Paths of life and death: Rotenese life-course recitations and the journey to the afterworld

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Introduction

The idea of the path and of the journey that the path implies is a prominent and persistent conception among the Rotenese. There are many paths, but all such paths are referred to in ritual language by the paired terms ‘path and road’ (eno ma dalan). In rituals, paths have a direction, a beginning and an end, and journeying can be from west to east or from east to west: towards sunrise at the ‘head’ (langa) of the island or towards sunset at the ‘tail’ (iko) of the island.

On Rote, this movement is through a specific nominated space. All of the 17 traditional domains (nusak) of the island have their dual ritual names and, within each of these domains, particular places and prominent locations—fields, streams, hilltops—have their ritual names as well. Rotenese ritual recitations rely on topogenies—the formal ordered recitation of ritual placenames—to give direction to movement along a particular path and thus trace a recognised progression. This recitation of topogenies forms an essential part of the knowledge of origins.
Journeying can go beyond Rote to places with ritually designated names on neighbouring islands and further to places about which Rotenese can only speculate. Not only is life full of journeying, but also life itself from birth to death is conceived of as a journey. This conception is particularly prominent in the life-course recitations that mark the main rituals of death.

From a comparative perspective, these Rotenese life-course recitations are remarkable and distinctive. While many Austronesian societies in their mortuary rituals focus on a journey—often complex and precarious—that leads to an afterworld, the Rotenese at their funeral ceremonies focus on selecting one chant from a variety of patterned life-course recitations that is intended to fit the life of the deceased. This life-course chant is then recited in celebration of the deceased on the evening or evenings prior to burial.

Plates 8.1 and 8.2 Rotenese funerals are generally convivial gatherings spent in meeting, talking and feasting, often interspersed with drumming, gong-playing and dancing.

Before the burial, the personal affairs of the deceased are discussed, debts are settled and the close kin of the deceased offer their ritual exchanges to presiding maternal relatives. Burial is in the late afternoon before sunset, with Christian prayers for the deceased. There is—or once was—a ritual framework to all these proceedings although it was rarely made evident (see Fox 1988a). Only on the night or nights before burial were life-course chants recited to the accompaniment of circle-dancing.

Photos: James J. Fox.
All life-course recitations in the Rotenese repertoire are conceived of as particular paths that define a diversity of human possibilities. They identify the deceased by a life pattern and, in some cases, by manner of death. Many of these recitations include or invoke journeys within this life-course, producing an array of alternative avenues, some criss-crossing the island or venturing to destinations on other islands. If life is seen as a grand journey, it often consists of a variety of lesser journeys. All these fanciful imaginary biographies are metaphorical excursions for which there can be multiple interpretations.

Following the burial, there can also occur a final dirge that sends the spirit of the deceased on its way. This lament is a simple, sad and succinct instruction of farewell. It, too, describes a journey—a final journey to the afterworld.

This chapter discusses the repertoire of these life-course recitations gathered in the central domain of Termanu on Rote. From this rich repertoire, the chapter considers a selection of these recitations and some of the paths they set forth. It then presents and provides exegesis on one particular recitation entitled *Kea Lenga ma Lona Bala* and concludes by providing an example of the farewell instructions to the deceased for the final journey to the afterworld.

**The genre of life-course recitations: Some illustrative examples**

Life-course recitations form part of a much larger body of Rotenese oral literature composed in strict canonical parallelism—the specific, obligatory pairing of words to create formal ordered compositions. These different compositions are named after the particular chant character who is most prominent in them. In the case of life-course recitations, this is the chant-name given to the deceased.

In general, compositions are also identified by their ritual use. Thus, what I refer to here as life-course recitations are all simply classified as ‘death chants’ (*bini mamates*). A persistent theme in all of these chants is that of the ‘orphan and widow’ (*ana-mak ma falu-ina*). One enters life as an orphan and widow, journeys through life and departs, as one began, once more as an orphan and widow.
'Orphan and widow' can be used as a category to describe a number of general life-course recitations including some origin chants that can be altered, recomposed and recited as life-course recitations. A good example of these possibilities is the chant *Suti Solo do Bina Bane*—a chant known throughout Rote. As an origin chant, *Suti Solo do Bina Bane* recounts the journeying of two shells, a nautilus and a baler shell, that become either clappers to ward off birds from a rice field or the container for indigo and the base for spooling cotton for weaving. With its emphasis on the journeying of the two shells, *Suti Solo do Bina Bane* can also be composed to be told as a general orphan and widow life-course recitation (for 21 versions of this chant in both formats, see Fox 2016).

In the discussion of life-course recitations, there is what would seem to be a proliferation of dual names of persons and places plus the names of various creatures of the heavens, of the earth and of the sea, as well as of plants, especially trees. All of these names carry a weight of symbolic significance defined by implicit cultural conventions. Some of these names can be translated while others are more elusive, with parts that hint at their significance. In the Rotenese, because these names are doubled, the verbs that can accompany them can be either singular or plural. In a maddening fashion, which is intolerable in English, singular and plural can alternate even in a short sequence of lines, as if the poet intended to pair them to increase his use of parallelism. In translations and exegesis in this chapter, I have tried to use singular for most persons except where two different creatures or objects are invoked and the plural is critical. I consider, in summary fashion, a number of different life-course recitations and then focus on one particular example, which I present as a good illustrative reference text.

**Manu Kama ma Tepa Nilu**

Soon after my arrival in Rote in April 1965, I began to study ritual language, working with three master poets from Termanu: Meno Tua (‘Old Meno’), the ‘Head of the Earth’ of Termanu; Seu Ba’i, an already accomplished poet who had attached himself as an apprentice to Old Meno; and Peu Malesi, a fellow clansman of Seu Ba’i but someone whom Seu Ba’i saw as a rival. Most of the first compositions I recorded were life-course recitations.
The first of these was a composition by Peu Malesi that, once I had managed to transcribe it, I took to Old Meno for help in understanding it. Gradually, after several months, when I had begun to comprehend various compositions, I realised that included in a volume of Rotenese texts, *Rottineesche teksten met vertaling*, that the Dutch linguist J.C.G. Jonker published in 1911, there was a beautiful life-course recitation entitled *Manu Kama ma Tepa Nili*, which Jonker described as ‘obscure’ and had left untranslated, providing instead commentary and notes on its content. When I read the Rotenese text to a couple of elders, their assumption was that it was another of the compositions that I had recorded from Malesi.

I then took the text to Old Meno and offered to read it to him. Instead, he insisted that I read it to an assembled group of elders at the end of a court session. I did this a week or so later, explaining before I began that I was bringing back Rotenese knowledge that the Dutch had recorded from their ancestors. The reading was a success. Old Meno had given me the opportunity of a public performance, which established a degree of credibility and seriousness to my status and opened the way for wider participation for my recording of oral compositions.

More significant for my research was Meno’s reaction. After initially telling me how he had stayed awake at night wondering about my arrival and my motivations for coming to Termanu, he accepted me and my tape recorder as means of transmitting his knowledge to subsequent generations. At one point in another life-recitation, *Lilo Tola ma Koli Lusi*, he interpolated his own commentary on *Manu Kama ma Tepa Nili* and, in just 28 lines, summarised a Rotenese understanding of all life recitations and their significance.

His lines assert that the human condition is one of dependence, which is expressed as being an orphan and widow. Using a traditional paired phrasing, ‘those who wear black hats//those who wear yellow slippers’—an expression that originally referred to the Dutch and Portuguese but is now applied to anyone who adopts superior airs—Old Meno, as Head of the Earth, whose position is in polar opposition to the Lord of the Domain, gave insistent emphasis to the idea of mortality as the levelling feature of human life that does not differentiate between the great and the weak:

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Hu ndia de neda masa-nenedak  Therefore consider, do consider
Ma ndele mafa-ndendelek       And remember, do remember
Basa lesik-kala lemin         All you great ones
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Do basa lenana-ngala lemin
Or all you superior ones

Boso ma-tei telu
Do not have three hearts

Ma boso ma-dale dua.
And do not have two insides.

