

Preface

Singing the Earth in the Mubi Valley

James F. Weiner

In this book are found the transcripts of every song I recorded and transcribed while I was engaged in anthropological fieldwork in Hegeso village, Mubi River Valley, Southern Highlands Province (Figure 1). I spent a total of 31 months between 1979 and 1995 in Hegeso. A complete account of the practice of composing, singing, and performing these songs in their total ethnographic context can be found in my book *The Empty Place: Poetry, Space and Being among the Foi of Papua New Guinea* (1991) and I will not here go into any detail concerning the musicological or poetic structure of the songs. All of the songs I discussed in that book are included in this complete catalogue.

Most of them are men's ceremonial songs, called *sorohabora*, and nearly all were recorded during two major pig-kill festivals held in 1985 and 1988 in Hegeso village. The women's sago melodies were gathered more continuously during my field work in Hegeso and Barutage villages between 1979 and 1988.

In recording these songs, I found that I had to take a totally different approach to that which I employed when recording and translating Foi myth (see Weiner 1988a). I found that people would recite a myth anywhere at any time, and they did not need an audience to do so. Most of the myth texts I collected were done in my own residence under ostensive interview conditions. That is, I rarely recorded them as they were spontaneously recited in the longhouse or in other communal settings.

With the song poetry, on the other hand, this was not possible. They could only be recorded as they were performed. Even the sago songs, which women sing to themselves while at work processing sago flour, could not be collected in a state divorced from the woman's bodily work of pounding and shredding sago pith, which forms a rhythmic percussive accompaniment to her singing. Likewise, the men's ceremonial *sorohabora* are meant to be sung in groups, even though each man has a distinctive song and voice within the total group performance.

In other words, while they may lack the analytical and theoretical terminology to concretise such a contrast, I think the Foi are well aware of the various degrees to which speech forms, and different specialised varieties of speech, can or cannot be detached from their communal performative context.

The three main forms of ceremonial song poetry are the women's sago songs (*obedobora*), the men's *sorohabora*, and the women's *sorohabora*. Women's sago songs are, in an important sense, work songs; they accompany the rhythmic work of sago shredding as a woman sits in front of a felled sago palm. Men too have their own work songs—I heard one man sing as he was hollowing out a new canoe—but they are not nearly as ubiquitous a part of men's work as they are of women's, because men engage in many fewer repetitive, rhythmic tasks of that sort.

As I described in *The Empty Place*, men turn the prosaic content of women's songs into their own songs, the *sorohabora*, which are performed the night following large-scale inter-community pig-kills, called *dawa* in Foi. While women sing by themselves, men sing in groups of paired men. Each pair of men sings a repertoire of between two and five songs in one evening, depending upon how many song groups there are. The pair of men is called the *soro ira*. About five or six pairs of men combine to form one *soro ga*. A large longhouse can accommodate up to twelve separate *soro ga*.

Besides the round-like, multiple-voiced structure of the men's performance, as opposed to the single voice of women's sago songs, the other major difference is that the men's version ends with what the Foi call the *dawa* or *dawabo*. This term is related to the verb *dawaye gi-*, 'to cut and give'. In this context, it refers to the end of the song, the last verse which 'cuts' the song off from the next one. The *dawabo* is the portion of the song where the names, both public and private, of the deceased are revealed, as well as the names and clan affiliations of his mother and father. Since the pig-kill and exchange ceremony, and the culminating, identifying portion of the *sorohabora* are called by the same term, *dawa*, we can take note of the importance of cutting or severing images in the most intensely public and ceremonial activities of Foi social life. Generalising, we can say that whenever the Foi perceive a flow—of pigs, pearl shells; of spatial movement over the land; the flow of words from the human voice—they see a potential for harnessing, cutting off, and redirecting that flow for human and social purposes. In my various interpretations of the Foi social world, I have made a case for the ubiquity of such imagery across a whole range of Foi social and expressive activities.

