Hoho, the Meaning-Making Tradition of Niasan People: Toward Theopoetic Spirituality

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Abstract
This article explores the local heritage of the lament tradition of the Niasan people, known as hoho, and constructs a form of spirituality based on aesthetic theology. Disasters and diseases such as pandemics caused the loss of loved ones, jobs, homes, community, status, and security. The suffering leads people to question their core identity, which shapes spirituality. The contribution of aesthetic theology is to open the space for human experience and knowledge at the level of feeling and imagination about God, reflect on the beautiful nature of relationship with God, and appreciate art as an expression of spirituality. This article consists of three parts. The first part explores hoho as a meaning-making tradition of Niasan people amid suffering. The second part explains the importance of aesthetic theology in strengthening spirituality. The third part is devoted to hoho as the practice of theopoetic spirituality amid suffering and its aftermath.

Keywords
hoho, spirituality, Nias, aesthetic, theopoetic

INTRODUCTION

The people of the Nias experienced a double pandemic in early 2020. Before Covid-19, the Nias Islands were infected by African Swine Fever (ASF) in April 2020. This virus caused the sudden death of millions of swine. Swine are closely connected to Nias culture because all the Niasan people rely on swine for daily needs.

rituals, from birth to death, are connected with swine. There is a form of *sumange* (respect for others) demonstrated by serving the jaw and meat of swine as the main meal in traditional feasts. Later, Niasan people were ravaged by Covid-19. Both of these diseases make the Niasan people aware of the vulnerability of humans and other creatures.

However, vulnerability in times of disaster is experienced differently. Some feel an extreme and direct impact from the calamity; others feel it indirectly. In a society that does not yet have gender equity, women and children are the most vulnerable group. Vasudha Gokhale wrote about fundamental things that make women more vulnerable to disasters. There is the economic vulnerability caused by a lack of access to resources; social vulnerability caused by the disintegration of social patterns; ecological vulnerability caused by environmental degradation and the inability to protect it; organizational vulnerability due to weak national and local infrastructures; educational vulnerability due to lack of access to information and knowledge; vulnerability in self-expression and motivation due to lack of public awareness; political vulnerability due to lack of access to political power and representation; cultural vulnerability due to certain beliefs and attitudes that are unfair to women; and physical vulnerability due to the destruction of infrastructure.

In terms of social life, women also experience post-disaster impacts. They include physical impacts such as illness, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, gynecological disorders, and miscarriages; emotional impacts such as anxiety, fear, shame, nightmares, and anger. In addition, there are also socioeconomic impacts such as adjustment to a new social role as a widow, single parent, and the head of the family. Women who have lost their foundation in life feel hopeless, isolated, stigmatized, disorganized, unable to carry on with routine life, and have lost faith.

To deal with suffering and human vulnerability, the Niasan people have a lament tradition known as *hoho*. According to Johannes M. Hämmerle, *hoho* is a reflective song about human life and death; and it is also an expression of the audacity to live. As a kind of local wisdom, *hoho* is the

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2 Vasudha Gokhale, “Role of Women in Disaster Management: An Analytical Study with Reference to Indian Society in the 14th World Conference on Earthquake Engineering” (Beijing, 2008), 2.

source of strength in the process of lament. *Hoho* is a meaning-making life process. This search for the meaning of life is not new for Niasan people. It has been a part of the spirituality of the local community for a long time.

The meaning-making tradition of *hoho* is not only about lamenting suffering but also leads to reflecting on and discovering the beauty of life. In constructive theology, this is known as aesthetic theology. It is a metaphorical narrative approach that interprets God, faith, and theology itself through aesthetics-based methodology. My argument is that the *hoho* tradition of the Niasan people with its foundation in aesthetic theology can be the source of spiritual strength in times of suffering and its aftermath. This article has three parts. The first explores *hoho* as a meaning-making tradition amidst suffering. The second explains the importance of aesthetic theology in dealing with suffering and its aftermath. The third is devoted to theopoetic spirituality.

**Hoho: A Meaning-Making Tradition of Niasan People Amid Suffering**

Carolyn Yoder emphasized that human beings are meaning-making creatures. Humans are seekers of the meaning of the life events they experience. In times of suffering, as meaning-making creatures, humans find identity and security in the process of giving meaning to the world. These meanings are often embedded in people’s life stories. When suffering destroys the world, the meaning and stories are also disrupted. It raises questions about previous assumptions of the meaning of life. There is, therefore, a need to tell the stories as a way of recreating a new sense of meaning and identity.

