



Theological Reflection on Love based on 1 John 4:7–8 through the Siri Pinang tradition in Atoni Pah Meto Culture

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Received: 10 Aug. 2024

Accepted: 02 Oct. 2024

Published: 29 Nov. 2024

How to cite this article:

Talan, Y.E., Bilo, D.T. & Purdaryanto, S., 2024, 'Theological Reflection on Love based on 1 John 4:7–8 through the Siri Pinang tradition in Atoni Pah Meto Culture', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a3272. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3272>

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The theology of love in the practice of giving betel nut with 'okomama' in Atoni Pah Meto culture reflects the values taught in 1 John 4:7–8. This study, utilizing qualitative methods and a descriptive ethnographic approach, explores how this tradition embodies Christian teachings of love within the local cultural context. It examines the values of love expressed in this practice and its impact on social and cultural relationships within the Atoni Meto community. The findings reveal that the offering of betel nut with 'okomama' symbolizes affection, respect, brotherhood, and serves as a tool for conflict mediation, cultural preservation, and the strengthening of community identity. This tradition enriches social relationships, maintains harmony, and applies the values of love in daily life.

Intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary implications: This research makes a significant contribution to the study of culture, anthropology, and theology by examining how Christian love values are reflected in local practices. It encourages further exploration of the interaction between culture, religion, and theology, while also opening opportunities to study the sustainability of traditions and community identity in modern contexts.

Keywords: 1 John 4:7–8; theology of love; betel nut giving tradition; Atoni Meto culture; okomama.

Introduction

Culture and tradition are crucial to a community's identity, influencing both social and spiritual behaviour. They shape social identity through values, norms, language, arts and practices, strengthening social cohesion, providing meaning to daily life and connecting individuals to their heritage (Shuman 1993). For the Atoni Pah Meto¹ community in South Central Timor, one significant tradition is the practice of giving betel nut through 'okomama'² to guests. Okomama serves as a symbol of the brotherhood bond among the Atoni Pah Meto community members. When betel nut is presented using 'okomama', it fosters familiarity and affection between individuals (Andung 2010). This tradition functions not only as a form of hospitality and respect but also as a profound expression of love in the local cultural context. Betel nut, often used in various traditional ceremonies and social gatherings, carries deep symbolic meaning. Through the offering of betel nut, the Atoni Pah Meto community emphasises the values of familiarity, acceptance and love towards guests. This tradition is not merely a ritual but also a profound expression of cultural values that bind the community together (Suminar 2020). Betel nut serves as a symbol that unites tribal members and functions as a communicative practice with significant value and meaning within the context of family and friendship. In the 'okomama' tradition, offering betel nut to guests signifies an open-hearted acceptance and appreciation of them. This reflects a way of life that values affection and togetherness, where Atoni Pah Meto, as Christians, practise love through the giving of betel nut as a principle for living out the truth of God's Word. This practice not only strengthens social and cultural relationships, but also integrates Christian values into their daily lives.

Additionally, the 'okomama' tradition among the Atoni Pah Meto teaches the principle that every guest, regardless of their background, should be treated with full respect and accommodated within the community. According to an interview with a community leader from Atoni Pah Meto,

1. Atoni Pah Meto refers to the Timorese people who reside in the South Central Timor region. This designation is given because of the dry conditions of the land during the dry season. Thus, the literal meaning of Atoni Pah Meto is 'the Dawan people living on the island of Timor'.

2. Okomama is a traditional tool used by the Atoni Pah Meto (Timorese people) to present betel nut to guests or visitors.

the tradition of giving betel nut using *okomama* is a time-honoured practice that serves as an expression of affection and embodies the values of love taught in the Bible, practised as a manifestation of the Christian identity that has embraced the truth (Talan 2024). This tradition strengthens social bonds and represents the fruit of the Spirit, namely love, among community members. Thus, betel nut not only serves as a component of ceremonial practices but also as a means to foster and uphold harmony and Christian values in communal life.

This tradition strengthens the social and spiritual bonds among community members, while also affirming the values of solidarity and unity. The love practised by the Atoni Pah Meto is merely a reflection of the Agape love practised by God and experienced by them. Therefore, as a form of simple love practice, every guest who visits the homes of Atoni Pah Meto is welcomed with betel nut presented using *okomama*. This tradition symbolises the Atoni Pah Meto community's acceptance of new guests. An interview with Mr Marten Fallo revealed that 'a guest is a king, so one of the symbols of acceptance is presenting betel nut with *okomama* as a sign of love' (Talan 2024). In 1 John 4:7–8, it is explained that love comes from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God (Mangentang & Salurante 2021). The concept of love in this text encompasses unconditional love that reflects divine nature. The love discussed in the context of 1 John 4:7–8 is essential to be practised in daily life.