Se neu langa le
Whoever suffers lack and hindrance

Na basang-ngita teu ndia
We all go there

Ma se neu toa piak
And whoever suffers need and distress

Na basang-ngita teu ndia.
We all go there.

Se ana-mak?
Who is an orphan?

Na basang-ngita ana-mak.
All of us are orphans.

Ma se falu-ina?
And who is a widow?

Na basang-ngita falu-ini.
All of us are widows.

Fo la-fada lae:
They speak of:

Manu Kama dala dain
Manu Kama’s road to Dain

Ma Tepa Nilu eno selan.
And Tepa Nilu’s path to Selan.

Na basang-ngita ta enon
All of us have not his path

Ma basang-ngita ta dalan.
And all of us have not his road.

Sosoa-na nai dae baisak kia nde bena
This means that on this earth then

Ana-mak mesan-mesan
Each person is an orphan

Ma falu-ina mesa-mesan.
And each person is a widow.

De manasaepo nggeok
Those who wear black hats

Do manakuei modok ko
Or those who wear yellow slippers

Se ana-ma sila boe
They will be orphans, too

Ma falu-ina sila boe.
And they will be widows, too.

Meno’s interpolation is both powerful and personal. It acknowledges that people follow different paths. Not everyone has ‘Manu Kama’s road to Dain and Tepa Nilu’s path to Selan’, which is distinctive and remarkable.

This life recitation begins with the marriage of Manu Kama/Tepa Nilu’s mother, Silu Lilo/Huka Besi, and his father, Kama Lai Ledo/Nilu Neo Bulan, part of whose names, ‘Sun/Moon’ (Ledo/Bulan), signifies a heavenly origin. As Manu Kama/Tepa Nilu (MK/TN) is growing up, first his father and then his mother dies, leaving him an orphan. Another
woman, Bula Pe//Mapo Tena (BP//MT), offers to be his true mother and aunt but when he asks her to provide bridewealth so he can marry, she is unable (too poor) to do so. This request is metaphorically phrased as a request to buy him ‘a friarbird’s voice and a parrot’s whistle’, but BP//MT replies that she is a ‘woman without a ring on her finger and a girl without copper on her legs’. MK//TN therefore leaves BP//MT, sets forth and meets another woman, Lide Mudak//Adi Sole, who offers to take him in and be his true mother and aunt, but again she, too, is unable to provide him the bridewealth he needs. So, MK//TN grabs his ‘friarbird-hunting bow and parrot-hunting blowpipe’ and sets off once more. Next, he meets the woman Lo Luli//Kalu Palu (LL//KP), who offers to be his true mother and aunt.

One night, he hears the beating of drums and gongs and asks what is happening. LL//KP tells MK//TN that the Sun and Moon are holding a great feast at Rainbow Crossing//Thunder All-Round. So, MK//TN goes to attend the feast that is in progress. He is recognised but then insulted when he is offered millet in a rice basket and lung in a meat bowl. He leaves the feast and meets yet another woman, Leli Deak//Kona Kek (LD//KK), who becomes his mother and aunt. He moves with her to ‘Lini Oe’s birth group and Kene Mo’s descent group’, where he taps lontar palms and prepares fields for his mother and aunt, LD//KK. A perahu appears selling ‘nine fine things and eight delightful objects’ and its captain invites LD//KK to come on board, saying: ‘What pleases you, buy it and what displeases you, put it back.’ While LD//KK is looking through the offering, the owner sets sail, stealing LD//KK to take her to Selan do Dain. When MK//TN returns from the field, he is told that his mother has been carried away to Selan do Dain. He climbs on to a ‘pig’s feeding trough and a giant clam shell’ and sets off to Selan do Dain in search of LD//KK. When he arrives at his destination—now referred to by its full ritual name, Sela Sule ma Dai Laka—he instructs the owner of the perahu to take a message back for him:

'Mai leo Lini Oe mu  'Go back to Lini Oe
Do leo Kene Mo mu! Or go back to Kene Mo!
Mu mafada lena Lini-la Go and tell the lords of Lini
Do mafada lesi Kene-la, Or tell the headmen of Kene,
Mae: “Sek-o makanilu neo-la Say: “Come to see me
As a funeral chant, this life-course recitation, which ends with Manu Kama//Tepa Nilu’s journey to Selan do Dain, is open to speculation and interpretation. It is not clear precisely what category of person it can be used to celebrate. As an all-purpose widow and orphan chant, it could possibly be used for any variety of persons. For Meno, Manu Kama’s road to Dain and Tepa Nilu’s path to Selan was a passage to the grave and a general commentary on all human endeavours that led finally to a tomb-house and earthen-grave.¹

**Dela Kolik ma Seko Bunak**

*Dela Kolik ma Seko Bunak* is another fanciful life-course recitation that involves more of a pursuit than a journey. Meno recomposed an origin chant from Termanu to create this recitation, which he claimed was appropriate for the funeral of a child who dies as an infant. Dela Kolik ma Seko Bunak (DK//SB) is this male child, who is snatched from his mother and is only regained after his death. DK//SB’s name includes the paired placename Kolik//Bunak, which is a ritual designation for the domain of Termanu. This gives the recitation a specific setting from which to trace the pursuit of the child.

This recitation begins with the birth of DK//SB’s mother, Pinga Pasa ma So’e Leli (PP//SL), to Koli Faenama ma Bunak Tunulama (KF//BT). The critical cultural premise that underlies this recitation—and other ritual recitations—is that a mother’s cravings in pregnancy reflect and reveal the character of the child to be born. Almost one-third of this recitation is taken up with KF//BT’s efforts to satisfy the cravings of his wife. First,

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¹ The complete reference text of *Manu Kama ma Tepa Nilu* can be found in Fox (1988b) and has been reprinted in Fox (2014: 229–64).
PP//SL craves ‘goat’s liver and buffalo’s lung’; then, ‘bees’ larvae and wasps’ larvae’; then, ‘chucks of turtle meat and strips of seacow flesh’; and then, fatally, ‘a hawk’s egg and an eagle’s child’. KF//BT has to employ ‘a three-toed lizard and a two-toothed mouse’ to obtain the egg and child of a particular named hawk and eagle, Tetema Taenama and Balapua Loni (TT//BL), nesting in two high nitas and delas trees. These two trees, the nitas (*Sterculia foetida*; Indonesian: *Kelumpang*) and the delas (*Erythrina Spp.*; Indonesian: *Dedap*), are large, prominent flowering trees of ritual importance in this and other ritual compositions.

Soon after the birth of DK//SB, the hawk and eagle, TT//BL, takes her revenge by stealing the child and carrying him eastward to Sepe Ama Li’s nitas tree and Timu Tongo-Batu’s delas tree (again, the paired terms Sepe//Timu [‘Dawn//East’] indicate the direction of the hawk and eagle’s flight). DK//SB’s mother, PP//SL, ‘strikes her ribs in anger and beats her thighs in distress’ and sets out in pursuit of her stolen child. When she reaches the place where the hawk and eagle are perched, she kicks the tree but cannot dislodge her child. It is at this point that the eagle and hawk, TT//BL, speak to her, saying:

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\begin{align*}
'O & \text{ sue anam leo bek, } \quad \text{ 'Just as you love your child,} \\
Na & \text{ au sue anang leo ndiak } \quad \text{ So I love my child} \\
Ma & \text{ o lai tolom leo bek, } \quad \text{ And just as you cherish your egg,} \\
Na & \text{ au lai tolong leo ndiak boe. } \quad \text{ So I love my egg also.} \\
De & \text{ o muä au-anang-nga so } \quad \text{ You have eaten my child} \\
De & \text{ besak-ia au uã o-anam-ma } \quad \text{ Now I eat your child} \\
Ma & \text{ o minu au-tolong-nga so } \quad \text{ And you have drunk my egg} \\
De & \text{ au inu o-tolom-ma bai.' } \quad \text{ So I drink your egg also.’}
\end{align*}
\]

