13. Admonitions of the ancestors: Giving voice to the deceased

Introduction

Rotenese mortuary chants are compositions whose intention is to invoke deep emotions, particularly when they are recited, at night, among a gathering of mourners. Here I wish to examine a particular chant of exceptional power and poignancy. My concern is with the ‘voice’ that emerges in this chant. In the chant, the recently deceased, represented as a particular ‘chant character’, is given voice. The deceased speaks to the living and offers admonition and instruction to his immediate family. The power of this performance derives from the fact that the chant gives voice to the deceased as part of his burial ceremonies.

This chant is one among various possible forms of Rotenese mortuary recitations. The question, however, that I wish to pose is whether its use of voice is unique or whether—as I suspect—such use of voice can be found in the rituals and poetry of other Austronesian-speaking populations. This chapter thus poses a comparative question and calls for other examples of this kind of singular use of voice.

Among the Iban, for example, the deceased is given voice to speak to the living. An excellent illustration of this use of voice can be found in Clifford Sather’s *Seeds of Play, Words of Power* (2001). In the ‘rite to sever the flower’ (*pelian beserara’ bunga*), a ritual in which the spirits of the dead take leave from the world of the living, the dead person speaks through a *manang* or shaman chanter and addresses members of the surviving family:

> Although I have died and gone to the other world,
> From there I will continue to watch over you,
> My precious child, in this world,

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1 This chapter was first published in 2003 as ‘Admonitions of the ancestors: giving voice to the deceased in Rotenese mortuary rituals’, in Peter J. M. Nas, Gerard Persoon and Rivke Jaffe (eds), *Framing Indonesian Realities: Essays in symbolic anthropology in honour of Reimar Schefold*, Leiden: KITLV Press, pp. 15–26. As appropriate, I originally began this study with a recognition of Reimar Schefold’s work: ‘The Austronesian-speaking world offers a rich field for ethnographic inquiry. Within this field, Reimar Schefold has distinguished himself as one of the great contemporary explorers. His meticulous study of the social and ritual activities of the Sakuddei of Siberut is a truly remarkable contribution to our understanding of the possibilities of Austronesian living. His entire corpus on the Sakuddei—but in particular his masterwork, *Lia: Das grosse Ritual auf den Mentawai-Inseln* (1988), with its accompanying photographs—is a work of subtle artistry linked to ethnographic acumen. In his most recent writing, Schefold has begun an exploration of the patterns of ritual blessing in a number of different Indonesian societies. In the spirit of this new exploration and in recognition of Reimar’s nuanced attention to individual ritual performance, I dedicate this particular exploration.’
To help you become rich and successful, so that your name is known far and wide. (Sather 2001:95)

Another example of this use of voice can be found in a remarkable poem, *Kasaksian Bapak Saijah*, by the Indonesian poet Rendra. By way of comparison in this chapter, once I have considered the Rotenese text in which the deceased speaks to the living, I would like to discuss Rendra’s use of the voice of the dead in his poem.

I begin with an examination of the Rotenese chant *Ndi Lonama ma Laki Elokaama*.

**The text: Ndi Lonama ma Laki Elokaama**

I recorded the text of *Ndi Lonama ma Laki Elokaama* from the eminent chanter (*manahelo*) Stefanus Amalo in 1965. At the time, Amalo had already reached a distinguished old age and was regarded as a poet at the height of his powers. He was a member of the royal line of Termanu and one of the few noble chanters in the domain. During the time of my first fieldwork in 1965–66, the two most respected chanters in Termanu were Stefanus Amalo and Stefanus Adulanu, the Head of the Earth, who was known as ‘Old Meno’ (Meno Tua). Old Meno was my principal instructor in ritual language and he assisted me with the transcription and initial translation of this text. To some extent, therefore, this text, as presented here, is a product of a joint collaboration of these two remarkable men.

Each mortuary chant in the Rotenese repertoire is identified by the name of a specific chant character. Each chant character’s life course is associated with a social category: noble, commoner, rich man or young man or woman who has died young or unmarried. There also exist a number of all-purpose ‘orphan and widow’ chants that can be adapted to fit most funeral situations. The selection of a specific mortuary chant is intended to fit the social status of the deceased and to provide a general representation of his or her life.

