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Ethnotheology of Kosu Dance: Reconstruction of the Meaning of Syukur Amarasi Within the Framework of Multicultural Christian Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Kosu Dance as a cultural expression of the Amarasi tribe in Kupang Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, from an ethnoteological perspective. The Kosu Dance is a traditional dance performed in the context of wedding ceremonies, where community members both family and invited guests voluntarily and with sincere hearts place money on the heads of the bride and groom as a form of blessing, support, and prayer for the couple embarking on a new family life. This study aims to identify the theological meanings embedded in this voluntary giving practice, as well as to reconstruct the meanings of gratitude and generosity manifested in the Kosu Dance within the framework of Multicultural Christian Religious Education (PAK).

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a nation rich in local cultural traditions, including various forms of performing arts that possess a profound spiritual dimension. Among these treasures, the traditional dances of the indigenous communities in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) hold local wisdom that has not yet been fully explored in theological studies and Christian education. The Kosu Dance, a cultural expression of the Amarasi tribe in Kupang Regency, is a visual and social representation of the theology of generosity and gratitude rooted in local cosmology and social values.

Unlike many indigenous dances that are merely spectacles or forms of entertainment, the Kosu Dance serves a very specific liturgical-social function: it is performed as part of the Amarasi traditional wedding ceremony. In this dance, community members ranging from the immediate family, relatives, to invited guests appear one by one before the bride and groom and, with sincere hearts, place money on the couple's heads. This act is not merely a common wedding gift-giving tradition; it is a theologically rich gesture signifying how the community welcomes, blesses, and supports a couple embarking on a new chapter of life as a family.

The word "kosu" in the Amarasi language refers to rhythmic body movements accompanied by communal singing, and this dance is uniquely marked by a solemn moment when each dancer approaches the couple, raises their hands, and gently places money on the couple's heads. Voluntariness and sincerity are the two values most emphasized in this practice; no one is forced to give a specific amount, and the size of the gift is entirely an expression of the depth of their love and prayers for the couple. Schulte Nordholt (1971) notes that the Atoni Pah Meto community a cultural group that includes the Amarasi people highly values the principles of reciprocity and communal solidarity as the foundation of social life; the Kosu Dance is one of the most tangible manifestations of these principles.

From a Christian theological perspective, the practice of the Kosu Dance resonates strongly with several central biblical themes. First, the concept of generosity as a grateful response to God's grace, as affirmed in 2 Corinthians 9:7: "God loves a cheerful giver." Second, the concept of a community bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), where the entire community is physically present to support the newlywed couple as they begin their life together. Third, the concept of communal blessing that blessings are not merely vertical (from God to the individual) but also horizontal (from the community to its members in need).

However, this rich theological potential has never been systematically studied, let alone integrated into the framework of Christian Religious Education (CRE). Groome (1980) asserts that authentic CRE must be dialogical, bringing together biblical texts with students' concrete life experiences, including their cultural experiences. In the context of NTT, the cultural experience of the Kosu Dance is a very real and meaningful experience for the young generation of Amarasi; thus, integrating it into PAK is not only pedagogically valuable but also pastorally significant.

Bevans (2002) asserts that true contextual theology cannot avoid a serious engagement with local culture as the place where God has been at work prior to the arrival of the Gospel. Thus, this study aims to: (1) describe the Kosu Dance comprehensively within the context of the Amarasi traditional wedding ceremony; (2) identify the theological dimensions contained in the practice of the voluntary offering of the Kosu Dance; (3) reconstruct the Amarasi meanings of gratitude and generosity manifested in the Kosu Dance; and (4) propose a model for integrating these reconstructed findings into the framework of Multicultural PAK.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design. Creswell (2014) explains that ethnographic research aims to describe and interpret the patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language characteristic of a cultural group. This design was chosen because the research objective is to understand the intrinsic meaning of the Kosu Dance from the emic (insider) perspective of the Amarasi community, rather than merely describing the practice from the outside as an external observer.

