Abrahamic Religions: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama
Volume 6, Number 2, September 2026, pp: 323-341
E-ISSN: 2797-6440 P-ISSN: 2797-7722
DOI: 10.22373/arj.v6i2.34696

ECOTHEOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS IN THE TOET ULAN RITUAL: A FIELD STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CREATION THEOLOGY

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Abstract
The global ecological crisis calls for theological reflections that move beyond normative approaches and engage with the lived religious experiences of local communities. This study addresses the limited attention given to indigenous rituals as sources of theological reflection in the development of contextual ecotheology. The research seeks to answer the following questions: How is the *Toet Ulan* ritual structured and understood within the community of T'eba Timur Village? How does it relate to the theology of creation? What ecotheological dimensions are embedded within the ritual practice? This study employed a qualitative approach using an ethnographic-theological method. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving twelve informants consisting of 3 traditional figures, ritual practitioners, religious figures, community figures and ritual participants. The data were analyzed through data reduction, thematic categorization, and theological interpretation in dialogue with the creation narratives of Genesis 1–2 and contemporary ecotheological perspectives. The findings reveal that the Toet Ulan ritual represents an ecotheological expression of the Timorese Dawan agrarian community, articulating an integral relationship among human beings, nature, ancestors, the community, and God as the source of life. Rain is understood as a divine gift, land as a life-sustaining reality that must be nurtured, ancestors as collective ecological memory, and communal solidarity as an ecological praxis. This study proposes the Relational Ecotheology Model of Toet Ulan, which is grounded in four interconnected relationships: human beings with God, nature, ancestors, and the community. This model enriches the study of theology of creation and contextual ecotheology by showing that customary rites can function as a *locus theologicus* in building the ecological spirituality of society.
Keywords: *Ecotheology, Theology of Creation, Toet Ulan Ritual, Timorese Dawan Community*

Abstrak
Krisis ekologis global mendorong perlunya pengembangan refleksi teologis yang tidak hanya bertumpu pada pendekatan normatif, tetapi juga pada pengalaman religius masyarakat lokal. Penelitian ini berangkat dari masalah masih terbatasnya kajian yang menempatkan ritus adat sebagai sumber refleksi teologis dalam pengembangan ekoteologi kontekstual. Pertanyaan penelitian yang diajukan adalah: bagaimana struktur dan makna *Ritus Toet Ulan* dalam kehidupan masyarakat Desa T'eba Timur, bagaimana relasinya dengan teologi penciptaan, serta dimensi ekoteologis apa yang terkandung di dalamnya? Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode etnografis-

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teologis. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi terhadap duabelas informan yang terdiri atas 3 tokoh adat, pelaku ritus, tokoh agama, tokoh Masyarakat dan juga peserta ritus. Data dianalisis melalui reduksi data, kategorisasi tematik, dan interpretasi teologis dalam dialog dengan narasi penciptaan Kejadian 1–2 serta perspektif ekoteologi kontemporer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Ritus Toet Ulan merupakan ekspresi ekoteologis masyarakat agraris Timor Dawan yang menegaskan relasi integral antara manusia, alam, leluhur, komunitas, dan Allah sebagai sumber kehidupan. Hujan dipahami sebagai rahmat ilahi, tanah sebagai ruang kehidupan yang harus dipelihara, leluhur sebagai memori ekologis kolektif, dan solidaritas komunal sebagai praksis ekologis. Penelitian ini menghasilkan Model Ekoteologi Relasional *Toet Ulan* yang dibangun atas empat relasi fundamental, yaitu relasi manusia dengan Tuhan, alam, leluhur, dan komunitas. Model ini memperkaya kajian teologi ciptaan dan ekoteologi kontekstual dengan menunjukkan bahwa ritus adat dapat berfungsi sebagai *locus theologicus* dalam membangun spiritualitas ekologis Masyarakat.
Kata Kunci: *Ekoteologi, Ritus Toet Ulan, Teologi Ciptaan, Masyarakat Timor Dawan*

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A. Introduction

The contemporary ecological crisis has increasingly become a subject of religious and ecological inquiry, including research on how religious traditions frame human relationships with the environment (Spicer et al., 2022). Studies of anthropocentrism likewise show how understandings of human dominion can contribute to exploitative relationships with nature (Sugar & Darling, 2025). In this context, religious and theological reflection can contribute to environmental responsibility by reconsidering how scriptural and doctrinal traditions understand humanity's place within creation (Musana, 2022).

Theological attention to environmental issues has developed through ecotheological and ecospiritual approaches that examine relationships among God, human beings, and the natural world (Messias, 2024; Cloete, 2023). This perspective finds a strong foundation in the encyclical Laudato Si', which frames ecological degradation within a broader crisis of human relationships with God, other people, and creation (Pope Francis, 2015). Recent ethnographic scholarship has also shown the value of examining lived religious responses to climate change rather than limiting analysis to abstract doctrinal formulations (Bjork-James & Hautzinger, 2026). Nevertheless, the studies cited here remain primarily conceptual, comparative, or focused on religious responses in contexts other than the Toet Ulan ritual. This leaves room for a field-based theological analysis of a local ritual as a source of contextual ecotheological reflection.

