



Nomadic Culture in Relation to Christian Faith

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A B S T R A C T

The Baliem Valley is considered the center of civilization in the Papua Highlands. Its rich cultural diversity has made the Baliem Valley well known both nationally and internationally. Many traditional practices are still preserved to this day. One such tradition is the culture of Nomat. Prior to the arrival of the Gospel in the Baliem Valley, this practice was known as Wakun, but later the name was changed to Nomat. Nomat is a tradition of giving or repaying gratitude in anticipation of a person's death. It is carried out by the family of the sick person as a form of payment or appreciation to the maternal uncles and aunts (the siblings of the patient's mother) or to others who have contributed significantly to the patient's life. Through the process of inculturation, Nomat can serve as a meaningful channel for the growth of Christian faith. Inculturation refers to the process by which the church embraces cultural practices as a medium for spreading the Gospel, without compromising the core purity of its message. The goal of inculturation in this context is to use Nomat as a platform for evangelism—both to the ailing individual and to the family and community members attending the Nomat event. Additionally, through a contextual pastoral approach, church leaders can educate congregants that the Nomat ceremony does not need to be extravagant or burdensome. Instead, the central focus should be the proclamation of the Gospel, thereby avoiding economic and social strain on families. The Mic Kelson Ai Hitigima congregation is one of the communities that continues to practice the Nomat tradition. Therefore, this journal aims to explore the inculturation of the Nomat tradition and its influence on the development of Christian faith within this church community. This research adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach, utilizing observation, interviews with church leaders, congregants, neighboring churches, and a literature review. The findings show that the Nomat tradition has a dual impact: it strengthens family bonds and fosters social responsibility as an expression of love and respect. However, if not approached wisely, it can also cause economic burden and social conflict within households. This paper employs a contextual pastoral approach to bridge the values of local culture with Christian teachings.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a country rich in cultural diversity, and one of the places that best reflects this is the Baliem Valley in the Papua Highlands. Among the many traditions still preserved in the region is the Nomat culture. Nomat is a cultural transformation of an earlier tradition known as Wakun. Wakun was a ceremonial ritual performed after someone had died, and it included elements of idol worship.

At the First Conference on April 6, 1962, in Beoga, the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) handed over church leadership in the region to the local population through the Indonesian Evangelical Tent Church (Kemah Injil Gereja Masehi Indonesia – KIGMI) in Irian Jaya. One of the attendees from Hitigima was an evangelist named Sirili Asso. Upon returning from the conference, he publicly burned idols and forbade the practice of Wakun. Since then, Protestant Christians have abandoned Wakun ceremonies and instead adopted Nomat as a cultural alternative—a practice still carried out to this day (Interview with Narson Wetipo, May 27, 2025, at 17:10 WIT).

The Wakun ceremony followed specific stages. When a person died, the family would prepare several pigs and organize the Wakun ritual. The purpose of Wakun was twofold. First, it served as an act of gratitude and repayment to the maternal uncles and aunts—the brothers and sisters of the deceased's mother. Second, it was a form of appreciation from the paternal family or the husband's side. This is because the people of the Baliem Valley follow a patrilineal system, in which lineage and inheritance are traced through the father. As such, a child belongs to the father's family line. (Referenced in: Bambang Danu Nugroho in *Introduction to the Study of Customary Law*, Hilman Hadikusuma, 2003: pp. 108–109).

During the Wakun ritual, the mother's siblings (maternal uncles and aunts) would receive gifts, typically in the form of live or slaughtered pigs, as repayment for having "given" the child into the father's lineage.

The second part of the Wakun ritual involved preparing and delivering the deceased's spirit (called wakun oak). When someone passed away, each tribe appointed a specific individual to perform this task. The wakun oak was made from a type of water gourd commonly used as a traditional drinking container (*i suak*), which was pierced with a digging stick (*sege*). Once prepared, it would be wrapped in leaves or grass (*eka yelogosogo*) and taken—along with some cooked pork (*wam enyo werago*)—to a sacred storage site. These sacred sites were often caves designated for each tribe. There, the wakun oak was placed alongside others in the cave. After the ritual, the person performing the task would eat the pork and return home.