Women also told me that they have their own ceremonial version of these songs, though I never saw them performed under actual ceremonial conditions. If the men are copying the women's sago songs to make their own *sorohabora*, then it appears as if women are copying the men's copies of their original songs. Several of these songs, which were performed for me under non-ceremonial circumstances, are also included in this collection.

The subject of nearly all these songs is deceased men. The songs are memorial in intent; they are designed to commemorate the lives of men who are no longer living. Most commonly they do so by naming the places the deceased inhabited during his lifetime.

These places are chiefly those in that part of the Foi territory devoted exclusively to hunting. In Hegeso, this region was called *Ayamo*, and I am still unsure whether this is a generic term for 'hunting preserve' or a named part of the Hegeso territory where this activity takes place. The term appears to function as both for the Foi of Hegeso.

Men leave their traces in the forest by erecting houses and other shelters and building traps. These constitute the marks of human life in the segment of their territory where no one lives permanently and is largely seasonally visited. The traces in the land of men's presence disappear rapidly at *Ayamo* under such intermittent use. When a man dies, he is no longer able to renew the vivacity of these traces. They begin to be eroded and covered over by the encroaching forest. An abandoned house being given over to the forest is a poignant image of death in Foi.

In addition to the abandonment that Foi people feel when a close relative dies, they give expression to similar sentiments when their living relatives leave the area for long periods of time, a condition that, by 1995, was becoming more and more common as opportunities for mobility in Papua New Guinea were increasing for everyone. One woman thus sings of her eldest son, serving with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force in Manus Province.

However, as the texts below indicate, the songs are used to convey other messages. Reminiscent of the neighbouring Kewa (see LeRoy 1978), some of the songs convey politically competitive feelings between men of different villages; women also use the songs to complain about their mistreatment at the hands of men.

The most common prosaic property of these songs is to list the names of places in the local territory which the deceased inhabited during his lifetime. The lifespan of the individual man is thus rendered spatially as a sequence of occupied places, and these places constitute a track or trace through that territory. Theoretically, so I was told, a full longhouse of performers would recite the name of every deceased man of the longhouse and by implication the name of every place in the territory (or at least the hunting territory) inhabited by those men. The performance of the *sorohabora* thus can be seen as a poetic or narrative constitution or totalisation of the community of men as a whole, a series of lives rendered as a temporal sequence of inhabited and inhabitable places in

the productive imagination. But it effects this retotalisation out of a prior act of discursive disassembly—detotalising the territory into its constituent life tracks, which each constitute the lifespan of a single man.

What is the future of this most powerful expressive form in Foi? My last trip to Hegeso for my own research purposes was in December 1994–January 1995. For the first time since I began visiting the Foi, no *sorohabora* performances occurred during the Christmas holiday season in any of the Mubi Valley villages, even though this is ordinarily a time that is reserved for pig-kills and ceremony. Since that time I have visited Hegeso regularly, if briefly, in the course of conducting social mapping, landowner identification, and other related consultancy work for various companies which have comprised the Kutubu petroleum and LNG Joint Venture Partnership between 1999 and the present.

I do not wish to be too precipitous in forecasting that the practice of Foi song composition and performance is now on the wane. Still, string instruments, and the learning and singing of string band music were more popular among young men in 1995 than they were in 1988, and I suspect that there will be more occasions for more national, ‘generically’ Papua New Guinean ceremonies and festivities in the Foi region, now that there has been a sharp increase in the number of non-Foi living in the area. What this will mean for the composition, learning, practising, transmission, and performance of traditional Foi memorial songs remains to be seen. I welcome current students of anthropology, linguistics, verbal art, aesthetics, cultural heritage, and ethnomusicology to give an account of the future of the Foi memorial poetic song.

This text is taken from *Songs of the Empty Place: The Memorial Poetry of the Foi of the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea*, by James F. Weiner and Don Niles, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.