In the agrarian society of Timorese Dawan, the relationship between human beings and nature is expressed through various customary rituals transmitted from generation to generation (Fios & Prameswari, 2023). One ritual that continues to be practiced is the Toet Ulan Ritual in T'eba Timur Village, North Central Timor Regency.

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This ritual is performed when prolonged dry seasons threaten the continuity of community agriculture. Through customary prayers, ritual symbols, respect for ancestors, and communal participation, the community asks for rain as a source of life. This practice reflects a relational understanding that connects human beings, nature, ancestors, the community, and God within a single cosmological unity.

Previous studies of customary rituals in Timor have generally focused on their anthropological, social, and symbolic dimensions (Fuamuni et al., 2021; Mokos & Puspita, 2024). Meanwhile, studies of creation theology have more often emphasized biblical analysis and doctrinal reflection without directly connecting them to local cultural practices as a locus theologicus (O'Callaghan, 2022; Ngesthi & Sandeep, 2022). Consequently, the theological and ecological dimensions contained in the ritual experiences of local communities have not been widely examined from the perspective of contextual ecotheology. This gap demonstrates the urgency of studying the Toet Ulan Ritual.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the structure and meaning of the Toet Ulan Ritual in the life of the T'eba Timur community, explain its relationship with creation theology, and identify the ecotheological dimensions contained within it. More specifically, the study examines how the community understands rain, land, ancestors, and communal solidarity in the ritual, and how these religious experiences reflect the relationship among human beings, nature, and God. The novelty of this study lies in the development of the Toet Ulan Relational Ecotheology Model, which emerges from the religious experience of the Timorese Dawan agrarian community. The model shows that the community's ecological awareness is built through four interconnected fundamental relationships: the relationship of human beings with God as the source of life, with nature as the space of life, with ancestors as collective ecological memory, and with the community as the praxis of ecological solidarity. These findings expand the discourse of contextual ecotheology by presenting customary ritual as a locus theologicus and by offering academic, theological, and pastoral contributions to the development of ecological spirituality rooted in local culture.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using an ethnographic-theological method to understand the religious and ecological meanings of the Toet Ulan Ritual practiced by the community of T'eba Timur Village. A qualitative approach enables researchers to explore phenomena in depth from participants' perspectives and to attend to meanings embedded in lived experience (Chasokela, 2024). The ethnographic component was used to examine cultural practices and ritual symbols in community life, while theological interpretation placed the empirical findings in dialogue with the perspective of creation theology.

The study was conducted in T'eba Timur Village, North Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. The location was selected purposively because the local community

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continues to actively perform the Toet Ulan Ritual, a rain-invoking ritual closely connected with the community's agrarian life. The study involved twelve informants selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in the ritual. The informants consisted of three traditional leaders, three ritual practitioners, three community figures who understood the social and religious meanings of the Toet Ulan Ritual, and three ritual participants.

Data were collected through three main techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted by directly observing the ritual process, including its preparatory stages, implementation, and the symbols used in the ritual. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore the informants' understandings of the meaning of the ritual and the relationships among human beings, nature, and God. Documentation included records of customary prayers, ritual symbols, and field notes related to the performance of the ritual.

The data were analyzed through several stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, and theological interpretation. Data reduction was conducted by selecting information relevant to the research focus. The data were then grouped into major themes, including the community's socio-ecological context, ritual structure, and the social and ecological meanings of the ritual. The final stage was theological interpretation, in which the empirical findings were read in dialogue with creation theology, particularly the creation narratives in Genesis 1–2. To ensure data credibility, the study used source triangulation by comparing data obtained from observation, interviews, and documentation (Morgan, 2024).

C. Results and Discussion

1. Community Dependence on Rainfall and Agriculture in T'eba Timur Village

T'eba Timur Village, Biboki Tanpah District, North Central Timor Regency, is located in a dry climatic zone characterized by unpredictable rainfall and a prolonged dry season. Most residents cultivate maize, upland rice, and tubers, with agricultural production depending almost entirely on rainfall. This dependence creates considerable anxiety when the rainy season is delayed, particularly as household food reserves begin to decline. Interview excerpt Inf. 5:

> "When months like these come and there is still no rain, we begin to worry and feel pressured because we think about what we will eat later. The food stored in our granaries is already beginning to run out."

Field observations conducted from September to November 2025 documented severe signs of drought. Soil in agricultural fields had cracked to approximately two fingers in width, small rivers had dried up, and well-water levels had receded to depths of approximately three meters. This situation generated collective anxiety, which was particularly evident when residents gathered in front of the traditional house (ume tola) while awaiting decisions from customary elders. A farmer described the direct

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consequences of these conditions for agricultural activities. Interview excerpt Inf. 1 (farmer):

> "If the rain has not fallen and the soil is already dry, we cannot plant. That is why we perform Toet Ulan, so that the rain will come and we can continue living from this land."

