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Invoking the Skies: The Neni Wair Uran Ritual among the Tana Ai People in Nebe Village Talibura District Sikka Regency

Yovita Febronia Bolen
STIPAS Keuskupan Agung Kupang
yofithabolen15@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the spiritual meaning and cultural role of the Neni Wair Uran ritual performed by the Tana Ai community in Nebe Village, Sikka Regency. Held annually before the planting season, the ritual serves as a sacred appeal for rainfall and agricultural blessings, reflecting both ecological and theological values. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research involved participant observation, interviews with local leaders, and documentation. The findings reveal that the ritual is deeply rooted in the community's cosmology and continues to shape their identity, spirituality, and social structure. Symbolic offerings, ritual speech, and spatial transitions illustrate the intricate connection between traditional beliefs and Catholic faith. The study shows that the ritual fosters intergenerational cultural resilience and functions as a site of inculturation, where indigenous and Christian elements converge. By contextualizing the ritual within both theological and anthropological frameworks, this research affirms the value of local traditions as vital expressions of ecological spirituality and cultural theology in contemporary faith practices.

Keywords: Neni Wair Uran Ritual, Tana Ai People, Inculturation, Cultural Heritage, Catholic Faith.

Introduction

Cultural expression constitutes the collective heritage of a community, embodying symbolic meanings and values transmitted and preserved across generations (Sequera & Gangui, 2011). Through these expressions, communities construct social identities and maintain the continuity of traditions that form the foundation of communal life. Cultural values not only shape interpersonal relationships but also reflect the community's connections with nature and the divine (Yulisinta, Murniati, & Eigenstetter, 2024). In various local contexts, cultural expressions are manifested in rituals, symbols, and religious practices that encompass profound spiritual and social dimensions (Bevans, 2002).

Within the Tana Ai community in Nebe Village, Sikka Regency, such cultural expressions are manifested through traditional rituals that bridge ancestral heritage with

contemporary spiritual understanding. One of the central rituals is the Neni Wair Uran ceremony, held before the planting season as a plea for rain through divine intervention. This ritual illustrates the integration of spiritual and ecological values in Tana Ai society, where sacred forests and clan houses of Ata Pu'an are revered as sanctified spaces for ancestral heirlooms (Bevans & Schroeder, 2004). Its reliance on spiritual dimensions, rather than meteorological knowledge, highlights the predominance of religious aspects in local cultural practices (Rosidy & Prasasti, 2024).

This phenomenon raises deeper questions about how the Tana Ai community interprets symbols and spirituality within the ritual. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore the extent to which the community understands the symbolic and spiritual meanings embedded in the Neni Wair Uran ritual. Employing a qualitative approach, the research offers insights from traditional leaders, villagers, and local authorities to reveal the dynamic relationship between cultural practice and Catholic faith (Ranubaya, Nikodemus, & Endi, 2023). This aligns with the spirit of Gaudium et Spes and perspectives that emphasize the presence of God through diverse cultural expressions throughout history (Szrot, 2023).

The Catholic Church, as affirmed by Pope John Paul II, recognizes the importance of cultural context in proclaiming the faith and encourages appreciation of local traditions. In this regard, religious practices rooted in local culture are not deviations from doctrinal teachings, but tangible expressions of theology in action (Pereira Rufino, 2023). Religious expressions through language, symbols, and ritual acts demonstrate the spiritual agency of indigenous communities and warrant serious attention in both pastoral and theological approaches (Gumo, 2017).

The Neni Wair Uran ritual serves as a concrete example of inculturation, where local symbols and gestures enrich the understanding of Christian faith. For the Tana Ai people, rain is perceived as a divine blessing that not only sustains agricultural life but also affirms a spiritual covenant between humanity and the Divine (Gumo, 2017). Although conducted within customary law, the spiritual values underpinning the ritual remain consistent with the Catholic faith embraced by the community (Phan, 2011).

The execution of this ritual is entrusted to the clan leader or customary authority designated through hereditary succession. In the absence of leadership, the role is assumed by a respected elder known as Bian Wu'un. Ritual preparations involve a range of sacred items such as rice, coconut water, black pigs, tobacco leaves, betel nuts, and ceremonial machetes. Each

item carries symbolic meaning associated with fertility, ancestral presence, and hope for divine intervention.

The ritual begins in the clan house with a symbolic purification using coconut water sprinkled on ancestral heirlooms. The procession then moves to the sacred forest where a holy altar is prepared. At this site, the clan leader chants ancestral hymns and offers sacrifices as a plea for divine blessings. This practice embodies the concept of collective spiritual experience, where communal rites foster social cohesion through shared sacred encounters.

