16. Adam and Eve on the island of Rote

The Rotenese are a Christian people. In their oral histories, they assert that they sought and obtained the Christian religion before there were Dutch missionaries to preach it. They are therefore confident in their tacit claim to be the oldest and foremost Protestant Christians of the Timor area. This early establishment of Christianity, which can be traced in the archival records of the Dutch East India Company beginning in the eighteenth century, has given the Rotenese the grace of time to assimilate Biblical knowledge with their own culture, creating in the process a distinctive local tradition. In the past 250 years, this local Christian tradition has developed deep roots on the island.

A feature of this tradition is its aristocratic origins. The formal establishment of Christianity began with the conversion of the ruling families of several small domains in southern central Rote (Fox 1977:101–12), and the new religion was taught via a school system that was originally sponsored and supported by the rulers of these domains. Because the schools taught Malay and, in particular, the Malay Bible, Christianity became intimately and inextricably associated with education and literacy in Malay. While Malay came to be the vehicle of Christianity, the Rotenese language, in its various forms, continued to provide for the oral preservation of older indigenous traditions.

The progress of Christianity was gradual. It spread generally from nobles to commoners in most domains, yet in several there were rulers who personally rejected the new religion and refused conversion, even though members of their own families and fellow clansmen adopted Christianity. This chequered combination of acceptance and rejection persisted throughout the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century. After independence, however, as a result of a mass literacy campaign, an insistence on compulsory primary education for all children, apprehension engendered by the events of the 1965 communist coup and the recent introduction of a variety of competing forms of Christianity—Catholic, Pentecostal and Adventist—the conversion of Christianity was now complete. The process of accommodating Christianity and traditional wisdom, however, continues in a complexity of oral and written guises. The following is a brief vignette that attempts to describe aspects of this process.

---

1 This chapter is a revised version of a paper originally presented at a conference on Transmission in Oral and Written Traditions held at the Humanities Research Centre of The Australian National University, 24–28 August 1981. The principal research on which this chapter is based was conducted in Indonesia in 1965–66 and 1972–73 under the auspices of various US Public Health Service grants (MH-23, 148; MH-10, 161 and MH-20, 659). Continuing research since 1975 has been supported by The Australian National University.
Introduction to the recitation

On my return to the island of Rote in 1972, the oral poet Peu Malesi promised to recite for me a chant that I had never heard before. This chant, he explained, recounted the origin of death and contained knowledge of the past that was rarely revealed. The promise was made in the course of a long evening’s discussion of a number of narrative texts, some of which I had gathered during my previous stay on Rote in 1965–66. The clan lord, Mias Kiuk, with whom I was living, had specifically asked that I read to him the texts of various tales relating to his clan, Ingu-Beuk, which I had originally gathered from the former Head of the Earth, Stefanus Adulanu. This man, ‘Old Meno’ or simply ‘Meno’, as he was generally called, had died in the interval between my visits. Already in 1965, however, because of his ritual position, his age and his personal knowledge, Meno was regarded as the most knowledgeable elder in the domain of Termanu, and after his death his reputation continued to grow. My reading of Meno’s texts was an occasion of special importance and Malesi—Meno’s junior in age and status—had come expressly to hear the texts and to judge them. Most of the evening focused on a discussion of ‘historical narratives’ (*tutui-teteëk*), which, in the cultural traditions of Rote, is an oral genre distinct in form and subject matter from the formulaic ritual chants (*bini*) that preserve knowledge of primal origins (Fox 1979, 1980). (In the narratives, however, occasional lines and phrases from the chants occur.) At one point during the evening, I took the opportunity of Malesi’s presence to ask the assembled elders about the meaning of a cryptic paired phrase in a narrative I had recorded from Malesi. The narrative in question concerned the coming of the first royal ancestors to Termanu and therefore, in the Rotenese time perspective, related to a period 16 generations in the past when the history of the domain began to unfold. The lines, in formal parallelism, were simply:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ala ta fua beu} & \quad \text{They did not burden the beu-tree} \\
\text{Ma ala ta ndae ka} & \quad \text{And they did not drape the ka-tree}
\end{align*}
\]

