




A biblical response to *Arwah Be Am Nai* as mediator between humans and God in Hauteas tradition



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The combination of tradition and Christian belief in the Dawan community is inseparable, as the Christian Dawan people believe in '*Usif Jesus*' as the 'redeemer of sins'. At the same time, the Hauteas tradition still upholds belief in '*Be Am Nai*' as a 'mediator', especially in matters related to the Creator [*Uis Neno ma Uis Pah*].

Contribution: This article explores the Hauteas tradition of the Dawan tribe from an anthropological perspective and integrates biblical studies to address the concept of '*Arwah Be Am Nai*' as a mediator between humans and God, examining its relevance in the context of a diverse, heterogeneous society.

Keywords: biblical studies; *Arwah Be Am Nai*; mediator; Hauteas tradition; Dawan tribe; theological anthropology.

Introduction

The Dawan people are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Timor, East Nusa Tenggara, and many of them have embraced Christianity. However, some Dawan communities still hold firmly to the Hauteas tradition, which has roots in animism and dynamism (Gravelle 2010:6). This tradition is recognised as an agrarian rite where the Dawan people worship the spirit '*Be Am Nai*' as an intermediary between humans and God. This ritual involves honouring ancestors through symbols within the Hauteas structure, believed to help connect humans to the Sky God [*Uis Neno*] and the Earth God [*Uis Pah*]. The Dawan people live exclusively in specific areas of West Timor, including Kupang, South Central Timor (TTS), North Central Timor (TTU) and Oecusse. Each of these ethnic groups has a strong tradition, preserving a rich cultural identity, especially in their spirituality (Mubyarto 1991). This article aims to explore in depth the concept of intermediaries in the Hauteas tradition and provides a biblical response to the spirit '*Be Am Nai*', regarded as a mediator between humans and God. It also examines theological and biblical approaches that can be applied in ministering to Dawan communities that continue to hold this tradition.

Methodology

This study selects the two sources because they provide a solid methodological foundation for analysing the concept of μεσίτης [mediator] in the biblical context and its relevance to the belief traditions of indigenous communities.

McGrath (2020) emphasises the critical use of primary and secondary sources to construct a comprehensive literature review. This approach ensures that theological discussions are grounded not only in traditional interpretations but also incorporate contemporary developments in theological understanding. In the context of this article, McGrath's method provides a framework for evaluating various perspectives on μεσίτης from multiple disciplines, such as biblical studies, systematic theology and the anthropology of religion. These insights enable the author to construct evidence-based and relevant arguments, particularly in highlighting doctrinal differences between Christian faith and local traditions such as Hauteas.

Wright (2021), on the other hand, significantly contributes through his narrative-biblical approach, which emphasises the overarching biblical story in unveiling key themes such as creation, fall, redemption and restoration. Wright's perspective assists this article in contextualising μεσίτης within the grand narrative of God's plan, where Christ is understood as the fulfillment of the divine mediator's role. This provides critical insight that Christ, as μεσίτης, is relevant not only within systematic theology but also in practical ministry contexts for traditional communities.

The interconnected contributions of these studies are noteworthy. McGrath (2020) offers a methodological framework for critically evaluating and integrating theological sources, ensuring

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that the analysis is both descriptive and argumentative. Wright (2021) adds a narrative-biblical depth that allows the article to articulate *μεσίτης* in relation to the theological and cultural needs of the target communities.

Together, these approaches enrich the author's argument that this article contributes not only to academic discourse but also provides practical insights for church missions and ministry in traditional communities. By employing a Historical and Theological Contextualisation approach, the study examines how *μεσίτης* has been interpreted throughout church history and how these interpretations can be applied to indigenous societies. In addition, in the context of pastoral ministry, understanding deep theological concepts like *μεσίτης* can be translated into practical ministry strategies to address the spiritual and cultural needs of local communities effectively.