In the present text, Ndi Lonama and Laki Elokaama form the double name of a single chant character. Since the text is in strict canonical parallelism, all lines are paired and all personal names and placenames must therefore have a double form. *Ndi Lonama ma Laki Elokaama* is the chant appropriate for a rich man who dies with most of his wealth intact, leaving behind a family to continue his house.

Mortuary chants generally follow a standard format beginning with a stylised genealogical recitation. The chant then recounts the life of the chant character, focusing on the occasion of his or her death. After the death of the character, most chants soon come to an end.
The chant *Ndi Lonama ma Laki Elokama* is unusual in its overall structure: more than half of the chant consists of the admonition on the verge of the chant character’s death. It is at this point that Ndi Lonama//Laki Elokama begins to counsel his family, telling them what to do with his wealth but also describing his forthcoming journey to the afterworld.

The chant begins not with Ndi Lonama//Laki Elokama’s genealogy but with his marriage to the woman Lisu Lasu Lonak//Dela Musu Asuk. The chant briefly describes her marriage transfer as follows:

- *Soku Lisu Lasu Lonak* They lift Lisu Lasu Lonak
- *Ma lali Dela Musu Asuk.* And they transfer Dela Musu Asuk.
- *De ilete neu sao* She bridges the path to marry
- *Ma fifino neu tu.* And she joins the way to wed.
- *De ana tu Ndi Lonama* She weds Ndi Lonama
- *Ma sao Laki Elokama.* And she marries Laki Elokama.

The chant then describes the birth of Ndi Lonama//Laki Elokama’s children, first a boy, Solu Ndi//Luli Laki, who is metaphorically identified as ‘a cock’s tail’/‘a rooster’s plume’, and then a girl, Henu Ndi//Lilo Laki. The names of these children have subtle connotations. For the boy, Solu implies that he is a commoner rather than a noble; Luli that he is potentially a ‘stormy’ character. For the girl, Henu refers to valued *mutisalak* beads and Lilo to ‘gold’, suggesting that she is her parents’ treasure.

- *Boe ma ana bongi-na Solu Ndi* She gives birth to Solu Ndi
- *Ma ana lae-na Luli Laki* And she brings forth Luli Laki
- *Fo popi koak Solu-Ndi* A cock’s tail feathers, Solu Ndi
- *Ma lano manuk Luli Laki.* And a rooster’s plume, Luli Laki.
- *Boe te ana bei boe bongi* But she still continues to give birth
- *Ma bei boe lae.* And still continues to bring forth.
- *Lae-nala Henu Ndi.* She brings forth Henu Ndi.
- *De ke fetok;* She is a girl child;
- *Ma lae-nala Lilo Laki,* And she brings forth Lilo Laki,
- *De tai inak.* She is a woman child.

At this point, the chant proclaims:

- *De malole-la so* These things are good
- *Ma mandak-kala so.* And these things are proper.

Ndi Lonama//Laki Elokama’s particular regard for his daughter is emphasised in the chant when he tells his wife to have another girl child who will be a help
to the household. Instead of recounting the birth of another child, the chant proceeds immediately to create a portrait of the character Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama. His defining identification is his wealth of goats and water buffalo:

- **Te hu touk Ndi Lonama** (The man Ndi Lonama)
- **Ma ta’ek Laki Elokama** (And the boy Laki Elokama)
- **Tou ma-bote biik** (Is a man with flocks of goats)
- **Ma tae ma-tena kapak.** (And is a boy with herds of buffalo).

Some lines later, the extent of this wealth is emphasised:

- **Fo bote-la dai lena** (The flock is great)
- **Ma tena-la to lesi.** (And the herd is extensive).

Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama’s other defining characteristic is his generosity. The chant’s portrayal of this generosity is coded in a distinctive Rotenese poetic fashion, relying on the key metaphor of ‘orphan and widow’. The metaphor has a wide range of meanings. At its core, the metaphor of ‘orphan and widow’ implies a state of dependency. As such, whoever is dependent as ‘orphan and widow’ is defined in relation to a benefactor, who can be a ruler in relation to his subjects or a rich man in relation to those whom he supports. In this chant, Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama is portrayed as a rich man who supports a large number of dependants. The herd that he tends—the basis of his wealth—is itself likened to the flock of orphans and widows whom he supports. This equivalence is expressed in the following lines that metaphorically link his daily routine with his social obligations:

- **De basa fai-kala** (On all the days)
- **Ma nou ledo-kala** (And every sunrise)
- **Ana tada mamao bote** (He separates the flock in groups)
- **Ma ana lilo bobongo** (And forms the herd in circles)
- **Na neni te tada tenan** (Bringing his herd-separating spear)
- **Ma neni tafa lilo bote-na** (And bringing his flock-forming sword)
- **Fo te nade Kafe Lasi** (His spear named Kafe Lasi)
- **Ma tafa nade Seu Nula.** (And his sword named Seu Nula.)
- **Fo ana loe tafa neu be na** (For where he lowers his sword)
- **Bote hae neu ndia** (The flock stops there)
- **Ma te’e to neu be na** (And where he rests his spear)
- **Tena lu’u neu ndia,** (The herd lies down at that place,)
- **Fo tena ta neu lu’u** (But it is not the herd that lies down)
- **Ma bote ta neu hae** (And not the flock that stops)
- **Te ana-mak-kala hae** (But it is orphans who stop)
- **Ma falu-ina-la lu’u.** (And widows who lie down.

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2 See Fox (1988:165–9) for an extensive discussion of this metaphor.
Having thus succinctly defined Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama’s character, the chant proceeds to recount the sickness that strikes him.

Te hu faik esa manunin
Ma ledok dua mateben
Boe ma touk Ndi Lonama
Ma ta’ek Laki Elokama
Ana mela tei neu tein
Ma ana langu langa neu langan.
Boe te mela tein sanga hene
Ma langu langan sanga kae.

But one certain day
And on a second particular time [sun]
The man Ndi Lonama
And the boy Laki Elokama
He feels stomach cramps in his stomach
And he feels head dizziness in his head.
The stomach cramps begin to rise
And the head dizziness begins to mount.

At this point, he addresses his son, Solu Ndi/Luli Laki:

‘Au mela teing ta lui
Ma au langu langang to hai
De fai-a neu fai
Ma ledo-a neu ledo.
Te se au sapu nitu
Ma se au lalo mula…’

‘My stomach cramps do not subside
And my head dizziness does not heal
From day to day
And sun to sun.
So it is my spirit is about to die
And my ghost is about to perish…’

Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama then begins his admonition. When this chant is recited on the night of a funeral ceremony, it is the voice of the deceased instructing his family.

Te sadi mafa-ndendele
Ma sadi masa-nenedak
Mala mu tada tena
Do mala mu lilo bote
Na muni au te tatada tena-nga
Ma au tafa lililo bote-nga
Fo ela o te’e te neu be
Ma oe tafa neu be na,
Ela tena lu’u leu ndia
Ma bote hae leu na;
Fo tena ta leu lu’u
Ma bote ta leu hae
Te ela ana-mak leu luu
Ma falu-ina leu hae
Fo leo tetun esa boe
Ma leo teman esa boe.

But do remember
And do keep in mind
When you go to separate the herd
And you go to form the flock
Take my herd-separating spear
And my flock-forming sword
Go where you rest the spear
And where you lower the sword,
This lets the herd lay down
And the flock stop at that place;
It is not the herd that lies down
And not the flock that stops
But orphans who lie down
And widows who stop
As is right
And as is fitting.