As I expected from past experience, Malesi said little or nothing, since his invariable approach to questions of exegesis was to recite other lines in the poetry itself. On the other hand, Kiuk, himself no poet, but a superb, patient and knowledgeable commentator on the intricacies of ritual speech, was able to explain these lines as a reference to the former practice of tree burial, which preceded the present custom of earthen burial. Prompted by these lines and, I suspect, by the desire to be seen as Meno’s successor, Malesi offered to recite the chant of the origin of death. In three days, he said dramatically, he would return and recite this chant. Kiuk accepted his offer on my behalf and agreed to make the arrangements for the gathering. Word of the occasion spread in the Ufa
Len area and, on the agreed night, quite a number of people assembled to hear Malesi, who, having been given a good meal and sufficient palm gin to induce a ‘flow of words’, recited the following chant:

**Teke Telu ma Koa Hulu: Text and translation**

1. *Hida dodo bei leo fan*  
   Once long ago

2. *Sapu nitu bei ta*  
   There was no spirit death

3. *Datu bei leo don*  
   Once in a bygone time

4. *Lalo mula bei ta.*  
   There was no ghostly demise

5. *Poin bei tua beuk*  
   Heaven still burdened the beu-tree

   The Heights still draped the ka-tree.

7. *Ma Lesik Lain Lelebe*  
   The Lord of the Exalted Heights

8. *Ma Manek Ata Malua*  
   And Ruler of the Heavens Above

9. *Nafada Koa Hulu*  
   Told Koa Hulu

10. *Ma nafada Teke Telu*  
    And told Teke Telu

11. *Nafada ita bain*  
    Told our male ancestor

12. *Ma nafada ita bein*  
    And told our female ancestor

13. *Nanea lutu kiu*  
    To guard the surrounding stone wall

14. *Ma lutu kiu fani oe*  
    The wall surrounding the honey tree

15. *Ma nanea pa’a feo*  
    And to guard the encircling fence

16. *De pa’a fua tua nasu.*  
    The fence encircling the syrup tree.

17. *Siluk ka soi dulu*  
    Sunrise opened the east

18. *Do huak mai langa.*  
    Dawn arrived at the head.

19. *Inak Koa Hulu*  
    The woman Koa Hulu

20. *Neu fetu lae Menge Batu*  
    Went and stepped on Rock Snake

21. *Ma hange lae Tuna Buta.*  
    And trod on Eel Serpent.

22. *Tuna Buta natane*  
    Eel Serpent asked

23. *Ma Menge Batu natane:*  
    And Rock Snake asked:

24. ‘*Singo-na nai be*’  
    ‘Where is the error

25. *Ma salan nai bei*  
    Where is the wrong

26. *De ta ketu do tua nasu*  
    To pluck a leaf of the syrup tree

27. *Ma seu boa fani oen?’*  
    And to pick a fruit of the honey tree?’

28. *Boe ma inak leo Koa Hulu*  
    So the woman Koa Hulu

29. *Lole halana*  
    Raised her voice

30. *Na selu dasin na neu:*  
    And elevated her speech, saying:

31. ‘*Lesik leo poin*’  
    ‘The Lord of Heaven

32. *Ma Manek leo lain*  
    And the Ruler in the Heights

33. *Ma ana henge ne*  
    He bound us

34. *Ma ana bala taa, nae:*  
    And tied us, saying:

35. ‘*Boso ketu do fani oen*’  
    ‘Do not pluck the leaf of the honey tree

36. *Ma seu boa tua nasu.*  
    And do not pick the fruit of the syrup tree.