Based on previous research, it was found that there has been no study on how the tradition of giving *betel nut* using *okomama* as a symbol of the practice of love has been integrated into the context of the Atoni Pah Meto. The previous research conducted by Iwan Setiawan Tarigan, Maria Widiastuti, and Warseto Freddy Sihombing (2022), titled 'The Law of Love as the Foundation of True Christian Life', only focuses on the nature of love. Christie Kusnandar, in her research titled The Second Part of the Ten Commandments: Love for Humanity from a Christian Ethics Perspective, also emphasised love as the foundation of Christian ethics (Kusnandar 2017). Therefore, this study aims to analyse how the tradition of giving betel nut using 'okomama' to guests within the Atoni Pah Meto context can be understood as a manifestation of Christian love practices that reflect and apply the teachings of 1 John 4:7–8 in daily life. By combining local cultural perspectives and Christian theology, this research hopes to provide a deeper understanding of how the values of love can be integrated and applied within the context of cultural traditions.

This research also aims to document and preserve the local tradition, which is rich in social and spiritual values, while contributing to the dialogue between local culture and the teachings of the Christian faith. Hence, this study focusses not only on theoretical aspects but also on practical applications in the daily lives of the Atoni Pah Meto community. Therefore, this research is essential to provide novelty for future studies and to offer a tangible contribution to preserving the tradition of giving betel nut with *okomama*

in the context of Atoni Pah Meto as a manifestation of love-based local wisdom.

Results and discussion

Theology of love in the Bible

Love is a central concept in the Bible, representing more than just emotions – it encompasses actions and deep commitments to others' well-being. In the Old Testament, 'ahavah' signifies love between people and God's love for his people. In the New Testament, 'agape' describes unconditional, altruistic love, as seen in John 3:16. 1 John 4:7–8 highlights love as the essence of God's nature. The phrase 'beloved, let us love one another' in 1 John 4:7, translated from 'agapetos' (beloved ones), indicates that believers, who are loved by God, are called to practise 'agapao' love (Sutanto 2014). The word 'agapao' refers to unconditional love that must be practised continuously. Because 'agapao' is a verb, it implies 'I am and continually love' (Penulis 2013). John urges believers to practise 'agapao' love as a response to God's unconditional 'agape' love, encouraging them to express their gratitude by loving others with the same selfless love.

The reciprocal relationship in the practice of love, where God has loved humanity, serves as the foundation for John to earnestly encourage those beloved by Him to apply 'agape' love toward one another (Mangentang 2021). The essence of the theology of love is rooted in God's love as a model for believers to emulate. The Bible's paradigm of love includes human love for God and others, and reflects commitment, sacrifice and justice, mirroring God's nature and character in daily actions. Love is central to Christian life, with loving others being a fundamental ethical principle. Jesus teaches that the first and the greatest commandment is to love God, and the second is to love one's neighbour as oneself (Mt 22:37–39). According to Efesus Suratman and Sadrakh Sugiono, the teaching of love underpins the principle of unity in Indonesia's diverse context (Sugiono 2023). This demonstrates that love is the foundation of all actions and relationships in Christian life.

Love is the primary commandment from Jesus, and by loving others, Christians reflect God's love demonstrated through Jesus' sacrifice (Jn 3:16). Thus, loving one's neighbour is an act of obedience to God's command and a way to mirror his love to the world (Adeltania & Pius X 2024). When Christians love others, it demonstrates their faithfulness to God's teachings and fosters harmonious, peaceful relationships. Love is essential for unity and cooperation. Jesus stated that love is the hallmark of his disciples (Jn 13:35) and defines true Christianity, motivating believers to serve and care for others. Implementing love in daily life involves tangible actions such as helping those in need, comforting the grieving, supporting those in difficulty, forgiving others, respecting everyone's dignity, building good relationships and giving selflessly without expecting anything in return (Mangentang & Salurante 2021). Applying the principle of love in daily life allows Christians to fulfil God's command, positively impact their surroundings and serve as tangible evidence of their faith, spreading goodness and peace.

