

**Toward Unity and Reconciliation:  
An Analysis of a Cultural Application of the *Qutux Qniqan* among the  
Atayal Tribe of Taiwan through Biblical and Anthropological Principles**

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates how the *Qutux Qniqan* ceremony becomes an origin of conflict when Christian groups perceive its relational and reconciliatory activities as possible syncretism. The article is based on five years of field interviews with Rev. Tali Behuy, his family, and other Atayal people, both non-Christians and Christians. The study asserts that the Lord's Supper provides an essential theological framework for redefining its purpose by integrating Atayal cultural significance with biblical interpretation. This integration enables Atayal Christians to affirm their cultural identity while staying faithful to biblical truth.

**Key Words:** Taiwan, Atayal, *Qutux Qniqa*, cross-cultural communication, contextualization, eating together

## **Introduction**

In recent years, both mission practitioners and scholars have revisited the relationship between Scripture and anthropology, particularly where Christian communities encounter cultural traditions shaped by strong relational commitments in communities anthropologists have defined as “egalitarian” (Lingenfelter, 1998, pp. 30-31). Anthropological insights have long helped missionaries communicate the gospel across cultural settings more effectively (Hiebert, 2006, pp. 291-293; Rynkiewich, 2012, pp. 7-8), while cultural hermeneutics has reminded Christians that their reading of Scripture is influenced by their own assumptions and worldview (Kraft, 1991, pp. 139-140; Wrogemann, 2016, pp. 45-46).

When the dialogue between the Bible and culture is approached without intentional care, misunderstandings surface easily (Sanneh, 2009, pp. 68-72; Walls, 1996, pp. 53-58). Such conflict is evident among the Atayal of Taiwan. Ever since Christianity spread widely after 1948 (Atayal Presbyterian Church Council (APCC), 2017, pp. 3-5), the traditional reconciliation rite known as *Qutux Qniqan* has remained contested. Early missionaries discouraged participation, because the ceremony included orientations to ancestral spirits. Over time, many Atayal Christians came to see abstaining as part of their commitment to God, while non-Christian relatives viewed that absence as a break in family and clan relationships.

This article is grounded in interviews conducted from 2020 to 2025 with Rev. Tali Behuy, his family, pastors, elders, and non-Christian Atayal. Their stories reveal how deeply Christian teaching and Atayal cultural expectations continue to clash. Although anthropologists like Kraft and Hiebert offer practical theological frameworks, the discussion that follows relies primarily on the voices heard in these interviews. Across these conversations, two movements became clear: (1) the initial Christian refusal to attend the *Qutux Qniqan* ceremony, and (2) a neutral position, which this study takes, acknowledging both the existing ritual and the concerns articulated by the church. As a result, this article inquires whether there exists a biblically faithful approach that might allow the Atayal church to engage the cultural meaning embedded in *Qutux Qniqan*.

### **Cultural Background and Interview Reflections**

For the Atayal, relationships include social, spiritual, and ancestral responsibilities. *Qutux Qniqan*—often described as “friends and enemies eating together”—is not merely a shared meal but a covenantal act meant to repair strained relationships. Food, stories, and the public act of eating together reaffirm ties within the family and clan. Traditionally, spiritual beings are invited to witness the reconciliation and to safeguard the renewed harmony (T. Behuy & Y. Kuray, 2020; A. C. Tali, 2020). Because of these dynamics, participation holds significance, and refusing to attend is often seen as withdrawing from one’s relational duties. Many Christian families’ absence has created years of misunderstanding (E. C. Lo, 2016, pp. 104-105; Y. Lo, 2023, p. 153).

Rev. Tali Behuy’s story reflects this tension. Although his grandparents first encountered Christianity through a Japanese physician in 1913, fuller teaching reached the family after 1949 (T. Behuy, 2020). Rev. Behuy’s ministerial training taught him that Atayal rituals were spiritually dangerous; he even recalled burning traditional clothing when he converted to Christ in the 1960th, because he believed wearing that clothing would dishonor the God of Israel. His daughters remembered relatives urging him to attend family gatherings, yet the family consistently declined, convinced that doing so would be an act of faithfulness (A. C. Tali et al., 2023). Later, while teaching culture and Bible stories in public schools, Rev. Behuy began to sense how earlier missionary teachings had created a divide between Atayal Christians and their cultural identity. Teaching the Ten Commandments prompted him to revisit the Fifth Commandment (Exod. 20:12). That command to honor parents encouraged him to inquire whether cultural expressions he had previously rejected might carry meanings compatible with the Christian faith.

