense of loss, but the placing of grief in the light of God's work.

The Basis of Hope: The Death and Resurrection of Christ

The basis of Paul's consolation is clearly seen in verse 14: "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." This structure of argument shows that the believers' hope for those who have died is rooted in the Christ event.[20]

Fee emphasizes that the conviction about believers who have died does not stand alone. Paul connects it with the belief that Jesus died and rose. Thus, the resurrection of Christ becomes the basis for hope concerning those who have "died in Jesus." Christian hope is

[17]G. Nsiah, "Reception of Paul's Eschatological Teaching in Ghana: A Contextual Study of 1 Thess. 4:13–18," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2024): art. a9065, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9065.

[18]Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 165.

[19]Nsiah, "Reception of Paul's Eschatological Teaching."

[20]Nsiah, "Reception of Paul's Eschatological Teaching."

therefore not primarily a hope based on the experience of communicating with the deceased, but a hope rooted in God's act in Christ.[21]

This is an important point when Paul's text is placed in dialogue with *Niut Sa'e*. *Niut Sa'e* gives families space to experience or interpret the presence of the deceased through a particular message. Meanwhile, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 places the basis of hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both confront the experience of loss, but they offer different foundations for consolation.

Thus, there is a point of convergence in human experience, but a difference in theological foundation. *Niut Sa'e* departs from the community's cultural experience of relationship with the deceased, whereas Paul departs from the testimony of faith concerning the death and resurrection of Christ.

The Hope of Being Together with the Lord

Verses 15–17 then portray the coming of the Lord. The Lord will descend from heaven, those who have died in Christ will rise first, and those who are still alive will together with them meet the Lord. This passage reaches its climax in the declaration that they will "always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

According to Fee, this passage is not primarily intended as a detailed chronology of the end times, but as an affirmation concerning the fate of believers who have died. They will not lose their share in the Lord's coming. On the contrary, they are mentioned first in the sequence of events.[22]

Wanamaker also places verses 16–17 in the context of the congregation's eschatological hope. Believers who have died and those who are still alive alike take part in the Lord's coming. Thus, Paul's hope does not end with the idea that the dead "remain in contact" with their living families through experiences in the present world. The center of his hope is the togetherness of all believers with the Lord.[23]

This yields an important understanding of Christian consolation. Consolation is not merely that the bereaved can feel close to the deceased through certain memories or experiences. Christian consolation has an eschatological orientation: there is hope that those who are in Christ will share in life together with the Lord.

"Therefore Encourage One Another"

Verse 18 gives the pastoral purpose of Paul's entire explanation: "Therefore encourage one another with these words." This sentence shows that a theology of death does not stop at

[21]Fee, *First and Second Letters*, 170.

[22]Fee, *First and Second Letters*, 166.

[23]Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 167.

doctrinal knowledge. That knowledge must produce communal action in which people comfort one another.[24]

Here the close relationship between hope and praxis becomes apparent. Eschatological hope is not a reason to neglect those who are grieving. On the contrary, hope becomes the basis for the community to sustain one another. In this context, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 can be read not only as a text about what will happen at the end of the age, but also as a text about how the Christian community faces death in the present.[25]

Therefore, the answer to the second question of this study is that consolation in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is built through hope rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ, the participation of believers in the Lord's coming, and the assurance of togetherness with the Lord. Grief is not denied, but placed within the horizon of hope. This hope is then embodied in practice through the call to comfort one another.

Theological Dialogue between Niut Sa'e and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Point of Convergence: Both Begin from the Experience of Loss

The encounter between *Niut Sa'e* and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 can begin first of all from a shared human experience, namely death and grief. *Niut Sa'e* arises in a context in which a family faces loss and needs space to work through its relationship with the deceased. Meanwhile, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 arises in the context of a congregation that likewise experienced a problem concerning members of the community who had died.

Thus, both contexts show that death is not merely an individual matter. Death affects the community, relationships, memory, and the way the living understand the future. The differences in cultural and theological context do not eliminate this point of convergence in human experience.

