
Introduction

The short narrative *Lakimola Bulan Ma Kaibake Ledo* tells of the origin of a variety of millet. Composed in formulaic canonical parallelism, it provides an illustration of a Rotenese ‘origin chant’. Such chants recount the origins of a great variety of critical cultural items ranging from the tools for building a traditional house and the implements for weaving and dyeing to the key sources of the Rotenese livelihood. This composition comes from the domain of Termanu on the island of Rote. It is remarkable for its brevity and for the fact that it provides an account of the origin of a specific kind of millet. This account, though linked to the larger encompassing narrative of the children of the Sun and Moon, offers a separate origin for millet to that of a long narrative that accounts for the origin and spread of rice and millet on the island.

Narratives of the Sun and Moon

In Rotenese ritual language, the complementary pair *Ledo//Bulan* (‘Sun’//‘Moon’) represents the heavenly powers. Although no longer recognised as a unified whole, the overwhelming majority of Rotenese origin narratives appear to form part of a single interconnected narrative—a kind of epic contest—in which the Sun and Moon and their heavenly descendants encounter, dispute and intermarry with the rival powers who rule over the sea (*Liun//Sain*) and are represented as Shark and Crocodile. The Earth is the meeting place for these encounters and it is from them that the Rotenese trace the origins of their cultural goods and institutions.

The principal character in this narrative on the origin of millet is Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo. This dual name identifies these personages as children of the Sun and Moon and links their actions to the larger narrative. The narrative hints at a ruptured relationship and recounts the rejection by the Sun and Moon of a request for seed. This, in turn, prompts the actions of Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo.

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1 This paper was initially written in English, but it was published in German in a festschrift in honour of Karl-Heinz Kohl (Fox 2008:401–9).
In the overarching narrative of the Sun and Moon, rice and millet derive from the sea. The opening lines of the various versions of this narrative, which I have recorded, are as cryptic as the key passages in the Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo narrative. An altercation in the sea drives the two creatures Bole Sou//Asa Nao, identified as a tiny crab and shrimp, into a stone weir at a site at the eastern end of Rote known as Mai Oe//Tena Lai, where they are fished forth and become the seeds of rice and millet, thereafter referred to as Doli Mo//Lutu Mala. These seeds are then taken and planted in an ordered succession of fields around the island of Rote until they arrive back at Mai Oe//Tena Lai and return to the sea.

The Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo narrative bears no resemblance to the Doli Mo//Lutu Mala narrative. On the other hand, it does bear resemblance to another origin narrative associated, in Termanu, with another of the heavenly children of the Sun and Moon, Patola Bulan//Mandeti Ledo. This narrative is perhaps the single most important, ritually charged narrative in the Rotenese origin corpus. It recounts the first encounter of the son(s) of the Sun and Moon with the Lords of the Sea, the discovery of fire in the sea, the strategic marriage between Heaven and Sea intended to obtain this cooking fire and other cultural goods from the sea and then the construction of the Rotenese house. Embedded in this narrative is the allusion to the sacrifice of the crocodile to obtain a schematic pattern for the house. According to elders, origin narratives touch on actions of such cosmic portent that they can never be voiced but only hinted at.

The Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo narrative begins in a similar way to that of Patola Bulan//Mandeti Ledo. Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo descends to the Earth and begins to hunt with dogs whose names are specified. The hunt is for ‘pig//civet cat’. To this point and only to this point, the narratives are similar. The Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo composition then leaps to the preparation of a garden and a request for seeds from the Sun and Moon. When this request is refused, Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo cuts a little finger of the right hand and a little toe of the left foot to draw blood and then stomps through the cleared field, dripping blood that grows into blood-red millet.

**Lakimola Bulan Ma Kaibake Ledo**

**Lae:**

1. *Hida hatan ma data don na,*
2. *Touk Lakimola Bulan*
3. *Ma ta’ek Kaibake Ledo*
4. *Ala lona ue leme poin mai*
5. *Ma fefo fa leme lain mai*

**A. Amalo**

**They say:**

In a former period and a past time,  
The man Lakimola Bulan  
And the boy Kaibake Ledo  
They come down from the Heights  
And they swing down from Heaven

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2 See Fox (1975) for a version of this narrative.
6. De ala tena mai dae bafok
They land upon the Earth

