

TATA LIBA CEREMONY FOR RECONCILIATION AND HEALING (PALU'E ISLAND, EASTERN INDONESIA)

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Abstract: This article examines the Palu'e *Tata liba* ceremony with the help of multimedia research documentation, participant observation, and comparison with other local ceremonies. The form and performance, including reasons and effects, are described and analysed. On Palu'e, a person who is ill, or who has tried medicines without results, wonders if he/she has done something wrong according to custom or toward fellow human beings, and can request one of several ceremonies or healing genres. *Tata liba* is integrated into a holistic system of general health and can also be performed preventively for good feelings and the maintaining of good relations. The ancestors are called upon with ritual language, shown to exhibit semantic parallelism, to heal the participants' suffering relations and possible ill health. The overcoming of negative feelings is symbolically displayed by wiping the participants with water, throwing rice grains behind the back, and spitting in a coconut bowl. The main objective is to achieve harmony within or between families, and there is no argumentation or chronological issues producing a win-win situation.

Keywords: ancestors, folklore, healing, medical anthropology, Palu'e, reconciliation, semantic parallelism, traditional ceremony

INTRODUCTION

This article describes the Palu'e *Tata liba* ceremony and analyses how it is used to resolve conflicts or heal relations, and reveals how it forms part of a holistic system of general health and wellbeing. For an outsider it might seem odd or superstitious to use a ceremony for conflict resolution, but with the allegedly high success rate due to time-honoured cultural roots there is reason to consider the approach seriously. A successful method of conflict resolution should preferably, whether in theory or practise, be beneficial for all sides of the conflict. That traditional or cultural approaches can be useful in dealing

with conflicts is no news; studies from around the world have shown that customary approaches to conflict resolution have positive outcomes. For example, Rajesh Choudree (1999: 11) reports for South Africa the importance of social relations and that the conflicting parties strive “to restore a balance, to settle conflict and eliminate disputes” – in short, to mend relations rather than to win or lose. Wolff and Braman (1999: 45) write in a similar vein about Micronesia: “Generally, a traditional Micronesian settlement results in a genuine closure, whereby two disputants become friends and are able to coexist again. These settlements often involve restitution...” Geographically closer to this investigation, in Papua, Undinus Kogoya (2013: 11) finds that disputants tend to be unsatisfied with court settlements, and prefer settlements based on customary law: “settlement of conflicts between individuals that can satisfy both parties needs to be considered. ... initially tribal wars occurred because of conflicts between individuals.”¹ Kogoya’s sources all provide examples of the function of ceremony and wiser elders or ritual officiates in reconciliation.

This account of *Tata liba* builds on the author’s 2014–2016 research documentation of the Palu’e language (*Sara Lu’a*) and oral traditions,² which covers a wide spectrum of sources and narratives. The local beliefs correspond to what Pickering (2017) refers to as ‘islands of stability’, where the Palu’e culture forms one in a multitude of knowledge system constellations (ontologies) and the classical Western science paradigm forms another. The latter has, after the challenges from developments in quantum physics, been forced to take an ontological turn toward an acknowledgement of multiple worlds, which in short means that there is more than one paradigmatic way of understanding the world. Nevertheless, the discussion of *Tata liba* situates the ceremony within the larger system of Palu’e belief and ritual in the hermeneutic-semiotic way, mostly comparing from within because this is a first study. The method is ethnographic, qualitative, and linguistically informed (see Danerek 2019), using primary sources and verifiable data in the form of recordings with interlinear annotations produced with the methods and underpinning theoretical considerations of documentary linguistics (see McDonnell & Berez-Kroeker & Holton 2018) and made available at the Kaipuleohone Digital Ethnographic Archive.³

I was first made aware of this ceremony and how it is used to reconcile quarrelling families/parties by my former assistant and local partner Ratu. He contributed an audio recording (handphone) he had made for his own records in 2012 and provided contextual notes. The first time I witnessed *Tata liba* myself was during a short visit to Palu’e Island in 2018, and on the most recent visit in April 2021 I requested to have the ceremony performed at my former host’s house. Both occasions were video recorded. Another recording of the ceremony was made in 2019 by my host Pitu Sopune, a Palu’e man who kept the previous

project's sound recorder and DSLR camera. Pitu's own recent experience of the ceremony was also audio recorded. The mentioned recordings are the primary data, together with field notes and participatory observation. To understand *Tata liba*, the following working questions were used: What form(s) does the *Tata liba* ceremony take? For what reasons is it performed? Who leads the ceremony and who participates in it? What materials or ritual agents are used? What is spoken and how (semantics of form and content)? What is the function of the ceremony? Is *Tata liba* a shamanistic ceremony?⁴