From the perspective of contextual theology, such a point of convergence is important. Bevans affirms that contextual theology is concerned with the effort to understand the Christian faith in relation to the context of concrete life. Therefore, the Dawan community's experience of grief can become a starting point for theological reflection, provided that the experience is then placed in critical dialogue with the sources of the Christian faith.[26]

Point of Convergence: Consolation Is Relational

The second point of convergence lies in the relational nature of consolation. *Niut Sa'e* provides space for families to speak about their relationship with the deceased and with other

[24]Nsiah, "Reception of Paul's Eschatological Teaching."

[25]Nsiah, "Reception of Paul's Eschatological Teaching."

[26]Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3-5.

family members. 1 Thessalonians 4:18 likewise does not end the discussion with individual experience. Paul instead says, "encourage one another."[27]

Thus, consolation in both contexts has a communal dimension. The bereaved are not left to face death alone. In *Niut Sa'e*, family and kin become the social space in which the experience of loss is processed. In 1 Thessalonians, the community of faith becomes the space in which hope is shared and consolation is practiced.

Here Bevans' praxis model becomes relevant. The praxis model pays attention to the relationship among concrete experience, reflection, and action.[28] The experience of death does not stop at understanding but demands communal action. The dialogue between *Niut Sa'e* and 1 Thessalonians can therefore be directed toward a pastoral question: how does the Church accompany grieving Dawan families while continuing to respect their cultural ways of processing loss?

Fundamental Difference: The Source of Hope

Although there are points of convergence, the two traditions cannot be equated. The most fundamental difference lies in the source of hope. In *Niut Sa'e*, consolation is related to the experience or interpretation of the presence of the deceased through a living person and the message the family receives. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, hope is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul does not base the congregation's hope on a human ability to receive messages from the deceased, but on God's act in Christ.[29]

This difference must be maintained in theological dialogue. If *Niut Sa'e* is immediately equated with Christian hope, the basis of Christian hope may shift from Christ to cultural experience. Conversely, if *Niut Sa'e* is immediately rejected without listening to its human and social function, theological reflection loses the opportunity to speak contextually to people who live within that culture.

A more appropriate approach is therefore critical dialogue. *Niut Sa'e* can be listened to and appreciated as a cultural experience of processing grief, while the basis of Christian hope remains placed in the Christ who died and rose. This distinction allows for appreciation of culture without making cultural experience a substitute for the foundation of the Christian faith.

Niut Sa'e as a Locus for Contextual Theology

Within this framework, *Niut Sa'e* can be understood as a *locus contextualis* for theological reflection. That is, the practice becomes one concrete context in which questions about death, grief, consolation, relationship, and hope arise in real ways. Bevans' anthropological model helps theology listen to this context. This model stresses the importance

[27]Nsiah, "Reception of Paul's Eschatological Teaching."

[28]Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 70.

[29]Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 45.

of human experience and culture in the process of formulating contextual theology. Meanwhile, the praxis model helps connect that experience with critical reflection and concrete action.[30]

The use of these two models keeps this article from stopping at the question of whether *Niut Sa'e* is compatible or incompatible with the Christian faith. The more productive question is this: what human values appear in *Niut Sa'e*, how do those values encounter the Gospel, and where is theological discernment required?

From this, several values can be identified as points of dialogue: love for the family, respect for the deceased, concern for family relationships, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, apology, reconciliation, and the need to comfort those who grieve. These values can become a space of encounter with the Christian calling to love one another, to forgive, to live in communion, and to comfort one another.

Nevertheless, a convergence of values does not amount to theological identity. The values of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation found in the experience of *Niut Sa'e* do not in themselves make the practice an expression of the Christian faith. Contextual theology must precisely retain the capacity to distinguish between cultural values that can be brought into dialogue and the theological claims that form the foundation of the Christian faith.