7. Ma tuda mai batu poi
They fall to the ground

8. De ala mai mamanak esa
They arrive at a place

9. Nde be na, ala lona lo busan
called Poko Danon [in Korbaffo].

10. Ma tuda mai batu poi
And they come down with three dogs
telu

11. De esa nade Solu Ndán
One is named Solu Ndán

12. Esa nade Lau Masin
One is named Lau Masin

13. Ma esa nade Deta Dosó.
And one is named Deta Dosa.

14. De ala kati kofio busa
They whistle for their dogs

15. Ma fu tolesi asu
And they call for their hounds

16. De leu Nula Tati Bafi daen
And they go to the land of Nula Tati Bafi

17. Ma leu Seda Solo Mako oen.
And they go to the water of Seda Solo Mako.

18. De esá sopu bafi leme ndía
They hunt pig there

19. Ma fule kue leme ndía
And they pursue civet cat there

20. Boe ma ala tao osi leme ndía
Then they make a dry garden there

21. Ma ala tina leme ndía
And they make a dry field there

22. Boe ma leu loke bini no ngges
And they go to ask for seed and grain

23. Lai poin do lain
From the Heights and Heaven

24. Fo Bulan uman ma Ledó lon.
The Moon’s house and the Sun’s home

25. Te hu aman Bulan do Ledó ta fe fan
But their father, Sun or Moon, would give none

Because their children had separated themselves.

27. De hu ndía de ala lona leó
Therefore they descend to

28. Dae bafa batu poi a mai.
The Earth and the world.

29. De ala fali ma’is
When they return

30. Boe ma ha’i la felas sa ma dope a leon
They take up their machete and knife

31. De ala paun neu lima ku’u dao konan na
And they stab the little finger of their right hand

32. Ma paun neu ei ku’u dao kim na.
And they stab the little toe of their left foot

33. Boe ma ala lao feo
They walk around

34. Osi a no tina a dalen na leon.
Within the dry garden and the dry field

35. De dan na nesik be
Wherever their blood falls

36. Na ana moli te betek ma pela
It grows up as millet and maize

37. Fo loke lae bete pila lai doli
They call the red quick-maturing millet

38. Ma [pela] pila pa daki
And the red flesh and blood [maize]

39. Losa faik ia
To this day and

40. Ma nduku besak ia.
Until this present time.

41. Basan nde ndía so.
This is the end.
Compositional flaws: An internal critique

Rotenese ritual language is canonical in the sense that it is composed using recognised pairs: formal dyadic sets. Because of this semantic structure, it is possible to evaluate any composition as to how well it makes use of conventionally required pairs. Rotenese origin narratives are also canonical in another sense. They belong to a corpus of compositions that relate to each other. The compositions embody what Rotenese consider to be the most basic foundational knowledge they possess.

The oral poets of Rote are not simply performers: they are the custodians of fundamental knowledge. Hence there is often fierce debate among them over particular chant character names and about the sequences within particular compositions. Based on some of these criteria, it is also possible to assess the quality of this particular composition.

Clearly, this composition has links to the overarching origin narrative whose different episodes are encountered throughout the island. Although the poet who provided this narrative came from the domain of Termanu, his recitation refers to a particular field in the neighbouring domain of Korbaffo, identified as Poko Danon. It is therefore possible that because the narrative relates to the special local knowledge of another domain, the poet regarded his composition as one that could be told succinctly.

The dual chant character names Lakimola Bulan//Kaibake Ledo suggest this relationship to the overall narrative. These chant characters are children of the Sun and Moon. Elsewhere on Rote, however, the name Lakimola would more likely appear as Lakamola. Lakamola is the name of a distinctive outcrop in the domain of Bilba in east Rote associated with the origin of what the Rotenese refer to as the nine seeds (*pule sio*).

The names of their dogs cited in this composition would also likely be the subject of criticism. Three names are given, which is unusual since one would expect one pair or two pairs of names. The assumption would have to be that the name that should partner with Solu Nda has been omitted. The other dogs’ names, Lau Masin and Deta Dosa, are the same as, or similar to, the names of the dogs associated with the Lords of the Sea; hence, they would be unlikely as the hunting dogs of the sons of the Sun and Moon.