For the first time, Rev. Behuy considered whether *Qutux Qniqan* might be understood through biblical lenses rather than dismissed outright (T. Behuy, 2020; Y. Tali, 2020). Anthropological perspectives help explain this shift. According to Lingenfelter (1998, pp. 25-26), Atayal can be classified as a high-group, low-grid society, where mutual responsibility and shared norms shape

daily life. Stepping away from communal rituals, therefore, has significant relational consequences. *Qutux Qniqan* became the point where two systems of meaning—Christian concerns and Atayal expectations—intersected and, for some, opened a space for reconsideration. For Rev. Behuy, this marked the beginning of imagining how the ceremony might be reintroduced—not in its traditional spiritual form, but as a way for the church to restore its relationship with the surrounding community.

### Analysis of Interviews and Findings

The interviews reveal several layers of tension that help explain why *Qutux Qniqan* remains contested among Atayal Christians. Much of the conflict has centered on the relationship between Rev. T. Behuy's family and their non-Christian relatives, a situation familiar to many Atayal households. In a collectivistic, high-context society, identity is tied to family and clan (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, pp. 75-76). Thus, when the Behuy family withdrew from the ceremony, relatives interpreted their absence not simply as a private decision but as a breach of loyalty. Several interviewees also expressed anxiety that disrupting harmony could provoke ancestral displeasure (Y. Hayong et al., 2022; Y. Piho et al., 2023). Relational and spiritual concerns, therefore, blended into a single moral expectation.

A second tension surfaced when Rev. Behuy and his family later attempted to reintegrate the rite into Christian practice. Their application emphasized honoring ancestors and restoring unity through shared meals, but the Atayal Presbyterian Church Council (APCC, 2017, pp. 1-2) viewed their approach as a move toward syncretism. Although Scripture affirms honoring parents (Exod. 20:12) and frequently uses meals to reinforce communal relationships, the theological reasons behind these practices differ from traditional Atayal assumptions and worldview (L. Tali et al., 2023). The Behuy family understood *Qutux Qniqan* as a symbol of relational healing, whereas the APCC regarded its invocation of spiritual beings as incompatible with Christian belief (T. Behuy et al., 2021).

These tensions point to deeper interpretive issues. In the traditional Atayal worldview, communication with spiritual entities is not considered idolatry but as a means of safeguarding relational integrity and respecting the surrounding nature. Lingenfelter (1998, pp. 25-26) notes that in high-group, low-grid settings, social stability depends on shared expectations, and rituals function to maintain cohesion. *Qutux Qniqan* plays this role by reaffirming belonging through the act of eating together. However, early missionaries instructed converts to reject all Atayal rituals and ceremonies, since they may have been associated with spiritual beings and components. These teachings unintentionally created a divide between Christian Atayal and their non-Christian relatives. Christian abstention, meant as faithfulness to God, was perceived by relatives as a

betrayal of both ancestors and community (W. Taru et al., 2025; A. Taru et al., 2022). Over time, some community members began to perceive Christianity as weakening rather than strengthening the relational core of Atayal life.

Within the Behuy household, this tension became deeply personal. For many years, Rev. Behuy taught that Christians should avoid the ceremony. Only after retirement, while teaching Scripture and reflecting on the Fifth Commandment, did he begin to question long-held assumptions. The command to honor parents prompted him to consider whether cultural expressions he had previously rejected might carry meanings consistent with Christian faith (T. Behuy, 2020). His transformation was influenced not only by theological study but also by familial recollections and decades of ministry within Atayal communities that continued to cherish the relational profundity represented in *Qutux Qniqan* (Y. Hayong et al., 2024).

The interviews also show how cultural biases shaped both Christian and non-Christian responses. Lingenfelter (1998, pp. 30-31) observes that worldview commitments serve as filters through which people interpret new ideas. This filtering was evident in the mutual skepticism at work: Christians feared spiritual compromise, while non-Christian relatives feared relational abandonment (Lo, 2016, pp. 56-60; Wu, 2015, pp. 19-21). Both concerns were genuine, yet neither group fully understood how the other interpreted the same actions.