Theological Boundaries in Reading Niut Sa'e

Beyond the question of the content of the message, the church also needs to attend to the position of the person who serves as the medium or intermediary in the experience of *Niut Sa'e*. In this practice, a living person is understood to become the intermediary for conveying a message from the deceased. Pastorally, this practice cannot simply be positioned as a source of spiritual truth possessing the same authority as the faith and teaching of the Church. The Church needs to distinguish between the human values that may emerge through the message, such as love, apology, reconciliation, respect for the family, and the resolution of unfinished matters, and claims concerning the source or authority of that message.

For this reason, the person who serves as the medium should not be placed as an absolute mediator between the living and the dead, still less as a party with authority to determine decisions of faith, family life, or the will of God. Pastoral accompaniment needs to be carried out through listening and dialogue, without shaming or negating the cultural experience of the people, while at the same time offering discernment, that is, critical evaluation grounded in the Christian faith. Where the practice of mediation gives rise to fear, dependency, manipulation, or economic demands, or replaces the people's trust in God and Christ, the Church needs to set firm limits. In this way, the Church can value *Niut Sa'e* as a cultural experience that contains reconciliatory values, yet without making the practice of mediation the basis of doctrine or a source of hope for salvation. Christian hope remains rooted in Christ, while the values of

[30]Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 55–60, 71–78.

reconciliation that arise from this cultural experience can be accompanied and directed toward the restoration of life together.

Not Converting Cultural Experience into Christian Doctrine

The first boundary is that the experience of *Niut Sa'e* cannot be made a doctrinal basis for Christian hope. Testimonies concerning the experience of the presence of the deceased have a place within the culture of the community that gives them meaning, but such experiences cannot replace the testimony of faith concerning the death and resurrection of Christ.

In this regard, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 provides a clear center. Paul connects hope for those who have died with the conviction that Jesus died and rose again.[31] Thus, the center of Christian hope is not communication with the deceased, but Christ and God's promise concerning the life to come.

Not Eliminating the Consoling Function of Niut Sa'e

The second boundary is that theological critique should not lead the Church to negate all the human values found in *Niut Sa'e*. If families find in this practice a space to express love, to apologize, to make peace, or to resolve conflict, then these aspects can become an entry point for pastoral accompaniment.

This is where the praxis model becomes important. Theology does not merely ask in the abstract whether a practice is right or wrong, but also attends to how that practice works in real life.[32] The Church can accompany families so that the processing of grief, reconciliation, and acceptance of loss proceed in a healthy way, without making the experience of *Niut Sa'e* the primary basis of Christian hope.

From "Communicating with the Dead" toward "Processing Relationships and Memories"

A pastoral approach that can be developed is to shift the focus of attention from the question of the ability to communicate with the deceased to the human function of that experience. Pastoral attention is thereby directed to the question: does this experience help the family to reconcile, to forgive one another, to accept loss, and to continue life? This shift of emphasis allows the Church to value the cultural experience of *Niut Sa'e* without having to make communication with the deceased a basis of faith. What matters pastorally are the human values that emerge from the experience, especially love, forgiveness, reconciliation, respect for the family, and acceptance of loss.

This change of emphasis does not mean eliminating the cultural meaning of *Niut Sa'e*. On the contrary, this approach enables the Church to enter the community's experience with a more dialogical language. The Church need not immediately pass judgment on the whole of the

[31]Fee, *First and Second Letters,* 173.

[32]Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology,* 71-78.

cultural experience, but can listen to its meaning and then bring it into dialogue with the Christian faith. Within this framework, the experience of *Niut Sa'e* can become one starting point for the Church to accompany families in processing grief, so long as that experience is not placed as a substitute for faith in God and Christ.

In light of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, consolation is ultimately directed toward the hope that those who have died in Christ will share in life together with the Lord.[33] For this reason, pastoral accompaniment can help families integrate their love and memories of the deceased into the life of faith, without making the message or experience of *Niut Sa'e* a source of salvation. Christian consolation does not require families to forget the deceased, but helps them live out those memories in the light of faith in the resurrection and life together with Christ.