The prolonged dry season affects not only the natural environment but also the economic life of the community. When rainfall is delayed, planting schedules are disrupted and crops face a greater risk of failure. Consequently, drought is perceived as a collective problem requiring a communal response. The ecological experiences of this agrarian community have therefore shaped how its members understand the relationship between humans and nature. Interview excerpt Inf. 6:

> "When the rain does not come, it cannot be separated from the Toet Ulan ritual. Rain is not merely about the weather; it is a matter of life and death for us."

This fragile agrarian context and the community's extensive dependence on rainfall explain why Toet Ulan is understood not merely as a cultural tradition but also as a theological expression through which the community responds to its struggle with nature and the Creator.

2. Historical Background and Performance of the Toet Ulan Rite

a. Origins of Toet Ulan

The origins of Toet Ulan are not recorded in written documents but have been preserved through the oral memory of the community. Its underlying logic is relatively straightforward: because humans cannot compel rain to fall, they learned to "call" for it according to practices inherited from their ancestors. Inf. 3, a customary elder, recounted the origin of the ritual as transmitted to him by his father. Interview excerpt Inf. 3 (customary elder):

> "In the past, our ancestors saw the land as ume (a home). When the land cracked, there was no water. They planted maize, but the maize died, the children cried, and people wondered what they would eat. Then our elders went up Mount Fatumnanu, placed stones there, burned muti leaves, and called the names of the bei'i-na'i (ancestors). They called so that the bei'i-na'i would remember us. They said that if we no longer remembered those who came before us, the land would also forget to provide us with food. That was how Toet Ulan began."

The expression "the land would forget to provide us with food" indicates that the ritual originated from an understanding of disrupted relations between human beings and the land. Toet Ulan represents an attempt to restore this fractured relationship by calling upon the ancestors to remember their living descendants. The tribal leader known as Usi Snon Pole functions as a "living archive" of Toet Ulan. He was born before the Catholic mission entered the area and has led the ritual since his thirties. His account demonstrates the continuity of Toet Ulan across generations. Inf. 3 also recalled periods of ecological crisis in 1965 and 1997. Interview excerpt Inf. 3:

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> "In 1965, there was a long drought for two years. We performed Toet Ulan three times. In 1997, it happened again, and we also performed Toet Ulan three times. Five days later, the rain came. I am not good at reading books, but I read the signs in the soil and in the sky. That is what the bei'i-na'i taught us."

This account indicates two important points. First, Toet Ulan had been practiced long before the introduction of Catholicism. Second, "reading the signs" represents ecological knowledge transmitted across generations rather than an act of magic or sorcery. The customary elder (Usi Snon Pole) positions himself as an inheritor rather than the creator of the ritual. The historical development of Toet Ulan also demonstrates the adaptability of Dawan culture without the abandonment of its spiritual core. Although its fundamental ritual structure has been retained, its duration and several components have been shortened following the introduction of Catholicism and changes associated with state policies. A village head who also serves as a catechist described this transformation. Interview excerpt Inf. 2 (village head and catechist):

> "In my father's time, Toet Ulan was performed for three days and three nights. Now it has been shortened to only one day. In the morning we pray the 'Our Father' together; at noon the customary elder (amaf mnasi) recites the traditional prayer; and in the afternoon we slaughter chickens and goats and then eat together. The priest asked us to shorten it so that the children would not miss school or stay too long in the traditional house because they still have to attend school."

Field observation on December 15, 2025, confirmed this transformation. The ritual began at precisely 7:00 a.m. Central Indonesian Time and ended at 4:30 p.m., concentrating the entire ceremony within a single day. The transition from "three days and three nights" to "one day" does not necessarily indicate a degradation of meaning. Rather, it reflects a negotiation among customary obligations, the pastoral concerns of the Church, and the realities of modern education. The historical development of the ritual thus illustrates the dynamic character of Dawan local wisdom: ritual forms may be adapted while their underlying meaning is preserved.

b. Structure and Practice of the Toet Ulan Rite

The structure and performance of Toet Ulan involve three interrelated dimensions: leadership, transmission, and participation. Ritual leadership rests primarily with the customary elder (amaf mnasi) and the guardian of the traditional house (apao le'u). These two figures have the authority to open the traditional house (ume tola), bring out sacred heirlooms, and lead customary prayers addressed to Uis Neno Apinat Uis Neon Aklahat (Almighty and Most Benevolent God). Priests, pastors, and village officials do not lead this portion of the customary prayer.

The performance of the rite involves collective participation by community members, from customary leaders to ordinary residents, reflecting the understanding that ecological conditions affect the life of the entire community. Field observation at the Saku Bara Mataus traditional house showed that after seven pairs of betel nut offerings and coconut water had been placed on the stone table, participants sat in a circle while the

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amaf mnasi placed an ancestral heirloom spear in the center. Interview excerpt Inf. 2 (apao le'u, traditional-house guardian):

> "Not everyone is allowed to hold this spear. When I die, my eldest son will replace me. If someone who is not of our bloodline takes the position, the bei'i-na'i will be angry and the rain will not come."