The research findings offer an essential missiological insight: the conflict was less about ritual practice itself than about differing understandings of relationships, honor, spiritual mediation, and communal harmony. The Behuy family's effort to reinterpret *Qutux Qniqan* aimed to close these gaps and restart the conversation between Christian faith and Atayal culture after years of distrust (C. Silan et al., 2023). Their application lacked clarity for the APCC (Atayal Presbyterian Church Council), which feared that reintegrating the ceremony could lead to confusion or doctrinal fault. However, the interviews suggest that the Behuy family was not seeking to restore the ceremony to its traditional spiritual form. They were looking for a means for Atayal Christians to embrace their cultural identity while grounding their spiritual significance in the God revealed through the Bible (Y. Lo, 2023). Their efforts pose an essential question for the church: How could cultural expressions of relational harmony be understood, transformed, or guided in accordance with the gospel and biblical truths while being an Atayal?

## **Exegetical Study**

The Behuy family's attempts to reinterpret the *Qutux Qniqan* ceremony were fundamentally based on two biblical motifs that became pivotal to their theological reflections: the Fifth Commandment's directive to honor one's parents and the covenantal importance of communal

eating as represented in the Lord's Supper. Due to the misunderstandings around these two issues that influenced the disagreement between the Atayal Presbyterian Church Council and the Behuy family's suggestion, it is imperative to scrutinize the biblical texts and their interpretive traditions more thoroughly.

The Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12), transcends a mere moral principle. The Hebrew verb *kabed* signifies "weight" or "substance" (Biblica, 2015, p. 83), implying that honoring entails bestowing appropriate significance through tangible manifestations of care, respect, and obedience. Kaiser (2008, p. 482) asserts that this commandment is foundational to Israel's covenantal identity; revering parents sustains the framework through which Yahweh's teachings are conveyed throughout generations. Lai (2014, pp. 60-62) contends that the commandment instructs children to honor Yahweh, as parental authority—despite being mediated and flawed—exists within the divine order of the family. Lai observes that the biblical focus is not on ritualistic actions following a parent's demise but on maintaining an appropriate relational stance throughout the parent's life, thereby contributing to the stability of the covenant community.

Moreover, biblical history emphasizes the seriousness of dishonoring parents through the instructions and penalties stated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, where such actions are seen as destructive to Israel's covenantal foundation (Kaiser, 2008, p. 482; Lai, 2014, pp. 60-62). Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas (2014, p. 124) emphasize that the Ten Commandments are inseparable from the broader narrative of liberation and covenant establishment. The family serves as the focal point for Israel to commemorate God's actions, teach His commands, and maintain communal fidelity. In the New Testament, when this idea of multigenerational family responsibility is reiterated—exemplified by Paul's assertion that he serves God "as my ancestors did" (2 Tim. 1:3)—the veneration of ancestors is explicitly contextualized as adherence to those who remained loyal to God's promise, rather than participating in ritualistic communication with the deceased. Cheung (2005, pp. 399-400) argues that Paul's recollection of his ancestors is theological rather than ritualistic, serving as a reaffirmation of continuity with those who truly worshiped Yahweh.

#### *Dialogue between Atayal Cultural Worldview and Christianity*

These biblical interpretations, along with those that follow, become particularly significant when situated within the Atayal cultural context. The Atayal's traditional practices of honoring ancestors embrace relational and spiritual aspects linked to the existence of the *utux* (spiritual beings), residing within the community (E. C. Lo, 2016, pp. 56-60; Y. Lo, 2023, pp. 150-160). The relational goal aligns with the biblical focus on honor, although the spiritual ways of communicating with the ancestors significantly deviates from biblical doctrine. The Behuy family

regarded the honoring in Scripture as a conduit for cultural affirmation, whereas the APCC considered the spiritual implications of *Qutux Qniqan* to be inappropriate with Christian beliefs (Atayal Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, 2017, pp. 3-5). Their concept was often misinterpreted due to the lack of a clear distinction between relational honoring and spiritual invocation (T. Behuy et al., 2022; H. Normin et al., 2020).

In addition to honoring, the second biblical element that influenced the Behuy family's contemplation was the theological significance of communal eating. In Scripture, meals are not mere social gatherings but relational interactions filled with covenantal implications. From the Passover dinner in Exodus 12, which commemorates Israel's liberation, to Jesus's eating together with sinners, meals serve as moments through which God redeems and redefines His relationship with the chosen people. This meaning of communal meals is most clearly articulated in Paul's teaching regarding the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11. Flemming (2005, p. 178) asserts that the Supper goes beyond mere memorialization: it serves as an active declaration of Christ's sacrificial love, uniting believers into a reconciled community. Keener (2005, pp. 98-99) notes that early Christians perceived the meal as an engagement in Christ's self-sacrifice, analogous to how Passover involved Israel in God's redemptive work. Murphy-O'Connor (2009, p. 208) also observes that Christ constitutes the essence of the assembled community, rendering the act of communal eating and drinking a re-entry into the unity established by His death.