The research was conducted in Amarasi District, South Amarasi District, and East Amarasi District, Kupang Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. The selection of locations was based on the consideration that these three districts constitute the core settlement area of the Amarasi tribe and that the Kosu Dance is still actively performed in various traditional wedding ceremonies. Data collection took place over nine months (January–September 2023), covering five distinct traditional wedding ceremonies in which the Kosu Dance was performed.

Data was collected through three primary methods. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 informants selected through purposive sampling, including: traditional elders (mnane), experienced leaders and dancers of the Kosu Dance, brides and grooms who had participated in the Kosu Dance, guests who took part in the ceremonies, a pastor from the local GMIT congregation, and a PAK teacher from a secondary school in the Amarasi community. Spradley (1979) recommends open-ended ethnographic interviews using descriptive, structural, and contrastive questions, allowing informants to express their understanding within their own conceptual categories.

Second, participatory observation was conducted during five distinct wedding ceremonies. The researcher attended as a guest welcomed by the hosts and systematically took field notes, including documenting the sequence of rituals, specific gestures in the Kosu Dance, social interactions that occurred, and the emotional expressions of the participants. Third, the document study involved an analysis of the lyrics of the songs accompanying the Kosu Dance, historical records of Amarasi wedding ceremonies in Dutch missionary literature, and GMIT church documents related to inculturation policies and Christian-traditional marriages.

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2014) thematic analysis procedure: (1) organizing and preparing transcribed data; (2) conducting a comprehensive reading of all data to obtain an overview; (3) coding the data (open coding, axial coding, selective coding); (4) developing themes and analytical categories; (5) representing themes in descriptive narratives; and (6) interpreting the meaning of findings within the framework of ethnotheology and Multicultural PAK. Triangulation was conducted through three methods: source triangulation (comparing interview, observation, and document data), researcher triangulation (involving two independent researchers in the coding process), and member checking with key informants.

Research ethics were strictly adhered to through: written informed consent from all informants; confidentiality of informants' identities for sensitive data (initials were used in place of full names); respect for sacred values in the observed rituals; and the sharing of research findings with the community through focus group discussions involving traditional leaders, church leaders, and local PAK teachers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kosu Dance: The Anatomy of a Wedding Ritual

Observations and interviews revealed that the Kosu Dance possesses a highly structured and meaningful ritual framework, which the Amarasi community itself interprets as the culmination of the entire series of traditional wedding ceremonies. This dance is typically performed on the peak night of the wedding celebration, after the traditional procession (belis/dowry) and the communal meal have been completed.

The Kosu Dance begins with an opening phase (tuke), in which a traditional leader or an elder of the family opens the ritual with a prayer and an announcement to all guests that the Kosu Dance is about to begin. The bride and groom are seated on chairs of honor prepared in the center of the arena, dressed in full Amarasi traditional attire. The couple's seating position at the center of the arena symbolically places them as the recipients of the communal blessings that are about to be bestowed.

The core phase of the Kosu Dance begins when the accompanying music typically consisting of gongs, drums, and communal singing starts playing in its characteristic rhythm. One by one, or sometimes in pairs, members of the community step forward to face the bride and groom. They move with rhythmic steps following the beat of the music (this is the "dance" element of the Kosu Dance), then stop directly in front of the couple, reach into their pockets or pouches, take out money, and with great solemnity and tenderness place the money on the heads of the bride and groom one hand for the groom, one hand for the bride.

This moment of placing money on the couple's heads is the climax of the Kosu Dance. A traditional elder (informant AN, 68 years old) explained clearly: "When we place money on the couple's heads, we are not paying for anything. We are praying. We are saying to God: 'God, bless these heads; make their minds wise; make their households prosperous.' The money is a sign of that prayer." This informant's statement very clearly reveals the theological dimension inherent in this physical gesture.

Turner (1969), in his analysis of liminal rituals, asserts that the body in ritual becomes a speaking text; every gesture is a language that communicates meaning to the present community. Within this framework, the act of placing money on the bride and groom's heads is a "body text" that simultaneously communicates blessings, prayers, solidarity, and joy. Langer (1953) adds that dance, as an art form, possesses a unique ability to express emotional and spiritual realities that cannot be fully verbalized; the sincerity of heart demonstrated in the movements of the Kosu Dance transcends what words can convey.