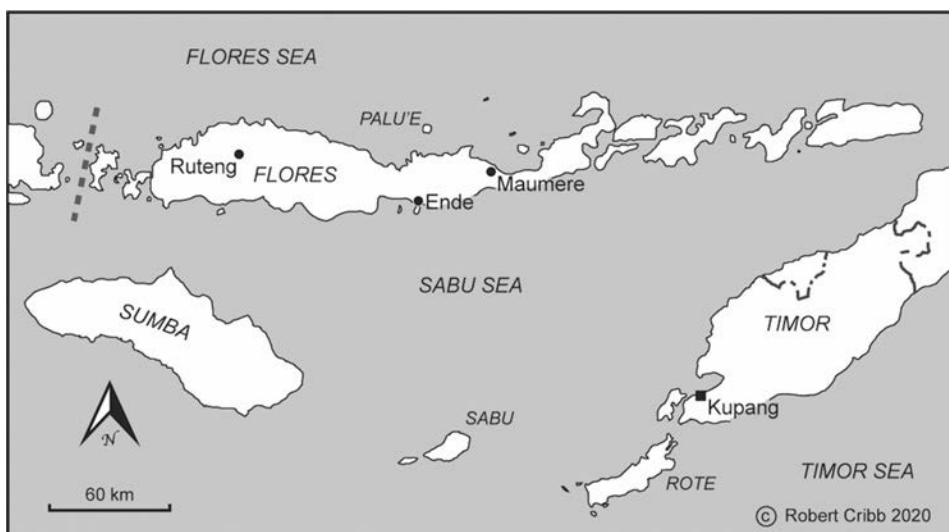


Figure 1. Map of the eastern Indonesian province Nusa Tenggara Timur.

PALU'E AND CEREMONIAL HEALING

Palu'e (*Lu'a*) is a small volcanic island, approximately seven kilometres wide in each direction, located near the coast of north-central Flores, the land of the Lio (Ende regency), a cultural-linguistic group who are closely related to the Palu'e. The island's approximately 10,000 inhabitants are traditionally horticulturalists, but the men often fish and do seasonal work outside of the island and, since the 1980s, have migrated to Batam or Malaysia for work. There are limited work opportunities for both men and women in the eight local *desa* (village) administrations and health care clinics on the island, which is a municipality under the Sikka regency (Maumere). On Palu'e, the local language *Sara Lu'a* is spoken more often than the national language, Indonesian (Ind. *Bahasa Indonesia*).

Catholicism was introduced to Palu'e during the 1900s and by the end of the century almost 100% of the population was converted. Palu'e ancestral customs, *adha* (Ind. *adat*), are still practised alongside religion, particularly the water buffalo ceremonies and the dowry system that ties houses, families, and alliances together in reciprocal exchanges of masculine and feminine goods between wife-givers and wife-takers. The ancestors belong to a category of 'metapersons' (Graeber & Sahlins 2017) who are at least as feared as the one (or those) of the so-called modern religion.⁵ Palu'e consists of a dozen 'ceremonial domains', lands with borders under a politico-ceremonial authority, of which seven, more interior, 'domains of buffalo blood' adhere to five-year agricultural cycles (cf. Vischer 1992).⁶ The cycles begin with a large-scale ceremony where a young water buffalo is brought to the island. About five years later, depending on which domain, the full-grown buffalo(es) are sacrificed as atonement and for fertility at the ceremonial centre for the benefit of the entire domain. The Palu'e worldview emphasises fertility, ancestors, and descendants, and is characterised by dualism, particularly between male and female forces, such as the instable category of heat (male) and cool (female).⁷ Excessive heat is negative, and a main theme or aim of ceremonies is to get rid of that heat (*puna melu* 'to cool') and return a harmonious condition. The most potent cooling agent is the blood of the water buffalo, followed by the blood of pigs, goats, dogs, and fowl. Coconut juice, money, unhusked rice grains (called *siwe*), and eggs are also common cooling agents.