Inf. 5 further explained that even minor procedural errors may invalidate the ritual because such mistakes are considered violations of the customary order. Ritual knowledge is transmitted primarily through direct participation in the rite. This transmission begins when the eldest son reaches approximately fourteen years of age. The eldest male child within the amaf mnasi lineage is expected to participate in ritual activities, memorize customary prayers, learn the prescribed sequence of ritual prohibitions, and understand the significance of sacred objects. Interview excerpt Inf. 9 (Amteme clan):

> "This knowledge is not written down. I began teaching my eldest son when he was fourteen. If he does not memorize it, then when I die, who will call for the rain?"

Women do not lead customary prayers or hold the sacred spear, but they occupy a central role in the logistical preparation of the ritual. Interview excerpt Inf. 8 (female community member):

> "We prepare the seven pairs of betel nut, we cook the tekes, and we keep the fire burning. The men pray, while the women make sure the ceremony continues properly. That is the division of responsibilities inherited from our ancestors."

This division of ritual responsibilities reflects a strong patriarchal structure while simultaneously demonstrating a functional form of gender-based cooperation in the performance of the rite. Community participation is inclusive but uneven, particularly among younger generations. According to customary practice, all members of the three clans are invited and expected to participate, usually contributing a chicken as part of the communal offering. Observations at three ritual locations, however, showed relatively limited participation among people aged 18–35. Younger participants were more commonly present as observers than as active ritual practitioners. Interview excerpt Inf. 7 (28 years old):

> "I participate because my father asks me to. But honestly, I do not memorize the prayers. What matters is that I attend, pray together, record a video, and then go home."

Another informant described generational changes in participation. Interview excerpt Inf. 11 (female community member, 47 years old):

> "In the past, everyone sat together in one circle. Now young people sit outside the fence and use their phones. They say Toet Ulan is an identity, not a prayer. As long as they attend, they think that is enough."

These accounts indicate a shift in ritual meaning across generations. For customary elders and older community members, Toet Ulan remains primarily an act of

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faith and supplication. For some younger participants, however, it increasingly represents a cultural identity that should be preserved even when its full ritual and theological meanings are no longer understood.

c. Stages of Ritual Performance

Based on field observations, the Toet Ulan rite is performed through three principal stages: preparation, the central ritual performance, and closure. During the preparation stage, the ritual begins with a customary deliberation involving elders (mnasi-mnasi), clan leaders, and community figures representing the three founding clans of T'eba Timur: Amteme, Tciompah, and Kaesnube. Such deliberation usually occurs when the dry season lasts longer than expected and the community begins experiencing difficulties obtaining water for agricultural purposes. Interview excerpt Inf. 10 (customary figure):

> "When the rain does not come for a long time, the kapitan will come to the amaf mnasi and the customary elders to discuss the condition of the village and decide whether Toet Ulan should be performed."

Once a decision has been made, the customary elders determine the ritual location. These rituals are generally performed at sacred places inherited from previous generations, including Hauteas, Fatu le'u (sacred stone), or Oe le'u (sacred spring). These places are understood as spaces of encounter among human beings, ancestors, and the Creator and therefore cannot be arbitrarily replaced. Interview excerpt Inf. 12:

> "The ritual place cannot be chosen arbitrarily because it has been inherited from our ancestors. It is there that the ancestors traditionally receive our prayers and convey our requests to Uis Neno (God)."

After the decision has been made, community members are informed and begin preparing ritual materials. Research documentation identified the principal items as betel nut, rice, traditional cloth, money, bracelets, traditional beverages, and sacrificial animals such as roosters or male goats. Interview excerpt Inf. 5 (community figure):

> "Betel nut and rice are signs of respect. Everything brought into the ritual has meaning as part of our request for life."

The central stage of the rite takes place at the designated customary ritual site. The customary leader recites the traditional prayer while holding rice and betel nut. The prayer contains a supplication for rain to fall and for community life to return to normal. Interview excerpt Inf. 3 (customary figure):

> "We pray so that the seasons will not be disrupted and so that disasters will not occur. If nature is damaged, all of us suffer."

The next stage involves preparing the offerings, including a black rooster, betel nut, rice, and selected heirloom objects considered sacred. Once all materials have been prepared, the elders recite the ritual prayers in the traditional language passed down across generations. Through these prayers, the community asks the Creator to send rain for the continuation of human, animal, and plant life. Interview excerpt Inf. 5:

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> "We bring a black chicken and betel nut to the ancestors so that they will convey our request to Uis Neno, asking for rain to fall and for the plants to live again."

After the prayer, the sacrificial animal is slaughtered and its blood is dripped onto the customary stone. Interview excerpt Inf. 4 (ritual practitioner):

> "The chicken's blood is a sign of life and becomes an offering to the ancestors."

Interview data indicate that community members understand the offering as an expression of respect toward ancestors who serve as intermediaries in conveying human prayers to God. Interview excerpt Inf. 6 (customary leader):

> "We offer chickens or goats to our ancestors so that they will convey our prayers to God the Creator."