TT//BL then flies back to her original perch in Taoama Dulu’s nitas and Loniama Langa’s delas and from there to Loma-Loma Langa’s nitas and Pele-Pele Dulu’s delas with PP/SL in pursuit (again, the names of the owners of these trees, both of whom have Dulu//Langa [‘East//Head’] as part of their names, indicate that the flight of the hawk and eagle is in the east of Rote). However, as PP//SL approaches, TT/BL takes wing again and this time flies to the far western end of Rote at Dela Muli//Ana Iko. When PP//SL finally arrives, the eagle and hawk fly out to sea but PS//SL ‘cannot wade the waves nor cross the swell’ and she is forced to return home.
TT//BL then flies into the heavens and perches on the ‘Moon’s delas and the Sun’s nitas’, where she continues to munch and chew DK//SB. Finally, when all that remains are ‘chicken bones and buffalo sinew’, the eagle and hawk return to earth and drop what remains of DK//SB near two large rock formations off the coast of Termanu, Batu Hun ma Sua Lai, where his mother, PP//SL, can gather them. And so, the recitation ends with the lines:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Besak-ka tetema tapa henin} & \quad \text{Now the hawk throws him away} \\
\text{Ma balapua tuu henin.} & \quad \text{And the eagle casts him away.} \\
\text{Boe-ma inak-ka Pinga Pasa} & \quad \text{The mother, Pinga Pasa} \\
\text{Ma teon-na So’e Leli neu} & \quad \text{And his aunt, So’e Leli} \\
\text{De tenga do hele nenin.} & \quad \text{Takes or picks him, carrying him.} \\
\text{De la-toi dui manun} & \quad \text{They bury the chicken bones} \\
\text{Ma laka-dofu kalu kapan.} & \quad \text{And they cover with earth the buffalo sinews.}
\end{align*}
\]

The path of pursuit in this recitation transverses the island of Rote, shifting heavenward to the Sun and Moon before returning to the coast of Termanu at the centre of the island. As an imaginary biography to celebrate the death of an infant, this recitation presents a moving life-course where there has been little of life to celebrate.²

**Ndi Lonama ma Laki Elokama**

*Ndi Lonama ma Laki Elokama* is a life-course recitation for the death of a rich man. This recitation was gathered from Old Meno’s contemporary, the master poet Stefanus Amalo. It is remarkable for its long personal admonition from the deceased addressed to the members of his family. The genealogical introduction to this recitation begins with the marriage of the woman Lisu Lasu Lonak//Dela Musu Asuk to Ndi Lonama//Laki Elokama (NL//LE), who in this case is the principal chant character and

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² The complete reference text for *Dela Koli ma Seko Bunak* can be found in Fox (1971) and has been reprinted in Fox (2014: 91–128). Knowing that Old Meno had composed this version as a funeral chant, Seu B’ai, years later, provided me a version of this same chant that recounts the origin of the rock formation Sua Lai//Batu Hun, on Termanu’s north coast. This version initially follows Meno’s version, but then diverges significantly. The eagle and hawk do not drop Dela Koli//Seko Bunak back in Termanu but fly on to Timor and drop the child there. The child survives, marries and gives rise to the rocks Sua Lai//Batu Hun. Eventually, these rocks return to their place of origin and fix themselves on Termanu’s coast.
subject of this recitation. The recitation continues with the birth of their children: a son, Solu Ndi//Luli Laki (referred to in ritual language as ‘a cock’s tail feathers and a rooster’s plume’), and a daughter, Henu Ndi//Lilo Laki. NL//LE’s wealth in herds of animals is described at length:

_Té hu touk Ndi Lonama_ But the man Ndi Lonama,
_Ma ta‘ek Laki Elokama_ And the boy Laki Elokama,
_Tou ma-bote bii_k Is a man with flocks of goats
_Ma ta‘e ma-tena kapak._ And is a boy with herds of water buffalo.

_Dé basa fai-kala_ On all the days
_Ma nou ledo-kala_ And every sunrise
_Aná tada mamao bote_ He separates the flock in groups
_Ma ana lilo bobongo tena_ And forms the herd in circles
_Ná neni te tada tenan_ Bringing his herd-separating spear

_Má neni tafa lilo bote-na …_ And bringing his flock-forming sword …

_Fo bote-la dai lena_ For the flock is great
_Ma tena-la to lesi …_ And the herd is extensive …

NL//LE is suddenly struck down by illness and, as he is about to die, he gives instructions to his son and daughter on how to use his wealth. These instructions are long and elaborate injunctions to recognise and care for widows and orphans. When they are concluded, NL//LE sets out in poignant detail his journey to the afterworld:

_Té au touk Ndi Lonama_ For I am the man Ndi Lonama
_Ma au ta‘ek Laki Elokama_ And I am the boy Laki Elokama
_Ná au tonang sanga sosokun_ My boat is about to lift
_Ma au balung sanga sasaên_ And my perahu is about to rise
_Fo au ala u tunga inang_ For I am going to search for my mother

_Ma ala u afi teong_ And I am going to seek my aunt
_Nái muli loloe_ In the receding west
_Ma iko tatai._ And at the tail’s edge.
_Fo au leo Dela Muli u_ For I go to Dela in the west
At a funeral ceremony, these sad words of departure foreshadowing the personal journey to the afterworld were intended to be sung as a message from the deceased to his descendants.³

³ The complete reference text for Ndi Lonama ma Laki Eloka ma was first published in Fox (2003) and reprinted in Fox (2014: 283–95).
Pau Balo ma Bola Lungi

_Pau Balo ma Bola Lungi_ is yet another life-course recitation, intended for the funeral of a young man who dies before he has married and had a family. It is an explicitly erotic celebration of the many illicit loves of a Don Juan–like figure, who, in the version from Termanu, comes to a violent end. This chant is popularly known throughout Rote in many diverse versions, some even more explicitly adulterous than Termanu’s.

This version was also obtained from the master poet Stefanus Amalo. It is one of the longest chants in my collection of life-course recitations. Pau Balo ma Bola Lungi’s exploits take him on lengthy journeys to and through the domains of Rote.

This recitation begins with an extended genealogical introduction starting two generations before the birth of Pau Balo ma Bola Lungi (PB/BL). The woman Henu Elu//Bula Sao marries Lai Lota//Sina Kilo and gives birth to Malungi Lai//Balokama Sina (ML//BS). When ML//BS reaches maturity, he sets off in search of a noble wife, sailing first to the island of Savu, referred to as Seba Iko ma Safu Muli, in the west. When he is unable to find a wife on Savu, he returns to Rote, Kale do Lote, and encounters the woman Si Solu Hate Besi//Kona Boi Kado Lofa, whom he marries. When she becomes pregnant, she craves ‘chucks of turtle meat and strips of seacow flesh’. These cravings can be interpreted as a sign of PB/BL’s eventual character. In the Rotenese mythological imagination, the turtle and seacow were originally women who were condemned for their adultery to their sea creature condition. While seeking the food to satisfy his wife’s cravings, ML//BS also gathers small sharks and stingrays to give to her—again, signalling PB/BL’s future nature. PB/BL is born, twisting and lashing like a shark and stingray.

When PB/BL is growing up, he plays with some young girls who mock his claim to nobility. Stung by this taunt, PB/BL asks his mother to provide him with the variety of bamboo he needs to fashion a blowpipe and a bow to hunt parrots and friarbirds—a metaphorical declaration that he is ready to seek a woman to marry.

PB/BL sets off with his parrot-hunting blowpipe and his friarbird-hunting bow. The first woman he encounters is Liu Pota//Menge Solu (LP//MS), whose father has died. She sits upon her father’s grave grieving
over her situation as an orphan and widow. PB//BL decides not to use his bow and blowpipe but instead returns to his mother to tell her about LP// MS and to lament the condition of the world:

‘Seuk-ko teman ta dae bafok
Ma tetun ta batu poi …’  ‘Integrity is not of the earth
And order is not of the world …’

As a result, he changes his resolve to marry and instead chooses to seek pleasure before he dies, asking his mother to buy lovemaking sorcery medicine to aid him in his efforts:

‘Mu asa fe au nai
Ma tadi fe au modo
Fo nai masamu siok
Ma modo maoka faluk
Fo ela Paung neu sosoa
Ma Bolang neu piao,
Te se Paung pu lemu lon na
Ma Bolang ao malo sain na.
Neuk-ko dae holu lalutun
Ma batu luni laselan …’

‘Go and buy for me some sorcery stuff
And get for me some herbal medicine
Sorcery stuff with nine small roots
And herb medicine with eight large roots
Allowing my Pau to make love
And my Bola to take pleasure,
For my Pau’s thigh will be a dolphin in the ocean
And my Bola’s body will be an eel in the sea.
Later the earth will embrace it as fine dust
And the rocks crush it into rude lumps …’

PB//BL then sets off on his lovemaking journey. His exploits are many and varied and carry him across the island. His adventures are explicitly proclaimed:

De ana sosoa basa oe la
Ma piao ndule dae la.