Hämmerle conducted research on several types of *hoho* in Nias. He collected them in a book called *Lawaendröna*. One of the well-known *hoho* collections tells the story of the search for the meaning of life amid vulnerability. There is a *hoho* about a man who goes hunting. In the middle of the jungle, he finds the carcass of an eagle that is rotting and being

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6 Hämmerle, *Lawaendröna*, 121.
eaten by worms. He contemplates for a moment and asks if human fate will also end up as this eagle. His heart begins to ask: How can humans live eternally? The hunter returns home and asks *duminia tambali gate*, *duminia tambali mbo* (his wife), “How can humans continue to live?” The wife answers realistically that no one can live eternally and everyone will die. Not quite satisfied with his wife’s answer, he asks *omo ledawa* (big house) whether this big house could guarantee eternal life. The big house replies that it cannot be eternal. It will be destroyed if a wicked child burns it. Then, the hunter asks *batu tödö lala* (roadside stone), which replies that humans cannot rely on it. The roadside stone will be trampled upon by people who will break it. He asks *balaki ana’a* (big house). Gold also says that it will perish when it is burned. He asks *böhö sowaha* (horned deer). The deer replies that one day it will be killed by the humans. He asks *eu sahuwa-huwa* (an old giant tree), which replies that one day it will be cut down by humans. He asks *baewa nidanö* (eel). The eel says that during the dry season, it is easy for predators to catch it. He asks *hösi* (the hardest stone). The stone answers that it will roll over if there is a landslide. In the end, the hunter makes *batu soniha-niha* or *gowe* (menhir stones). There is a belief that humans will not die because in that form they are always remembered. Thus, human life becomes eternal. 

*Hoho* is evidence that Niasan people are meaning-makers. The search for the meaning of life is from several perspectives. The first is idealism. Humans have ideas that make them restless until they arrive at an answer or a way out of such a problem. There is a human desire to live and to look for ways to become eternal. The second is positivism, which is based on things that can be proven. The hunter’s wife gives a view based on her experience of seeing the reality as it happens: One day, humans will surely die. The third is existentialism, which sees existence as always governed by the fear of mortality; therefore humans seek ways to stay alive. In Christianity, humans also continue to search for the meaning of life. When Christianity came, the Niasan people were introduced to the concept of God and life after death.

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Meaning-making or search for the meaning of life becomes more intense when humans have to deal with suffering caused by disasters or diseases. It is not surprising that when Covid-19 and ASF occurred, several questions about life, God, and the relationship in between arose. They also raise the question of theodicy, when the love of God encounters unjust reality. Why does God allow disaster to occur while humans are obedient in worshiping her/him? If God is powerful, why can’t she/he stop the pandemic? Why do good people die in the pandemic while bad people survive? These questions are part of the search for the meaning that leads to meaning-making.

**The Significance of Aesthetics in Spirituality**

The depth of feelings, thoughts, and reactions caused by suffering can be terrifying, even devastating. The pandemic causes the loss of loved ones, jobs, homes, community, status, and security. When people feel out of control or “unspiritual,” they tend to suppress their grief, pain, and questions, which leads to feelings of self-blame, shame, and humiliation. Sometimes guilt feelings arise as a result of surviving when others have died. Suffering also can leave us disordered, disempowered, and feeling disconnected from other people and life. Some may respond to the suffering with anger, anxiety, depression, and ask: “Why me?,” “Why us?,” “Where is God?,” “What is the meaning of life?” They continually ask these unanswerable questions. Together with suppressed fears, these questions provoke anger at everything and everyone. To restore the ability to think rationally, the questions need to be reframed and answered by the process of meaning-making.

Contemporary spirituality emphasizes the importance of personal experience in understanding God and responding to divine initiative. Experience is a term often used to describe anything that enters human life, whether it is religious, mystical, theological, ethical, psychological, or physical. Experience is also about events, stories, relationships, commitments, suffering, hope, and tragedy.

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In the vocabulary of contemporary spirituality, “relation” and “relational” are the keywords.\(^\text{11}\) “Relational” is the matrix in which we feel the presence of God, while “relation” refers to how people are connected mutually, reciprocally, or equally. In spirituality, relationships are not only about the relationship between humans and God or fellow humans but also encompass the relationship with nature. Another term in contemporary spirituality is “silence.” In Christianity, silence is not emptiness but the space within which the Spirit enables us to hear the Word of God.\(^\text{12}\) In silence, then, we can speak of relationship to the wider context that leads further into the infinity and inexhaustibility of the self-giving God.