Palu'e culture is polite and hospitable, with strong ties between families, which must be maintained also when family members work faraway, often for several years. The Palu'e believe that acting and speaking wrong to fellow human beings will impact negatively on the self, which like the breaking of customary rules may invoke the wrath of the ancestors, who can strike with disease, accident, withholding of livelihood, or even death. There is also the concept of *dhura* 'pact', a pact or a peace agreement between larger groups, clans, or cultural groups. For instance, violence between the allied Ndéo and Kéli domains is strictly prohibited by such a pact, and people believe it would bring disaster to assault a person of the other domain. In everyday life there is ancestral intervention. For instance, once (in 2015) when a baby, a grandchild of my hosts in the hamlet Nara, had been crying continuously for a couple of hours after sunset, the grandmother remembered that she had forgotten to 'give food' at her mother's grave located near a neighbouring house, which she normally does every evening before supper. After she had offered the food, the baby stopped crying immediately. Was it coincidence, an anthropological social fact, or was it an intervention by the deceased ancestor (the child's great-grandmother), an active agent in the local 'island of stability' reality paradigm?

Local medicine and healing practices live side by side with modern medicine and a rudimentary healthcare system. The Palu'e venerate the deceased, the ancestors. The ancestors are invoked with the binary word pairs *Hina hama* (lit. 'mother father') – *Pu mori* (lit. 'grandparent great-grandparent'). The supreme being, *Hera Wula Watu Tana*, is rarely and primarily invoked by the *lakimosa*, the domain's ceremonial-political leader(s), in ceremonies pertaining to the whole of the land, or in curses. The head *lakimosa* are also shamans, according to common definitions, although their capacities differ; the *lakimosa* influences the world of spirits, practices divination and healing, and enters a trance-like state (without hallucinogens) during the buffalo sacrifice. *Lakimosa* is a hereditary office on the male side and the chief *lakimosa* is the one who is entitled to cut the throat of the buffalo.

The following rituals provide a comparative context for the *liba* rituals and represent traditional beliefs. *Ka tara* (lit. 'eat illness') is a common ritual performed for somebody who suffers from a chronic disease or who cannot be cured with other treatments. It is usually performed on the level of the (lineage) House for a member of the larger family. A pig is consumed communally, and it is implied that the disease is transferred to the pig or that the patient's health is returned through ancestral mediation in exchange for the blood. *Ka toi dhubu* is basically the same ritual as *Ka tara* but performed at the ceremonial centre (*dhubu*) by the *lakimosa*. Traditionally it is believed that diseases, and even accidents, result from the transgression of ancestral rules, and a person who feels that he or she has done something wrong, perhaps cut a tree during the period of *bhijie* ('prohibition'), can ask the *lakimosa* to perform *Ka toi dhubu*. The body and mind of the patient are then said to 'be put back in place' (*bati* or 're-tightened'), a word that is also used to describe the effects of *Tata liba* on the participants.

Ngiru huru is the most common ethno-medicinal genre. *Ngiru* (lit. 'to spit') here means to apply areca nut and piper betle fruit, masticated with other plant material, on a patient who is afflicted by *huru*, referring both to symptoms and a type of curse that protects crops from theft, which causes the same symptoms. Often, the practitioner of *ngiru huru*, generally of *Wai walu, hana halo* 'society (commoners)', utters *Bhulu wa'o*, a type of prayer which is also used in the *Liba* and *Ka toi dhubu* ceremonies. The two words carry the same meaning, 'to call upon', and can serve as an example of the binary dualism and parallelism of ritual language, called *Pa'e*, the speech genre to which *Bhulu wa'o* belongs. The full pair reads *bhulu pu, wa'o mori* (lit. 'call on grandparent, call on great-grandparent'), where *pu* and *mori* stand for *Hina hama pu mori*. To mention the one invokes the other. The ancestors play a role in every ceremony and the linguistic-magic component is crucial; without it there is no ceremony, and ceremonial authority derives from the ability to *Pa'e*.

TATA LIBA

The word *liba* means ‘to unite’ or ‘to make whole’, which describes what the *liba* ceremonies do. *Tata* means to sprinkle or splash (water). *Liba* is the generic name for the type of ceremony. The most common name is *Tata liba*, but the term *liba lae* is also used in some contexts, which should be more large-scale and involve the *lakimosa*.⁸ But, generally, any trusted elder who is able to speak sufficient *Pa’e* can take the place of the officiate. *Tata liba* cannot be performed without the necessary language skills.