The Hauteas tradition of the Dawan people

The Hauteas tradition is recognised as one of the principal spiritual practices within Dawan culture. Hauteas, literally meaning a tree with its outer bark peeled off, has three branches symbolising the three highest entities in Dawan beliefs: '*Uis Neno*' [Sky God], '*Uis Pah*' or '*Uis Oe*' [Earth God] and '*Bei Am Nai*' [ancestral spirit as an intermediary]. Previous researchers explain that Hauteas is usually placed in front of traditional houses and serves as an altar where stones are arranged symmetrically at its base for sacrificial offerings. For the Dawan people, these three branches of Hauteas represent three levels of significant spiritual entities in their lives. The highest branch symbolises '*Uis Neno*', which is beyond human reach and believed to be the creator of life. The second branch represents '*Uis Pah*' or '*Uis Oe*', who controls land and water.

The third and lowest branch symbolises '*Bei Am Nai*', the ancestral spirit considered a mediator between humans and God (Neonbasu 2011). Furthermore, other views suggest that the kinship system within Dawan society consists of several family levels that play a crucial role in their social structure. The nuclear family is called '*ume*' [house], while the extended family is known as '*puknes*' [group]. This system also includes the existence of '*klen*', referred to as '*kuanes*' [village], which is an association of several extended families. Smaller clans unite to form a larger clan, called '*kanaf*' [name], which is led by a clan leader. Each clan has its own religious ceremonies and sacred objects called '*Nono*' [inheritance]. This kinship system is patrilineal, where lineage is traced through the father. A child automatically becomes a member of the father's clan and holds rights and obligations within that clan. This structure significantly influences traditional ceremonies, including Hauteas (Nomleni 2020).

The benefits of Hauteas for the Dawan community

The practice of the Hauteas religious tradition holds significant sociological value for the Dawan community. In the community's perspective, Hauteas tradition serves as

a cultural practice offering three key benefits: social solidarity, communal cooperation and strengthened unity. As noticed in previous research, the primary benefit of Hauteas, preserved by the Dawan people, is its role as a unifying force. Hauteas not only fosters unity but also strengthens ties among family members, clans and the broader community, even as they disperse because of work or marriage. Through Hauteas, they reunite to reinforce both physical and spiritual unity. This tradition also serves to restore and deepen a sense of family, kinship and solidarity within clans and the broader ethnic group. Beyond human fellowship, Hauteas is believed to enable communion with the 'divine' and ancestral spirits. This belief is central to the Dawan people's philosophy, expressed in the saying '*Nekaf Mese*' and '*Ansaof Mese*', meaning 'one heart and one mind' (Boy 2020).

This concept reflects a life marked by solidarity, unity and shared purpose, realised in collective action and fraternity. For the Dawan people, unity and brotherhood are not merely human virtues but divine values.

Be am Nai as an intermediary

In the Hauteas tradition, '*Bei Am Nai*' holds an important role as a spiritual intermediary between humans and the Sky God [*Uis Neno*]. The Dawan believe that ancestral spirits convey their prayers and requests to '*Uis Neno*' to receive blessings and prosperity, especially concerning agriculture, livestock and family. During these rituals, Dawan people place offerings at the base of Hauteas, often involving animal sacrifices and agricultural produce as symbols of gratitude. Respect for '*Bei Am Nai*' is shown through traditional ceremonies, where the entire Dawan community participates. The beating of gongs and the '*likurai*' dance mark the peak of these celebrations, performed in front of the traditional house, a spiritual centre for the community. This ritual highlights the role of '*Be Am Nai*' [ancestors] as intermediaries capable of mediating human relations with the unseen divine forces (Boy 2020).

The term '*Be'am nai*' refers to ancestors who have passed on and dwell in a different realm from the living. However, their spirits are still believed to influence the lives of their descendants. '*Be'i nai*' is also called '*atokos abeat es haube bian fatu bian*', '*peut uf*', '*oe mataf*' and '*alikin apean*', referring to those who sit and rest near trees, stones and springs and are believed to bestow life upon humanity. Ancestor spirits are thought to bring blessings but may also bring curses if not respected by their descendants (Silab, Kanahebi & Soleman 2011).