Spirituality is also related to the search for an authentic self. The suffering due to these losses leads people to question their core identity. Thomas Merton specifically saw a connection between spirituality and the search for the true self. According to Merton, an authentic self is not obtained from human effort or a method that is filled with pressure and expectations. The authentic self is increasingly present in the vulnerable human being and the mystery hidden in the depths of one’s heart.

Disasters show how vulnerable humans and nature are, and the search for meaning shows awareness of their vulnerability as well as the vulnerability of all creation. The awareness of vulnerability makes humans understand that they cannot rely on themselves but must live in the power of relationships. Humans need relationship with God, others, and nature. These relationships shape Christian spirituality.

Theology has a significant role in offering an answer that leads to hope in times of suffering. The realization of vulnerability and the need for relationship gives rise to meaning-making that leads to healing. Here, I propose the concept of aesthetic theology as the basis for the process of meaning-making in times of suffering and its aftermath. The term “aesthetics” comes from the Greek \textit{aistēsis}, which means perception by the senses. Alexander Baumgarten understands aesthetics as the “art of thinking beautifully” \textit{(ars pulcher cogitandi)} and the “art of forming taste”

\(^{11}\) Downey, \textit{Understanding Christian Spirituality}, 95.

The aesthetic goal is the attainment of “beauty,” namely, the perfection of sensitive cognition.

Using the contribution of Richard Viladesau on aesthetic theology, I consider three elements of aesthetics in spirituality. The first is that aesthetic spirituality allows space for human experience and knowledge at the level of feeling and imagination about God. The second is that it reflects the beautiful nature of the relationship with God, or transcendence. The third emphasizes how art can express spirituality and communication with the divine. Based on these elements, the aesthetic factor can add a new color to spirituality. Aesthetics allows space for imagination, beauty, and art to be part of spirituality. It also encourages the creation of a new language, parables, and symbols about the triune God in spirituality, especially in times of suffering.

In aesthetic theology, there is a term, “theopoetic,” which comes from the Greek *Theos* (God) and *poiesis* (to make). In the earliest Christian centuries, theopoetics referred to both the humanizing of the divine and the divinizing of humanity. The meaning of this term has expanded in modern times. Stanley Hopper interpreted theopoetics as a way to reengage experience in theological discourse. Amos Wilder defines theopoetics as an invitation to conversation and an offer for renewal by engaging contemporary religious experience in language that has an invitational character. Scott Holland, influenced by Wilder’s thinking, understands theopoetics as writing that invites other writings, narratives that invite other narratives, a metaphor that invites new metaphors, a confession that encourages other confessions, and conversation that invites further conversations. From these three thinkers, theopoetics can be understood

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as religious writing that becomes an invitation for everyone to understand God.

Richard Kearney has a unique understanding of theopoetics. For him, theopoetics is the process of seeing the world more divinely. Instead of people trying to see God, people try to see as God sees. In his book *Poetics of Imagining*, Kearney shows the importance of imagination as a possible vision of the future. Metaphors, symbols, and narratives can produce various types of imagination that offer the freedom to see the world differently. The imagination is also open to receiving forms of action that lead to transformation.\(^1\) As Kearney puts it, theopoetics is writing or material that provides space for metaphors, symbols, and narratives by involving imagination, beauty, and art. Theopoetics opens free space for people to understand God, including those whose voices have not been heard.

John Caputo and Catherine Keller, in their article “Theopoetic/Theopolitic,” deal with theopoetics and the role of social transformation.\(^2\) For Keller, our society tends to the dualism between soul and body or between God and the world, whereas in spirituality the two are interrelated. Keller emphasized that a different way of seeing God is a way of seeing creation with new eyes. This way of seeing differently has consequences for transforming perspectives and ways of life.\(^3\) I use Caputo and Keller’s thoughts to complement my proposal for theopoetics, which drives social transformation, especially in how we relate to and treat others and nature.

**TOWARD THEOPOETIC SPIRITUALITY AMID SUFFERING AND ITS AFTERMATH**

There are three aspects of theopoetics that have a bearing on spirituality. First, theopoetics leads to a beautiful relationship with God that involves imagination, beauty, and art, especially in times of suffering. As argued by


Hopper, Wilder, and Holland, religious theopoetics is an invitation to reveal God’s meaning by involving new experiences and language. The second aspect is that it invites and provides space for the “voiceless” to express the human relationship with God and others. It is in line with the thought of Kearney, who emphasized elements of the imagination and engaged “the other voice.” Third, as shown by Caputo and Keller, theopoetics inspires social transformation.

Theopoetic Spirituality: A Beauty of Relationship through the Presence of a New Voice

Theopoetic spirituality shows that a relationship with God is not only something right and true but also something beautiful. Believing in God can fill our life with new splendor and profound joy, even amid difficulties and sufferings. Every expression of true beauty can be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with God.

