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Suti Saik ma Bina Liuk: A Composition from the Domain of Dengka

Frans Lau was the older of the two master poets from Dengka who joined the recording session in October 2008. He was well-educated, a former schoolteacher and a civil servant who had spent much of his life involved in local political affairs. Compared with most of the other poets, Frans Lau had experience beyond the island of Rote. He had a host of connections established through his involvement with the Golkar Party and had passed these connections on to his son, who was a local representative of the party at the national level. When he joined the group in 2008, he took on the role of supporting Simon Lesik rather than putting himself forward as a speaker. In fact, his recitation of *Suti Saik ma Bina Liuk* consisted of hardly any narrative but was rather a commentary on the cosmology of Dengka's traditions and Simon Lesik's performances. Some of the lines from this short recitation provide an idea of his presentation:

<i>Fai fè'a tetu-tetu</i>	The day is still ordered
<i>Ma ledo fè'a teme-teme</i>	The time still harmonious
<i>Na ala habate do kokoni:</i>	They remember and commemorate:
<i>Ina mana nggao natu</i>	The woman who holds a hundred
<i>Ma fetu mana ifa lifu ...</i>	And the girl who cradles a thousand ...
<i>Ala habate do kokoni:</i>	They remember and commemorate:
<i>Ina mana nggiti ate</i>	The woman who works the loom beams

<i>Do mana ndolo selu</i>	And who throws the shuttle
<i>Ina mana sole sio</i>	The woman who dances at the origin feast
<i>Do fetu mana foti limbe</i>	And the girl who spins at the <i>limbe</i> feast
<i>Ina mana lendo sai ala</i>	The woman who dances in the sea
<i>Ma ina Tau Tenggu Bulan</i>	And the woman Tau Tenggu Bulan
<i>Boema fetu Kudu Hedu Ledo</i>	And the girl Kudu Hedu Ledo
<i>Ina mana sole sio sai ala</i>	The woman who dances at the sea's origin
<i>Inak Suti Sai do fetok Bina Liu</i>	The woman Suti Sai and the girl Bina Liu
<i>Ina mana o'o natu</i>	The woman who lifts a hundred
<i>Do mana ifa lifu ...</i>	Or who cradles a thousand ...

While Simon Lesik's recitation links Suti Sai and Bina Liu to the creation and origin of textiles, particularly the patterns produced by the tying and dyeing of these cloths—a tradition that is widespread on Rote—Frans Lau's commentary seems to imply some association of these shells with the origins of rice and millet (as is the case in Thie). In his recitation, he twice refers to the 'woman who holds a hundred//who cradles a thousand'. As in Thie, this invocation of 'a hundred and a thousand' is a metaphoric reference to the flourishing of rice and millet. In another of his compositions, Frans Lau recounts the gathering of these seeds from the sea and the planting that enables them to grow:

<i>Mbulen loloso</i>	The buds creep forth
<i>Loloso lifu hadek</i>	Creep forth like a thousand rice plants
<i>Kalen fefe o</i>	The kernels spread round
<i>Fefeo natu betek.</i>	Spread round like a hundred millet stalks.

However, in that composition, he does not link Suti Sai and Bina Liu to these seeds.

Frans Lau, as an elder figure in his domain, may have been cryptic in his recitations, but he was someone who had reflected on Dengka's traditions and was concerned with their possible disappearance in his lifetime.



Figure 24: Frans Lau



Figure 25: Frans Lau conferring with Simon Lesik

To our recording session in 2008, Frans Lau brought with him a personal notebook—a simple school notebook—that contained 18 compositions in ritual language, many of them shortened versions of much longer chants. This notebook offered an Indonesian translation and a commentary for each of his selected poems. These poems he described, in Indonesian, as the ‘key’ (*nada*) to understanding Rotenese originality and to appreciating Rotenese relations with the Heavens (*Lain//Ata*), the Earth (*Dae Bafok//Batu Poik*) and the Ocean and the Sea (*Sain//Liun*). Frans Lau had given considerable thought to his collection and, appropriately, he entitled it *Sastra Rote* (‘Rotenese Literature’).

Occasionally, he would refer to this notebook before launching into one of his oral recitations, but, on inspection of his notebook, I could see that his recitations had only a tenuous connection to his written notes. Like other Rotenese poets, Frans Lau was a genuine oral poet. The flow of words—his natural fluency—took over in his recitations and this had little to do with the written word.