John 4:7–8 as the theological foundation for practising love in the Atoni Pah Meto community

1 John 4:7–8 reveals the core doctrine of love within the Christian tradition, emphasising that ‘God is love’ and calling believers to love one another as a manifestation of the love God has bestowed upon them. This verse provides a strong theological foundation for understanding and practising love in various cultural contexts, including within the Atoni Pah Meto community in Indonesia. In this context, 1 John 4:7–8 serves as a relevant theological basis for exploring how the biblical concept of love can be integrated into the Christian life practices of the Atoni Pah Meto. Accordingly, the application of love demonstrates that Atoni Pah Meto Christians are able to comprehend and simply implement love in their daily lives as a response to the love they have received from God. The theology of love contained in 1 John 4:7–8 affirms that love is the essence of the relationship between God and humanity, as well as between fellow humans. For the Atoni Pah Meto community, this teaching indicates that cultural practices such as the offering of betel nut should be viewed as a deeper expression of love that originates from God. This practice can be seen as a tangible form of implementing Christian teachings on love, emphasising that love should naturally flow through daily actions and interactions.

By referring to 1 John 4:7–8, the Atoni Pah Meto community is encouraged to deepen their understanding of love and apply it in their cultural practices in a manner more consistent with Christian teachings (Mangentang & Salurante 2021). This includes ensuring that acts of love are not merely symbolic but also reflect profound and transformative love values in their social and cultural relationships. Through this understanding, it is hoped that the practice of love within the Atoni Pah Meto community will continue to evolve, enriching community life and contributing to better social harmony.

The tradition of offering betel nut in Atoni Pah Meto culture as a reflection of believers’ love

The Timor Island community (Atoni Meto) preserves the culturally rich tradition of chewing betel nut, which involves betel nut, betel leaves and lime. This practice has a long history and is widely accepted in South Asian communities because of social, religious, health and addictive factors (Singh, Dikshit & Chaturvedi 2020). Visitors to Atoni Meto often see locals with red-stained mouths from chewing betel nut, which is offered as a sign of acceptance and camaraderie. Betel nut symbolises building intimacy and expressing affection (Touweli 2020). In Atoni Meto culture, the tradition of chewing betel nut symbolises love and plays a significant role in social interactions and community values. In the context of Atoni Pah Meto, the tradition of offering betel nut serves as a simple expression of love taught in the Bible. This practice reflects their belief as faithful individuals who have experienced the love of God (Nayuf 2022). The betel nut used is the Bonak variety, known for its larger size and rounded shape.

The significance and symbolism of betel nut in Atoni Pah Meto culture as Christians

The tradition of offering betel nut is an integral part of Atoni Pah Meto culture, possessing deep symbolic meaning and serving as a medium for social communication. In a Christian religious context, this tradition not only reflects local cultural values but also integrates Christian principles into daily life. The betel nut components include betel leaves, betel nut and lime, each symbolising important aspects of social and cultural relationships. Betel leaves symbolise harmony, betel nut represents strength and lime signifies purity. When combined in the tradition of *okomama*, these elements represent affection, respect and brotherhood (Asanab 2022). The practice of chewing betel nut functions not only as a consumption habit but also as a tool for building and strengthening social relationships (Nayuf 2022). In traditional ceremonies such as weddings, birth rites and funerals, betel nut is used to express respect and appreciation. This tradition highlights the importance of togetherness and mutual respect within the Atoni Pah Meto community (Syarifudin & Wibowo 2022). Additionally, in social conflict situations, betel nut serves as a tool for mediation and dispute resolution, symbolising peace and justice while demonstrating the community’s commitment to resolving issues fairly (Singh et al. 2020).

The principle of Christian love is clearly reflected in how the Atoni Pah Meto community implements this tradition. Offering betel nut is interpreted as an expression of deep love, involving not just symbolic acts but also reflecting Christian teachings on love and respect for others. This tradition acts as a bridge between local cultural values and Christian principles, demonstrating how the community integrates their religious beliefs into daily life. The significance and symbolism of betel nut in Atoni Pah Meto culture reflect the integration of local cultural values and Christian teachings. This tradition not only strengthens social and community bonds but also serves as a practical expression of Christian love in the everyday lives of believers.

Application of Christian love principles in the tradition of offering betel nut among the Atoni Pah Meto community

In the context of Christian religion, the Atoni Pah Meto community demonstrates their understanding and application of the principle of love through the tradition of betel nut offering. This tradition not only serves as a cultural practice but also represents a tangible expression of the Christian teachings they adhere to. When an Atoni Pah Meto individual offers betel nut to a guest, this act symbolises openness, appreciation and affection towards others (Suryadi 2020).

The practice of offering betel nut reflects their understanding of love as a fundamental principle in Christian faith, which teaches believers to love and respect one another. In this practice, betel nut is not merely a cultural symbol but also a means of conveying love and strengthening social bonds.