He makes love in all the waters
And has intercourse through all the land.

On his journey, he travels to Soni Manu ma Koko Te, the domain of Lelenuk, on the south coast of Rote. There he has the chance to sing enticingly to the accompaniment of gongs and drums:
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**Boe ma t'ek-ka Pau Balo**  
The boy Pau Balo

**Ma touk-ka Bola Lungi**  
And the man Bola Lungi

**Lole halan no meko**  
Lifts his voice with the gongs

**Ma selu dasin no labu.**  
And raises his words with the drums.

**De bala filo fani-oen na**  
His voice as fragrant as bees’ honey

**Nafeo fani-lasi**  
Spreads round like forest bees

**Ma dasi loloa tua-nasun na**  
And his words as sweet as lontar syrup

**Naleli bupu timu.**  
Wander round like hovering wasps.

Women drop their fishing nets and come running to make love with him:

‘**Hala Pau Balo ia**’  
‘That is Pau Balo’s voice

**Ma dasi Bola Lungi ia.’**  
And those are Bola Lungi’s words.’

**Boe te ala nggafu heninafi tasi nala**  
So they shake sea cucumbers back into the sea

**Ma ala toko henin si meti mala.**  
And they throw the molluscs back into the tide.

**De lalai lelena**  
They come dashing

**Ma tolomu sasali.**  
And they come running.

**De leu te Paung loloi aon**  
They go for Pau’s rayfish twisting body

**Ma Bolang fefele aon.**  
And Bola’s shark lashing body.

**Boe ma ala tu lale’ak Paun**  
They wed by ravishing Pau

**Ma ala sao lanolek Bolan.**  
And they marry by forcing Bola.

PB//BL continues on his way, making love to a married woman whose husband threatens to kill him but instead curses him. PB//BL makes light of this curse and continues his lovemaking:

**Boe ma Paung sosoa lali**  
So Paung makes love once more

**Ma Bolang piao seluk.**  
And Bolang takes pleasure again.

**De leo dulu oen neu**  
To the eastern water, he goes

**Ma leo langa daen neu.**  
And to the headland, he goes.
Finally, he meets a woman planting rice, Nggeo Lao//Pila Selu, who rejects his overtures by refusing to share betel–areca nut with him. She sends him on his way and, as he strides forward into yet another village, the curse takes effect: the rainbow cuts across him and lightning spears him.

De ana sapu no tene-tuk  He perishes quickly
Ma ana lalo no hā'e-laik  And he dies suddenly
Nai Bafi Sole dulu mon  In Bafi Sole’s eastern field
Ma nai Diu Ama langa fuan.  And in Diu Ama’s headplain.
De late-dae neme ndia  The earthen grave is there
Ma lo-ai name na.  And the wooden tomb is at that spot.

Although his death is sudden and violent, PB//BL remains something of a heroic figure among Rotenese men and references are frequently made to him as a recognised cultural figure.4

Life-course recitations as literary compositions

All life-course recitations are literary compositions. Composed according to cultural norms that require the strict pairing of words, these formal recitations are formulaically structured and follow an array of recognised conventions. Journeys are ordered according to a directional template that looks east or west, north or south through a landscape clustered with ritually designated dual names. The dual names of chant characters overlap with placenames, adding to the evocative significance of each recitation. The names of other creatures from the heavens, the earth and the sea as well as the names of plants form part of this same system. By convention, some creatures and some trees are specifically male or female. Their associations are the literary vehicle for cultural understandings.

For the Rotenese today, these recitations are literary compositions in another sense. They continue to be preserved by the poets and elders of the island, but they are rarely performed at rituals. Virtually all funerals

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4 I have already gathered several versions of Pau Balo ma Bola Lungi recited in different dialects that provide varying accounts of Pau Balo//Bola Lungi’s exploits. I am still hoping to gather at least another two versions to be able to compare them with one another with a particular focus on their erotic language.
are now conducted with Christian rituals, which allow, at best, fragments of the past—snatches and segments of a recitation—to emerge. That these recitations are still maintained as an oral tradition is a tribute to the perseverance of the past and the recognition of a rich ancestral tradition that continues to evoke cultural respect.

Attempting to interpret any single life-course recitation requires careful attention to the conventions on which it draws. It is therefore instructive to consider one life recitation in detail—one that, like many similar recitations, involves journeying back and forth across the island with messengers and messages sent to convey sentiments of symbolic significance about the nature of life, death and memory.

**Kea Lenga ma Lona Bala: A life-course reference text**

*Kea Lenga ma Lona Bala* is perhaps an inappropriate name for this life-course recitation. *Kea Lenga//Lona Bala* is the chant character who figures most prominently in the recitation but, as a funeral chant, this composition concerns the chant character Delo Iuk//Soma Lopa, a woman who dies in childbirth. This composition offers an excellent example of many of the chief features of a life-course recitation, including the journeying and messaging that link its protagonists.

Unlike most life-course recitations, this composition, gathered from the master poet Seu Ba’i in 1965–66, does not begin with a genealogical introduction. Its opening lines posit a time when *Kea Lenga//Lona Bala* is old enough to begin the search for a spouse.

*Kea Lenga//Lona Bala* hears that there are beautiful women to be wed on the tiny island of Ndao, referred to as Ndao Dale//Folo Manu, and he sets off in a perahu to find a wife:

1. *Touk-ka Kea Lenga* The man *Kea Lenga*
2. *Ma ta’ek-ka Lona Bala.* And the boy *Lona Bala.*
3. *Faik esa manunin* On one certain day
4. *Ma ledo esa mateben* And at one particular time [sun]
5. *Ndii na namanene* Ears hear
6. *Nggata na namania* Hearing listens
7. **Benga lafafada**  
   Words are spoken

8. **Dasi lakatutuda**  
   Voices let fall

9. **Ina lena Ndao Dale la**  
   There are extra women on Ndao Dale

10. **Feto lesi Folo Manu la**  
    Additional girls on Folo Manu

11. **Dani la lahe lolek**  
    Unmarried girls of rivalling loveliness

12. **Leo lutu lahe lolek**  
    Like smooth stones of rivalling loveliness

13. **Sopa laka’ai kalek**  
    Unwed girls of imposing beauty

14. **Leo dongi laka’i kalek.**  
    Like barbed spears of imposing beauty.

15. **Boe ma touk-ka Kea Lenga**  
    The man Kea Lenga

16. **Ma ta’ek-ka Lona Bala**  
    And the boy Lona Bala

17. **Nakandolu tona ofan**  
    Builds a perahu ship

18. **Ma nalela balu paun.**  
    And designs a sailing craft.

19. **Faik esa matetuk**  
    On one right day

20. **Ledok esa matemak**  
    On one perfect time

21. **Boe ma laba nala tona ofan**  
    He mounts the perahu ship

22. **Ma tinga nala balu paun.**  
    And steps aboard the sailing craft.

23. **De ana pale uli titidi de neu**  
    He guides the splashing rudder

24. **Ma leko la kuku lu de neu**  
    And manoeuvres the flapping sails

25. **Neu tasi Ndao balu buin**  
    Toward Ndao’s sea anchorage

26. **Ma neu meti Folo beu te’en.**  
    And toward Folo’s tidal harbour.