If a family failed to perform Wakun, they would often face social backlash when one of them passed away. The maternal relatives (uncles and aunts) of the deceased might voice demands or grievances, and the family could suffer public shame or social disgrace (Interview with Ruben Wetapo, May 11, 2025, at 6:45 PM; and Segehutik Asso, November 22, 2025, at 8:37 AM).

However, with the spread of the Gospel and the growth of Christian faith, the church officially recognized Nomat as a replacement for Wakun (Interview with Sepedaus Wetapo, May 12, 2025, at 7:25 PM). Unlike Wakun, Nomat is carried out while the individual is still alive, usually when they are chronically ill or approaching death. The aim remains the same: to express gratitude and repay kindness to the mother's siblings—uncles and aunts—as well as to show appreciation from the father's family. This practice aligns with the patrilineal tradition where lineage is traced through the father's side (Hilman Hadikusuma, 2003: pp. 108–109).

In the Nomat ceremony, the maternal siblings—specifically the uncles and aunts (the brothers and sisters of the mother)—receive tokens of appreciation or repayment in the form of live or slaughtered pigs, as well as a sum of cash money. Over time, the practice has evolved so that this appreciation is also extended to other individuals who have significantly contributed to the life of the person being "nominated" (usually the seriously ill or terminally ill individual).

The act of giving to the mother's side of the family, particularly the uncles and aunts, carries a deep spiritual meaning in Baliem Valley society. Maintaining good relationships with the maternal relatives is believed to bring blessings for the children, including health, well-being, and the fulfillment of life goals. Conversely, strained or neglected

relationships with them are often thought to result in curses, manifesting as chronic illness or hindered progress in life.

One real-life example is from Demianus Asso, who had a poor relationship with his wife's brother (his children's maternal uncle). His children frequently fell ill. However, after Demianus gave a pig as a form of reconciliation, peace was restored in the relationship, and his children began to recover and have remained healthy since (Interview with Demianus Asso, May 22, 2025, at 07:18 AM).

This tradition reflects profound social and spiritual values in Baliem Valley culture. The maternal uncles and aunts are considered influential figures in the social structure. When a boy transitions from childhood to adulthood—leaving the women's house (*honai perempuan*) to live in the men's house (*honai laki-laki*)—a ritual known as *musan hotarek* or *ap honai kelanyaparek* is performed. During this ceremony, the maternal uncle is invited and gives a blessing to the boy by symbolically handing him a bow and arrow, marking his readiness to enter adult life. The boy is thus believed to be equipped to face life until death with the strength and blessing imparted by his maternal uncle.

In Baliem cosmology, the maternal uncle is symbolized by *Pogot muli*—meaning “blue sky” or “clear sky.” This reflects the belief that a harmonious relationship with maternal relatives brings fertility and blessings, whereas neglect or disrespect toward them brings misfortune or spiritual curses.

When a family member becomes seriously ill and is nearing death, the entire family is expected to gather and plan a *Nomat* ceremony. Failing to do so often leads to accusations or reproaches from the maternal relatives and may bring shame upon the family.

In both *Wakun* and *Nomat* ceremonies, the recipients of the appreciation or repayment are consistently the mother's siblings—whether the individual being honored is a child, parent, or elder, all are born of a mother. Therefore, the brothers and sisters of the mother are always the rightful recipients of the tribute. Although *Wakun* includes the ritual of escorting the spirit (*wakun oak*) to the afterlife, its other purpose remains similar to that of *Nomat*: to express gratitude and uphold kinship obligations to the maternal side.