Frans Lau lent me a copy of *Sastra Rote* so that I could make a xerox copy of it and use it to try to understand Dengka dialect. In the months that followed our recording session, this notebook proved an enormous help.

I worked through his various compositions and gradually managed to understand some of the main features of Dengka ritual language. From Frans Lau's notebook, I was able to compile a word list of dyadic sets that are distinctive to Dengka dialect.

Among the poems in the collection, there was one (number 16) that was a kind of *Suti Saik ma Bina Liuk* chant. This composition had the engaging title 'Considering Death' (in Rotenese: *Ndanda Sapu Nitu*; in Indonesian: *Memikirkan Kematian*). Although the composition came to 63 lines, it was, in my judgement, a model of a Rotenese 'short poem' (*bini kekeuk*): a poem without narrative that consists of a succession of specific verbal images. The verbal images and short assertive statements that accompany them combine to convey an extended meaning. Such poems allude to other poems and demand knowledge of the wider poetic traditions. Often lines in these poems are in effect taken from other poems.

To begin to understand this poem, one must have an acquaintance with the *Suti Saik ma Bina Liuk* traditions—not necessarily those revealed in the origin chants but rather the use of the idea of Suti and Bina's search for shelter and protection in a threatening and transient world.

To help the understanding of this composition, I have arranged the poem in terms of specific stanzas, most of which are four to six lines in length. The succession of these stanzas creates the impact of the poem. Some of the images in the poem require explanation to be understood properly and this is what I provide in my exegesis after the poem. I have numbered the stanzas for reference and will consider each of them in turn.

***Considering Death: An Invocation of Suti Saik and Bina Liuk* Frans Lau**

I

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|----|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. | <i>Sunggu nala sain</i> | A storm strikes the sea |
| 2. | <i>Lulik nala liun</i> | A cyclone strikes the ocean |
| 3. | <i>Hu nitu hitu lele'an</i> | Caused by the seven grasping spirits |
| 4. | <i>Hu mula falu nonolen.</i> | Caused by the eight snatching ghosts. |

II

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|----|----------------------------------|---|
| 5. | <i>Nao saik lai bebelu aon</i> | <i>Nao</i> -pearl fish like to denigrate themselves |
| 6. | <i>Nggoi liuk sue babala aon</i> | <i>Nggoi</i> -pearl fish care to lower themselves |
| 7. | <i>Suti Saik si-si</i> | Suti Saik moans |
| 8. | <i>Bina Liuk hala-doi.</i> | Bina Liuk is in pain. |

III

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|-----|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 9. | <i>Le'a nendi hataboli dae bafok</i> | Grasping humans on earth |
| 10. | <i>Nole nendi andiana batu poi.</i> | Snatching people in the world. |

IV

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|-----|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 11. | <i>Sunggu nala Dae La'a</i> | A storm strikes the heartland |
| 12. | <i>Lulik nala Sela Sue</i> | A cyclone strikes the ancestral land |
| 13. | <i>Sapu nitu ala dadi</i> | The death of the spirit occurs |
| 14. | <i>Lalo mula ala moli.</i> | The demise of the ghost appears. |

V

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|-----|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 15. | <i>Leu nda-nda mengge batu</i> | They consider the rock snake |
| 16. | <i>Huna mengge batu olu-olu</i> | For the rock snake sheds its skin |
| 17. | <i>Leu do-do lama na'u</i> | They reflect on the grasshopper |
| 18. | <i>Huna lama nau selu lidan.</i> | For the grasshopper loses its wings. |
| 19. | <i>Te hu ...</i> | But yet ... |

VI

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|-----|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 20. | <i>Ndefak lama-kea lutu batu</i> | If you overturn the rock pile |
| 21. | <i>Mengge batu si-si</i> | The rock snake moans |
| 22. | <i>Mengge batu o sapu boe.</i> | The rock snake dies too. |
| 23. | <i>Dede lasapo na'u</i> | Burn away the grass |
| 24. | <i>Lama nau hala-doi</i> | The grasshopper is in pain |
| 25. | <i>Lama nau o lalo boe.</i> | The grasshopper dies too. |

VII

26. *Hataboli dae bafok lai
bebelu aon* Humans on earth like to diminish
themselves
27. *Andiana batu poi sue
babala aon.* People in the world care to lower
themselves.
28. *Sama leo nao saik* They are like the *nao*-pearl fish
29. *Deta leo nggoi liuk.* Similar to the *nggoi*-pearl fish.