When Kea Lenga//Lona Bala (KL//LB) arrives in the harbour of Ndao, he meets the man Ndao Eli-Sama//Folo No-Do’o (NE//FN), who is fishing. NE//FN interrogates KL//LB and KL//LB asks him about marriageable women on Ndao. NE//FN tells him that all the women of Ndao have married except for one woman in the house of Iu Ai//Lopo Maka. This turns out to be the woman Delo Iuk//Soma Lopo:
27. *Boe ma neu tongo lololo*  There he meets with his arms
29. *Ma neu nda lilima*  And he encounters with his hands
30. *Tā'e Folo No-Do'o*  The boy Folo No-Do'o
31. *Pili lide tetele*  Bending over to pick out *lide*-fish
32. *Nai tasi Ndao balu buin*  In Ndao's sea anchorage
33. *Maku moka luluku*  And stooping to spy minnows
34. *Nai meti Folo beu te'en.*  In Folo's tidal harbour.
35. *Boe te ana lole halan neu*  He raises his voice
36. *Ma a'e dasi neu, nae:*  And lifts his words, saying:
37. *'Baluk se balun o*  ‘This boat, is it your boat
38. *Tōnak se tonan o?’*  This ship, is it your ship?’
39. *Boe te touk-ka Kea Lenga*  So the man Kea Lenga
40. *Ma taēk-ka Lona Bala nae:*  And the boy Lona Bala says:
41. *'Baluk au balung ia*  ‘This boat is my boat
42. *Tōnak au tonang ia.*  This ship is my ship.
43. *Ndii nga namanene*  My ears hear
44. *Ma nggata nga namania*  My hearing listens
45. *Ina lena Ndao Dale la*  There are extra women on Ndao Dale
46. *Feto lesi Folo Manu la*  Additional girls on Folo Manu
47. *Sopa la kai kalek*  Unwed girls of imposing beauty
49. *De au pale uli titidi*  I guide the splashing rudder
50. *Ma au leko la kukulu*  And I manoeuvre the flapping sails
51. *Fo sanga leo Ndao Nusa u*  To seek Ndao Nusa
52. *Ma sanga leo Folo Manu u.’*  And to seek Folo Manu.’
53. *Boe te taē Folo No-Do'o*  The boy Folo No-Do'o
54. *Tou Ndao Eli-Sama*  And the man Ndao Eli-Sama
55. *Ana selu dasi neu*  He raises his words
56. *Ma ana aë balan neu, nae:*  And he lifts his voice, saying:
57. 'Ina lena Ndao Dale la  'The extra women on Ndao Dale
58. *Tu lama-noü so*  Have all wed
59. *Feto lesi Folo Manu la*  The additional girls on Folo Manu
60. *Sao lama-dai so.*  Have already married.
61. *Ala dani lai to'on lon*  There is a girl unwed in her mother's brother's house
62. *Sopa lai aman uman*  And a girl unmarried in her father's home
63. *Lai Iu Ai Ndao uman*  In the house of Iu Ai of Ndao
64. *Lai Lopo Maka Folo lon.'*  And in the home of Lopo Maka of Folo.'

Kea Lenga/Lona Balo marries Delo Iuk//Soma Lopo and she becomes pregnant. Unexpectedly, KL/LB hears that Pele-Pele Dulu//Loma-Loma Langa has died and he has to board his perahu to return home. The paired terms *Dulu/Langa* ('East/Head') in the name Pele-Pele Dulu//Loma-Loma Langa indicate that KL/LB must traverse the island from Ndao at the western tip of Rote to somewhere at the eastern end of the island. He returns to the ‘Dawning East/Reddening Head’ (*Timu Dulu//Sepe Langa*):

65. *Nadeka tu nala Delo Iuk*  Now he weds Delo Iuk
66. *Sao nala Soma Lopo*  And marries Soma Lopo
67. *Boe ma tu nala Delo Iuk*  He weds Delo Iuk
68. *Ma sao nala Soma Lopo.*  And he marries Soma Lopo.
69. *Faik esa mateben*  One particular day
70. *Ma ledok esa manunin*  And one certain time [sun]
71. *Boe te inak-ka Delo Iuk*  The woman Delo Iuk
72. *Ma fetok-ka Soma Lopo*  And the girl Soma Lopo
73. *Tei-na daä -fai*  Her womb enlarges
74. *Ma suu-na nggeo-lena*  And her breasts darken
75. *Nggeo-lena bobongin*  Darken to give birth
8. PATHS OF LIFE AND DEATH

76. *Ma daa-fai lalaen.* Enlarge to bring forth [a child].
77. *Boe te halak-kala mai* But voices come
78. *Ma dasik-kala mai* And words come
79. *Touk Pele-Pele Dulu* The man Pele-Pele Dulu
80. *Ma taek Loma-Loma Langa* And the boy Loma-Loma Langa
81. *Ana lalo ma ana sapu.* He has died and he has perished.
82. *Boe ma ta‘ek-ka Kea Lenga* So the boy Kea Lenga
83. *Tinga-nala balu paun* Steps aboard his sailing craft
84. *Ma touk-ka Lona Bala* And the man Lona Bala
85. *Sae-nala tona ofan.* Climbs on top his perahu ship.
86. *Ana leo Timu Dulu neu* He goes toward Dawning East
87. *Ma leo Sepe Langa neu.* And toward Reddening Head.

Time passes and the father of KL//LB’s wife, Lopo Maka//Iu Ai, on Ndao asks the Tiny Bat of the Dawning East and the Flying Fox of the Reddening Head to fly to the east to find out about KL//LB. There, where two roads form a circle and three paths come together, they meet Lani Pea//Siti Si’u:

88. *Teuk lakalaladik* Time passes
89. *Bulak lakaseseluk* Moons change
90. *Te balun ta lolo-fali* But the boat does not return
91. *Ma tonan ta diku-dua.* And the ship does not come back.
92. *Boe ma ta‘ek Lopo Maka Folo* So the boy Lopo Maka of Folo
93. *Ma touk lu Ai Ndao* And the man Iu Ai of Ndao
94. *Ana tetenin Bau Ana Timu Dulu* He questions the Tiny Bat of the Dawning East
95. *Ma ana Tata Soi Ana Sepe Langa* And asks the Flying Fox of Reddening Head
96. *Nai dala batu sepe langa* On the stone road to Reddening Head
97. *Ma eno dae timu dulu, lae:* And on the earthen path to Dawning East, saying:

98. *‘O eno daen sila boe* 'You on the earthen path

99. *Ma o dala batu sila boe* And you on the stone road

100. *De o leo timu dulu mu* Go to Dawning East

101. *Ma o leo sepe langa mu.* And go to Reddening Head.’

102. *Boe ma Bau Ana Timu Dulu la leu boe* So the Tiny Bat of Dawning East goes

103. *Ma Soi Ana Sepe Langa la leu* And the Flying Fox of Reddening Head goes

104. *Te leu dala dua bobongon* He goes to where two roads form a circle

105. *Ma leu eno telu tai-lolon.* And goes to where three paths come together.

106. *Boe te leu tongo lololo* There he meets with arms

107. *Ma leu nda lilima* And encounters with hands

108. *Lani Pea ma Siti Si’u.* Lani Pea and Siti Si’u.

Lani Pea//Siti Si’u tells the Tiny Bat and the Flying Fox that she is mourning the death of her father, Pea Pale-Sama//Si’u Lele-Lai. They sit at the gravesite, which is marked by two hardwood trees, a *tanga-tea* and *ka-koli*. These trees are, by convention, the signs of a poorly tended grave disturbed by roving animals. In her grief, LP//SS tells the Tiny Bat and Flying Fox to travel further and pose their questions again:

109. *De natane neme ndia* He asks there

110. *Ma teteni neme na.* And questions at that spot.

111. *Boe te ala selu dasi neu* They raise words

112. *Ma a’e halan neu:* And they lift voices:

113. *‘Mu manosi seluk bai* ‘Go inquire once again

114. *Ma mu matane seluk bai* And go, ask once again

115. *Te Si’u Lele-Lai sapu* For Si’u Lele-Lai has died

116. *Ma Pea Pale-Sama lalo.* And Pea Pale-Sama has perished.