This tradition shows that Christian values such as love and brotherhood can be seamlessly integrated into everyday cultural practices, enriching and deepening the meaning of Christian teachings in their lives (Nayuf 2022).

Thus, the practice of offering betel nut by the Atoni Pah Meto community not only reflects their cultural wisdom but also illustrates their commitment to Christian teachings in their daily social interactions. This practice strengthens community relationships and demonstrates how Christian principles can be practically implemented within their local cultural context.

The relationship between theological love and the tradition of giving betel nut with okomama

The tradition of giving betel nut with okomama in Atoni Pah Meto culture harmoniously integrates spiritual values and social practices, reflecting the Christian commandments of affection and respect taught by Jesus (Novalina 2020).

Background of 1 John 4:7–8

The Epistle of 1 John is one of the New Testament letters written by the Apostle John. Addressed to the early Christian community, this letter aims to strengthen faith and provide moral guidance to its readers. The verses 1 John 4:7–8 are part of a section that emphasises the importance of love as the core of Christian teaching. At the time of writing this letter, the Christian community faced challenges such as false teachings and internal divisions. John wrote to affirm that love is the essence of Christian life and the relationship between God and humanity. In this context, 1 John 4:7–8 encourages Christians to love one another as a manifestation of the love of God, which has been revealed to them through Christ (Karris 2002).

These verses underline the belief that love is not merely a moral action but is central to Christian faith itself. John declares that God is love, and therefore, Christians are expected to reflect this divine nature in their relationships with others. Thus, 1 John 4:7–8 reinforces that love is the foundational principle of Christian life and a primary indicator of God's presence in the lives of believers.

Analysis of 1 John 4:7–8 in the context of betel nut

Textual analysis is crucial for interpreting and describing biblical passages, such as 1 John 4:7–8, which highlights the importance of love in believers' lives. In these verses, the love desired by John is expressed as *ἀγαπάω* (*agapao*) (Sutanto 2010). This term is a verb, indicating that the love expected of believers is the love of God, which should be practised in daily life. In Atoni Pah Meto culture, the siri pinang tradition uses betel leaves, areca nuts and lime, symbolising harmony, strength and purity, respectively. Combined in okomama, they represent affection, respect and deep kinship (Dwinanto 2019). In this tradition, offering siri pinang is both a social act and an expression of the love values taught in 1 John 4:7–8.

Through this tradition, the Atoni Meto community shows their understanding and practice of divine love by giving siri pinang in ceremonies and when welcoming guests, reflecting the teachings of John that those who love are born of God and know him. By giving siri pinang, the Atoni Pah Meto not only show respect and affection to their fellow humans, but also reflect their relationship with God, who is the source of love itself. Furthermore, the tradition of siri pinang also serves as a medium for strengthening social bonds and solidarity within the community. In the context of 1 John 4:7–8, love is not only individual but also communal. This verse encourages people to love one another, indicating that love should be expressed in the relationships among community members. The reciprocal relationship in the practice of love, where God has loved humanity, serves as the foundation for John to earnestly encourage those beloved by Him to apply '*agape*' love toward one another (Mangentang 2021).³ An interview with a Kie elder revealed that 'we love each other with the simple practice of love through the giving of siri pinang using okomama' (Talan 2024). This is a tangible form of the teaching of love that strengthens social bonds and creates a harmonious and loving environment.

In addition to being an expression of love, the tradition of siri pinang also functions as a tool for reconciliation and peace. In situations of conflict or dispute, siri pinang is often used as a medium for mediation and conflict resolution. This reflects the teaching of 1 John 4:7–8, which emphasises the importance of love in maintaining good relationships and overcoming conflicts. By using siri pinang as a symbol of peace, the Atoni Meto community shows that they understand the importance of love in creating and maintaining peace (Nayuf 2022). This aligns with the biblical teaching that love not only unites but also heals and reconciles. The importance of the tradition of siri pinang in the context of the theology of love is also evident in its role in cultural conservation. Through this practice, cultural values and social norms are passed down from generation to generation. This helps preserve cultural continuity and strengthen the cultural identity of the Atoni Pah Meto. In this regard, love is not only understood as a theological principle but also as a cultural principle in social life (Andung 2010:8).