From an anthropological perspective, the continuity of the Neni Wair Uran ritual plays a vital role in preserving communal identity and social structure. The ritual functions not only as a plea for rain but also as a mechanism for reinforcing traditional leadership, strengthening social solidarity, and directing the community's spiritual orientation. Its integrative function becomes increasingly important amid pressures from modernization and environmental change.

Theologically, the ritual reflects a localized soteriology rooted in gratitude and dependence on divine providence. Rain, as a symbol of life and abundance, is sacramentally embodied in the ritual. Collective awareness of God's presence within natural dynamics reflects Catholic ecological theology, which views creation as a manifestation of divine love.

The urgency of this study grows in light of globalization and modernization, both of which threaten the sustainability of traditional rituals. By analyzing the Neni Wair Uran ritual through theological and anthropological lenses, this study aims to contribute to ongoing discourse on cultural preservation, religious pluralism, and contextual expressions of faith within a dynamic local setting.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the religious and symbolic dimensions of the Neni Wair Uran ritual practiced by the Tana Ai community in Nebe Village. Extended fieldwork enabled the researchers to gain a deep understanding of the community's spiritual life. Data were collected through participant observation and semi structured interviews with traditional leaders, elders, and community members. The interpretation of data was guided by anthropological, theological, and phenomenological frameworks to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the ritual's meaning within both cultural and ecclesial contexts.

Research Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the Neni Wair Uran ritual, as practiced by the Tana Ai community in Nebe Village, is regarded as a significant event that marks the beginning of the agrarian year and serves as a medium for requesting divine intervention to bring rain. The community's hope for a fruitful harvest forms the primary rationale for performing the ritual. This tradition has been maintained across generations, remaining resilient despite ongoing social and cultural changes.

The ritual process commences with an announcement made by the ritual leader, who is typically the clan head or a respected traditional elder. This announcement functions as the formal signal to begin preparations, which involve the participation of the entire community. The role of the ritual leader is specific and determined by lineage or customary designation. In particular circumstances, this responsibility may be assumed by the Bian Wu'un, who holds a similar level of authority within the traditional leadership structure.

The preparatory stage is conducted in a collective and well-organized manner. Community members work together to clean the gardens, collect offerings, and prepare symbolic objects needed for the ceremony. Offerings include black pigs, coconut water, betel nuts, and ceremonial machetes. Each item possesses strong symbolic meaning, and their inclusion in the ritual is believed to strengthen the spiritual connection with both the ancestors and the Creator.

The central sequence of the ritual begins at the traditional clan house, or *uma*, where ancestral heirlooms are stored and safeguarded. At this site, symbolic purification is carried out by sprinkling coconut water onto the heirlooms as a gesture of reverence toward the ancestors. This act is also interpreted as a request for permission to proceed with the ritual at a more sacred location, namely the altar in the forest. Such actions reflect the layered spiritual structure that underlies ritual procedures in Tana Ai.

Following the ceremony at the clan house, participants proceed to the altar located within the forest. This location is considered a place of encounter between human beings and the spiritual guardians of nature. The altar is decorated with leaves and other traditional items prepared beforehand. The movement from the clan house to the forest signifies the sequential stages of the ritual and the community's awareness of sacred spatial dimensions.

Upon reaching the altar, the ritual leader leads prayers and hymns in the local language addressed to Ama Lero Wulang Reta, the God of Heaven and Earth. These prayers are

accompanied by the burning of incense and the placement of offerings. Participants sit in a circle around the altar, following each stage with a deep sense of reverence. The entire process reflects the community's active engagement in every phase of the ritual.

A crucial stage of the ritual involves the slaughter of a black pig, which is first tied to a ritual post. The animal's blood is sprinkled onto the altar as a sacred offering to invoke divine favor for rainfall. This act is carried out by the ritual leader following specific customs inherited through tradition. After the sacrificial rites conclude, the pork is distributed among participants and cooked for communal consumption during the ritual feast.

As the closing act, all participants chew betel nut together, symbolizing unity and the affirmation of their commitment to customary values. This activity also marks the conclusion of the ritual and signifies that prayers and requests have been offered. The community then returns to their homes with the conviction that the blessing of rain will follow. The Neni Wair Uran ritual reveals a well-structured process that engages the community in actively preserving both spiritual and cultural heritage

Discussion

The Neni Wair Uran ritual, as identified in this study, possesses a spiritual significance that extends beyond agricultural concerns. Rain is understood not merely as an agricultural element, but as a divine gift that sustains life. Consequently, the ritual is not solely practical in purpose but also spiritually expressive. It serves as a collective form of communication aimed at maintaining harmony with transcendent forces. This understanding aligns with perspectives that emphasize the spiritual dimension of ritual practices.