37. *Tee o seu boa tua nasu*  
    If you pick the fruit of the syrup tree
38. Do o ketu do fani oen
Or if you pluck the leaf of the honey tree
39. Makaheduk nai ndia
There is sourness there
40. De sapu nitu nai ndia
A spirit death lies there.
41. Makes nai ndia.
There is bitterness there.
42. De lalo mula nai ndia.’
A ghostly demise lies there.’
43. Boe ma Menge Batu kokolak
So Rock Snake spoke
44. Ma Tuna Buta dede’ak, nae:
And the Eel Serpent conversed, saying:
45. ‘Seu boak tua nasu na
‘Pick the fruit of the syrup tree
46. Mandak nai ndia
For that is proper
47. Ma ketu do fani oe na
And pluck the leaf of the honey tree
48. Malole nai ndia.’
For that is good.’
49. Boe ma inak leo Koa Hulu
So the woman like Koa Hulu
50. Seu boak tua nasu
Picked the fruit of the syrup tree
51. Ketu do fani eo
Plucked the leaf of the honey tree
52. De neni fe Teke Telu.
She took and gave it to Teke Telu.
53. De leu laa boa tua nasu
Then they ate the fruit of the syrup tree
54. Ma do fani oe.
And the leaf of the honey tree.
55. Boe ma Lesik Lain Lelebe
The Lord of the Exalted Heights
56. Manek Ata Malua
The Ruler of the Heavens Above
57. Tolamu sasali
Came rushing
58. Ma nalai lelena.
And came hurrying.
59. Lesik Lain Lelebe
The Lord of the Exalted Heights
60. Ma Manek Ata Malue
And the Ruler of the Heavens Above
61. Ma naggo Koa Hulu
Called Koa Hulu
62. Ma nalo Teke Telu.
And shouted to Teke Telu.
63. Teke Telu nahala
Teke Telu spoke
64. Ma Koa Hulu nahala ma nae:
And Koa Hulu spoke, saying:
65. ‘Ami die dongo nai ia
‘We wait right here
66. Ma nene fino nai ia.
And we stand right here.
67. Ami malelak ndolu ingu
We know the rules of the land
68. Ma malelak lela leo.’
We know the wisdom of the clan.’
69. Boe ma inak Koa Hulu
So the woman Koa Hulu
70. Nahala nasosi nae:
Spoke and replied, saying:
71. ‘Au fetu lae Menge Batu
‘I stepped on Rock Snake
72. Ma hange lae Tuna Buta,
And I trod on Eel Serpent,
73. Tuna manatunga salak
The eel who misleads
74. Ma Menge manasanga singok.
The snake who misdirects.
75. De au seu boa tuna nasu
Then I picked the fruit of the syrup tree
76. Ma au ketu do fani oe.’
And I plucked the leaf of the honey tree.’
77. Boe ma nae:
So he said:
78. ‘Kalau leo ndiak sona
‘If this is so that
You picked the fruit of the syrup tree
And you plucked the leaf of the honey tree
Then I bind you
And I tie you
To descend in the earth’s grave
And to go down in a lontar coffin.’
On that day
And at that time
The man like Teke Telu
And the woman like Koa Hulu
He died instantly
And she perished suddenly.
So they felled the coffin head
And they cut the casket top
And they made them into a lontar coffin
And they made them into an earthen hole.
The baskets for digging the earth
They originated then.
And the axes for cutting the lontar
They appeared then.
Coconut shells for scooping the earth
They originated then.
And the iron sticks for digging the earth
They originated then.
So the man Teke Telu,
He died
And the woman Koa Hulu,
She perished.
Thus the baskets for scooping the earth
They originated
And the axes for cutting the lontar
They appeared.
To this very day
And to this very time.
So it is that all men walk in their footsteps
And all men tread their path
As on this day
And at this time.
Reaction to the recitation

When Malesi had finished his recitation, the reaction of those present was unanimous. Without exception, the presentation was accepted approvingly as precisely what it had been declared to be: the revelation of a crucial portion of indigenous esoteric wisdom. Everyone seemed to appreciate the chant for its beauty and for its unusualness. The fact that no-one could remember having heard it before seemed only to confirm the rarity of the revelation. Since I had tape-recorded it, I was asked to replay my tape that night and on numerous subsequent occasions.

The recitation began to gain some local notoriety and eventually the poet Seu Ba’i, Malesi’s fellow clansman and rival, came from Namo Dale to Mias Kiuk’s house especially to hear the recording. His reaction to the text was quite different from that of others who heard the chant, for he immediately rejected it as false. His grounds, however, were thoroughly traditional: the almost predictable reaction of an accomplished chanter. ’Teke Telu’ and ’Koa Hulu’ were not proper chant names and the text therefore belonged to none of Rote’s established ritual canons. Only one person—a schoolteacher—from among all those to whom I played the tape recognised the chant as a reworking in oral tradition of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve.

The text and its relation to the Rotenese canon

Since 1965, I have been systematically studying the way in which oral poetry is produced on the island of Rote. This has meant recording as large a corpus of texts as possible, but, even more importantly, gathering numerous versions of the ‘same’ chant from different poets as well as, on subsequent return visits, the ‘same’ chant as told by the same poet. From this research, it is clear that the chief feature of all Rotenese poetry is a thoroughgoing parallelism dependent on a rigorous pairing of semantic elements. Knowledge of these permissible semantic pairs or dyadic sets is the requisite of proper poetic composition. An accomplished poet must know the canons of his tradition. Specific chants within this canon are linked to and identified with a body of chant names, each of which is itself a compound pair. The exploits or exemplary life features of these named characters and their interrelations are the subjects of the chants.