One informant also described his personal experience while waiting for a sign from the entrails of the sacrificial chicken. Interview excerpt informant:

> "My hands trembled while holding the knife to kill the animal. But when I saw the sign, I began to calm down. It felt as if the bei'i-na'i whispered, 'That is enough.' Tomorrow the rain will come."

Field observation further documented the sensory and emotional atmosphere of the ritual. Silence, the smell of incense smoke, and the sound of coconut water being stirred in a jar created a sacred atmosphere in which participants closed their eyes and bowed their heads. Inf. 7, a 28-year-old participant who had previously expressed reservations about the ritual, described an emotional response when coconut water was distributed among those present. Interview excerpt Inf. 7 (28 years old):

> "When the coconut water was distributed to everyone, I suddenly remembered my late grandfather. I cried quietly. Perhaps that is what the bei'i-na'i mean: they want us to remember where we come from."

Such experiences indicate that the "ecotheological expression" of Toet Ulan is embodied not only in the words of ritual prayer but also in bodily experience, emotion, and collective memory reactivated through ritual participation. During the closing stage, the ceremony concludes with a communal meal and conversations among community members, symbolizing kinship and social solidarity. Interview excerpt Inf. 10:

> "After the ritual, we eat together so that our relationships remain good. If the rain comes, the blessing is not experienced by only one person but by the entire village."

Another village resident similarly emphasized the communal significance of the shared meal. Interview excerpt Inf. 8 (village resident):

> "After the prayer is finished, everyone eats together. It is a sign that we are one family in the village."

These findings suggest that Toet Ulan is not only a ritual for requesting rain but also a social space that reinforces relations among human beings, ancestors, nature, and the wider community of T'eba Timur.

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The entire ritual sequence demonstrates that community members understand their relationship with nature in spiritual terms. Nature is not regarded merely as an object that can be completely controlled by human beings but as part of a reality under divine authority. From the perspective of contextual theology, this ritual practice can therefore be understood as a religious expression through which the community responds to its concrete ecological circumstances.

d. Symbols and Sacred Spaces in the Ritual

Interview data indicate that although interpretations vary among the Amteme, Tciompah, and Kaesnube clans, the symbols employed in Toet Ulan carry complementary meanings. The black rooster is understood as a symbol of a request for forgiveness, sincerity in offering, and communication with the ancestors. The sacred spear represents the authority of customary elders, ancestral courage, and a symbolic connection between human beings and God the Creator. The ritual jar and fishhook, meanwhile, represent local ecological knowledge concerning the management and preservation of water resources, particularly during periods of drought.

Collectively, these ritual symbols function not merely as customary objects but as carriers of religious, historical, and ecological meanings that reflect a harmonious relationship among human beings, ancestors, nature, and God within the life of the Dawan community of T'eba Timur. The findings also show that ritual symbols do not possess a single fixed meaning. Rather, different emphases emerge from the historical memories and ancestral experiences of each of the three founding clans of T'eba Timur. Although the basic ritual structure remains relatively similar, each clan has developed distinct interpretations of particular ritual objects.

These differences do not create divisions within the ritual. Instead, they enrich the collective meaning constructed through the shared ceremony. Ritual symbols therefore function as media through which ancestral memory, kinship identity, and ecological knowledge are transmitted across generations. Toet Ulan consequently operates not only as a rain-invocation rite but also as a space in which diverse cultural memories are integrated into a common religious and communal practice.

3. Toet Ulan as a Local Expression of Relational Ecotheology

The findings demonstrate that the Toet Ulan rite carries profound religious significance in the life of the T'eba Timur community. It is understood not merely as a cultural tradition but also as an expression of a spiritual relationship among human beings, nature, and divine reality. From the perspective of creation theology, the rite may be interpreted as a form of local relational ecotheology: a way of believing that emerges from the community's lived relationship with God's grace, ancestral mediation, and the capacity of the land to produce crops that sustain communal life. This ecological consciousness is relational rather than individualistic. God, humans, ancestors, land, and

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rain are woven into a single network of meaning. Four major dimensions illustrate how Toet Ulan expresses this locally rooted ecotheology.

a) Human–Nature Relations: From Domination to Kinship

Toet Ulan challenges an anthropocentric logic that positions human beings as masters of nature. During the ritual, people do not "command" the rain to fall. They sit, bow, bring betel nut and chickens, and offer supplication. Cracked soil and dried rivers are interpreted not merely as damaged "resources" but as signs of a wounded relationship. This understanding resonates with the ecojustice hermeneutic developed in the Earth Bible project, particularly its principles of the intrinsic worth of Earth, interconnectedness, voice, and mutual custodianship (Habel, 2000). Similarly, Laudato Si' emphasizes the moral and spiritual responsibility of human beings toward the Earth and rejects exploitative forms of domination (Pope Francis, 2015).