Tata liba can be performed for several reasons, mentioned as ‘because of wrong X’, which fall within the following categories:⁹ 1. the breaking of the domain’s customary rules (requires the *lakimosa*); 2. speaking wrong or denying human relationships; 3. disturbances from ancestors in the matters of dowry; 4. denying eating fish or eating them the wrong way (special for Hona village in the south of the island); 5. incest. Within or outside these categories one can also *liba* with nature, specifically the Sea, and for similar reasons as in the Hona area. The above reasons may also correspond with the following: inter-domain border warfare (has not occurred since 1989), political conflict (new, modern phenomenon), quarrels between settlements/villages, quarrels within the family, or domestic violence. It is also common, as will be shown, to make relations harmonious before departure from the island (usually work migration), or upon returning after a long period away from one’s family and neighbours, without any specific quarrel being the reason to initiate the ceremony.

A *liba* ritual is usually initiated by someone who feels that he/she has done something wrong, perhaps the person is ill and thinks that it is because he or she has acted wrongly to another person or family. The steps leading up to the ritual are:¹⁰ 1. Prior mediation, a person from one side of the conflicting parties, often the person who feels he/she has done something wrong, visits a person/family from the other side, and invites them to make peace. If the intention is to *liba*, chronology does not matter after this step; there is no more arguing about who began the dispute or why. 2. A person from the side who feels they have done wrong (or from any side if this is unclear) request the *lakimosa* or another able person to lead the ceremony. 3. Preparation of the needed materials and cooling agents.

Liba ceremonies are not unusual, performed several times a year in each domain, and are neither complicated nor costly. The author has found no reason to believe that the materials or the language employed, or other aspects of how the ceremony is performed, have changed for many generations. *Tata liba* is a living tradition, with fixed elements in a flexible verbal structure. In principle it can be performed by anyone, but few people are sufficiently fluent in ritual

language, so the task befalls either the *lakimosa* or an elder who is versed in ritual language. The materials used are: 1. water (fresh water unless the problem is with the Sea); 2. a coconut bowl; 3. cotton; 4. long piece(s) of bamboo, depending on the number of participants (not needed when the problem is with the Sea); 5. *siwe*, ceremonial rice grains; 6. an egg and rice grains are offered at an ancestor stone immediately after the ritual. 1–5 are essential if the *lakimosa* performs the ceremony; eggs and rice can be offered at the ceremonial centre.



Figure 2. Four participants throw rice grains behind their backs at the closing of the Tata liba ceremony. Two persons are symbolically present with their clothing, on the lap and in the arms of the two women (left). Facing them is the officiant, Sosu du'a, a trusted elder from the village. Nara, Palu'e 2018. Photograph by the author.

Tata liba is led by a trusted elder or the *lakimosa*. The participants, both parties, sit in a line (or more than one if the participants are many) on a bamboo pole, facing east with their hands open. If a person cannot be present, their clothing can replace the person (Fig. 2) and be treated with water and spoken to as if they were there. The officiant takes the rice grains from a coconut bowl and distributes them into the hands of all the participants, who remain seated with their hands open throughout the ceremony. Speaking *Pa'e*, the officiant takes cotton, dips it in the water of a coconut bowl and wipes each participant on the forehead (five times), and then the shoulders, hands, knees, and the feet. After all the participants have been cleansed, they throw the rice grains in their hands behind them, an act called *siko*, toward the setting sun and the

west, without looking back. Next, each person spits saliva in the coconut bowl. The officiant discards the contents of the coconut bowl. Further, in *Liba lae*, the *lakimosa* offers money and/or rice and eggs to an ancestor stone. He will also oversee the slaughtering of a pig for a communal meal, normally provided by the party who sought mediation. There is a small, unfixed fee for the service of the officiant, especially if in some cases the *lakimosa* (from the *lakimosa* family) is the officiant and performs offerings at the ritual centre.

As extra or alternative material, the leaf of the *hule mila* plant may be used, at least to keep the rice grains. The participants kick the bamboo backward with their feet, standing up, after they have thrown the rice grains behind their backs and spat in the coconut bowl, which is obligatory. The officiant or a participant offers an egg and rice grains at the *rate* (a symbolic gravestone and ancestral dwelling) of the House. Water is, to the author's knowledge, only a cooling agent in this ceremony. It is called *wae rita*, referring to the water of the *Rita* tree (a large, yet unidentified tree species), but metaphorically meant, the water does not have to be taken from the roots of that tree. *Wae rita* is also a nickname for the ceremony.