Broadly speaking, these chants belong to two classes: one tells of the complex, complementary deeds of beings of the heavens and of the sea, whose interactions gave rise to the cultural objects and institutions of the Rotenese. These chants could once have formed part of a single epic, now told only in fragments, as the ritual prelude (or conclusion) to the use of the specific ‘objects’ in question (as, for example, the tools for building a home, the implements for weaving, the containers used for dyeing or the objects for bride-wealth exchange). The
other class of chants comprises a large and diverse collection of mortuary compositions that are elaborated to cover all possible categories of deceased people (nobles or commoners, rich or poor, widows or orphans, young or old). Following the format common to these chants, the deceased is compared with a specific chant character and then the stereotyped genealogy and life course of this character is told, often allowing the character to explain the reasons for his or her death and to admonish the living on what they must do. The recitation of these chants is confined to funerals.

Figure 16.1: The poet, Peu Malesi, who recounted Teke Telu ma Koa Hulu
Although these two broad canonical classes do not exhaust the possibilities of ritual languages, which the Rotenese insist can be used for any purpose, they do identify the major components of the traditional canon. It is from this vantage point that one can judge Malesi’s presentation of *Teke Telu ma Koa Hulu* and the reaction to it.

From the point of view of Rotenese tradition, several features of Malesi’s composition make it unusual, if not unique. The first is that it assumes neither the format of an origin chant nor that of a mortuary chant but instead attempts to merge these two formats. As an origin chant, it purports to explain the inception of earthen burial as opposed to tree burial, a change hinted at in other contexts; more specifically, it explains the origin of a group of objects associated with the preparation of the coffin and the grave: ‘baskets for digging the earth and axes for cutting the lontar’, ‘coconut shells for scooping the earth and iron sticks for digging the earth’. The format and phraseology of this section of the chant are precisely those of an origin chant and are made the more plausible by the existence of other origin chants that explain the origin of similar objects, such as axes and adzes. The key feature of the chant, however, is its explanation of the origin of death: ‘Thus all men walk in their footsteps and all men tread their path.’ This is achieved by providing an explanation of the cause of the death of the first ancestors, following the common format of a mortuary chant: ‘So the man Teke Telu, he died and the woman Koa Hulu, she perished... as on this day and at this time.’ The cogency of this explanation hinges on specific cultural associations. The poetic reference to ‘honey tree’ and ‘syrup tree’ is to the lontar or *Borassus* palm that provides the basis of the Rotenese economy. The tree (*tua*) is identified by the honey-sweet syrup that is produced from juice that is regularly extracted from its crown. The fact that most Rotenese are buried in coffins made from this same tree provides the critical link in the underlying cultural argument: the tree in the garden—the tree of life—becomes the tree of death. Tree burial gives way to earthen burial as the *beu*-tree and the *ka*-tree are replaced with felling the honey tree and the syrup tree. Only in dealing with the subject of death and by relying on specific cultural associations is it possible to combine the formats of origin and mortuary chant so felicitously.

Similarly—except for one structural flaw—the chant is rendered in technically perfect, indeed exquisite, parallelism, for Malesi is a master of poetic composition. The flaw, however, is the one that Seu Ba’i recognised in rejecting the chant and is directly related to its non-traditional derivation. Seu Ba’i objected not to the names Teke Telu and Koa Hulu, but to the possibility of such names. By the very rules of composition, the double names of chant characters must be either masculine or feminine; they cannot be hermaphroditic names of the sort that Malesi has created. Given the need to transform an Adam and Eve pair into a Rotenese equivalent, Malesi has had to decompose his chant character into separate parts. For example, since only the woman Koa Hulu
steps on the snake, line 19 has no parallel line to accompany it. Similarly, lines 28, 49, 52, 53 and 69 lack parallel lines and are therefore improperly composed. At one point, in fact, Koa Hulu gives ‘fruit and leaf’ to Teke Telu, which is perfectly intelligible but formally unacceptable according to the rules of the naming system in ritual speech.

Nonetheless, for the majority of Rotenese who heard Malesi’s chant, these formal flaws do not seem to have detracted from the power and beauty of the composition, nor were the chant’s partial parallels with Biblical events worthy of note or objection. This chant is, however, exceptional for the fact that it draws on Rote’s other tradition: a 250-year-old literary tradition based on the Malay Bible.