Toet Ulan gives this theological principle a distinctly local expression: those who care for the land are expected to restore harmonious relations before cultivating it. Such awareness fosters ecological humility, namely, recognition that human beings do not stand above nature but participate within a broader system of life. The rite therefore reflects an ecological relationship characterized by human dependence on environmental balance (Everard et al., 2021). These findings reinforce the study by Fios and Prameswari (2023), which shows that customary rituals in Timor help maintain harmonious relations between communities and their environments. However, whereas that study gives greater emphasis to socioecological dimensions, Toet Ulan reveals a particularly strong theological dimension: the belief that ecological balance is inseparable from the human relationship with God as the source of life. Ecological relations within Toet Ulan are consequently not merely functional but also spiritual and religious.

The findings are also consistent with Cloete (2023) and Messias (2024), who present ecological spirituality as an important religious response to the ecological crisis and as a basis for ecological conversion, renewed practice, and care for creation. Within Toet Ulan, ecological awareness is expressed through respect for the land, preservation of sacred spaces, communal prayer, and social solidarity. The rite therefore embodies a local form of ecospirituality that integrates relationships with God, nature, ancestors, and community within an interdependent unity of life.

b) Rain as Grace: Ecological Theocentrism

Within Toet Ulan, rain is consistently understood as "water from Uis Neno Apinat," or water from Almighty God. Rain is therefore not regarded as something produced by human intervention but as a gift received through supplication. This understanding places God at the center of the ecological cycle, while human beings occupy the position of dependent petitioners. Such an orientation corresponds with Laudato Si' nos. 75 and 84, which describe creation as a gift and criticize the "myth of unlimited progress" (Pope Francis, 2015). The understanding of rain as originating from God also demonstrates that community members do not necessarily perceive the ritual as

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a magical means of controlling nature. Rather, the rite is understood as an act of prayer that acknowledges human limitations before divine power (Beyers, 2024).

In this respect, Toet Ulan represents a practical rejection of the assumption that nature can be entirely controlled through human technological or productive capacity. The community lives instead according to an awareness of sufficiency and dependence, recognizing that rain remains a divine gift rather than a product that humans themselves can manufacture. The Toet Ulan rite can also be examined through dialogue with the creation narratives of Genesis 1–2. These narratives affirm God as the source of life who sustains all creation, including humanity and the natural world. Genesis 2:5–6 describes a period before rain had fallen upon the Earth, when the soil had not yet produced vegetation because there was no water to sustain it. This biblical narrative demonstrates the importance of water and rain within divine providence as conditions enabling life to develop. The ecological experience of the T'eba Timur community reflects a comparable awareness: without rain, the soil hardens, seeds cannot grow, and agrarian life is threatened.

c) Land as the Source of Life: The Sacramentality of Matter

For the Dawan community, land is not an empty physical space. The land is ume, a home where ancestors are buried and where subsequent generations continue their lives. Fatumnanu is regarded as a place of prayer where cutting surrounding trees is prohibited, while Hauteas is the site where the ritual stone table is located. Every part of the land contains history, customary rules, and prayer. In the interpretation emerging from the field data, damaging the land therefore also threatens collective memory and the community's relationship with the Giver of Life. This local valuation of land can be placed alongside research showing that local wisdom can function as an important basis for soil and water conservation and environmental management (Utari et al., 2024).

Interview accounts describe customary elders touching cracked soil before praying and placing the sacred spear. This gesture treats the soil metaphorically as a wounded body that is touched in the hope of restoration. Ecological spirituality emphasizes the "sacramentality of creation," according to which material creation can serve as a sign of divine presence. In Toet Ulan, the land acquires such a sacramental character: it metaphorically "speaks" through its cracks and "listens" through the ritual touch and prayer directed toward it. This locally embodied understanding enriches forms of Catholic creation theology that might otherwise remain abstract by grounding theological reflection in concrete material experience. Awareness of the human relationship with the land also gives rise to an ecological ethic reflected in the community's customary norms. Human relations with nature are not understood within a framework of exploitative domination but through responsibility, care, and preservation (Palari, 2022).

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d) The Sacredness of Ecological Space: From Place to Relational Space

The locations used for Toet Ulan, including ume tola, the upper space of Saku Bara Mataus, and Fatumnasa, are not chosen because of their aesthetic qualities but because of their sacred significance. Their sacredness is located not primarily in physical structures but in the relations restored within them: human beings, ancestors, land, rain, and God are brought together within a common ritual space. Ecological space thus becomes, metaphorically, a "cathedral without a roof." The emotional experience of Inf. 7, who cried while remembering his late grandfather when coconut water was distributed, further demonstrates the role of sacred space in activating collective and familial memory. Participants enter the ritual not only with their physical bodies but also with memories of their broader genealogical lineage.

Laudato Si' nos. 233–237 addresses integral ecology as a perspective that integrates environmental, economic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions (Pope Francis, 2015). Toet Ulan may be understood as a local embodiment of such integral ecology because it does not separate worship from agricultural fields or prayer from the experience of cracked soil. Toet Ulan therefore demonstrates that ecological spirituality is already present in Timor as a relational form of faith. Human beings approach rainfall with humility, land is treated as a fellow element within creation, and ecological spaces are preserved as places of encounter with God. This spirituality offers a contextual perspective for broader creation theology: before speaking of "saving the Earth," theological reflection may also need to attend to local practices through which communities sit upon cracked soil, pray collectively, and acknowledge their dependence on creation.