The disposal of the rice grains behind the back, without ever looking back, and the spitting in the bowl are obvious symbolic gestures, which remove the negativity from the participants, caused, among other possible reasons, from coarse behaviour or harsh words uttered toward fellow human beings. West was the direction the original ancestors came from in the origin myths, and the direction everything negative is disposed toward in ceremonies, to disappear with the setting sun. The closing communal meal is also part of the reconciliation process; eating together is always important. The main, active part of the ceremony only takes a few minutes. Afterwards, if there has been a conflict or long neglect, people may hug each other.

Pa'e is another essential, non-tangible, component of *Tata liba*. It is part of the language's sign system, consisting of meaningful, metaphoric form and content. Only a few people master *Pa'e*, but the majority can grasp the meaning, which per design is never as clear as in everyday communication. The vocabulary itself is not separate from everyday language, only a few words have more archaic forms, but the word order of phrases is often different. *Pa'e* is an ordered form of speech with rules, uttered according to a certain rhythm, phrase by phrase, with elements of assonance and rhyming. Like mantra, *Pa'e* sounds different from everyday speech and bestows a sense of magic because of that, and it is understood that the ancestors listen to *Pa'e* – meaning that there is a referent beyond both the system of signs and the participants. Utterances in *Pa'e* are poetically composed of binary word pairs in semantic parallelism, full of metaphor, as is common in the ritual speech genres of eastern Indonesian

cultures, for which there already exists a substantial body of work: “[P]aired correspondences, at the semantic and syntactic levels, result in what is essentially a dyadic language – the phenomenon of ‘speaking in pairs’” (Fox 1988: 1). The structure of phrases and couplets builds on fixed sets of binary word pairs (nouns, verbs, or adjectives, split over phrases) and parallelism between phrases and couplets. For instance, if a phrase or sentence mentions *wiwi* (lips),¹¹ the following, corresponding phrase must mention *lema* (tongue). Both words relate to speech or the speaker; to be influential is to have ‘big lips’ and a ‘long tongue’ (*wiwi ca lema lawa*). The two parts of a couplet often express the same thing semantically. Literal or word-by-word translations therefore make little sense, because the phrase or couplet forms one semantic unit, which is used in the ritual context and may have been chosen as tailored content for the participants.

In the recorded *Tata liba* ceremonies the ritual speech is a little bit different in each session. There is a component which refers to the specific participants and their problems, and another, the dominant part, the *Bhulu wa’o*, which is universal and almost a formula, but also this part is performed slightly differently by different officiates, and the same officiate does not necessarily utter *Bhulu wa’o* the same way every time, which the recordings show. The following is the transcript and free translation of the ritual speech act at a *Tata liba* ritual performed in 2012 in kampong Ndeo, Ndéo domain, recorded by Ratu (SD1-302). The example is highlighted because the ceremony was larger, involving more people than the other three ceremonies which were video recorded with a DSLR camera. The background to the ritual was an ongoing quarrel between the Pio Ware and the Ngaji Mude families. When after a few months a member of the Pio Ware family fell ill, the family made the decision to try to make peace with Ngaji Mude through *Tata liba*. The ceremony was led by Ndéo’s *lakimosa* Ropi, but the traditional prayer was delivered by Sosu *du’a*,¹² an elder from the nearby Nara hamlet, because Ropi had only recently begun serving as *lakimosa*, after a long stay on Java, and was not yet sufficiently fluent in *Pa’e*. Further interpretation follows the translation.

A’e te, pé’e hera sa hera wai cewi, meré wai rua a’e. Miu nu’ane wo tei lau nua e Nitu. Miu wo tei lau woga e Noa. Pé’e wiwi a’e leka ére meké u no’o weta. Lema ére bila u no’o naja. Leka a’e leka tembo tara lo peti. Ha’e téna, miu wo tei lau nua e Nitune. Miu wo noto lau woga e Noane. Aku ha’e wae ko aku ha’e rita u. Dhe wiwi hé’e weta, wiwi e weta, ka’a ngala... ka’a ngala bila no’o ata wiwi naja. Naja keli wiwine ka’a ngala bila no’o ata weta. Lae sepu seru a’e nunune. Pé’e leka.. naja leka dhengune dhaga u. Ana a’e leka limane dhali u. ... Sepu seru a’e nunu. Pé’e wiwi