The analysis of 1 John 4:7–8 in the context of the tradition of offering betel nut reveals that this tradition is a tangible manifestation of the biblical teaching of love. For the Atoni Pah Meto community, who embrace Christianity, the offering of betel nut is viewed as an expression of the value of love that they practise in their social lives. Through the ritual of giving betel nut with okomama, the Atoni Pah Meto people affirm that love serves as the foundational principle in their social interactions. This tradition strengthens social solidarity, fosters harmony within the community and preserves their cultural heritage. Therefore, the betel nut tradition not only

3. In the Atoni Pah Meto tradition, the betel nut offering, which consists of betel nuts, betel leaves and lime, is presented to visiting guests. For them, this practice reflects the value of love, understood as an expression of gratitude for the gift of salvation they have received from God.

holds social and cultural significance but also carries profound theological meaning, reflecting the principle of love taught in 1 John 4:7–8.

Theological implications of the siri pinang tradition in Atoni Meto society

The tradition of giving siri pinang with okomama in Atoni Pah Meto society is not only a rich cultural practice but also carries profound theological implications. This tradition reflects the principles of love, respect and brotherhood that are deeply rooted in Christian theological teachings. In Atoni Pah Meto society, the giving of siri pinang is a way to show respect and affection to guests and community members, which aligns with the teachings of love in Christian theology. This act not only strengthens social bonds and fraternity among community members but also demonstrates how religious and cultural values can unite to form a strong collective identity. Each time siri pinang is given, it serves as a reminder of the importance of love and solidarity, values that are also taught by Christianity. Through this tradition, the Atoni Pah Meto community not only celebrates their cultural heritage but also incorporates spiritual teachings into daily life, creating harmony between religious beliefs and cultural practices (Syarifudin & Wibowo 2022:15). In this context, siri pinang serves as a medium to express the values of love taught by Christ.

From a theological perspective, the giving of siri pinang can also be seen as an act of love that reflects God's love for humanity. In Christian tradition, love is the primary commandment given by Jesus to his disciples. By giving siri pinang, the Atoni Meto community emulates the love shown by God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is a tangible form of obedience to God's command and demonstrates faithfulness and adherence to his teachings (Gunjal et al. 2020). The giving of siri pinang also has a deeper meaning in the context of building and maintaining relationships among people. This act reflects the principle of love that creates harmonious and peaceful relationships among individuals (Clough 2006). Each instance of giving siri pinang carries good intentions and prayers for the recipient's well-being and happiness. It strengthens social bonds and deepens the sense of brotherhood within the community. In the context of Christian Religious Education (PAK), the tradition of siri pinang has been cultivated since childhood as a symbol of acceptance, sharing and love. In their innocence, honesty and simplicity, children enjoy togetherness in love, which continues into adulthood. Siri pinang serves as a means of cultivating and implementing Christian values in accordance with biblical teachings.

The Atoni Pah Meto community, who are Christians, still have room to deepen their understanding of the theology of love as taught in 1 John 4:7–8. This epistle emphasises the importance of a universal and boundless love, which must continually be pursued and applied in various aspects of life,

including cultural traditions like siri pinang. Although this community has internalised some of these values of love, no community is entirely perfect or beyond further development. The siri pinang tradition, which symbolises giving and solidarity, can serve as a means for them to deepen their understanding of love as taught in 1 John, allowing divine love to be applied more holistically, both in their internal community relationships and in their interactions with those outside the community.

Conclusion

The theology of love in the Bible emphasises that love is not just an emotion, but an action and commitment to the well-being of others, manifested through God's love and love for one another. In the context of both the Old and New Testaments, love describes the deep relationship between God and humanity, urging believers to love one another unconditionally, as taught in 1 John 4:7–8. For the Atoni Pah Meto community, the tradition of giving betel nut serves as a reflection of these values of love, affirming their commitment to Christian teachings and fostering harmonious social interactions. This practice is not only a cultural symbol but also a tangible manifestation of the love they experience as believers, connecting Christian principles with local cultural practices to nurture a community filled with love and understanding.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are extended to Dr Dyulius Thomas Bilo, Dr Samuel Purdayanto and Iman Kristina Halawa, for their contributions in conducting and describing this research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All authors, Y.E.T., D.T.B., S.P., contributed equally to every stage of this research, including planning, data collection, analysis and writing of the article. Each author played an active role in discussions and the development of ideas, as well as in the review and editing of the final article.

Funding information

This research did not receive any specific funding from public, commercial or non-profit funding agencies.

Ethical considerations

This article strictly adheres to all research ethics guidelines, particularly in the context of direct interaction with human subjects. Before commencing the research, the researchers obtained written consent and approval from each participant, ensuring that they fully understood the purpose, procedures,

and their rights throughout the study. Additionally, all measures were taken to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, in accordance with the applicable ethical standards. Ethical approval to conduct this study was received from Research Ethics Committee of Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Sabda Agung. The reference number is 24/STTSA/B.I/2024.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were generated or analysed in this study.

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