VIII

30. *Suti Saik selu dasin* Suti Saik raises her voice
31. *Bina Liuk lole halan:* Bina Liuk lifts her words:
32. *Hai bambi mi be* Where can we hide
33. *Hai sulu mi be?* Where can we shelter?

IX

34. *Hai bambi mi to batu* We can hide with the border stone
35. *Tena kapa la bahangge* Herds of buffalo trample there
36. *Hai sulu mi lane ai* We can shelter with the boundary tree
37. *Bote bi'i la fefetu.* Flocks of goats tread there.

X

38. *Bambi mi sa'o ai* Hide with the tree's shade
39. *Sa'o ai mana lalalik* The tree's shade that moves
40. *Sulu mi mafo tua* Shelter with the lontar's shadow
41. *Mafo tua mana e'èok.* The lontar's shadow that shifts.

XI

42. *Ledo a bene dulu* The sun climbs in the east
43. *Sa'o ai la muli leu* The tree's shadow moves west
44. *Ledo a loe muli* The sun descends in the west
45. *Mafo tua la dulu neu.* The lontar's shade moves east.

XII

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|-----|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 46. | <i>Tetun ta nai dae bafok</i> | Order is not of the earth |
| 47. | <i>Teman ta nia batu poik</i> | Integrity is not of the world |
| 48. | <i>Mana sapuk mesa-mesan</i> | Those who die are everyone |
| 49. | <i>Mana lalok mesa-mesan.</i> | Those who perish are everyone. |

XIII

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|-----|------------------------------|---|
| 50. | <i>Hundi ma-sapo pedak o</i> | The banana is fertile with stems |
| 51. | <i>Hundi sapu no nggin</i> | The banana dies with its fruit |
| 52. | <i>Tule masa-lodo udok o</i> | The <i>gewang</i> rises straight upwards |
| 53. | <i>Tule lalo no buan.</i> | The <i>gewang</i> perishes with its stalks. |

XIV

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|-----|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 54. | <i>Bambi mi namo tua</i> | Hide in a great harbour |
| 55. | <i>Sulu mi teno dae.</i> | Shelter in a hole in the earth. |

XV

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|-----|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 56. | <i>Sadi masa-neda</i> | Remember, just remember |
| 57. | <i>Sadi mafa-ndele</i> | Keep in mind, just keep in mind |
| 58. | <i>Lutu batu neu langgan</i> | Pile rocks at the head |
| 59. | <i>Fua dae neu ein.</i> | Raise earth at the foot. |

XVI

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|-----|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 60. | <i>Manu ai kakali</i> | Chickens scratch there |
| 61. | <i>Bafi ai totofi.</i> | Pigs root there. |
| 62. | <i>Dadi neu batu nenggetuk</i> | It becomes a stone to rest upon |
| 63. | <i>Dadi neu ai nese laik.</i> | It becomes wood to lean upon. |

The first stanza sets the tone of the poem with its announcement of the storm and cyclone (*lulik//sanggu*). The storm is a cosmological event and in the next two lines seems to be attributed to threatening spirits (*nitul//mula*).

The second stanza, ‘the sea creatures stanza’, offers the first reference to the distress and suffering of Suti and Bina. At the same time, however, it introduces a reference to two varieties of pearl fish without making clear the connection between these two references.

The pearl fish is a tiny, sinuous, translucent fish of the *Carapidae* family. The Rotenese describe the pearl fish as like a miniature eel. The larvae of the pearl fish are free-living but when they reach adulthood, they seek out habitats within various invertebrates. In the coastal waters of Rote, pearl fish find their habitat in sea cucumbers, entering via the creature’s anus.

The pearl fish’s actions have been carefully documented on many natural history sites.¹

This symbiotic search for shelter is carefully noted and distinguished by the Rotenese. The *nao-saik* is the pearl fish that inhabits sea cucumber nearer the shore while the *nggoi-liuk* harbours in larger sea cucumber further from the shore. Together these pearl fish are seen as a complementary pair and cited as a dyadic set (*nao/nggoi*). However, the supposed security of their shelter in the anus of the sea cucumber is illusory because sea cucumbers (with their content) are regularly harvested from the seabed.

It is immensely difficult to find just the right translation for the reflexive verbal pair *bebelu//babala*, which is applied to the pearl fish in this context; both verbs describe a ‘lowering, downward motion, a sinking action’ that describes the pearl fish’s behaviour but also, metaphorically, signals a general deprecation of self. By implication, it may imply a self-deception as well.