Etymologically, the word “faith” originates from the Hebrew word “*Emun*”, which means faithfulness, and “*Batakh*”, meaning to trust. In Greek, it derives from the word “*Pistis*”, which means belief, confidence, or faith, and “*Pisteuo*”, meaning to believe, to trust, to have faith in. In English, the word carries a similar meaning—“faith”, defined as belief and conviction [(http://media.neliti.com, accessed May 23, 2025, at 05:32 WIT)].

According to the Apostle Paul, faith is accepting something as true or real. This understanding contains two key elements: first, the object of faith—what is believed to be true; and second, the attitude or response—how one expresses that belief in practice. When we accept and trust the truth contained within, we not only gain knowledge but also align our lives with that truth. A person of Christian faith will accept the truth about God revealed in Christ, and express this acceptance through their attitudes, lifestyle, and concrete actions.

Paul emphasizes that faith comes from hearing, as stated in Romans 10:17. He reminded the believers in Rome that before they came to faith, they were slaves to sin. Therefore, a believer should not allow sin to reign in their mortal body or use it as an instrument of wickedness. Rather, Paul urges them to offer their bodies to God as instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:12–13). He also teaches that the believer's body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within them, and thus their bodies do not belong to themselves. Consequently, Christians are called to glorify God with their bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

According to H. Venema (2006:280), there are four theological models that describe the relationship between the Gospel (or the Church) and culture:

1. Inculturation: The Gospel is inserted into the culture and adjusted to local traditions. Not only the method of preaching is inculturated, but even the Gospel message itself is adapted. In this view, the local cultural context becomes the primary determinant of Christian life, with the Gospel merely enriching the culture from a higher standpoint.
2. Interculturation: The Gospel and local culture mutually influence and enrich each other through interaction. They

are seen as equals, complementing one another in a dialogical relationship. The result is a kind of compromise that refines both elements.

3. Deculturation: This model views the Gospel and local culture as entirely incompatible. Culture is identified with sin, and therefore, the old way of life must be completely abandoned and replaced by a new life. This leads to disintegration and total discontinuity with the past.
4. Reculturation: In this model, the Gospel purifies and renews local culture. Culture is evaluated and aligned with Gospel values. Elements corrupted by sin are either discarded or redeemed through a process called *possessio* (reclamation). This leads to a Christianized culture, where integration and continuity—once broken—are restored through a new life and new form.

According to Bevans (2002), inculturation is the process of integrating local cultural values into the expression of Christian faith. The encounter between Christian faith and culture is a crucial part of the Church's mission. This effort seeks to bridge Christianity and culture in such a way that it introduces the true concept of God to all people.

Christianity as it grows in the Baliem Valley does not develop in a vacuum, but rather interacts with local cultural contexts. Therefore, inculturation becomes a vital space for the growth and development of faith.

This research aims to answer the question:

How does the Nomat culture influence the development of Christian faith through a study of inculturation in the Mic Kelson Ai Hitigima congregation?

The study is important because it touches on the domains of inculturation and local spirituality, which often represent both challenges and opportunities for churches across Papua.

2. Theoretical Basis

Culture and Christian Faith

Culture is born out of human practices—repeated habits that are preserved and passed down from generation to generation. According to Soerjono Soekanto (2007:150), and referencing anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1871), culture is defined as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society.”

Prasudi Suparlan (1981/1982) defines culture as the totality of human knowledge as a social being, used to understand and interpret their environment and experiences, serving as the framework for motivating and shaping behavior. Meanwhile, Havinghurst and Neugarten describe culture as human behavioral patterns, including ethics, language, eating habits, religious and moral beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and values, as well as the material products of human creativity, including tools and technology.

Based on these expert definitions, culture can be summarized as a long-standing system of beliefs and practices, deeply held and passed down through generations, shaping a society's way of life. In accordance with these understandings, the people of the Baliem Valley continue to uphold and practice their inherited cultural norms, one of which is the Nomat culture. As a form of local wisdom, Nomat is still practiced today in the Mic Kelson Ai Hitigima congregation.