117. *De lalo ela Lani Pea* He has perished leaving Lani Pea
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118. *Ma sapu ela Siti Si’u.* And he has died leaving  
Siti Si’u.
119. *De ami mangatu late dae* We sit on the earthen grave
120. *Ma ami masalai lo ai* And we lean on the wooden  
tomb
121. *De lo ai tanga-tea la* A tomb of wood-hard *tanga-
*tea* tree
122. *Ma late batu ka-koli la.* And a grave of rock-hard  
*ka-koli* tree.
123. *Ala pila bala dededen* It is now a deep-burnt red
124. *Ma ala nggeo lasa kekenin.* And is now a dark, glossy  
black.
125. *Ami mangatu tunga seli* We sit on one side
126. *Na manu kali tunga seli* While chickens scratch  
on one side
127. *Ma ami masalai tunga seli* And we lean on one side
128. *Bafi tofi tunga seli.* While pigs uproot the  
ground on one side.
129. *De mu teteni seluk bai* Go, question once again
130. *Ma mu tata seluk bai.* And go, demand once again.’

The Tiny Bat and the Flying Fox fly on to another site where two roads  
form a circle and three paths come together and there they meet Dano- 
La Lalata/Beu-La O’oko, part of whose names (*dano*: ‘lake’) and actions  
evoke an aquatic scene. This spot attracts the Tiny Bat and Flying Fox to  
stay and they do not return to Ndao:

131. *Boe ma neu natane seluk* So he goes to ask again
132. *Ma neu tata seluk.* And he goes to demand  
again.
133. *De neu dala dua bobongon* He goes to where two roads  
form a circle
134. *Ma eno telu tai-lolon.* And where three paths come  
together.
135. *Boe te neu nda lilima* There he encounters  
with hands
136. *Ma neu tongo lololo* And he meets with arms
137. *Dano-La Lalata* Dano-La Lalata

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138. Ma Beu-La O’oko. And Beu-La O’oko.
139. De oko lo dene buna They wade there with kapok flowers
140. Ma lata lo mea lilo. And they float there with golden red buds.
141. De Soi Ana Sepe Langa The Flying Fox of Reddening Head
142. Ma Bau Ana Timu Dulu And Tiny Bat of Dawning East
143. Ala lili dene leme ndia They love the kapok plants there
144. Ma neka dano leme na. And crave the lake plants at that place.
145. De ala ta tulek Ndao They do not go back to Ndao
146. Ma ala ta falik Fol. And they do not return to Fol.

When the Tiny Bat and the Flying Fox do not return to Ndao, Iu Ai//Lopo Maka (IA//LM) demands that the Friarbird and Green Parrot fly off to the Dawning East and Reddening Head to find Kea Lenga//Lona Bala and tell him to come back to Ndao because his wife has died giving birth. This initiates a dialogue: the Friarbird and Green Parrot explain that they need two specific trees—a nitas tree and a delas tree—on which to alight. IA//ML then instructs them to alight on Timu Tongo-Batu’s nitas tree and Sepe Ama-Li’s delas tree. Again, the terms Timu//Sepe (‘East’//‘Dawn’) in these names indicate a location in the east of Rote. By convention, the Friarbird and Green Parrot are considered to be female. Their gentle, sweet song is an important aspect of the message they are intended to convey:

147. Boe ma ta’ek Iu Ai Ndaok So the boy Iu Ai of Ndao
148. Ma touk Lopo Maka Fol. And the man Lopo Maka of Fol
149. Ana tata Koa Ndao He demands of the Friarbird of Ndao
150. Ma teteni Nggia Fol. And requests the Green Parrot of Fol
151. Fo leo Timu Dulu neu To go to Dawning East
152. Ma leo Sepe Langa neu And to go to Reddening Head
153. *Do na-lo Kea Lenga* To call Kea Lenga
154. *Ma na-nggou Lona Bala* And to shout for Lona Bala
155. *Fo falik Folo Manu mai* To return to Folo Manu
156. *Ma tulek Ndao Nusa mai* And to come back to Ndao Nusa
157. *Te Delo Iuk bongi* For Delo Iuk was giving birth
158. *Te ana lalo* But she died
159. *Ma Soma Lopo lae* And Soma Lopo was bringing forth
160. *(Te) ana sapu.* But she perished.
161. *Boe te Koa lole halan* But the Friarbird raises her voice
162. *Ma Nggia aë dasin, nae:* And the Green Parrot lifts her words, saying:
163. *'Au koa mana taidok* ‘I am a leaf-clinging Friarbird
164. *Ma au nggia manasae baëk.* And I am a branch-perching Green Parrot.
165. *De au u Timu Dulu* If I go to Dawning East
166. *Fo au sae baëk u be* On what branch will I perch
167. *Ma au(u) Sepe Langa* And if I go to Reddening Head
168. *Fo au tai dok u be?* To what leaf will I cling?
169. *Boe ma taëk Iu Ai Ndaok* The boy Iu Ai of Ndao
170. *Ma touk Maka Lopo Folo* And the man Lopo Maka of Folo
171. *Ana lole halan neu* He raises his voice
172. *Ma a’e dasin neu, nae:* And lifts his words, saying:
173. *’Mu Timu Tongo-Batu nitan ba’en* ‘Go to a branch of Timu Tongo-Batu’s *nitas* tree
174. *Ma Sepe Ama-li delan poin* And go to the top of Sepe Ama-Li’s *delas* tree
175. *Fo sa’e baëk mu ndia* Go, perch on the branch there
176. *Fo bebenu mu ndia* Go, balance there
177. *Ma tai dok mu ndia* And go, cling to the leaf there
178. *Fo dodoko mu ndia.* Go hang there.
The Friarbird and Green Parrot fly off to the east to perch on nitas//delas trees. There they meet the woman Buna Sepe//Boa Timu (BS//BT: ‘Reddening Flower//Eastern Fruit’), who asks them who they are. They explain that they are the Friarbird and Green Parrot of Ndao and have come to look for Kea Lenga//Lona Bala to tell him that his wife has died giving birth. BS//BT tells them that the mourning is continuing for the death of Loma-Loma Langa//Pele-Pele Dulu (LL//PD), who has left his child, Ka Loma//Pua Pele, an orphan. (It was the news of LL//PD’s death that prompted Kea Lenga//Lona Bala to leave Ndao and come back to the east.) BS//BT instructs the Friarbird and Green Parrot to be aware of this situation when they go on to speak to KL//LB:

179. *Boe te ana leo Sepe Langa neu*  
So she goes to Reddening Head

180. *Ma leo Timu Dulu neu.*  
And goes to Dawning East.

181. *De ana sae bâ’ek neu Nitas*  
She perches on the branch of the nitas

182. *Ma tai dok neu Delas.*  
And clings to the leaf of the delas.

183. *De siluk bei ta dulu*  
Dawn is not yet in the east

184. *Ma huak bei te langa*  
And light is not yet at the head

185. *Te ana kako doko-doe halan*  
But she sings pleadingly with her voice

186. *Ma hele tai-boni dasin.*  
And whistles requestfully with her words.

187. *Boe ma inak-ka Buna Sepe*  
The woman Buna Sepe (Reddening Flower)

188. *Ma fetok-ka Boa Timu*  
The girl Boa Timu (Eastern Fruit)

189. *Ana kona boke dae mai*  
She climbs down to the ground

190. *Ma tuda nggodi dae mai.*  
And slips down to the ground.

