

## Postscript

This now concludes a project I began in 1965 but does not conclude my research on Rotenese ritual poetry. *Master Poets, Ritual Masters* merely marks a stage in this continuing work.

*Suti Solo do Bina Bane*, and its variant *Suti Saik do Bina Liuk*, is one ritual composition in the considerable Rotenese chant repertoire. It is considered an ‘origin chant’, but it has also been used as a mortuary chant. The knowledge of this composition throughout the island afforded me a superb opportunity to follow a lead in gathering variants of this chant and then to proceed to examine them, in comparative context, as an illustration of the art of oral composition among the master poets of Rote.

In my gathering of ritual language compositions on Rote from 1965 onwards, and, later, in my recording of the poets who joined me on Bali, *Suti Solo do Bina Bane* was, in fact, incidental to the larger effort of recording the full range of Rotenese poetry. Translating and analysing this large corpus of many hundreds of compositions are still in progress.

There is a danger in drawing general conclusions about the tradition on the basis of this single composition. *Suti Solo do Bina Bane* only hints at the extensive body of ‘origin chants’ that makes up the once revered traditional knowledge of the Rotenese. By this same token, *Suti Solo do Bina Bane* gives little idea of the even more extensive corpus of distinctive mortuary chants. Although some versions of *Suti Solo do Bina Bane* exhibit the influence of Christian ideas, no version of this chant portrays the new and developing repertoire of explicitly Christian chants (see Fox 2014: 317–64, for a discussion of this Christian canon). The full repertoire of possibilities within the Rotenese tradition remains to be documented.

It is precarious therefore to offer comment on the tradition as a whole. Since my arrival on Rote in 1965, I have been repeatedly told that the great master poets have died. Yet I encountered in my sessions on Bali several

poets who were as capable as those I first recorded in 1965. The tradition has the capacity to throw up able individuals. Clearly, however, their numbers are diminishing.

It is not the ability of individuals that is in question but the knowledge that forms the basis for their recitations. The 'knowledge of origins' is definitely waning on Rote; occasions for the performance of the rituals of origins have ceased and what knowledge currently exists is steadfastly maintained by only a few older members of Rotenese society. For most Rotenese, such knowledge is considered of little ritual importance whereas the ideas of Christian origins are a matter of greater concern. More precarious is the knowledge of the numerous specific, stylised 'life-course' mortuary chants that make up an even larger component of the traditional repertoire. Although dirges are still performed in some domains, Christian funeral ceremonies have curtailed the recitation of most mortuary chants. The most prominent of these funeral chants are still remembered, as are origin chants, by key poets, but the former remarkable range of these individual chants has been progressively reduced.

As in the case of *Suti Solo do Bina Bane*, it is my present, pressing task to provide a record of these chants as evidence of a cultural tradition that has passed and in the hope that future generations of Rotenese may rediscover their value.

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.