The pervasive dualism of ritual language often presents a problem of translation. Singular and plural, which are grammatically critical in English, for example, are ambiguous in ritual language. Whether a dual chant character name identifies one or two characters is indeterminate and largely irrelevant. Some gifted poets actually treat the singular and plural third-person pronouns as a
dyadic set, leaving the translation to alternate between a ‘he’ and a ‘they’. In this composition, however, the third-person plural forms are used consistently except in reference to the Sun and Moon where a third-person singular is used.

In terms of composition, lines 8, 9 and 10 as well as lines 25, 26, 27 and 29 plus lines 33 and 35 are not in strict parallelism. They advance the narrative but not through properly composed verses. This, too, is an internal deficiency that lessens the quality of the composition.

In short, this composition is flawed; it is revealing but frustratingly elusive. It was recorded in 1965 from a Rotenese chanter who, during a brief encounter, could have been interested principally in hearing his voice played back to him on what was, at the time, the first tape recorder on the island. At best, the composition is a tantalising fragment rather than a full account—a small piece in a large jigsaw puzzle that I am still struggling to assemble.

**Conclusion**

A substantial proportion of the population of eastern Indonesia, particularly in the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur, are committed Christians. In his notable ethnography *Der Tod der Reisjungfrau* (1998), Karl-Heinz Kohl has provided a well-structured investigation of a particular local community: that of the Belogili in the domain of Lewolema in eastern Flores. The people of Lewolema among whom Kohl did his fieldwork are Catholics, while the Rotenese are, for the most part, Protestants. Like the Rotenese, the people of Lewolema retain the knowledge of their origin narratives, but continue to reformulate the bases of this ancestral knowledge within a Christian conceptual framework.

Most Lewolema origin narratives are composed in strict canonical parallelism and Kohl provided translations of these narratives that are remarkable for their literal clarity. His work therefore has considerable value for the comparative study of traditions of parallelism in eastern Indonesia. The title of the volume, ‘The Death of the Rice Maiden’, refers to the charter narrative for the origin of dry rice: the ritual killing of the maiden Tonu Wujo by her youngest brother. The body of Tonu Wujo, sacrificed in a field prepared for interment, gives rise to the first crop of rice. Nearly one-third of Kohl’s ethnography is devoted to the careful translation of this text, which is combined with exegesis and linked to local ritual practice.³

In his conclusion, Kohl quotes at length the words of one of his key informants, Bene, who endeavoured to interpret for him the relationship between Catholicism

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³ Kohl’s work follows a tradition begun by Adolf Jensen, whose study *Hainwele*, published in 1939, initiated the study of this botanical theme among the Wemale of the Seram in eastern Indonesia.
and traditional beliefs. As a good Catholic, Bene explained that Christ offered Himself for the salvation of the souls of mankind while Tonu Wujo—the rice maiden—offered herself for humankind’s physical wellbeing. One sacrifice was intended for the care of the spirit, the other for the care of the body. Both sacrifices were necessary and thus complementary rather than contradictory.

Like the people of Lewolema, the Rotenese, as one of the oldest Christian populations in the region, have for some time been involved in interpreting the relationship between their traditional knowledge and Christianity. Recently, Lintje H. Pellu, a Rotenese student at The Australian National University, who has carried out fieldwork in the domain of Landu on Rote—one of the last remaining areas where millet is still a prominent crop—encountered a local interpretation of the origin of blood-red millet that echoes the interpretation of Kohl’s informant.

According to the account she was told, the first millet, referred to as white millet (*bete fulas*), came from God. It was given to Ibrahim, who, in turn, gave it to his wife, Masa Rai (Sara), and his daughter, Dati Lenu Tasi. They passed the seeds to Masi Mai in the sea from whence these seeds came to land at Tena Lai and Mae Oe—the place of origin of rice and millet acknowledged widely throughout Rote. When this white millet proved insufficient, a man, who is not identified in Landu, pierced his ankle and allowed his blood to soak the white millet, turning it into fast-growing blood-red millet. Christians of Landu see an analogy between this blood sacrifice that created the new millet—purifying the seeds and making them whole—and Christ’s sacrifice of His blood to purify humankind of its sins. On this basis, the various stages in the preparation of millet fields in Landu, each with their required traditional sacrifices, have a Christian equivalent with appropriate prayers that allow the continuation of ancestral procedures with new spiritual underpinnings (see Pellu 2008:189–93).

Karl-Heinz Kohl would certainly recognise this intellectual transformation since he has, in his own research in eastern Indonesia, documented a similar intellectual effort at reinterpreting traditional knowledge.