For numerous Atayal Christians, the cultural substance of communal meals presented an unforeseen opportunity (T. Hayong et al., 2021). The cultural essence of *Qutux Qniqan*—reestablishing connections via communal eating—parallels the social role of the Lord's Supper, despite significant differences in spiritual rationale. In the conventional ritual, relational harmony is reinstated through the participation of the *utux*, whose presence validates and finalizes reconciliation (E. C. Lo, 2016, pp. 110-130; Y. Hayong et al., 2022). In Christian theology, reconciliation is entirely achieved through Christ, who facilitates unity and forgiveness independently of other spiritual entities. The difference is fundamental to the APCC's interpretation of the Behuy family's application as inclined towards syncretism, notwithstanding their goal to supplant the *utux* with the presence of the Holy Spirit (Y. Tali et al., 2023).

The underlying challenge highlighted by the interviews pertains not only to spiritual disagreement but also to cultural confusion. Nevertheless, this repurposing necessitates rigorous explanation and collective deliberation. The Behuy family attempted to achieve this redirection by preserving *Qutux Qniqan*'s relational structure while substituting its spiritual essence with Christ (A. Behuy et al., 2022; T. Behuy et al., 2020). The APCC, however, regarded the form as closely associated with its pre-Christian connotations. Lingenfelter's (1998, pp. 25-31) observation that

cultural institutions function as filters is evident here: each party understood the significance of the rite through its own cultural beliefs. Christians apprehended doctrinal compromise, and the broader Atayal society feared relational forsakenness. Both functioned consistently within their respective worldviews, while neither acknowledged the other's interpretive framework.

The exegetical analysis sketched above indicates that the issue transcends the mere acceptance or rejection of a cultural practice. The inquiry pertains to how Scripture addresses cultural identity, relational responsibilities, and spiritual mediation, while respecting both the biblical text and the experiential reality of the Atayal community. The Behuy family's idea, if inadequately articulated, demonstrates a sincere effort to address these tensions by anchoring cultural expression in biblical significance (P. Losing et al., 2023). The APCC's caution demonstrates a passionate commitment to preserving doctrinal clarity. Amidst these considerations exists the persistent challenge of contextualization—that is, the critical faithful process by which Scripture engages local cultures, allowing cultural forms to be evaluated, transformed, and reinterpreted so the gospel is communicated meaningfully within contexts while remaining obedient to biblical authority (Hiebert, 2006, pp. 88–92; Kraft, 1991, pp. 384–395; Sanneh, 2009, pp. 51–54; Flemming, 2005, pp. 17–19).

### **Contextualization for the Atayal Church**

The theological and cultural insights derived from the interviews lead to a broader examination of how *Qutux Qniqan* could be interpreted within a Christian context—an interpretation that cautiously integrates its traditional spiritual framework. The data indicate that the core of the tension lies not in the ritual's relational meaning, but in the technique by which relational harmony has historically been facilitated. For the Atayal, reconciliation is unattainable without the participation of the *utux*, whose presence assures that restored ties are both genuine and binding (E. C. Lo, 2016, pp. 110-130; Y. Lo, 2023, pp. 150-160). In Christian theology, reconciliation is achieved solely through Jesus Christ, who unites and forgives through His death and resurrection.

This distinction clarifies the task rather than removing the possibility of contextualization. Shaw (2018, p. 2) contends that rituals frequently embody significant cultural values that can be realigned with divine intentions through the guidance of Scripture and collective discernment. The concern is not whether Atayal Christians need to appreciate reconciliation through communal meals—Scripture consistently supports this practice—but rather how the significance of the rite might be recontextualized by placing Christ at the center rather than the *utux*. Various interviewees indicated that the conventional supplication of supernatural entities was the specific factor that led Christians to disengage from the rite. Their disengagement was perceived by non-Christian relatives as a rejection of relationship obligation, highlighting a profound disruption in cultural

communication (Y. Hayong et al., 2022; W. Piho et al., 2023).