4. Theological Negotiation between Ancestral Respect and Christian Faith

The encounter between Dawan traditions and Catholic faith demonstrates a form of constructive theological negotiation. Within the Dawan understanding, ancestors (bei'i-na'i) are not positioned as God. Rather, they are understood as ritual intermediaries who maintain collective memory, customary values, and communal relations with Uis Neno Apinat-Uis Neon Aklahat (Almighty and Most Benevolent God). The invocation of ancestors within the ritual is consequently understood by the community not as worship but as respect for those who transmitted wisdom, ways of life, and ecological ethics to subsequent generations. This understanding bears some similarity to the biblical image of the "cloud of witnesses" in Hebrews 12:1, in which preceding generations remain witnesses of faith for the community.

The introduction of the Catholic Church did not eliminate Toet Ulan but contributed to a process of reinterpretation and inculturation. This process can be observed in the recitation of the "Our Father" before customary prayers, the shortening of the ritual duration, and modifications to certain elements of ritual offerings. Such developments can be placed in dialogue with Gaudium et Spes 58, which explains that the Church engages different cultures while the Gospel also purifies and elevates cultural

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life (Second Vatican Council, 1965). A closely related principle appears in Ecclesia in Asia 21, where inculturation is described as a process in which the Church engages cultural values while remaining faithful to the Gospel and Christian faith (John Paul II, 1999).

Toet Ulan therefore illustrates how Catholic faith has developed within a Dawan cultural context without completely severing its relationship with local traditions. At the same time, Catholic teaching maintains the unique mediating role of Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that Jesus Christ is the one and only mediator between God and humanity; respect for ancestors should therefore be distinguished from the unique salvific mediation attributed to Christ (Catholic Church, 2014).

The research data indicate that the T'eba Timur community recognizes this distinction. Ancestors are understood as conveyors of prayer and guardians of communal memory, while Christ remains central within Christian soteriology. From this perspective, Toet Ulan can be understood as an example of inculturation in which Dawan cultural identity is maintained while Catholic theological boundaries are negotiated. The relationship between customary tradition and Christian faith, therefore, need not necessarily result in direct conflict or simple syncretism but may produce a contextual expression of faith rooted in local culture.

5. Toet Ulan in the Light of the Creation Theology of Genesis 1–2

Interview and observational data indicate that the Dawan community of T'eba Timur holds theological understandings that can be placed in dialogue with the creation narratives of Genesis 1–2, even though community members do not necessarily articulate them through formal academic theological terminology. These understandings are particularly evident in the conception of God as the source of life, human beings as caretakers of creation, and nature as a gift that must be preserved. From this perspective, the Toet Ulan rite can be read as a local expression of creation theology embodied within the cultural practices of the community.

a. God as Creator and Giver of Rain (Gen. 1:1–8)

Genesis 1:1–8 presents God as the Creator of heaven, Earth, and the waters that sustain life. This understanding is reflected in the community's conviction that rainfall ultimately remains under the authority of Uis Neno Apinat-Uis Neon Aklahat. In local religious language, Uis Neno is understood as the One above who governs the sky, clouds, and rain. This local formulation can be placed in dialogue with biblical depictions of water and rain as realities ultimately dependent upon divine agency (Deming, 2024). This understanding is also placed in parallel with Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," and Genesis 1:6–8 concerning the separation of the waters and the formation of the firmament.

The data show that the community understands Toet Ulan primarily as a ritual through which rain is requested from Uis Neno. The findings therefore suggest that the rite is not intended to exercise magical control over nature but functions as a religious act

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acknowledging human dependence upon God as Creator and sustainer of life. This interpretation is consistent with Beyers' (2024) comparative study of rainmaking traditions, which emphasizes that rain is ultimately understood as originating with God and that rainmaking need not be interpreted simply as magical manipulation of nature. More broadly, this theocentric orientation can be situated within Christian eco-theological readings that connect creation with responsibility for environmental preservation (Suryani et al., 2025).

b. Human Beings as Caretakers of the Land (Gen. 2:15)

The anthropological and ecological dimensions of Toet Ulan are evident in the community's understanding that land belongs within the web of human life rather than functioning merely as an external object. This relational valuation of land can be situated alongside research emphasizing local wisdom in soil and water stewardship (Utari et al., 2024). It also corresponds with Palari's (2022) argument that human beings should act as caretakers and managers of nature rather than as exploitative conquerors. Genesis 2:15 states that God placed humanity in the Garden of Eden "to work it and take care of it." Genesis 1:26–28 and Genesis 2:15 can therefore be read as giving humanity responsibility for cultivating and preserving creation. Within the Dawan context, this responsibility is expressed in the understanding that land is entrusted by God and must be protected rather than exploited. The manuscript records the community understanding that "the land is entrusted to us by Uis Neno." Field observations also showed customary deliberation and communal labor in cultivating agricultural land after the ritual had been performed.