The religious beliefs of the Dawan people are expressed through symbols that function as intermediaries for relating with spiritual entities such as '*Uis Neno*', '*Be'e-Na'i*', '*jin*', '*nitu*', '*nijabu*', '*alaut*' and '*mat molo*'. One significant symbol in their relationship with ancestors is '*Hau Teas*' or '*Hau Monef*'. This tradition aligns with Cassirer's definition of religion, which suggests that religion offers a relationship with the transcendent world, a reality beyond human experience

(Letsoin, Opat & Baunsele 2021). Further research suggests that these deceased ancestors act as intermediaries between the living and God, as they are believed to dwell closer to the divine, enabling prayers made through ancestors to be granted by God (Ikun 2022). However, biblical studies have introduced a differing view, suggesting that communication with the spirits of the dead is not biblically mandated, as God has prepared a place for the spirits of the deceased. Ancestral spirits are regarded as passive, awaiting resurrection (Faot, Octavianus & Juanda 2017).

Research sources

In addition to literature review as a source of analysis, the author visited several villages among the Dawan people that are known to preserve the tradition of honouring ancestors [*Be Am Nai*] from 01 June to 12 June 2024. During these 12 days, the author interviewed two respected community elders, Otnial Nome, a 94-year-old man, and Yohana Kase, a 106-year-old woman. These figures are known as leaders capable of interacting with 'ancestral spirits', and their prayers are often believed to be answered by these spirits. In addition, the author interviewed a church leader, Pastor Meshak Faot.

The first informant, Otnial Nome, aged 94 years, deeply believes in '*Be Am Nai*' and finds it challenging to accept biblical verses, as he has rarely attended church throughout his life. He attributes his longevity, having reached 94 years, to the blessings of '*Be Am Nai*'. Otnial Nome has nine children – eight sons and one daughter – and has passed down his belief in honouring the spirits of '*Be Am Nai*' to his children, considering these spirits the closest intermediaries. He believes their prayers, even for rain, are always granted. His primary occupation is gambling, regarded as a way to receive blessings from '*Be Am Nai*'. Upon receiving such blessings, he expresses gratitude to '*Be Am Nai*' as a gesture of thanksgiving for the blessings bestowed upon his family. Otnial Nome believes that showing respect to ancestors has granted him longevity, health and material blessings, and he predicts he will live until 2030, reaching 100 years.

Otnial Nome explained that ancestor veneration is not only performed during times of hardship but typically occurs from 21 December to 24 December 24, when he gathers his extended family for grave cleaning of '*Be Am Nai*' and performs rituals such as lighting candles and offering sacrifices at the grave. This is a way to honour their time spent with ancestors, believed to remain active in the community, providing protection and conveying the Dawan people's prayers to '*Uis Neno*' [Sky Creator] and '*Uis Pah*' [Earth Creator]. Otnial Nome also revealed that neglecting the rituals honouring the ancestors [*Be Am Nai*] is believed to bring misfortunes such as accidents, illness, dropping out of school, premature death and even difficulty in receiving blessings. His final piece of advice was that to attain blessings, one must show respect both to God and to the ancestors [*Be Am Nai*].

The second informant, Yohana Kase, is a 106-year-old woman who was married to a nobleman. Her husband, Tobias Nome, passed away in 2019 at the age of 116. According to information obtained from Yohana Kase, she often witnessed the rituals performed by her late husband during his lifetime.