cala u leka ére dobho, leka no'o.. leka téki dobho leka ére.. leka ére lé. Kaju leka ére balu u. Cala ha'e te. Cepu seru. Hera a'e téna, weta no'o naja bo wiwine lele ha. Lemane bo ére wara, dhéne weta te cu'u palu no'o naja. Ata naja, bama lalane. Naja keli bo lau cu'u palu no'o ata weta. Ata weta dibho hojene. Wati kepa wai rua kami weta no'o naja dhu ko dhaga, lima ko dhali, kami mede weki no'o ata weta, bama lalane, tama dhibo hojene. Ére ke'é keli, pé'e lau mai ata weta, pé'e no'o cepu seru ko ha'e nunu. Ko pé'e dhengu dhaga lima dhali, ko pé'e tembo tara lo peti. Mede weki ata naja bama lalane, ata ama dibho hojene. Hera a'e téna, miu nu'ane, pé'e po kuri no'o kami u, bo tei lau ata dhanane, noto lau ata watune. Wae ha'e pa u. Liba melu u. Ko ha'e téna, weta no'o naja wiwine bomo ere lele. Lemane bo ka'a ngala bila u. Téki wo kaju, langa wo dhali, bu'u a'e téna tembone tara lone peti u. Wetane téki kaju e najane, langa dhali hanane. Hamane. Ére ke'é keli, naja u keli dhe téki kaju wetane, langa dhali hanane. Ha"e téna sago miu lau nua noto, lau nua e Nitune, lau woga e Noane. Mai dhi'o dhega no'o kami wo tei tetune a'e dhana wolone. Bhulu, wo pu a'e te tembone ére céwo, dhe tio lé Wae Rio, (nangu lé Nangu Nanga).

Here, perhaps the day since before yesterday, two nights ago. You elders who live in the house of Nitu.¹³ You who live in the home of Noa. Perhaps these lips have split with the siblings (*weta* 'wife-takers'). The tongue has split with the siblings (*naja* 'wife-givers'). So now the body is ill, the person is sick. Now, you who live in the house of Nitu. You who live in the house of Noa. I am here with water, I am here to 'rita'. So that the lips of the *weta*, lips of the *weta* cannot... cannot split with the *naja*. The lips of the *naja* also must not split with the *weta*. In conflict here by the banyan tree. Perhaps so... *naja* then his neck was tied. The child here, then his hands were tied. ... Conflict by the banyan tree. Perhaps the lips have wronged, so took a machete, then with... and picked up the machete, and... and threatened. The wood has struck. Error here. Conflict. Today, *weta* and *naja* will have one pair of lips. Their tongues will be joined, so that our *weta* knows *naja* again. *Naja*, heal the path. *Naja* too will know *weta* again. *Weta* watch over the canyon. Tomorrow or the day after we *weta* and *naja* our knees tied, or hands tied, we hope for *weta*, heal the path, enter, watch over the canyon. Like that too, if from the direction of *weta*, if there is conflict here at the banyan. Or if the neck and hands are tied, or if the body is ill, the person is sick. Hope only for *naja* to heal the path, the father people watch over the canyon. Today, you great people, perhaps fed up with being behind us, will stay in another land, stay in

another land. This water has made wet. United and cool. And now, the lips of *weta* and *naja* will be one. The tongue will not be able to split. Pick up the wood, roll up the rope, because now the body is ill the person is sick. *Weta* pick up the wood of *Naja*, roll up the rope of the child. The father. Like this too, *Naja* also pick up the wood of *weta*, roll up the rope of the child. Here and now at once, you live in the house, in the house of Nitu, in the home of Noa. Come all of you to us who live at the flat area here on the hill. Bless us descendants that we are healthy and harmonious and will bathe in Wae Rio (swim in Nangu Nanga).

In short, this is an appeal in *Pa'e* to both the participants and the ancestral spirits to make them aware that they should not be in conflict and must be reconciled. A person is ill because of the conflict, and the ancestors are asked to intervene and cure the victim. The participants are there to make peace, aware of their actions, some of them have spoken bad things about people from the other family. But from now on they will not repeat their harsh words or wrongdoings. They have been reunited: *Liba melu u* 'united (through ceremony) and cooled', makes it explicit that the excessive heat is being removed. The last sentence, beginning with *Bhulu*, is a request or prayer that the participants, especially the ill, be blessed by the ancestors to become healthy and harmonious. The word *pu* can signify both grandparent and grandchild. Here the author interprets it as 'descendants'. *Bhulu wa'o* always ends with the couplet *Tio lé Wae Rio; nangu lé Nangu Nanga*; the second part, which is invoked by the first, was not captured in Ratu's recording.