Two traditions of transmission

In 1679, one of Rote’s local rulers was taken to Kupang on Timor to study Malay at the behest of the Dutch East India Company. By 1729, the first of these rulers had converted to Christianity and, within a few years, had succeeded in establishing a Malay school in his domain. Three other local rulers followed this precedent and, by 1754, there were six Malay schools on the island. By 1765, these schools—staffed with Rotenese teachers—had become nearly self-sustaining and remained so through the first half of the nineteenth century, with occasional assistance from the Netherlands Missionary Society. The purpose of these schools from the beginning was to teach Malay, and their major text and resource was the Malay Bible. After 1857, Rotenese schools were given direct colonial government support, and their numbers increased rapidly. Rotenese government schools were then obliged to follow a standard curriculum. By 1871, there were no less than 34 local schools on the island. As Malay was the basis for Indonesian, the Rotenese made an effortless transition to the use of the national language in their schools.2

The Rotenese have therefore had long exposure to a written tradition and are, in fact, among the paramount exponents of its use in the Timor area. What is remarkable, however—and requires explanation—is the relative disjunction of Rotenese oral and written traditions, each with its distinct source of inspiration. This disjunction is itself reflected in a social etiquette that insists on separate linguistic genres and, until recently, showed a marked aversion to language mixing. The lack of a single standard form of spoken Rotenese and the reliance on a variety of dialects to convey local traditions have also contributed to a situation in which Malay alone is deemed appropriate for written communication and either dialect or ritual language for oral traditions. (When I arrived on Rote

---

2 For a fuller discussion of this linguistic situation and its history, see Fox (1974; 1977:61–195).
in 1965, there was as yet no significant effort to record oral traditions in a written form of Rotenese.) Furthermore, as longstanding Christians, most Rotenese do not see their traditions as being at variance with those of Christianity and indeed often see in their origin myths and chants evidence of a kind of ancestral perception of Biblical occurrences. Finally, from a social point of view, it is evident that a fully functional literacy was, in the past, confined largely to the upper strata of Rotenese society and began to affect the whole of society only after independence.

Despite the possession of a written tradition, it is an oral tradition that remains dominant on Rote. The Rotenese place great stress on speaking well and value verbal abilities above all others. Hence, in any social interaction, the written word is almost always transmuted into strikingly different verbal forms. This process is most evident, for example, in church services that are supposedly based on the written word.

In the past (as missionary letters reveal), Rote's popular preachers were themselves oral poets and they, it seems, were principally responsible for the development and elaboration of a 'new' theological vocabulary and a set of conventions in ritual language for rendering the Scriptures in an appropriate oral mode. The canonical parallelism in much of the Old Testament—its own comparative significance—seems to have encouraged this process of translation among the Rotenese.

Thus the borrowing of established dyadic sets and the common use of a botanic idiom carry sermons in ritual language well beyond the original written text. Christ, for example, is compared with ‘a banana with copper blossom and a sugar cane with golden sheath’ and His death and resurrection are metaphorically likened to the growth cycle of ‘yam and taro’. In this way, a text becomes the 'pretext' for a new form of speaking.

Comment and conclusion

This chapter has taken as its starting point the recitation of an unusual chant in the ritual language of the Rotenese and has attempted to indicate how a crucial Christian religious text has been transformed in the Rotenese oral tradition. I would argue that this forms part of a general process by which Christianity has been assimilated by the traditional culture. In this process, an oral mode of transmission has managed to predominate, despite the existence of an established tradition of writing. Ultimately, this predominance of the spoken word rests on the authority and ability of people and the value accorded to speaking.
One final point deserves noting. This study would not have been possible, in its present form, were it not for the existence of yet another form of transmission—namely, that of the tape-recording. In 1965, I brought the first tape recorder to the villages of Rote and its effect was dramatically evident among the poets of the island. My ‘voice catcher’ (penangkap suara), as it was immediately named, provided the means of recording spontaneously and permanently the spoken word of particular individuals. From the Rotenese point of view, this exceeded by far anything that could be achieved by writing. It represented the triumph of oral transmission.

Since my first visit to Rote in 1965, tape-recording has become a ubiquitous feature of everyday life. What this suggests is that oral cultures of this and other parts of the world now have a technological means for their own preservation, which oral cultures in past ages did not. On Rote, a new phase of oral presentation has begun and with it has come new modes of religious accommodation.