Yohana Kase revealed that whenever there was a forest fire or in places considered sacred as the dwelling place of '*Uis Pah*', her late husband, Tobias Nome, would pray to the ancestors [*Be Am Nai*] to ask for forgiveness and to calm the wrath of '*Uis Pah*' [King of the Earth]. Yohana Kase explained that after her husband's passing, the responsibility for communicating with '*Be Am Nai*' shifted to the '*Amaf Sin*' [elders] who would perform traditional ceremonies during long droughts, landslides or other natural events. The elders would offer a chicken and pray to '*Uis Neno*' [God of the Sky], '*Uis Pah*' or '*Uis Oe*' [God of the Earth] and '*Bei Am Nai*' [ancestral spirits as intermediaries], and rain would fall, allowing the Dawan tribe to plant seeds in their fields. Natural phenomena like landslides are also believed to reflect the anger of '*Bei Am Nai*' [ancestral spirits]. This ceremony is conducted in the traditional language as a form of respect for '*Bei Am Nai*', so the leader of this ceremony must be a chosen individual considered to have words that the ancestors listen to (Nomleni 2020). The Dawan tribe always uses their traditional language in each region, as this tradition must be followed carefully to avoid bringing the wrath of the ancestors.

The third informant, a pastor named Meshak Faot, aged 47 years, pioneered a church among the Dawan tribe in TTS (South Central Timor) Regency, specifically in Naukae Village. Meshak Faot started the church in 2021 with the Indonesian Lutheran Church (GLI) until 2021 and then joined the Assembly of God Church (GSJA). According to Meshak Faot, belief in the spirits of '*Be Am Nai*' in the Dawan tribe has grown significantly, as this belief continues to thrive today. The Dawan community holds that the spirits of '*Be Am Nai*' are the closest intermediaries, while '*Uis Neno*' [King of the Sky or God the Creator of Heaven] is seen as distant and unreachable by sinful humans, so they must pray through the spirits of '*Be Am Nai*'. Additionally, the tribe believes that '*Uis Pah*' is the God who reigns and rules over the earth, present in certain ominous places. Sacred places include mountains, springs and large trees, where ancestors used to pray for blessings, such as rain, crop yields and even health. The spirits of '*Be Am Nai*' are thought to carry prayers to '*Uis Pah*' [King of the Earth or Creator of the Earth].

Furthermore, '*Be Am Nai*' spirits are also believed to protect people from danger. Meshak Faot's approach began with fellowship within a single family, eventually expanding to 25 families. This church planting effort also gained support from several traditional figures who had once led prayer ceremonies to the spirits of '*Be Am Nai*'. However, throughout his ministry, Meshak Faot has tried to teach a biblical understanding of the true intermediary, but his teachings have been rejected by the community, as they see Meshak Faot's teachings as opposing the traditions built by their ancestors.

As a result, he has faced multiple death threats, and the church he started has also been threatened with closure. However, these threats did not succeed, although in 2016, a tragic event struck Meshak Faot's family: the pastor's residence caught fire on 10 April 2016, at midnight. All the theology books he had bought during his studies and various versions of the Bible with different translations were consumed by the flames, with nothing saved, as he only managed to escape with his wife and three children.

He mentioned that the main argument often put forward by the Dawan people generally refers to (Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia [LAI] 1997) Exodus 20:12, which reads, 'Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you'. In the Dawan language (LAI 2000), this verse is translated as, '*Mumtausan ho ama ma aina, he nati mupeni aomina ma ua mnanu anbi pah le Au fe ani neu ki*'. This verse is used to justify that the Bible also commands honouring parents, including ancestors, even though they are not physically present, as their role as spirits still exists and is close to humanity.

Christ as the absolute mediator

In Christian doctrine, Christ is recognised as the sole mediator between humanity and God, a foundational teaching in Christianity. This concept is based on New Testament scripture, such as 1 Timothy 2:5, which states, 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus'. This verse provides a succinct affirmation of Christ's nature and work as both true man and true God. Christ is the exclusive mediator of the New Covenant between God and humanity, providing salvation and facilitating prayer to God. Paul's theology in 1 Timothy 2:5 distinctly presents Christ as the sole mediator (AYT version) between God and humanity, aligning with Jesus' declaration in John 14:6 (Constable 2019).