After all the guests have finished participating, the Kosu Dance concludes with a closing phase (mnanas), during which all participants gather around the bride and groom and sing a blessing song together. The money that has been placed on the bride and groom's heads is then collected by the family and saved as seed money for their new married life. A young informant (informant MK, 29 years old, who got married just a year ago) shared: "When we received the Tari Kosu, we felt we weren't alone in starting this life. The whole village was there, giving what they could, sincerely. That gave us the strength to move forward."

The Theological Dimensions of Tari Kosu: An Ethnoteological Reading

An ethnoteological analysis of the Tari Kosu practice identifies four main theological dimensions that resonate strongly with Christian teachings. The first dimension is voluntarism as a theology of grace. The most fundamental value in Tari Kosu is that no one is forced to give, and no minimum standard is set. Someone with very limited financial means can give a small amount and still be received with the same respect. This is the theology of grace in its cultural form: giving flows not from legal obligation but from a free response of the heart to the love that has been received. Volf (2005) asserts that this is the defining characteristic of Christian generosity: it is an expression of freedom, not obligation.

The second dimension is sincerity of heart. In the interviews, nearly all informants emphasized that what matters most in the Kosu Dance is not the amount of money given, but the sincerity of the giver's intention. An elderly female informant (Informant SR, 74 years old) stated: "Our parents always advised: give with a pure heart. If you give while grumbling or showing off, it has no value. But if you give with a joyful heart, even if it is little, that is what God blesses." The resonance with 2 Corinthians 9:7 is very clear: God loves a cheerful giver (hilaron doten a cheerful/sincere giver). The third dimension is communal life as a pillar of

existence. Tari Kosu categorically rejects individualism: no one begins married life alone in Amarasi culture. The entire network of extended family, neighbors, church members, and coworkers is present and actively participates in the Kosu Dance. Bosch (1991) asserts that true Christian mission is communal; the church is not a collection of individuals saved separately, but a community that together bears witness to and acts as an agent of God's blessing. The Kosu Dance expresses a very vibrant ecclesiology (theology of the church/community): we are one body that bears one another's burdens and supports one another (Galatians 6:2).

The fourth dimension is a blessing that is concrete and holistic. The money placed on the bride and groom's heads is a symbol of a very concrete blessing not merely an abstract prayer, but tangible and measurable support that will help the newlyweds begin their life together. This reflects the biblical understanding of shalom (peace in a holistic sense) that encompasses material, relational, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously. Wright (2006) asserts that God's mission (missio Dei) is always holistic it does not separate the salvation of the soul from the well-being of life. The Kosu dance is a cultural expression of this holistic understanding of blessing.

Reconstructing the Meaning of Amarasi Gratitude in the Kosu Dance

Based on the four theological dimensions above, the meaning of Amarasi gratitude manifested in the Kosu Dance can be reconstructed as follows: Gratitude in the Amarasi understanding is a total response of the community expressed through the act of voluntarily and sincerely giving to fellow community members who are entering a new phase of life. Gratitude is not merely a feeling or verbal acknowledgment, but a concrete communal action involving the whole person (heart, mind, body, and possessions), offered before God as a living community.

This reconstruction has several important theological implications. First, it expands the understanding of gratitude from the private-individual domain to the public-communal domain. In many modern Christian traditions, gratitude is understood primarily as a vertical relationship between the individual and God. The Kosu Dance teaches that true gratitude always bears fruit in horizontal actions toward our neighbors; we give thanks to God by tangibly blessing our brothers and sisters.

Second, this reconstruction challenges the reduction of spirituality to the "spiritual" realm, detached from economic reality. The money placed on the bride's head is real money, which will be used for real needs. The Kosu dance integrates the economic dimension into spiritual acts without shame or hesitation; on the contrary, this act actually enhances the sanctity of the economic act. This aligns with Volf's (2005) view that healthy theology does not separate the material from the spiritual.

Third, this reconstruction affirms the role of the community as a mediator of God's blessings. In the Kosu Dance, God is not accessed in isolation but through the community that gathers and gives together. When the entire village is present and gives what they can, they become the visible hands of God used to pour out blessings upon the newlywed couple. This is a theology of communal mediation with strong biblical roots (compare Acts 2:44–47; 4:32–35).

