

THE TEXT OF *A Celebration of Origins*

By Timothy & Patsy Asch and E. Douglas Lewis

WAI BRAMA FLORES, EASTERN INDONESIA, 1980

The people who form the domain of Wai Brama come together only when they perform rituals at the mahe altar. These rituals should be conducted about every seven years but they had not been completed in twenty years.

During the 1970s, the growing influence of the District Government and the Catholic Church, which view some local customs as “backward”, contributed to a decline of traditional religious practice.

But in Wai Brama, pressure to hold the Celebration of Origins increased as a result of poor harvests, widespread illness, and the desire of many people to reaffirm the value of their traditions.

To open the sacred mahe grove, the men who are ritual leaders must chant the history of clan Ipir, the source clan of the domain.

[Narration]

The world was created when the deity separated The earth of the islands from the waters of the sea, Caused the mountains to rise and the rivers to flow, Brought forth the trees of the forest and the vegetation of the valleys.

The first ancestors of clan Ipir were two brothers, who broke forth from the earth in the west and bubbled up from the land in Krowe. The elder brother was Hading, the younger brother was Uher. They found the land dry and barren discovered the earth steep and rocky

“Let us search for wide rich valleys; Let us seek tall mountain forests.” The brothers reached the mouth of a great river. There they felt hungry and decided to go hunting.

Hading’s dogs caught the scent of a pig, while Uher’s dogs bayed after a deer. The pig led Hading directly to the valley of Wai Brama, where he came to wide meadows and discovered broad valleys.

Meanwhile, Uher chased his deer through the mountains and valleys of eastern Flores and he, too, came to Wai Brama.

Eventually others came and created the lesser clans of the domain. From the people of Ipir, they received land to plant and rituals to perform. They built houses, opened gardens and their children married the children of clan Ipir. Thus they populated the domain.

To this day the people of clan Ipir are the trunk of the Land and the Source of the Earth.

(Distant view of the mahe grove)

In each generation, a male descendant of the elder of the two brothers who founded Wai Brama is recognized as the ritual leader of the community. He is called the Source of the Domain.

For many years, Rapa was Source of the Domain. In August, 1979, while I was doing fieldwork in Wai Brama, Rapa spoke the ritual words that

committed the community to perform the Celebration of Origins the following year.

But Rapa died three weeks later leaving the community without recognized ritual leadership. Once started, the rituals should be completed.

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A year later, we began filming. We focused on Sine, a close ally of Rapa’s. Sina is an accomplished chanter. He assumed responsibility for the performance of the rituals.

Sine was not eligible, through descent, to become the next Source of the Domain, but his son, Pius, was eligible. In Wai Brama, children belong to their mother’s House rather than their father’s. Plus’ mother is a descendant of the elder of the two brothers who founded Wai Brama. Thus Pius belongs to the descent group from which the Source of the Domain must be chosen.

The Celebration of Origins was Pius’s first opportunity to serve as a chanter in an important ritual.

Four years after we had filmed in Wai Brama, we invited Pius to come to Australia.

We showed him video tape of our footage of the Celebration of Origins.

We have used some of Pius’s reflections as commentary in the film.

[Voice over #115 SYNC]

When our ancestors opened gardens and got rice, deer and pigs, they thought, “we should celebrate our origins. Now that we have many children, we ought to hold rituals at the mahe, to tell the story of what has happened since we were born from a hole in the ground at Krowe. If we do not do these rituals our children will die. Our children will forget their history. They will wonder, are we from America? From Australia. Where are we from? We tell our history so our children will not forget their origins. So it has been from the beginning until now.

[Narration]

After months of preparations and uncertainty, men gathered in the mahe groue.

[Subtitles]

First, give it to Ipir, clan of the Earth.
Give it to Ipir (*Pius of clan Ipir, Sina’s son*).
Don’t just grab it.
Later you’ll each have a chance.

A goat is brought from clan Ipir. It will be sacrificed to end the hunger, disease and disorder that have afflicted the domain.

[#797 & 799]

The branching wood is the mahe; the stones are the mahan --- those tall stones. But they are not really like scones or wood. They represent the deity. The round stones are Mother’s basket; the tall stones are Father’s spear.

[Narration]

Rudun is the Source Mother of clan Ipir because she is the eldest surviving female descent of the founding ancestor.

In Wai Brama, rituals are the responsibility of men, but women are said to be the source of things. As the Source Mother, Rudun must be present in the mahe grove.