The admonition to care for ‘orphans and widows’ is continued. Solu Ndi/Luli Laki is told that in guiding the herd back to its corral, he should not throw a
flock-herding stone or stick so as to strike any of those who depend on him, thus causing them to weep. Instead, Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama speaks to his son in the first person, advising him to rely on his herd dogs and to do as he did when he was alive:

\begin{align*}
Ma \ sadi \ mafa-ndendelek & \quad \text{And do remember} \\
Ma \ sadi \ masa-nenedak & \quad \text{And only do keep in mind} \\
Au \ teng \ nade \ Kafe \ Lasi & \quad \text{My spear’s name is Kafe Lasi} \\
Ma \ au \ tafang \ nade \ Seu \ Nula & \quad \text{And my sword’s name is Seu Nula} \\
Ma \ au \ busang \ nade \ Lepa \ Lae & \quad \text{And my dog’s name is Lepa Lae} \\
Ma \ asung \ nade \ Doi \ Soi; & \quad \text{And my hound’s name is Doi Soi;} \\
Fo \ au \ ala \ u \ tada \ tene & \quad \text{When I go to separate the herd} \\
Na \ au \ o \ Doi \ Soi & \quad \text{Then I go with Doi Soi} \\
Ma \ au \ ala \ u \ lilo \ bote & \quad \text{And when I go to form the flock} \\
Na \ au \ o \ Lepa \ Lae & \quad \text{Then I go with Lepa Lae} \\
Fo \ makuma \ na-hala \ lai \ dua & \quad \text{And if he barks twice} \\
Na \ au \ tati \ ai \ dua & \quad \text{Then I cut two sticks} \\
Ma \ na-dasi \ lai \ telu & \quad \text{And if he howls thrice} \\
Na \ au \ ndalu \ longik \ telu \ boe. & \quad \text{Then I trim three vines.}
\end{align*}

Some of the elusiveness of these lines depends on an understanding of Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama’s dog’s name, Doi Soi/Lepa Lae. Ritual names are particularly elusive because they cannot be directly translated. Often, however, they consist of words whose meaning in ordinary language is generally clear. In the context of ritual language, these words coalesce to imply a sense for these names. Thus, Doi/Lepa are verbs for ‘carrying’; lepa as a noun can also refer to ‘provisions’—that which is carried on a journey. The dyadic soi/lae, in this context, suggests ‘affection’, a willingness to clear things up, make things right. Thus the dog’s name signals a willingness to assist others and help in removing obstacles and encumbrances. Hence, when the dog barks, Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama acts accordingly and advises his son to do the same.

He then goes on to instruct his son in what his daughter should do:

\begin{align*}
Ma \ ma-fada \ ke \ fetok \ Henu \ Ndi & \quad \text{And say to the girl child Henu Ndi} \\
Te \ o \ dudi-no \ ma-lolem & \quad \text{Your good near-relative} \\
Ma \ ma-fada \ tai \ inak \ Lilo \ Laki & \quad \text{And say to the woman child Lilo Laki} \\
Te \ o \ tola-tunga \ ma-ndam & \quad \text{Your proper close-kin} \\
Fo \ ela \ leo \ be \ na & \quad \text{In this way that} \\
So’e \ sasau \ neka & \quad \text{She should scoop and scrape from the rice basket} \\
Na \ so’e \ sau \ no \ inan & \quad \text{Scoop and scrape with her mother} \\
Fo \ inak \ Lisu \ Lasu \ Lonak & \quad \text{Her mother, Lisu Lasu Lonak,}
\end{align*}
Ma kola ndundui tua
And draw and serve from the lontar-syrup jar

Na kola ndui no te’on
Draw and serve with her aunt

Fo te’on Dela Musu Asuk.
Her aunt, Dela Musu Asuk.

Fo ela neka lama kako bafa
Let the rice basket overflow at the mouth

Na dai ana-ma leo
To be enough for a clan of orphans

Ma bou lama lua fude
And the syrup jar run over with froth

Na ndule falu-inu ingu.
To be sufficient for a band of widows.

This passage is the most explicit in its urgings to support ‘orphans and widows’ from the wealth of the family. Having thus repeatedly instructed his family to provide for all of his dependants, Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama foreshadows his journey to the afterlife in a series of striking images. These images of being carried by perahu to the west, of seeking his ‘mother and aunt’ and of marriage with the Earth as spouse follow one another in succession, ending with the refrain that this is the fate of all who die.