Etymology of the word μεσίτης

The Greek word μεσίτης [*mesitēs*] in 1 Timothy 2:5 and other texts is translated as 'mediator'. Etymologically, it refers to someone who acts between two opposing parties to bring them into a better relationship or agreement. In a theological context, especially in 1 Timothy 2:5, this term designates Jesus Christ as the sole mediator between God and humankind (Newman Jr. 2002:105). In New Testament texts, μεσίτης conveys 'someone who acts as a bridge' between two sides, with the purpose of creating peace. However, in the context of human salvation, this Mediator's role extends beyond merely being a 'connector'. The mediator must possess divine attributes as well as the human nature He seeks to save, although without sin. By embodying both divinity and humanity, the mediator can fully understand God's demands and human needs. Furthermore, only one who is sinless can offer Himself as a redemptive sacrifice for humanity (Vine 1996).

This understanding has formed the basis of Christology since the early centuries and is maintained by various Christian

traditions as a fundamental, unshakable pillar. The Bible, authored by 40 writers over approximately 2000 years, consistently reveals the hidden mystery of Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity (Marantika 2008). This view is essential in Christian theology, where Jesus' role as mediator emphasises not only His work in atoning for humanity's sins but also as the channel through which divine blessings are bestowed upon humanity. Marantika highlights that 'mediator' is one of 365 beautiful names or titles given to Jesus, reflecting unique aspects of His identity and role in salvation.

In biblical theology, the concept of Jesus as mediator, as expressed in 1 Timothy 2:5, directly pertains to His exclusive role in reconciling humanity with God. Christ is the only one who can bridge the separation caused by sin, rendering any other mediator unnecessary. His role as mediator is vital, as through Christ, God has bestowed abundant spiritual blessings on humanity (Eph 1:3). Through Christ, blessings of salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation are conveyed, establishing Him as the only valid and effective mediator before God.

Marantika's emphasis on the '365 names' of Christ can be understood as an expression of the multifaceted dimensions of Christ's role as mediator, demonstrating that each title or name attributed to Christ reflects a different aspect of His redemptive work. Therefore, in relation to the concept of mediator, Marantika's perspective strengthens orthodox doctrine by affirming the exclusivity of Christ's role in the relationship between God and humanity, as well as His ongoing role as the mediator who continually provides spiritual blessings to believers.

Christ as the eternal high priest and absolute mediator

In Christian theology, Christ acts as humanity's representative before God in His capacity as the eternal High Priest. Christ not only saves humanity from sin but also continuously mediates on their behalf. As emphasised in Hebrews 7:25, Christ 'lives forever' and 'always intercedes for those who come to God through Him'. This indicates His role as a comprehensive and ongoing mediator, highlighting that His salvation is neither temporary nor partial but complete and definitive for all who believe in Him. The concept of Christ as mediator in Hebrews 7:25 illustrates His role not just as Saviour but as an eternal intercessor for His people before God (Enns 2016).

In biblical theology, this mediation encompasses two main aspects: propitiation and advocacy. In His propitiation, Christ bore humanity's sins, reconciling the relationship between God and His people. As an advocate, Christ continually intercedes for believers before God, ensuring the preservation of the new covenant relationship (Jn 1 2:1-2). This view affirms Christ's unique and definitive position in Christian theology as the ongoing mediator, rejecting any alternative concepts that propose other mediators as means of salvation (Tm 1 2:5).

The theological link between Christ's role as mediator and as High Priest is developed in Hebrews. Christ's role as High Priest includes His function as the 'forerunner', paving and opening the way for humanity to enter God's presence. This is underscored in Hebrews 6:19–20, where Christ is described as the 'forerunner' who has entered the most holy place, representing humanity before God. The term 'forerunner' [*prodomos*] carries profound theological significance, referring to someone who not only shows the way but prepares a place for those who will follow Him. As the forerunner, Christ traverses a path that humanity, because of sin, could not travel, becoming both the atoning sacrifice and the perfect mediator (Heb 9:12–14; Ryrie 1991).