Within a praxis framework, this approach can be realized through liturgies of consolation and family prayer. When a family experiences a death, the pastor or pastoral worker can provide a special opportunity, whether in the context of family prayer or within the sequence of accompaniment before or after the funeral, for family members to express their sense of loss, to voice gratitude for the life of the deceased, and to acknowledge regret or unresolved relational problems. In the prayers of the people or in spontaneous prayer, the family can be accompanied in voicing petitions for forgiveness, peace, and strength to continue life. In this practice, the positive values that emerge in *Niut Sa'e*, such as the impulse to apologize and make peace with relatives, are not taken as evidence of communication with the dead, but are transformed into acts of prayer and reconciliation among the living. This approach has a basis in the Church's understanding of the funeral liturgy, which aims to bring consolation and hope to those who grieve and to commend the deceased to God.[34]

A second praxis can take the form of pastoral accompaniment or family counseling after the experience of *Niut Sa'e*. The priest, pastor, or pastoral companion can invite family members to recount the experience and ask what troubles them most, what they miss, or what remains unresolved in their relationship with the deceased. If the experience brings forth a message about apology or reconciliation, the companion need not center the conversation on proving whether the message actually came from the deceased. Instead, the companion can help the family translate the meaning of the experience into concrete action: apologizing to family members, ending quarrels, visiting relatives who are in conflict, settling postponed responsibilities, or praying together in remembrance of the deceased. In this way, the cultural experience does not remain merely a symbolic experience but yields a reconciliatory praxis in family life.

In the context of Dawan society, this approach can be applied especially when the message in *Niut Sa'e* concerns broken relationships among relatives. The Church can

[33]Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 169.

[34]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 1685–1686.

accompany families in making that experience a moment of reconciliation. For example, after the family reports an experience of *Niut Sa'e* containing an exhortation to make peace, the pastoral companion can facilitate a simple family gathering that begins with prayer and continues with an opportunity for the conflicting parties to listen to one another, to apologize, and to declare their commitment to mend the relationship. In this way, the cultural message does not become a new source of spiritual authority, but the values it contains, especially peace and kinship, are embodied in acts of Christian love. Here the praxis model in contextual theology becomes concrete: cultural experience is read, critically evaluated in the light of faith, and then translated into action that brings change in the life of the people.

This approach is also consistent with the Church's understanding that funeral rites may take into account the situation, traditions, culture, and piety of the local people, so long as they continue to express the paschal character of Christian death and the hope of resurrection.[35] For this reason, the local Church need not eliminate all the cultural elements that accompany the experience of death. What is required is a process of critical discernment: elements that support love, peace, solidarity, respect, and the processing of grief can be accompanied and carefully integrated, whereas elements that place the medium or the message of *Niut Sa'e* as a source of spiritual authority or salvation must be given clear limits.

Thus, the pastoral praxis being developed is not an effort to christianize *Niut Sa'e* directly, but to purify and direct the positive values already alive in that experience toward the praxis of the Christian faith. The Church is present by listening to the people's experience, helping them process grief, facilitating reconciliation, and directing hope toward Christ. In this way, *Niut Sa'e* can become a space of pastoral dialogue that enables the Church to find a point of convergence between the cultural experience of the Dawan people and the concrete needs of grieving families.

Ultimately, the shift from "communicating with the dead" toward "processing relationships and memories" gives the Church's pastoral ministry a safer and more constructive direction. The pastoral focus no longer lies in proving the origin of the message, but in the fruit it produces in family life: whether the experience brings peace, forgiveness, acceptance, and the restoration of relationships. Where these values can be realized, the Church can accompany the cultural experience dialogically and critically. Nevertheless, this whole process retains a theological boundary: Christian consolation and hope do not originate in communication with the deceased, but in God and the saving work of Christ. In this way, love and memories of the deceased can be preserved without obscuring the center of the Christian faith, namely Christ who died and rose again and who is the foundation of the hope of believers.

[35]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1685.