The Next afternoon, after sacrificing a goat for the spirit of the forest, ritual leaders gather to sacrifice a pig, but no one has brought the required animal.

Koa, a former village official, assumed political leadership. He worked behind the scenes to support Sine and the importance of the centre of the domain.

We've made the sacrifice for the spirits of the forest.
Now we should make the next sacrifice, for the boundary of the mahe.
Anyone who needs to expiate his own sins can provide a pig.
Fine! But no particular House is responsible for the boundary pig.
So who'll give one?
No one wants to give a pig he brought for his own sacrifice.
I wouldn't.
I'm asking about the purpose of the boundary sacrifice.
You say no particular clan is responsible.
So whom should we look to for the pig?
We're in trouble because we expected Dewa to bring the pig.
I am the most central person here.
If I, Koa, had agreed to provide a pig, it would be here now.
I'd run away in embarrassment if it were not.
You must only open your mouth for a reason.
Dewa said he'd provide the pig.

[Narration]

Dewa is a leader from the southern border of the domain. As a follower of the traditional religion, Dewa challenges Sina's and Koa's authority because they are Catholics.

You accuse Dewa, but he's not here to answer.
Perhaps Dewa meant clan Ipir's people at Diwang would bring the pig.
He probably delegated responsibility to someone else.
The problem is all this spinning around in talk.
Dewa is not here, so please, elders, tell us what to do.
You, Karok, and Teka represent the Diwang area of the domain.
Sina and I live here.
Thus we are closer to the source.
Because I speak as the central elder, I say,
Juang, the pig for the mahe boundary is your responsibility.
Juang doesn't necessarily have to catch the pig himself.
He can delegate that task, just as I have named him.
Suppose Sina asks a young man for a pig.
Later, I might ask, 'On whose authority are you acting?'
It was the young man's pig, but Sina's responsibility.
We elders don't play with our mouths, we play with our brains.

[#514 & 241]

When we offer the pig for the mahe boundary, women must be present because they have rights over cooking.

It is women who are the root of the clan... When we work for a woman in a garden that yields, we only have the right to use the produce; ownership belongs to women. We men travel with empty hands. However, we eat first and the women afterwards.

[#484]

From the film, I see that it was Juang who gave the pig; He said, "I have now given my pig... But later, tomorrow, give me one, so I can show the mahe, and wipe away my own errors.

Every clan must eat the areca nut.
Girl, you eat it!

Bago, gather it together. Be sure to give the women some.
It's not Bago who should eat it.
Mother's brother! Koa!
The District Official has arrived already.
Carry on. I'll go meet the official.
Koa, speak well for us.

[#536 & 540]

It is Gati's duty to bring the elephant tusk. I delegated to him the rights to carry the sins and errors of all the people. They are placed in the elephant tusk to be given to the mahe. It's just like a Catholic priest's bread: he mixes the bread with wine and then he drinks. Which means it is he who carries away the sins of all of us. We do the same thing. The elephant tusk is like a lure for the mahe, so it will expiate our errors.

I call upon the Land and Earth,
I summon the Sun and Moon.
Climb up from below; open a space within us.
Descend from above and speak with us.
Pius! Pius! Pius!

[#536]

Because we have all made errors, we confess them at the mahe boundary. Expiation comes from the mahe... I begin by giving a pig, along with cloth and a little rice. These (offerings) bind the rice, corn, and yams within the domain of Wai Brama so that our food will not flood out to other places. So that it will remain within the circle of the mahe.

[Narration]

Dewa finally appears in the mahe grove, after the pig has been sacrificed.

Are you men from clan Liwu ready?
Quickly! Bring the goat!

[Narration]

If he gains followers in the Mahe, Dewa may be able to influence the choice of the neHt Source of the Domain.

While Sina entertains the District Official, at Koa's home, Dewa encourages the clan Houses to begin their entrances into the mahe grove.

[#211 & 209]

We made a mistake at the beginning of the formal entrances into the mahe. The Source House of Clan Ipir should have entered first, and then the other houses should have followed in order.

Gather around! People want to speak their rituals.
(Sina) Be quiet!

We want to organize this ritual.
How many Houses are present?
Ten Houses plus two.
We're asking you.
Why do you ask us less central people?

Dewa! Dewa!
Summon Dewa.

Ask Dewa. He's been here for days.
I want to see how he would do the ritual.
If we had followed our custom, only two clans would be present:
Ipir first, then clan Tapo.
(Head of the Village) Listen to me!
I am the Lord of the Festival, the Lord of the Domain.
I carry authority here.