According to Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli (2000:39–40), faith can be defined in two ways: first, as the content of what Christians believe about what God has revealed in Scripture; and second, as the actual practice of that faith in every aspect of human life. Colossians 2:7 says: “Let your roots grow down into Him, and let your lives be built on Him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.” Romans 1:17 states: “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

From both expert definitions and Biblical descriptions, faith can be understood as a deep and steadfast conviction in God, which cannot be comprehended solely through human reason and logic—it requires sacrifice to truly attain.



Inculturation, as defined by Bevans (2002), is the process of integrating local cultural values into the expression of Christian faith. The church is expected to become the living body of Christ within the local context, without compromising the essence of the Gospel.

In Acts 17:22–23, Paul stood in the Areopagus and said, “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an unknown god.’ So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” This passage is an example of inculturation in Paul’s preaching at the Areopagus. He uses a pagan altar as a contextual entry point to proclaim the Word of God, without compromising or diminishing the essence of the Gospel.

Socio-Cultural Context of the Baliem Valley

According to Selo Soemardjan and Soelaiman Soemardi, societal change involves multiple aspects and can affect norms, values, patterns of behavior, social organization, and the structure of social stratification (Soemardjan & Soemardi, 1964:42).

Inculturation in the socio-cultural context refers to the process of integrating local cultural values with religious teachings or particular ideologies. It involves the acceptance and adaptation of foreign elements—including religion and local customs—to form a new, enriched unity between the two.

The Baliem Valley is a central hub of civilization for several major tribes in the Papua Highlands. The social and cultural life of the valley’s inhabitants is deeply influenced by local traditions and beliefs. The Hubula people—commonly referred to as the Dani tribe—live alongside several other tribes. These communities maintain strong social ties, and a culture of reciprocity forms a key social norm (Heider, 1970). The Nomat tradition is one manifestation of these social values.

Inculturation in this setting refers to how local values are blended with Christian teachings to create a faith expression that is both culturally rooted and theologically sound.

Contextual Pastoral Theology

Contextual pastoral theology is a branch of practical theology focused on applying religious studies within the everyday practices of church ministry. It takes into account the relevant social, cultural, and historical contexts, aiming to make theology practically applicable and meaningful in daily life.

In the Gospel of Mark 7:2–8, the Pharisees and scribes saw Jesus’ disciples eating without washing their hands, and they questioned Jesus: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” Jesus responded by rebuking them, saying, “Why do you nullify the commandment of God in favor of your tradition?” This passage teaches Christians not to elevate cultural traditions above the Word of God. It does not suggest that culture must be eliminated, but rather that culture should be redirected as a medium for proclaiming the Gospel.

As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 9:22: “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” This illustrates how Paul adapted himself to various cultural contexts in order to reach and save others.

Contextual pastoral theology plays a similar role, emphasizing a pastoral approach that engages directly with people’s lived realities and their cultural backgrounds. As Kritzinger (2011) notes, the Church is not only responsible for transmitting doctrine, but also for building a faith understanding that is grounded in the lived experiences of the congregation. In this regard, the responsibility of guiding believers in understanding the Gospel within their cultural context is not solely the pastor’s duty, but the shared responsibility of all members of the church community.

3. Methodology



This research employs a qualitative-descriptive method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the pastor, elders, and several members of the Mic Kelson Ai Hitigima congregation, as well as individuals from neighboring churches. In addition, direct observation was conducted on the practice of Nomat and related church activities.

The data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach, aiming to explore the subjective meaning of the Nomat culture in relation to the development of the congregation's Christian faith.

4. Result and Discussion

Nomat as a Form of Contextual Faith

Contextual faith is the effort to understand Christian belief within the lived experiences and cultural-social context of individuals. For some members of the congregation, Nomat is seen as a way to express love and social responsibility, aligning with Christian teachings on giving and serving others. In practice, Nomat is often accompanied by prayer and the offering of tithes from the total contributions collected.