Conducting the ritual at the beginning of the planting season reflects the close relationship between ecological cycles and the belief systems of the community. Within the cosmology of Tana Ai, time is viewed as a sacred structure that governs the order of life (Pastor & Santamaria, 2021). The planting season becomes an occasion to reactivate spiritual relationships with nature and the Divine. In this way, the ritual functions to reestablish both cosmic and social order.

The leadership structure evident in the ritual reveals an integration of customary authority and spiritual responsibility. The clan head or Bian Wu'un carries not only social responsibilities but also religious authority. This figure is recognized as the legitimate mediator who facilitates

the relationship between human beings and spiritual forces. Their presence affirms the cultural legitimacy of the ritual (Hrynkow & O'Hara, 2011).

Each offering element, such as the black pig, betel nut, coconut water, and ceremonial machete, embodies a rich layer of symbolism. These items are not merely physical representations, but also convey internalized values and spiritual meanings rooted in local culture (Manan et al., 2022). The offerings serve as symbolic communication tools between human beings and divine entities. They reflect the profound metaphorical dimensions embedded in the ritual.

The ritual also highlights the importance of spatial dimensions in spiritual experiences. The journey to the forest altar represents a transition into sacred space (Deopa & Rinaldo, 2024). The forest is not viewed merely as a geographical location, but as a spiritual realm where humans encounter the divine. Movement toward this place creates a transcendent experience within the ritual process.

The use of the local language in prayers demonstrates the performative power of ritual speech. The mother tongue resonates more deeply on a spiritual level. The words uttered do not simply deliver messages but also generate a sacred atmosphere (Efendi, Ade, & Mahadika, 2022). This reveals the function of language as a vehicle for meaning-making within the ritual context.

The slaughter of the black pig should not be interpreted as an act of violence, but as a sacred sacrifice imbued with religious value. This sacrificial act emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between humans and transcendent powers (Pandya, 2022). The animal's blood is offered as a gesture of supplication and reverence toward the spirits that guard nature. This act manifests the principle of spiritual balance in local tradition.

Interestingly, the Neni Wair Uran ritual does not conflict with the Catholic faith practiced by the Tana Ai community. The prayers, acknowledgment of God, and reverence for nature are consistent with the principles of Catholic ecotheology. Local traditions are reinterpreted in the light of faith without negating indigenous cultural values. This integration illustrates the Church's inculturative approach (International Theological Commission, 1989).

The preservation of the ritual demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage plays an essential role in reinforcing community identity and resilience. Intergenerational participation indicates a collective awareness of the ritual's importance as a symbol of unity. The ritual

becomes a medium for social and spiritual education at the community level (Ranubaya et al., 2023). This supports the idea that cultural vitality forms the foundation of local societal endurance.

In conclusion, the Neni Wair Uran ritual reflects a complex, holistic, and contextual spiritual practice. This tradition integrates cultural, religious, and ecological values into a living system. In confronting the challenges of modernity, the ritual stands as a model of spiritual practice that safeguards human dignity and the natural world. Such local traditions deserve recognition as exemplary models of sustainable cultural preservation, embodying ancestral values in the contemporary world.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study was limited to one community and focused primarily on qualitative interpretations of ritual meaning. Future research could expand by examining similar practices across different regions or through comparative theological analysis. Exploring the perspectives of younger generations may also provide insight into cultural transmission and adaptation amid rapid modernization.

Conclusion

The Neni Wair Uran ritual embodies a comprehensive expression of indigenous spirituality, wherein symbolic gestures, ancestral connections, and ecological consciousness are woven into a coherent religious practice. Through offerings, sacred language, and spatial transitions, the ritual affirms the Tana Ai community's theological understanding of life, rain, and divine providence. These elements, interpreted through a lens of inculturation, reveal the ritual's compatibility with Catholic theological principles and its role in contextualizing faith.

This ritual plays a vital role in preserving cultural identity and strengthening communal bonds across generations. The involvement of traditional leaders and collective participation demonstrates a shared spiritual commitment, reinforcing the community's connection to both ancestral wisdom and divine presence. In the face of external pressures such as globalization and ecological change, the ritual serves as a form of spiritual resilience and cultural continuity.

The study underscores the significance of traditional religious practices in shaping theological discourse and sustaining local faith expressions. The Neni Wair Uran ritual offers a valuable model for integrating indigenous knowledge with Christian beliefs, suggesting that lived cultural practices should be recognized as authentic forms of theological reflection. Greater

ecclesial and academic engagement with such traditions can enrich our understanding of faith as rooted in diverse cultural realities.

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