In contrast to dominative interpretations of Genesis 1:28 that understand humanity as possessing absolute authority over nature, the Dawan understanding represented in the data places human beings in the position of responsible caretakers concerned with the continuity of creation. The findings therefore correspond with the perspectives of Palari (2022) and Olaniyan (2023), which emphasize preservation rather than domination in human relations with nature.

c. Relational Balance (Gen. 2:18–25; Gen. 3)

Genesis 2 depicts harmonious relationships among humans, nature, and one another before the disruption associated with human sin. Within interpretations articulated around Toet Ulan, the rite is associated with efforts to restore relational balance when drought is perceived in connection with ecological wrongdoing. In this understanding, ecological sin concerns not only environmental damage but also damaged relationships with God and other human beings. Toet Ulan is therefore interpreted as involving a threefold request for reconciliation: asking forgiveness from God, acknowledging failures to care for the land, and restoring relationships among community members.

In addition to its theocentric and anthropological-ecological dimensions, Toet Ulan demonstrates a strong communal-relational dimension within the community's way of life. This interpretation is compatible with Abenaitwe's (2025) discussion of ritual as

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a mechanism that can reinforce social cohesion, collective meaning, and community resilience. The interview data suggest that, despite the absence of formal theological education, Dawan communities interpret themes that can be placed in dialogue with Genesis 1–2 "from below," that is, through the concrete realities of their lived ecological experience. Within the analytical framework of this study, Toet Ulan can therefore be interpreted through four interrelated themes of creation theology: God as Creator, humans as caretakers, the goodness of nature, and the restoration of disrupted relationships. These themes provide a basis for dialogue with Laudato Si' nos. 67–75 concerning integral ecology (Pope Francis, 2015).

6. The Toet Ulan Relational Ecotheology Model

Based on interview data, field observations, and dialogue with creation theology, this study formulates the Toet Ulan Relational Ecotheology Model as a theological synthesis of the religious experience of the Dawan community in T'eba Timur. The model consists of four interrelated dimensions: relationship with God, relationship with nature, relationship with ancestors, and relationship with the community.

The relationship with God places Uis Neno Apinat-Uis Neno Aklahat (Almighty and Most Benevolent God) as the source of life and giver of rain. The relationship with nature is reflected in respect for land, water, trees, and sacred ecological spaces as integral components of life. The relationship with ancestors is expressed through respect for bei'i-na'i as guardians of collective memory and transmitters of ecological values. The relationship with the community is manifested in mutual cooperation, customary deliberation, and communal sharing associated with the ritual, all of which reinforce social solidarity.

These four dimensions do not operate independently. Rather, they constitute an interconnected relational network. Within the Dawan worldview represented in the research data, disruption in one relationship can affect the others. Drought, crop failure, and ecological crisis are therefore understood not exclusively as natural phenomena but also within a broader relational framework involving human relationships with God, nature, ancestors, and fellow community members. This relational understanding corresponds with the concept of integral ecology in Laudato Si', which emphasizes that environmental crises are inseparable from ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual relationships (Pope Francis, 2015). From this perspective, Toet Ulan demonstrates that environmental restoration cannot be fully separated from the restoration of the fundamental relationships sustaining communal life.

Conceptually, the model contributes to contextual ecotheological discussion by suggesting that customary rituals can function as a locus theologicus for reflection on creation theology. The model can be placed in dialogue with O'Callaghan's (2022) broader presentation of creation theology as Christian reflection on the universe as God's creation. It also extends the ecological spirituality discussed by Cloete (2023) and Messias (2024) by emphasizing the ancestral dimension as an important component in

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the ecological relationships of an Indigenous community. Furthermore, the findings reinforce Fios and Prameswari's (2023) research concerning the role of local rituals in sustaining human–environment relations while offering a conceptual framework that connects God, nature, ancestors, and community within a single relational system.

The Toet Ulan Relational Ecotheology Model also corresponds with the principle of interconnectedness articulated in the Earth Bible ecojustice hermeneutic, which emphasizes the interdependence of Earth and the wider community of life (Habel, 2000). Within the limits of the present study, the model may also have educational relevance for contextual ecological formation in Christian settings, complementing initiatives that integrate ecological awareness with Catholic religious education (Rusae et al., 2024).

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Toet Ulan Rite represents a form of contextual ecotheology among the Dawan community in T'eba Timur Village, reflecting an integral relationship among God, human beings, nature, ancestors, and the community. In dialogue with the creation theology of Genesis 1–2, the rite reveals an understanding that rain is a gift of God, human beings are entrusted with the stewardship of creation, and nature possesses intrinsic value that must be preserved. The main contribution of this study is the formulation of the Toet Ulan Relational Ecotheology Model, which is built upon four fundamental relationships: the relationship with God, nature, ancestors, and the community. This model enriches discussions of ecotheology and creation theology by demonstrating that customary rituals can function as a *locus theologicus* for theological reflection and ecological spirituality rooted in local culture. The implications of this study underscore the importance of local wisdom as a source for the development of contextual theology and as a concrete contribution of the Church to strengthening ecological awareness and developing pastoral responses to contemporary environmental crises.

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