"When I hold a Nomat ceremony, my heart is at peace. I know I've made peace with the person to whom I was indebted." (Interview with Ruben Wetapo, May 11, 2023, 6:45 PM)

Replacing or eliminating cultural practices entirely may generate new issues. Therefore, the church must learn to engage with culture as a meaningful vessel for nurturing the faith of its congregation.

Potential for Conflict and Economic Burden

However, the Nomat tradition can also present significant burdens. In some cases, families feel pressured to gather large amounts of pigs or money. Failure to meet these expectations can bring social shame, leading to family disputes, hurt feelings, and internal tension.

In fact, Nomat ceremonies in the past were simpler—two or three pigs were considered sufficient (Interview with Ruben Wetapo, congregation member). Today, the increasing material demands have placed greater economic strain on families.

The Church's Role in Responding to Nomat Culture

The church must guide its members to understand Nomat as a spiritual event, centered on caring for the sick and proclaiming the Gospel to them before death. Nomat should not be about luxury or social status.

The Mic Kelson Ai Hitigima Church is encouraged to develop a contextual pastoral approach, accompanying its members in reinterpreting Nomat as a genuine expression of love—one that does not involve extravagance or financial hardship. Through sermons and congregational discussions, pastors must teach that repaying debts through Nomat is not what secures salvation. Rather, salvation comes through Jesus Christ, who redeems us from the debt of sin.

Thus, the church must ask: Has the person who received Nomat truly heard the Gospel and accepted Jesus as their Savior? Because while the person may have been relieved of physical burdens, their spiritual debt remains unless they have received forgiveness in Christ.

"Jesus Christ has already paid all our debts of sin. If we come to Him, He will cancel our spiritual debt." (Interview with Narson Wetipo, servant of God, May 27, 2025, 5:10 PM)

5. Conclusion

The church must utilize the Nomat tradition as a means to strengthen the faith of the ill person before their passing,



particularly within the Mic Kelson Ai Hitigima congregation. Just as all material debts are paid during Nomat, so too must spiritual burdens be lifted through pastoral care. Until now, the church's role in Nomat ceremonies has generally been limited to offering an opening prayer before the event, and the host family usually gives a tithe from the total donations received.

However, this paper proposes that there should be intentional spiritual ministry focused on the person being “Nomated” before death. The goal is that when the person passes away, they no longer bear the weight of unrepented sin. As Scripture teaches, there is no opportunity for repentance after death. In Ecclesiastes 9:10, it is written: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.”

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:23–31), the rich man in hell seeks relief and asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his family—but Abraham replies that this is impossible, as a great chasm separates the living and the dead. Through this parable, Jesus teaches that after death, the chance to repent is gone. Therefore, the one who is being honored in Nomat must first hear the Gospel and be given the opportunity to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior before death.

From a Christian theological perspective, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the true source of all blessings and eternal salvation. Without surrendering to Him, one is lost—for the path to salvation lies in Christ alone. As Jesus declares in John 14:6: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” For this reason, this paper highlights the need for the Gospel to be proclaimed during Nomat ceremonies, alongside pastoral care for the person approaching death.

At the same time, the Nomat tradition plays a key role in fostering solidarity and social responsibility within the Mic Kelson Ai Hitigima congregation. The values of love, forgiveness, and honor embedded in the tradition reflect a positive form of inculturation of the Christian faith. Nonetheless, the church must guide a re-interpretation of Nomat, so it can truly serve as a means of strengthening faith without placing undue burdens on the congregation.

Recommendations

1. The church should develop liturgies and sermons that critically and theologically engage with local cultural values.
2. Contextual theological education should be provided to church leaders to help them bridge culture and faith.
3. Economic empowerment programs such as church-run cooperatives or external social assistance should be pursued to reduce the financial burden of the Nomat tradition.

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