Theopoetic spirituality values experiences. Humans may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of God, but they can at least relate to those who are the least. We can experience it in telling stories about human experience during suffering, and how that story affects our relationship with God. Telling the stories about the experience of suffering reflects the process of meaning-making. A thirty-year-old friend of mine, Rosmeyanna Daeli, shared her experience after contracting Covid-19 twice in 2020 and 2021. She experienced what it was like to be close to death. During the suffering, she used her time to reflect more about life. She looked back and wondered how many times she spent not seeing the beauty of God in this life for she is too busy in her hectic job as a civil servant. After some days at the hospital in Gunungsitoli, she saw what happened to her more positively. She gives thanks to God for the moment she can pause from her work at the office, breathe the fresh air, and enjoy the beauty of nature. She reflects that “the pause” is a blessing, for she started to express the meaning of what happened to her by creating poems, prayers, and reflections. Here is one of her reflections entitled “When I Die”:

We have goals and dreams we want to achieve. When we were kids, we dreamed of being the first in class or maybe the first in school. We were fighting to get into our favorite university. Then, as we graduated and
had a job, we dreamed about having the love of our life. Then, after we married the love of our life, our dreams got bigger. We wanted to have children running around us. We wanted to own a car. We wanted to have a bigger house for our family. So, we worked harder and harder. Then, we struggled to get a higher salary, achieve more, be promoted in our career, as our family needs increase year after year. But suddenly without warning, our dreams were shattered. Everything that we had worked for had to be left behind with our loved ones. As seconds tick away, we now wish for something different. When I die, I wish to see the ones I love around me. When I die, I hope to leave the world in joy to meet my Creator. When I die, I hope I have no enemies, I wish to have reconciled with the one with whom I was in conflict. When I die, I hope I have given my children enough love to face the world without me. When I die, I wish to have given my loved ones enough courage, enough faith, enough joy, to live life without me. 

Through telling the story, people can find meaning and significance in what they have lived through and in what they grow into. This helps them to move forward in constructive ways. Acknowledgment and the ensuing grieving and mourning help people accept life-changing situations; and that life will never be the same. However, facing the possibility of a “new normal” can bring fear about the future. That fear must be identified and realistically addressed; otherwise, individuals or communities remain easily vulnerable to triggers that can throw them back into suffering. Facing the past, the reality of the present, and the challenges in the future opens the way to spiritual growth in the aftermath of pandemics/sufferings/calamities. We may never be able to understand fully the meaning today, but learning the story opens our eyes to the present context and the complexity of life.

From the hoho tradition, we learn that in times of suffering and vulnerability, there is a need for remembrance. In the past, to be remembered, Niasan people made menhir stones that resembled their ancestors. Today, this tradition no longer exists since the coming of Christianity destroyed their belief system, the so-called fanõmba Adu. However, the need to be remembered even after this life is still a part of human need. This remembrance is not a search for the authenticity of the past or the digging up of the past. It is more about creating mutable and

22 Interview with Rosmeyanna Daeli, August 20, 2020 in Gunungsitoli.
multiple perspectives that are brought to the surface to be reworked in the context of present circumstances. It is also about visiting relationships with God, culture, and context. Moreover, the making of memory by an individual depends upon being part of a social group with shared stories. One needs the capability of reasoning and comparing and of feeling in contact with God and society that can guarantee the integrity of our remembrance. It can create hybrid memories and stories that are in a continual process of being remade. Therefore, the significance of theopoetic form plays an important role in remembrance. It could take the form of stories, poems, songs, and other forms of art that connect humans with the divine, others, and nature.

Theopoetic Spirituality: Space for the “New Voice” to Express the Relation with God

Before the pandemic, the Niasan people easily accepted the concept of the almighty God in every situation. However, for the thousands who were victimized by the pandemic, this concept became quite contentious in theological conversations. The term in Hebrew, El Shaddai, means “He who comes from the mountain” or “She who suckles and gives life to her children.”23 The Hebrew understanding of El Shaddai was unknown in the Hellenistic world, in which the almighty God was perceived as distanced from the world, unlike the El Shaddai who is intimately related to his creatures. If this is so, what are we to make of the pandemic and ASF? Why doesn’t God save the creation from doom and misery? In the face of disaster, a more nuanced view of God is needed.