That's what you say, but you are not from the central clan.

[#560]

I followed Sina closely and whispered to him: "Sina, tell the mahe that I have brought a goat to atone for my own errors."

[Narration]

The District Official finally enters the mahe grove. He lives and works outside the Domain, in a village on the coast.

Whether a person is Pagan or Catholic, Protestant or Muslim,
the government can not prohibit religious practice.

So I hope that tonight we will stand up for the
Five Principles of the Republic.

But, and there is a but,
you must stick to the true path.

According to the priest,
Catholics should not participate.

You and I are Catholics, but perhaps others are pagan.

Forgive me for saying so, but it's a fact. Yes?

So I hope all of us here, will do this ritual
in accordance with the way we live.

While those who are pagan follow their own--
Do their own work.

Yes.

Whatever it is the pagan
worships is his business.

But we Catholics, must know ourselves.

I've spoken enough. I hope the rituals will be completed tonight.

They must be done tonight.

As Dewa already said, we must finish tonight.

It is forbidden for it to go on into tomorrow.

We of the government hope for peace and safety.

If there is chaos or fighting, I will not hesitate
to put my hand down.

If it is the Communist Party, that I will forbid.

I'll plant the head of any communist.

In this District, there cannot be a Communist Party any more.

As a police official here,

I want you to be able to hold a festival.

But safety must be guaranteed.

And we must reduce the waste.

Don't go and kill 200 pigs or goats. Okay?

Earlier I counted 30 animals.

I think that's enough. Yes?

[#582]

... We must follow our culture because of our ancestors. When our culture came into being, we came into being... Catholicism is something invented later. In recent history, it was people from the coast, who went to school, where they learned the ordinances of the Catholic church. But our traditions, such as the Celebration in the ma#g were already in existence. When the earth was created, we were created. So even those of us who are Catholic sccontinue to do our rituals.

You Source People, come here.

Those on the ground (*Uber's descendants*)
and those up inside (*Hading's descendants*), take your places.

Summon friends from left and right.

Call companions from both sides.

Travel in single file

Journey one behind the other.

If one forgets the other will speak.

If one gets lost, the other will point the way.

[#135]

My father is a descendant of the younger brother, Uher, so he stands below and seeks the deer. Because I am a descendant of Hading, I am above.

[#149]

Rights to ritual come from one's mother and one's mother's brother. It is my sister's children who will inherit my rights...

Everyday language we call "speaking ourselves." It can be about important things or just random speech. But ritual speech is different: it employs the language of the true core of things. We must speak the truth. If we speak falsely, it can kill us.

Make our thoughts like the pattern of threads.

Color our ideas like the red patola cloth.

Add the sharpness of the valley's grass.

Add the strength of the mountain's timber.

[Narration]

Despite the District Officials advice to finish the rituals that night, the men chanted until dawn. Then they resumed the sequence of sacrifices that reaffirms the order of the clans.

Bring the she-goat.

Two nights ago Gati and Bago said
that goat would be black and white,
and now I see it for myself.

If you cut the she-goat and cut a small pig,
that's the same as a he-goat.

This is now a male goat.

It will remove our sins.

Count the rice mortars.

You who brought this pig, are from the House at Tua Bao.

You're from Wai Kung ...

Four, five, six, seven.

Seven goats.

Summon the men who sit at the boundary stones.

Thousands are here.

Rituals I've already delegated can't be given to someone else.

Clan Maget! Clan Maul

Do not change anything.

How many more sacrifices are there?

Three. No two.

There are still two sacrifices.

We still have to make the mawar sacrifices.

Lift up the goat's spleen so we can all see it.

Now the youths can grow and the young men rise up!

[#470]

After, ah- the sacrifice, we examine the goat's spleen.

If it is dirty, it means we haven't done the ritual cleanly.

After we cut the animals for our sins, we're finished.

Just because the goat's spleen is clean,
don't think you won't have to work in your gardens.

Don't think you can just see the spleen and then sleep.

Let's dance together.

[#646]

Now Sina is happy. The divination shows he didn't choose to act as Source of the Domain. The deity delegated authority to him. It was given by the mahe.

(Head of the village)

The animal tax must be paid, then the sacrifices may begin.
If the tax is not paid, you'll have to kill them another day.
People accused me of delaying the rituals,
but I said we must follow the ritual calendar.
This festival must take place with local Government approval.
I, the Village Headman, have rights here; not anyone else.