Stanza III consists of two lines. Although these lines have no specific subject, the use of the verbs *le’al//nole*, as in the first stanza, indicates that the spirits (*nitul//mula*) are the ones who are responsible for ‘snatching’ and ‘grasping’ the lives of men on earth.

Stanza IV alludes to Stanza I and makes explicit the implications of Stanza III. A storm strikes the Rotenese homeland, whose name is Dae La’a//Sela Sue (Termanu: Dae Laka ma Sela Sue). This is the mythic land from which the Rotenese claim to have originated—hence, as these lines assert, the origin of death (*sapu nitul//lalo mula*) began with the first ancestors.

1 See: *Pearlfish enters sea cucumber anus* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fw2DrbhOA-M).

Stanza V cites the snake and grasshopper—two putative icons of immortality. The snake is able to shed its skin and the grasshopper its wings, but both continue to live.

Stanza VI is prefaced by a ‘but yet ...’, which signals that the stanza is intended to take an opposing view to that of Stanza V. Neither snake nor grasshopper is immortal. Overturning the rock pile renders the snake vulnerable and burning the grass also renders the grasshopper vulnerable. Instead of appearing as icons of immortality, their situation is one of vulnerability and impermanence.

Stanza VII makes a direct comparison: human beings are like pearl fish, who lower themselves to seek illusory, self-deceiving shelter. The same verbal pair, *bebelull/babala*, is used in Stanza VII as in Stanza II.

Stanza VIII resumes the theme of Suti and Bina: the search for a place to hide and shelter. Stanzas IX, X and XI are all recognisable ‘responses’ to the shells’ requests.

Stanza IX is cast in Suti and Bina’s voice: they propose to find sanctuary with the border stone and boundary tree (*to batull/lan ai*). But this is where herds of buffalo and flocks of goats (*tena kapal/bote bi’i*) trample the earth. (Various comparative examples of this formulaic episode are examined in the previous chapter.)

Stanzas X and XI offer the possibility for the shells to ‘hide and shelter’ (*bambill/sulu*) with the ‘tree’s shadow and the lontar palm’s shade’ (*sao ail/mafo tua*), but this possibility is negated by the fact that the sun rises and falls and thus the protecting shade of the trees shifts.

Stanza XII is one of the most common refrains in ritual language discourse: that there is no (certain) order in the world or (complete) fulfilment in the world. From a linguistic perspective, Frans Lau uses the Termanu dyadic set (*tetull/tema*) rather than the Dengka dialect variant (*tetull/teme*). The next lines in this stanza are the assertion that everyone is subject to death—again, a common refrain in mortuary chants.

Stanza XIII presents two images of the possibility of death at the height of fertility. The first of these images is the banana that may die, even as it bears its last large cluster of fruit. More spectacular is the *gewang* palm that grows for a hundred years or more and then, suddenly, puts out a huge single-stalked inflorescence that surmounts the palm to several

metres—and then dies. The Rotenese tap the lontar, a *Borassus* palm, on a regular basis because it puts out a succession of inflorescences; the *gewang* palm can only be tapped when it puts out its single inflorescence at the climax of its life cycle.

Stanza XIV's two lines are an urgent iteration of the need to 'hide and shelter' using the same verb pair, *bambil/sulu*, as in Stanzas IX and X.

Stanza XV offers the frequently enunciated ritual admonition 'to remember and keep in mind' (*masa-nedal/mafa-ndele*), immediately followed by the injunction 'to pile rocks at the head' and 'to raise earth at the foot'—a reference to the creation of a burial mound.

Stanza XVI present an image of a neglected grave with chickens digging and pigs rooting at its headstone and wooden marker. However, in Frans Lau's Indonesian translation of these lines, he writes that this condition is to be avoided, *Jaga jangan* ('Be careful do not') and *Asallah agar tidak* ('Just so as not'). There is nothing in the Rotenese to indicate this. However, were one to translate these lines as Frans Lau indicates, they might read as follows:

<i>Manu ai kakali</i>	[Avoid] chickens scratching there
<i>Bafi ai totofi.</i>	Pigs rooting there.
<i>Dadi neu batu ne-nggetuk</i>	That it becomes a stone to rest upon
<i>Dadi neu ai nese-laik.</i>	That it becomes wood to lean upon.

The 63 lines of this composition are composed of 43 dyadic sets. Virtually all of these sets are part of the common island-wide repertoire.

This text is taken from *Master Poets, Ritual Masters: The Art of Oral Composition Among the Rotenese of Eastern Indonesia*, by James J. Fox, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.