Theological Synthesis: From the Experience of Grief toward Hope

On the basis of this dialogue, *Niut Sa'e* can make an important contribution to contextual theology, especially at the level of the human experience of grief. This practice shows that the bereaved need a space to express loss, to remember the deceased, to resolve relational problems, and to experience anew the social bonds within the family. At this level, *Niut Sa'e* is an important resource for understanding how the Dawan people process the experience of death.[36]

Meanwhile, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 provides a theological orientation for that experience. Paul does not deny grief but places it within the horizon of hope. The basis of that hope is the death and resurrection of Christ and the promise of being together with the Lord.[37] For this reason, cultural experience and the testimony of faith can be placed in dialogue without having to be equated.

The synthesis that can be formulated is that *Niut Sa'e* can be read as a cultural space for processing grief, while 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 provides a Christian horizon for hope amid that grief. With this formulation, *Niut Sa'e* is not made a substitute for the Christian faith, but neither is it regarded merely as a practice that must be abolished. It can become a context in which the Church listens to the people's experience and develops contextual pastoral accompaniment.[38]

From the perspective of Bevans' anthropological model, this cultural experience needs to be heard seriously because theology always faces concrete human beings in a particular context. From the perspective of the praxis model, the experience is then brought into a process of critical reflection that yields pastoral action.[39] For this reason, the theological dialogue between *Niut Sa'e* and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 does not stop at a comparison of concepts but leads to the question of how Dawan Christians can face death while continuing to value their culture and, at the same time, living out a hope centered on Christ.

Accordingly, the answer to the research questions of this study can be summarized in three propositions. *First*, *Niut Sa'e* is a practice that can be understood as a space of consolation because it helps families articulate grief, love, longing, apology, and unresolved relational problems. *Second*, the consolation in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ and in the hope of being together with the Lord, so that grief is not abolished but placed within the horizon of hope. *Third*, the two contexts can be brought into dialogue at the level of the experience of grief, relationships, consolation, and reconciliation,

[36]L. Gibson dan D. J. Louw, "A Practical Theology of Bereavement Care: Re-Ritualization within a Paradigm of 'Comforting Presence'," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, no. 2 (2018): 521–551; L. K. Fuller, "Relearning the World: Pastoral Care in the Midst of Loss and Grief," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 32, no. 2–3 (2022): 176–201.

[37]Nsiah, "Reception of Paul's Eschatological Teaching."

[38]Nugroho dan Pramono, "Pendekatan Kontekstual."

[39]Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology,* 71-78.

but cannot be equated at the level of the source and foundation of theological hope. For this reason, *Niut Sa'e* can become a *locus contextualis* for theological and pastoral reflection, while Christ remains the center of Christian hope.

Conclusion

The tradition of *Niut Sa'e* can be understood as a cultural practice that serves an important function in the processing of grief among the Dawan people. Through this experience, *Niut Sa'e* appears as a symbolic space in which bereaved families can express love, longing, regret, apology, and farewell messages, and resolve various relational problems that remain unresolved. Thus, the meaning of *Niut Sa'e* lies not in the instant removal of sorrow, but in its capacity to help families give meaning to the experience of loss and to reorder social relations among kin.

Meanwhile, in light of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, Christian consolation is not built upon the experience of communication with the deceased, but is firmly rooted in the faith that Jesus died and rose again. Christian hope is directed toward the resurrection of those who have died in Christ and the promise of eternal togetherness with the Lord. Through this theological and pastoral dimension, grief is neither denied nor ignored, but placed within an eschatological horizon of hope that gives real strength to the grieving community.

The theological reflection between *Niut Sa'e* and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 shows a dialogue that is critical and contextual. The two share a point of convergence at the level of the human experience of facing loss, the need for consolation, and the impulse toward the restoration of relationships and reconciliation. Nevertheless, they differ fundamentally in the source and theological foundation of their hope. Therefore, *Niut Sa'e* can become a *locus contextualis* for theological reflection and pastoral accompaniment that values the reconciliatory values of Dawan culture, while Christ remains the center, foundation, and primary orientation of Christian hope.

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