Integration of the Kosu Dance into Multicultural PAK: Models and Implementation

Based on the theological reconstruction above, at least three models for integrating the Kosu Dance into Multicultural PAK can be proposed. First Model: Kosu Dance as a Text for Teaching Generosity. In this model, Kosu Dance is explicitly studied as a "cultural text" read alongside biblical texts on generosity (2 Corinthians 9:6–15; Luke 21:1–4; Matthew 6:2–4). PAK teachers guide students through a comparative analysis: What do the biblical texts teach about giving? What does the Kosu Dance teach? Where are the points of

similarity? Where are the differences that need to be critically discussed? Banks (2010) refers to this approach as authentic multicultural content integration not merely the addition of cultural content as decoration, but as an equal and serious source of knowledge.

Model Two: Simulating the Tari Kosu Experience in a Learning Context. In this model, students are invited to creatively simulate the core elements of Tari Kosu within a classroom or fellowship setting. For example, in a learning unit on generosity: each student is asked to bring something (such as small change, food, or another meaningful object) and present it to a classmate who is going through a difficult time, accompanied by a reflection on the sincerity of intention and voluntariness. Groome (1980) emphasizes that direct experience (embodied experience) is far more effective in shaping faith than conceptual teaching alone.

Model Three: Kosu Dance as a Gateway to Contextual Theology Discussions. In this model, Kosu Dance is used as a starting point for deeper discussions about how God works through local culture. Students are encouraged to identify other cultural practices in their communities that also embody the values of the Kingdom of God, and to develop their own cultural hermeneutical skills. This prepares students to become contextual theologians within their own communities rather than merely consumers of theology imported from outside. Schreiter (1985) refers to this process as the ongoing development of local theology.

The PAK teachers interviewed welcomed these models enthusiastically. A high school PAK teacher (informant GP, 38 years old) stated: "Up until now, we've been teaching about the kindness found in biblical texts, but the students seem disconnected from that material. If we start with the Kosu Dance something they already know and have experienced firsthand they'll find it much easier to connect with that biblical message." This statement confirms the pedagogical relevance of this integration.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully revealed that the Kosu Dance, a traditional Amarasi dance in which community members voluntarily and sincerely place money on the heads of the bride and groom, is a cultural expression rich in profound and meaningful theological dimensions. Through an ethnoteological analysis, four main theological dimensions were identified: voluntariness as the theology of grace, sincerity of heart as the foundation of true generosity, communality as the pillar of life, and blessings that are concrete and holistic. These four dimensions resonate strongly with Christian teachings on generosity, voluntary offerings, a mutually supportive community, and a holistic understanding of God's blessing.

The resulting reconstruction of the meaning of Amarasi's gratitude expands and enriches Christian theological understanding in several key ways: it shifts gratitude from the private-individual realm to the public-communal realm; it integrates the material dimension into spiritual acts without an unhealthy dichotomy; and it affirms the role of the community as a mediator of God's blessing which is tangible and visible. These implications are highly relevant in the midst the growing trend of spiritual individualism within the context of urban Christianity.

Within the framework of Multicultural PAK, the Kosu Dance offers three concrete and actionable models of integration: as a teaching text on generosity read alongside biblical texts; as a simulation of an embodied experience of giving sincerely; and as a gateway to broader discussions of contextual theology. Together, these three models can help students in the Amarasi community and the NTT society in general to experience a Christian faith that is not uprooted from their cultural roots, but rather grows from within and alongside that cultural wisdom.

As recommendations, this study encourages: (1) Christian and theological educational institutions in NTT to seriously develop a PAK curriculum that systematically integrates the local cultural wisdom of Timor; (2) churches, particularly the GMIT, to open more open forums for dialogue between traditional leaders, traditional artists, educators, and theologians in a process of ongoing inculturation; (3) other researchers to explore other Amarasi cultural practices such as belis (bride price), teon (food rituals), and various life-cycle ceremonies from an ethnoteological perspective, in order to build a comprehensive knowledge base regarding Amarasi local theology.

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