[#692]

The District Government imposes a butchering tax. They say we can cut the animals but we must pay a tax. ...We sacrificed more than two hundred animals... But they reported only 30 animals. We gave the tax money to the Village Official and be turned it over to the District Official. We have to pay --- not just at rituals.

This jaw is for the man who guards the sword.
Has the man who wields the sword of clan Liwu gotten his?
Yes.

[#709]

After they finish dividing the rice and the meat they distribute the jaws.

Mere! You've hidden yourself?
There was no bowl to receive the jaw.
Later you can take one.
They haven't gotten jaws at the House.
Have they gotten theirs?
It's done. It's done.
The Hearth already got its jaw.
And the drum hut, too
Okay. Stash the jaw for Mere somewhere.
Leba, invite everyone to eat.
Yes, I'll invite them.
That's yours.
Keep it!
The men of the boundary stones should sit down.
I'll get the next goats and pigs.
Now youths can grow and young men rise up!
Sina, we want you to organize the remaining sacrifices.
I want to dance. Get Leba and Bago to start them.
Must I do everything?
Let's organize the Mawar cutting.
Call Bago and Gati.
Collect all the goats, even those for the "big cut".
Juang, get the ten animals plus two.
Offer rice for, the mawar sacrifice.
Sprinkle the rice where the animals are killed.
(Dewa) For the mawar--
Elders! It's not my duty, but I can easily get this organized.

[#733]

My father was angry with Dewa. He said, "We worked all through the night, until we were half dead, while you went and drank palm gin and slept well. Now it pleases you to speak. After the great cutting, I will only be able to dance a little because I will be busy organizing the distribution--and I will be exhausted.

(Dewa) No one get in the way.
Perfect!
Enough!

After cutting the Goat of the Earth, then sacrifice clan Ipir's private animals.
Tighten the cord.
Mere, come here!
Sera of Hebing holds the sword.

Not yet! Not while the head is down.
Stand back!
Bring clan Ipir's private animals.

Clan Ipir must go first.
They cannot follow behind.
This blade is loose!

[#781]

The goats are given as food for the mahe and the spirits of the forest and for the Old Ones. The pigs are only for cooling.

[Narration]

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Koa said, "In the end we offer so many animals, so many kilos of rice and bottles of palm gin because of what's behind the mahe. If it were just a piece of wood, ah, we could burn it. But it's like a statue, one of our Catholic statues. Although we see the statue, what's behind it is the deity."

Move back so
I have more room.

[#833]

We built many small houses near the mahe grove so those who came could eat and drink. and so we could receive guests--guests from outside the domain

Douglas, Pius is already bloody!
They're killing Simon!
Pius, are you in pain yet?

[#877]

Usually fighting happens because people are drunk. In the past it was according to tradition that men must fight. When we begin to go around the mahe, there must be a little fighting. But in the old days, it was not just a little fighting. Men would fight until some were stabbed and some died. It is said that men must fight so that their work will yield fruit.

Do you have some palm gin, Mother?
No! You're already bathed in blood.

[#890?]

Because my wives were there-- the two of them--along with my mother and sister, they bound my arms... They were too strong for me, there were so many. (Laughs)

[#107]

I was acting as Source of the Domain, but I delegated that duty to my father because I was still young and could not ascend high office--

Well, I could have but I had not yet been chosen by the ritual leaders. That has now been done.

[#96]

As Source of the Domain, I cannot do everything. I just stand and speak. It was the same with Sina, my father. His duty was to seek the origins and source of things.

The collaboration of the people of the domain of Wai Brama was crucial in recording and in shaping this film.

This film is dedicated to the memory of
ROBERTUS RAPA IPIR WAI BRAMA (? - 1979)
Source of the Domain

and

RUDUN IPIR WAT BRAMA (? - 1981)
who lived to see her seventh Celebration of Origins

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SINA IPIR WAI BRAMA

and to his son,
Pius IPIR WAI BRAMA
Source of the Domain and Commentator

We also wish to thank PENI LIWU
who generously housed us in her garden

and

KOA TAPO
whose wit and patience made the Celebration and our work possible

[#921, 924]

It has been four years since the Celebration. How have things been?

There have been no problems;
Our harvests have been good;
our animals have been well;
yes, and we have watched over our children and all are healthy.
There have been deaths, but only one.
If a person who is old dies it means the deity has called him,
and not that we made errors in the mahe and so he died.
This means we did the ritual correctly, as our ancestors did them.

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