Te au touk Ndi Lonama
For I am the man Ndi Lonama

Ma au ta’ek Laki Elokama
And I am the boy Laki Elokama

Na au tonang sanga sosokun
My boat is about to lift

Ma au balung sanga sasa’en
And my perahu is about to rise

Fo au ala a tunga inang
For I am going to search for my mother

Ma ala u afi te’ong
And I am going to seek my aunt

Nai muli lolo
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

Ma leo Ana Iko u.
And I go to Ana at the tail.

De se au tonang ta diku-dua
My boat will not turn back

Ma au balung ta lolo-fali,
And my perahu will not return,

Te dae sa’on doko-doe
The earth demands a spouse

Ma batu tun tai-boni.
And the rocks require a mate.

De se mana-sapuk mesan-mesan
Those who die, this includes everyone

Mana-lalek basa-basan.
Those who perish, this includes all.

The chant continues in the first person, describing this passage to the underworld:

De neuk-o fai a neu fai
As day follows day

Ma ledo a neu ledo.
And sun follows sun

Te au dilu Ana Iko len
I turn down to the river of Ana Iko

Ma au loe Dela Muli olin.
I descend to the estuary of Dela Muli.

Nde be na iu sio dai dalek
There are nine sharks down below

Ma foe falu lai dalek.
And eight crocodiles down below.

De ala silu dope lai dalek
They bare their knife teeth down below
Ma ala dali noli lai dalek. And they sharpen their fangs down below.
De neuk-o se au balung to diku-dua Now my boat will not turn back
Ma au tonang ta lolo-fali. And my perahu will not return.

The chant concludes with a final admonition to care for ‘orphans and widows’, this time invoking a botanic metaphor of the tree that offers shelter and protection. In a special mortuary ritual for noted individuals in Rotenese society, a large tree is selected and ringed with smooth river stones to form a wide, rounded platform defined by the shade of the tree’s branches. This monument of remembrance is known as a tutus and the ceremony to celebrate the establishment of a tutus is possibly the single largest ritual celebration performed by the Rotenese. This passage appears to allude to this practice but is remarkable in that Ndi Lonama//Laki Elokama’s instruction is first to plant and then care for the tree (Tui//Bau), allowing its roots to grow into water to provide a sanctuary for shrimp and crabs, who are taken to represent ‘orphans and widows’.

Te sadi mafa-ndendelek But do remember
Ma sadi masa-nenedak And do keep in mind
Heo Ingu-Fao baun The Bau-tree at Heo Ingu-Fao
Ma Dolo Sala-Poi tuin na And the Tui-tree at Dolo Sala-Poi
Bau naka-boboik A Bau-tree to care for
Ma tui nasa-mamaok. And a Tui-tree to watch over.
De tati mala bau ndanan Cut and take a branch of the Bau-tree
Ma aso mala tui ba’en Slice and take a limb from the Tui-tree
Fo tane neu dano Hela To plant at the lake Hela
Ma sele neu le Kosi And to sow at the river Kosi
Fo ela okan-na lalae That its roots may creep forth
Ma samun-na ndondolo And its tendrils may twine
Fo ela poek-kala leu tain For shrimp to cling to
Ma nik-kala leu feon, And crabs to circle round,
Fo poek ta leu tain For it is not for shrimp to cling to
Te ana-mak leu tain But for orphans to cling to
Ma nik ta leu feon And not for crabs to circle round
Te falu-ina leu feon. But for widows to circle round.

The use of voice in this chant—the singular ‘I’ who admonishes—is a literary device that is used to powerful effect because the ‘I’ in this case is the deceased and his words, after his death and just before his burial, thus take on immediate and poignant significance.
The comparative question

To initiate the comparison that I have called for in this chapter, I would like to consider briefly one striking instance of a similar use of voice in the poem *Kasaksian Bapak Saijah* by the poet Rendra, which he has included in the volume entitled *Orang Orang Rangkas Bitung* (1993). *Kasaksian Bapak Saijah* is a poem of 67 lines, from which I have selected a few illustrative stanzas. The poem was composed in Depok in 1991 and is ostensibly a poem of protest set in the colonial period. Clearly, however, at the time of its writing during the New Order period in Indonesia, it was intended to be interpreted with wider implications. Admonition, in the Rotenese case, becomes, in Rendra’s poem, testimony (*kesaksian*)—a statement of profound protest. Although there is no formal ritual context for its recitation, its performance, as I have heard Rendra give it, is highly charged and, in this sense, fully ritualised. As a comparative example drawn from the Austronesian-speaking world, it is thus well worth noting.