The problem, consequently, resides in formulating a contextual strategy that enables Atayal Christians to validate the relational dimension of the rite while distinctly differentiating Christian theology from the traditional spiritual beliefs inherent in *Qutux Qniqan*. Rev. T. Behuy articulated a significant insight throughout the interviews, revealing that his enhanced comprehension of the Fifth Commandment enabled him to value the cultural significance of venerating ancestors while rejecting the conventional spiritual paradigm (T. Behuy 2020). His methodology regarded honoring as a relational practice rooted in biblical doctrine rather than a mere ritual responsibility to the spirits (A. Behuy et al., 2023). Upon presenting this concept to his students as he taught in governmental school systems, he recognized that he had discovered a way to articulate honor that aligned with both Scripture and Atayal principles.

### *The Lord's Supper*

The identical interpretive action can be applied to the theme of communal eating. The Atayal perspective on communal meals as manifestations of unity aligns with the biblical concept of fellowship, culminating in the Lord's Supper. Flemming (2005, pp. 178-210), Keener (2005, pp. 98-99), and Murphy-O'Connor (2009, pp. 208-210) all assert that the Supper establishes and maintains covenantal union through Christ's sacrificial act. The Supper does not eliminate cultural perceptions of fellowship but recontextualizes followers within the reality of Christ's presence. If Atayal Christians acknowledge that communal meals convey a relational truth supported by Scripture, then the cultural essence of *Qutux Qniqan* need not be entirely rejected (W. Taru et al., 2024). The question concerns the significance of the meal and the individuals through whom reconciliation is perceived to occur.

Discussions with many pastors and elders revealed that the primary barrier to reinstating the rite was the absence of meaningful theological dialogue (L. Taru et al., 2023; I. Hetay et al., 2022). The APCC misunderstood the Behuy family's application as validation of the ceremony's traditional spiritual aspect, even though the family sought to reframe its significance completely. This misinterpretation highlights a broader problem in contextualization: the church must discern not only which aspects of a cultural practice can be endorsed but also which must be altered or abandoned in accordance with Scripture. In the absence of this clarity, efforts to integrate cultural forms may be misconstrued as an unexamined approval of pre-Christian practices.

The interviews indicated that the complete rejection of *Qutux Qniqan* has led to consequences often discussed in relation to idolatry, since participation in the ceremony is commonly understood as signaling agreement with its spiritual assumptions, especially those involving ancestors or other

spiritual beings, regardless of whether the participant actually partakes of the ritual food (L. Takun et al., 2024). Some participants expressed apprehension that Christian withdrawal from the ceremony undermined both the familial relationship and the church's reputation in the broader community. Suppose the Atayal conception of relational obligation is preserved. In that case, a Christian's refusal to engage—regardless of theological justification—might be viewed as a failure of ethical accountability rather than adherence to Scripture (U. Yumin et al., 2021). This dynamic raises a pastoral question: how can Atayal Christians respect their families, live in harmony within the community, and acknowledge Christ's unique role as mediator?

The solution may lie in a reinterpretation of strategy that preserves engagement in culturally significant actions of fellowship while refraining from embracing the spiritual beliefs conventionally associated with them. The Behuy family's attempt to reinterpret the rite in light of the Fifth Commandment and the Lord's Supper signifies progress in this regard, despite the church leadership's incomplete understanding of the effort. Their perspective indicates that relational reconciliation—a fundamental Atayal principle—can be preserved, while spiritual mediation is reinterpreted via Jesus Christ. Scriptural instruction alters the ritual's inner value, while its visible form serves as a reminder of oneness. This approach aligns with both Kraft's (1991, pp. 389-395) assertion that cultural forms can acquire new meanings when rooted in Scripture and Hiebert's (2008, pp. 315-320) claim that comprehending worldview dynamics is crucial for adequate contextualization.

This study suggests that contextualization means the church should neither accept all cultural practices without question nor forsake culturally significant expressions without question. Contextualization necessitates a rigorous negotiation of meaning—a readiness to embrace what Scripture affirms, to modify what it contests, and to redirect what can be altered for the advancement of the gospel. The Atayal church's objective is not merely to determine the appropriateness of practicing *Qutux Qniqan*, but to ascertain how the relational virtues inherent in the ceremony might be aligned with the lordship of Christ to enhance the unity of both the family and the church.

## Conclusion

Years of interviews show that the tension surrounding *Qutux Qniqan* is felt on both sides: Christians navigating earlier teachings and non-Christian relatives expecting participation as a sign of harmony. Rev. Tali Behuy's reflections reveal how Scripture opened space to revisit this divide. Read alongside the Lord's Supper, these accounts suggest a way for Atayal Christians to affirm the relational meaning of eating together while reforming the ceremony's traditional spiritual elements.

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