191. *De ana lelu nalamula dulu*  
She looks intently toward the east

192. *Ma lipe nakanae langa.*  
And stares carefully toward the head.
She lifts her voice
And raises her words, saying:
‘What sort of friarbird are you
And what kind of green parrot are you?
Dawn is not yet in the east
And light is not yet at the head,
But you go to the top of my father’s nitas
And to the top of my mother’s brother’s delas.
You sing pleadingly with your voice
You have a human voice
And you whistle requestfully with your words
You have a person’s words.’
The Friarbird lifts her words
And the Green Parrot raises her voice, saying:
‘I am the Friarbird of Ndao
And I am the Green Parrot of Folo
I come from Folo Manu
And I come from Ndao Nusa
I come to call out for Kea Lenga
And I shout for Lona Bala.
His spouse, Delo Iuk, was giving birth
But she died
And his wife, Soma Lopo, was bringing forth
But she perished.’
The woman Boa Timu
218. *Ma fetok-ka Buna Sepe* And the girl Buna Sepe
219. *A’e halan neu* Lifts her voice
220. *Ma lole dasin neu:* And raises her words:
221. ‘*Bei huas-sa ia* ‘Just yesterday
222. *Ma bei nakas-sa ia* And just a little while ago
223. *Loma-Loma Langa lalo* Loma-Loma Langa died
224. *Ma Pele-Pele Dulu sapu.* And Pele-Pele Dulu perished.
225. *De sapu ela Pua Pele* He perished, leaving Pua Pele
226. *Ma lalo ela Ka Loma.* And he died, leaving Ka Loma.
227. *De leo Kea Lenga uman mu* When you go to Kea Lenga’s house
228. *Ma leo Lona Bala lon mu* And to Lona Bala’s home
229. *Fo mafada nai ndia* Speak there
230. *Ma manosi nai na.’* And talk at that place.’

The Friarbird and Green Parrot fly on to speak to Kea Lenga//Lona Bala to tell him of the death of his wife in childbirth. He explains that he is in mourning for LL//PD and then gives them an areca nut and coconut, instructing them to plant the coconut at the head of his wife’s grave and the areca nut at the foot of her grave so that he will recognise the grave when he returns to Ndao:

231. *Boe ma ana la lida neu* So she flies wings
232. *Ma ana meli ei neu.* And she hastens legs.
233. *De nafada Kea Lenga* She speaks to Kea Lenga
234. *Ma nanosi Lona Balá, nae:* And talks to Lona Bala, saying:
235. ‘*Saom-ma Delo Iuk bongi* ‘Your wife, Delo Iuk, was giving birth
236. *Te ana lalo* But she died
237. *Ma tum-ma Soma Lopo lae* And your spouse, Soma Lopo, was bringing forth
238. *Te ana sapu.’* But she perished.’
239. *Boe ma touk-ka Kea Lenga* The man Kea Lenga
240. *Ma ta’ek-ka Lona Bala* And the boy Lona Bala
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241. Lole halan neu  
242. Ma aë dasin neu:  
243. 'Bei henì huas-sa ia  
244. Ma bei liti nakas-sa ia  
245. Loma-Loma Langa lalo  
246. Ma Pele-Pele Dulu sapu.  
247. De sapu ela Pua Pele  
248. Ma lalo ela Kà Loma  
249. Bei doe-doe nita osi  

250. Ma bei nula-nula mupu no.  

251. De o tulek diku [-dua] Ndào  
252. Ma falìk lolo-fali Folo  
253. Fo muni pua ndë ia  
254. Ma muni no ndë ia  
255. Fo Delò Iuk sapu so  
256. Na sele pua neu ein  

257. Ma Soma Lopo lalo so  
258. Na tane no neu langan  

259. Fo ela no laboa langan  
260. Ma ela pua langgi ein  

261. Fo ela au falìk leo Ndào u  
262. Na au lelu u late dæ  
263. Ma au tulek leo Folo u  
264. Na au lipe u lo ai.'  

241. Raises his voice  
242. And lifts his words:  
243. ‘Only just yesterday  
244. And barely a little while ago  
245. Loma-Loma Langa died  
246. And Pele-Pele Dulu perished.  
247. He perished, leaving Pua Pele  
248. And died, leaving Ka Loma  
249. Still succulent as a nitas garden  

250. And still unripe as a coconut shoot.  

251. You go turning back to Ndao  
252. And return back to Folo  
253. Carrying this areca nut  
254. And carrying this coconut  
255. For Delo Iuk has died  
256. So plant this areca nut at her feet  

257. And Soma Lopo has perished  
258. So sow this coconut at her head  

259. And let the coconut grow fruit at her head  
260. And let the areca grow flower stalks at her feet  

261. So that when I return to Ndao  
262. I may go to look upon her earthen grave  
263. And I go back to Folo  
264. I may stare at her wooden tomb.'
The final journey to the afterworld

Just as life is conceived of as a journey, so, too, is death. Rotenese life-course recitations celebrate the possibilities of many different paths for life’s journeying. These celebrations were given voice by a chanter (or sometimes a succession of chanters), who would lead a long night’s round-dancing before the burial. The dirge that accompanied or immediately followed the burial recounted a different journey—a perilous journey on a single path to an unknown land westward, where the sun sets and from which there is no return.

The dirge has long since ceased to be performed in Termanu. In eastern Rote, particularly in Ringgou, such dirges (boreu) are still carried out to instruct the dead on this final journey. This long dirge was recorded from the master poet Ande Ruy. To perform it, he had to imagine for himself a setting and chose to remember the death of an elderly woman to whom he refers as ‘grandmother’ (besa). It constitutes an extended dialogue between the chanter and the deceased, remembering her life but at the same time firmly instructing her on her journey to the afterworld.

This long lament heaps image upon image, mixing the remembrance of moments of joy with the stark realities of departure, describing the coffin as the ship of the dead about to set sail. To emphasise the nature of the journey to the afterworld, the chanter states that when one goes to Kupang (referred to, in grandiose terms, as Kota Batu//Di’i Lilo: ‘the Stone-Wall Town//the Golden Pillars’), one can return, but from the journey to the afterworld, there is no return.

In pre-Christian beliefs, it was thought that some aspect of the person did return briefly to partake of the food offerings left for the dead. In this chant, that belief is evoked and the deceased is referred to as a remnant creature with the eyes of a bumble bee. However, even this visitation is fleeting. At its conclusion, the deceased is described as ‘a fallen coconut//a withered areca nut’ and instructed: ‘Just fix your eyes on your path and direct your nose to your way.’

He’e a’u we o besa o
Mana-sue o nei
Ma mana-lai o nei
Masa mao o nei

Ah, wee … O Grandmother
Who was so loving …
And so affectionate …
So caring …
Boi o nei.                      So supporting …
He’e a’u we                   Ah wee …
Ua ia tao le’e boe             What fortune is this
Ma nale ia tao le’e, besa?    What fate is this, Grandmother?
De rina basa nusa ara boe     There through all the domains
Ma basa iku ra boe, besa      And all the lands, Grandmother
Bei ro dudi no-nara            Still with relatives
Ma ro tora tuke-nara          And with kin,
Fo au afarene lolo, besa ei   For I remember, Grandmother
Do ameda rara.                Or I ponder.
Au ia isa apa                  Here I am like a single buffalo
Boe ma au ia mesa manu.       Here I am like a lonely chicken.
Tē nae:                        It is said:
Dale leo pila lolo             An inside like stretched red threads
Ma tei leo keo tenu,          And a heart like black woven threads,
Tei mamadai dulu              Your heart reaches to the east
Soa neu buna                  Taking care of (your) flowers [children]
Ma dale mamano’u laka         Your inside extends to the head
Bati neu boa leo.             Fending for (your) fruit [descendants].
Tē nae:                        It is said:
He’e a’u we, mana-sue o nei   Ah wee … one so loving
Ma mana-lai o nei,            And one so affectionate,
Mata malua ia                  The eye of the day is dawning now
Ma idu maka ledo ia            The hint (‘nose’) of the sun is shining now
Tē neuko su’i besi neu ko     But the coffin nails are for you
Ma koe riti neu ko.           And the coffin lock closes for you.
O besa, londa asa neu dulu    O Grandmother, drape cloth at the east
Ma ba pou neu laka. And wrap the cloth at the head.
He’e au we o neu ko Ah wee … for you
Tika mala balum lain, Climb aboard your perahu,
Balu pao-ma lain Aboard your sailing perahu
Ma hene mala tondam lain Mount aboard your boat
Tonda ufa-ma lain, Aboard your sailing boat,
Ma neuko hapa nunu balu paom Your banyan-wood sailing perahu
Ma ba e’a tonda umam. Your warining wood sailing boat.
De au afarene lololo I do continue to remember
Ma asa neda rara, besa. And I do continue to ponder, grandmother.
Na neuko au dale boe rasala Here my heart feels wrong
Ma teik boe rasiko. And my stomach feels off target.
He’e au we mana-sue o nei Ah wee … one so loving
Ma mana-lai o nei And one so affectionate
Fo hida bei leo hatan At a time long ago
Ma data bei leo don At a time since past
Honda rolam papa Your walking stick creaking
Te aim boboto And your wooden spear sounding
Ifa mala buna leo You cradled the flowers of your clan
Ma o’o mala soro mala leo. And you carried the descendants of your clan.
Faina ledo neu peu tua During that day, going to tap the lontar
Fo [ami] mala meu peu tua We went to tap the lontar
Te hu dadi mu nama hena. This became our hope.
Ma fai neu lele hade, And on that day, going to tend the rice
Na ami mala meu lele hade We went to tend the rice
Tehu dadi mu nabani, besa a. This became our prospect, grandmother.
Nai lo a dale Within the home
Ma nai uma a dale
And within the house

Ifa mara upu mara
Cradling your grandchildren

Ma o’o mara soro mara.
And carrying your descendants.