Marie Claire Barth-Frommel in her reflection after the series of disasters and sufferings argued that God as the creator is indeed very powerful. However, does God’s power mean a power to control all good or bad events? In other words, does all that happens depend on God’s decision or at least on God’s permission?24 In the testimony of the Bible, God is known not as a determinant of fate or destiny but as a God who is concerned

23 Marie Claire-Barth, Hati Allah Bagai Hati Seorang Ibu: Pengantar Pada Teologi Feminis (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2003), 152.
and suffers with his/her creatures. For Claire Barth-Frommel, God can be likened to a mother, who, even though she is saddened by the death of a family member, still struggles to help her surviving children and seek their welfare. God is the Almighty as creator, but she is also a mother who suffers with her creation in times of disasters.

The music group of young people in Nias, namely, Sikoli, created a theopoetic song during the pandemic after deep reflection on suffering due to Covid-19 and ASF. Despite reflecting on God as the almighty and powerful, the lyrics reflect on God who embraces creation and together cries with them in suffering. Here are the lyrics of the song Allah yang Menangis (The Crying God):

*Dawn-daun berguguran diterbangkan angin* (The fallen leaves are blown by the wind)

*Seakan tak ada harapan lagi* (It seems like there’s no hope anymore)

*Satu-satu yang kucinta sirna dan pergi* (One by one the ones I love vanished and left)

*Jiwaku, hatiku, rasakan perih* (My soul, my heart, feels the pain)

*Namun Kau ada* (but You exist)

*Kau hadir* (You are here)

*dan merasakanku* (and feel me)

*Kau Allah yang menangis* (You are the crying God)

*Allah yang merengkuh* (God who embraces)

*Allah yang menyentuh aku* (God touches me)

*dalam derita dan kehilangan* (in pain and loss)

*Jalan hidup penuh kabut, tak terselami* (The path of life is full of fog, unfathomable)

*Kakiku berjalan pelan tertatih* (My feet walk slowly teetering)

*Tangan-Mu kurasa menggenggam tanganku* (Your hand I feel holding mine)

*Bersama dunia saling berbagi* (Together we share with the world)

This song, entitled Allah yang Menangis (The Crying God), is one form of theopoetics that shows the spiritual struggle and meaning-making process and how God is revealed as one who is not indifferent to the bad things that happen to people. The Crying God shows God in solidarity with human

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vulnerability. It is not about glorifying vulnerability, for at the end of the song, there is a call to come and reflect on the core identity of Christian people as a community living in relation. The last line of this song is an invitation to act for others as part of spirituality.

In addition, Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice* reveals that women have power through relationships in the form of networks and connections. After the pandemic, women’s groups were formed in Nias as a forum for joint empowerment. Banua Niha Keriso Protestan (BNKP), a church in Nias, formed several women’s groups assisted by the BNKP Diakonia Department to strengthen one another not only spiritually but also economically and socially. Women realize that disasters have made them equally vulnerable to suffering. Because of that, women need a network to rise together. Solidarity among women becomes a collective strength to rise again.

Theopoetic Spirituality:
Invitations that Inspire Social Transformation

The presence of disasters further shows that both humans and nature are equally vulnerable. Therefore, through spirituality and the search for the meaning of life, humans are first made aware of their own and creation’s vulnerability. It is this awareness of a vulnerable self that makes humans understand that they cannot rely on themselves but must live in relationship. Humans need relationship with God, others, and nature.

Covid-19 and ASF have given rise to humanitarian movements. These movements are remarkable because they do not discriminate against people based on religion or ethnicity. In addition, the pandemics have made us aware that we are no longer in harmony with nature. They have made us more aware of the need to love the environment.

**Conclusion**

The Niasan people have a meaning-making tradition in times of suffering, namely, *hoho*. This meaning-making tradition is the source of spiritual strength in times of suffering. The process of lament (through

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stories or songs) is significant for meaning-making. Aesthetic theology contributes to developing a spirituality that gives space for human experience and knowledge at the level of feeling and imagination about God. It reflects on the beautiful nature of the relationship with God or transcendence and emphasizes how art can express spirituality and communication with the divine. Aesthetics gives space for imagination, beauty, and art as avenues to express spirituality. The hoho tradition of the Niasan people based on aesthetic theology can be the source of spiritual strength in times of suffering.

Theopoetic spirituality leads to a beautiful relationship with God and others through the presence of a new language that involves imagination, beauty, and art, especially in times of suffering. It also provides space for a “new voice” to express relationship with God. It invites and inspires social transformation. In the Nias hoho tradition, people give meaning to life in times of suffering. In the past, people of Nias made menhir stones and created hoho; today the new generation continues to give meaning to the life process by making poems and songs, or reflecting on what happened in life and how they experienced God who gave them hope to face suffering.

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