I have selected and translated five stanzas taken from different parts of the poem. These stanzas include the beginning and the end of the poem plus several illustrative sections that provide a good indication of Rendra’s use of the voice of the dead—in this case, a poor, murdered peasant.

*Ketika mereka bacok leherku*  
dan parang menghunjam ke tubuhku  
berulang kali,  
 kemudian mereka rampas kerbauku,  
aku agak heran  
bahwa tubuhku mengucurkan darah.  
Sebetulnya sebelum mereka bunuh  
sudah lama aku mati...  

When they slashed my neck  
and the machete pierced my body  
repeatedly,  
and as they sold my water buffalo,  
I was somewhat surprised  
that my body gushed blood.

*Sekarang setelah mati*  
baru aku menyadari  
bahwa ketakutan membantu penindasan,  
dan sikap tidak berdaya  
menyuburkan ketidakadilan...  

Now that I am dead,  
I have become aware  
that fear serves oppression,  
and feelings of hopelessness  
bury injustice...

*Baru sekarang setelah mati*  
aku sadar ingin bicara  
memberikan kesaksian.  

Only now that I am dead  
I am aware of the desire to speak  
and give testimony.

*O, gunung dan lembah tanah Jawa!*  

O you mountains and valleys of Java!
The effect of these lines—with their use of a singular ‘I’ in the defiance of death and injustice—is indeed rhetorically powerful. It is a superlative use of a literary device. The audience to whom it is addressed, however, is aware that Bapak Saijah is a fictional creation, the representative of an oppressed class of peasants.

In contrast, in the Iban case (Sather 2001:92–7), the voice rendered by the manang in his ritual can be that of a particular dead individual who addresses his immediate family. Instead of defiance, however, there is an element of deep sadness on the part of the deceased:

How reluctant I am to be severed by Nyara...

For I still wish to seek riches in this world.

The power of this voice is concentrated by the capacity of the manang to access the spirit world and thus speak the words of the dead.

In fact, however, the Iban ritual of ‘severing the flower’ involves a complex dialogue, which is reflected in the different voices in the chant. The dead can speak through the manang but the manang may speak on behalf of various other spirits whom he impersonates; or he may speak on his own behalf as performer of the ritual, or as the guide and conductor of the spirits of the dead on their journey by boat to Sebayan, the land of the dead. The dead can also speak to the manang and the manang can reply on behalf of the living to answer the words of the dead. Indeed, there is even a giving of gifts between the living and the dead.

The Rotenese case is different again. Ndi Lonama/Laki Elokama is the name of a chant character in a recognised recitation that can be used for any number of wealthy individuals. In this sense, it is a literary vehicle. On the other hand, when this chant is performed, it is performed for a particular individual at his funeral and is usually embellished with additional lines that allude to
this individual. The chanter (manahelo) who leads the chant, however, is not credited with powers of accessing the spirit world but the deceased’s spirit is believed to be present. The power of the chant is in the beauty of its language, in the insistence of the long monologue and in the immediacy of its message directed explicitly to the bereaved family.

**Concluding remarks**

Reimar Schefold has called for the comparative study of blessings. In a recent article (2001), he compared the modalities of blessings in a variety of societies from the Vazimba of Madagascar and the Sakuddei of Siberut to the Ata Tana Ai of Flores and the Laboya of Sumba, linking these modalities with the concept of precedence and the power of the ancestors. This contribution, intended as a complement to Schefold’s comparative explorations, is a call for more explicit attention to be paid to the ‘voices’ of the ancestors in their communication with the living.