Au dalek boe dola edu
My heart is full of sorrow

Ma au teika boe koko redo
And my insides are filled with regret

Besa a, maka ledo ia leo
Grandmother, the sunlight has past

Ma malua ia leo.
And the daylight has gone.

Neuko mori mu hapa nunu
Now is time to lay the *waringan* [coffin]

Ma dadi mu ba e’a.
And the moment to set your banyan [coffin].

De fain nea peu tuan
The day to watch the lontar tapping

Na bea neu mete upuma
Then to see your grandchildren

Ma ledo neu lele haden
The time to tend the rice

Na bea neu relu soro mara.
Then to look after your descendants.

Fain a beka ra-fafada
On that day, voices might say

Ma dasi rama-tuda, rae:
And words might fall, saying:

‘Seo dai Kota Batu
‘Go to the Stone-Walled Town [Kupang]’

Seo dai te fali
If you go, you can come back

Ma deru dai Di’i Lilo
‘And journey to Golden Pillars [Kupang]’

Na deru dai te tule.
If you journey, you can return.

Tebu balakai ia leo.
But now stiff like this …

Ki kalutu Folo
Green Parrots caw on Folo

Ki’ rae malua
Green Parrots speak to the dawn

Ma dolo kateu Ndao
Friarbirds twitter on Ndao

Dolo rae makaledo.
Friarbirds speak to the sunlight.

Neuko hene mala tondam lain
Now climb on board your boat

Tonda ufama lain.
On board your boat and perahu.

Idu maka ledo ia
The nose of dawn is here
Dolo kateu Ndao
Friarbirds twitter on Ndao

Neuko dolo rae maka kedu
Now the Friarbirds speak sobbingly

Na hene mala balum lain
Now step on board your vessel

Balu pao ma lain.
On board your vessel and canoe.

He'e au we mana-sue o nei
Ah wee, one so loving

Ma mana-lai o nei
And one so affectionate

Neuko leko la fo mu
Now set sail to go

Ma pale uli fo mu
And turn your rudder to go

De neuko leko la Safu Muri
Set sail for Savu in the West

Ma pale uli Seba I'o.
And turn your rudder to Seba at the tail.

De tule ta di'u dua so
Do not return, having turned your back

Ma fali ta soro lele so.
And do not come back, having turned round.

De nae:
It is said:

Ela dea-dea, besa o
Let's speak and speak, O Grandmother

Ma ela ola-ola dei, besa o.
And let's talk and talk, O Grandmother.

Sadi rene mafa-rene
Only remember, do remember

Te nai oe ma so
Where your water once was

Ma sadi neda masa neda
And only recall, do recall

Te nai dae ma so.
Where your land once was.

Tehu au dalen boe dola edu
But my heart is also full of sorrow

Ma teik boe koko redo
And my insides are filled with regret

Afia rene lololo
I continually remember

Ma ameda rara
And I constantly recall

Mata esa ko matan
Eye to eye

Ma rolu esa ko rolu
Knowing each other

Ma idu esa ko idu
Nose to nose

De lela esa ko lela.
Understanding each other.
De mana-sue o nei  One so affectionate
Ma mana-lai o nei. One so loving.
Te neuko fafi ara tao lada But in the middle of the night
Ma boro ara tao do And late in the night
O tule di’u dua mai You can return, turning back
Ma fali soro lele mai And come back, turning round
Te ma-mata bupu timu But with the eyes of a bumble bee
Fo mahara bupu timu The voice of a bumble bee
Ma ma-udu fanisasi And the nose of a honeybee
Fo madasi fanisasi. The sound of a honeybee.
He’e au we mana-sue o nei Ah wee … one so affectionate
Ma mana-lai o nei And one so loving
Au ameda neu upu mara I recall your grandchildren
Ma au afarene neu soro mara And I remember your descendants

Buna bei nai bui Flowers not yet at the tip
Modo bei nai odan. Green not yet at the head.
De dila bei ta nasa-e’e Wings not yet able to fly
Ma ei bei ta na-pa’i. Legs not yet able to crawl.
Ledo esa nai ria One time like this
Ma fai esa nai na One day like that
Besa, te doko doe reu dua Grandmother, begging twice
Ma tai-boni reu telu And requesting thrice
Ratane reu dua Questioning twice
Ma teteni reu telu. Asking thrice.
He’e au we mana-sue o nei Ah wee … one so affectionate
Ma mana-lai o nei And one so loving
Te idu bara te tasi As close as the spines of a sea urchin
Ma idu esa ko idun Nose to nose
Ma mata soro siu meti And as close as the gewang-leaf ocean net
Mata esa ko matan. Eye to eye.
Now [our] insides are filled with regret
And hearts are full of sorrow
But regret does nothing
And sorrow does nothing.
Ah wee … one so loving
And one so affectionate
You go to the stone of regret
Our inner regret is doubled
And you go to the tree of sorrow
Our hearts’ sorrow is tripled.
The noisy chicken of the wood
What has gone wrong
The tusked pig of the forest
What is mistaken?
Ah wee … one so loving
And one so affectionate
Like the forest of Loleh
Cut down the forest of Loleh
Then where will our Loleh monkey hoot?
And like the forest of Dela
Burn down the forest of Dela
Then where will our Dela pig root?
Regret of the heart is not here, Grandmother
And inner sorrow is not there.
Promises are past
Restrictions are past
Fortune with fortune
Fate with fate
We continually remember
And bear in mind
8. PATHS OF LIFE AND DEATH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rotenese</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ua leo besak ua</td>
<td>Fortune like the present fortune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma nale besak nale.</td>
<td>Fate like the present fate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama lasi leo no</td>
<td>Mother, old as a coconut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo ono aom leo no</td>
<td>Your body falls like a coconut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma mama latu leo pua</td>
<td>And mother, withered as an areca nut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo refa aom leo pua.</td>
<td>Your body drops like an areca nut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mita mai leo be a</td>
<td>We will see what happens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo balaha leo be a</td>
<td>What tomorrow will be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ami bulu mai leo be a</td>
<td>And we will learn what will be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo binesa leo be a.</td>
<td>What the day after next will be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ria neme ria leo</td>
<td>Let this be as this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma na neme na leo.</td>
<td>And let it be as it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tule di’u dua mu</td>
<td>Go, turning, turning back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu oe ma leo</td>
<td>Go to the waters and onward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma fali soro lele mu</td>
<td>Go, go back, turning round</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu dae ma leo</td>
<td>Go to [your] lands and onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadi pasa mata neu eno</td>
<td>Just fix your eyes on your path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma sunda idu neu dala</td>
<td>And direct your nose to your way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Besa ei.</td>
<td>Grandmother.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

Rotenese life-course recitations convey a vital imagined world. Although there are references to ordinary everyday activities in these recitations, much of what they portray is far from ordinary. In this chapter, I have focused on the world of movement these life-course recitations recount: messaging and journeying across the island and to destinations beyond Rote. This is a world of many possible paths. The possibility of many paths is the epitome of life, in contrast to the one-way journey into death.
References