This concept of Christ as mediator is reinforced by His role as forerunner, underscoring that reconciliation and fellowship with God are attainable only through Christ. Ryrie emphasises that Christ not only provides the path to salvation but also guarantees that His people can follow Him into God's presence. In systematic theology, this aligns with the doctrine of Christ's mediation, underscoring His exclusivity as the mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5). As High Priest, Christ actively intercedes on behalf of His people before the Father, affirming that salvation and access to God are possible only through Him (Heb 7:25).

This understanding solidifies the theological position that Christ is the sole mediator who reconciles humanity to God (Walvord 1969). Christ's dual role as mediator includes two essential aspects: the sacrificial propitiation and active intercession. Through His definitive sacrifice on the cross, Christ fully addressed the issue of human sin, opening the way for reconciliation between God and humanity (Heb 9:12–14). At the same time, He continually acts as an intercessor, pleading for forgiveness on behalf of those who confess their sins. In this framework, Christ as mediator has a solid theological foundation in the New Testament. He is not only the perfect atoning sacrifice but also the High Priest who continually intervenes for His people before the Father (Heb 7:25).

Christ, as the Son of God who came to redeem humanity's sins, eliminates the need for other mediators. Through His sacrifice on the cross, Christ opened the way for all people to have direct access to God without requiring mediation by ancestors or other spirits (Heb 9:15).

This provides a strong theological foundation for ministry to the Dawan community, which still holds beliefs in ancestral spirits as mediators. This message encourages them to redirect their spiritual focus from ancestors to Christ, the true mediator who offers eternal salvation.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significance of the concept of μεσίτης [mediator] in Christian theology, emphasising Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity. By introducing the unique person of Christ as both God and sinless man, Christ fulfills the demands of God's justice while understanding

human needs. This understanding forms the foundation of a doctrine that distinguishes the Christian faith from traditional beliefs, including the Dawan belief in ancestral spirits as spiritual intermediaries.

The findings also demonstrate the relevance of the theology of μεσίτης in the context of mission work among traditional communities such as the Dawan people. The doctrinal differences between Christian faith and Hauteas traditions call for a contextualised approach to ministry, one that not only presents Biblical truths but also respects the cultural values of the local community.

Moreover, the findings affirm that the integration of Christian teachings into pluralistic cultural contexts must consider profound cultural sensitivity and theological depth. A holistic approach encompassing doctrinal teaching, spiritual guidance and community empowerment can strengthen Christian faith amid the influence of ancestral practices.

These findings also encourage further theological studies that could explore the concept of μεσίτης in various New Testament books, such as Hebrews and 1 Timothy, to expand understanding of Christ's role as mediator in different contexts. In addition, studies on how modernisation affects the beliefs of traditional communities such as the Dawan in maintaining ancestral practices or transitioning to Christian teachings could provide valuable insights. Future research could also adopt an interdisciplinary approach, combining theology, anthropology and sociology to explore the dynamics of belief changes in traditional communities influenced by Christian missions.

This research opens broad opportunities for future studies in exploring the complex dynamics between modernisation, education and spiritual transformation within traditional societies such as the Dawan tribe. One area of research that needs to be developed is examining how modernisation not only transforms spiritual practices but also reshapes perceptions of the role of spiritual mediators, particularly regarding the acceptance of the Christological concept of μεσίτης. This study can provide deep insights into generational shifts in attitudes towards traditional mediators and Christ as the sole mediator, thereby offering a more detailed understanding of this theological integration.

Moreover, future research could focus on developing culturally contextual ministry strategies by exploring how formal and informal educational approaches can effectively communicate the truths of the Gospel in ways that are relevant within the local cultural framework. Comparative studies across indigenous communities in Indonesia could further enrich this discourse, uncovering unique patterns and interactions between ancestral traditions, modernisation and Christian teachings.

Such interdisciplinary research would make a significant contribution to the fields of contextual theology, missiology and the anthropology of religion, while addressing both theoretical and practical challenges in bridging traditional beliefs with Christian doctrines in a modern context.

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A.F., J.O. and J.J. collaborated to write this article by dividing tasks; including the concept of mindset and also word analysis in the original language of the Bible.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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