Both the second and third phrases invoke the ancestors. *Nua* and *woga* is a binary pair, *nua woga* means 'the home of a family'. *Nua e Nitu* 'the house of Nitu' and *woga e Noa* 'the home of Noa' are ancestral dwellings where the deceased reside.¹⁴ Together the phrases constitute a couplet, always mentioned together in that order, which calls upon the ancestors. The ancestors are addressed three times with 'You who live in the house of Nitu. You who live in the home of Noa', not directly with *Hina hama pu mori*.

Meké and *bila*, both meaning 'to share, to split', here have a negative meaning in the context of previous speech, metaphorically mentioned with *wiwi* 'lips' and *lema* 'tongue'. These words are used in the three recordings together with *weta naja* (siblings, or the wife-taking and wife-giving sides of the family), who are the participants in the ritual and who by being addressed in this way are reminded of their relations. *Sepu seru* means 'conflict' and the terminology is only used in ritual language. Here it refers to the feud between the two families, and so do *dobho* 'machete', *lé (ngao)* 'threatening with machete', and *kaju ére*

balu 'hit with wood', which are most likely metaphorically meant, although one of them may have occurred; Ratu did not go into such detail.

This ceremony resulted in peace between the quarrelling parties. A few weeks later, the person of Pio Ware's family who had been ill for a long time recovered. The two families became aware of their mistakes and regretted their actions, because wrong actions have implications in the form of illness, if not accidents. They are no longer in conflict (at least as of a few years after the ceremony).

Sosu also officiated a *Tata liba* ceremony recorded in 2018 (SD1-303) at the house of my former host family. It was performed for at least six people, with four of them present physically and at least two symbolically, with their clothing, while all of them represented their families (Fig. 1). Head *lakimosa* Ngaji Pione conducted the ceremony at the same house for only four people in 2019 (SD1-304). The ceremonies were carried out in the same way, and for similar reasons, aiming more at the maintenance of good relations while a family member was working in Malaysia and a good feeling before departure, by reminding the participants that their family ties had to remain firm. *Pa'e* was different on each occasion, but Sosu's speech acts were largely the same, using the same metaphors, with one part adjusted for the purpose. Ngaji, who is fluent in this speech genre, used a partly different vocabulary with similar metaphors.



Figure 3. Lute Wongga's (*Lute*, wife of Wongga) turn to be wiped with water on her forehead five times by *lakimosa* Ngaji. The amount of water was a bit excessive, therefore the laughter. Nara, Palu'e 2019. Photograph by the author.

One can also come in conflict with nature, particularly the Sea in the land of the fishing village Hona. SD1-305 is a short recording of Paji, a woman from Hona, who speaks about the custom of *liba* in Hona. As mentioned, the local customary rules there concern primarily the consumption of fish, more precisely, the denial of it, which is prohibited by the ancestors. As Paji explains, a person who has eaten even the smallest portion of fish and later denies it, or has thrown away fish, falls ill and must *liba* with the land, *Liba dhana Hona*. The transgressor/patient must come to the local officiate (Lelu), or an able person like Paji, who will reconcile them with the Sea and the Hona territory. Hona does not have a *lakimosa* and a ceremonial centre of its own; there it is senior women like Lelu and Paji who are versed in custom and ritual language and conduct the ceremony. *Liba dhana Hona* is basically the same ritual as *Tata liba*, but it can be performed also for only one person. The ritual speech is similar, but with some specific content for Hona. The *Bhulu wa'o*, after the participants have been wiped with water, can begin like this: *Kau leka putu leka peké. Pé'e mo kau ka cala, ninu cala lae dhana Hona* (You have become ill and hot. Perhaps you ate wrong, drank wrong in the land of Hona). The ritual request asks that the ancestors cure the transgressor and bless him or her with health.

A transgressor of the Hona ancestral rules must not necessarily perform *liba* in Hona. Pitu Sopune, who recorded Paji in 2016, was asked by the author in early 2019 to record a *liba* ceremony. It is with some irony that a few months later he spent several days in the south of the island, doing work and eating plenty of fish with relatives and friends (recorded interview, but not uploaded to the collection). Pitu also did work and ate fish in the land of Hona. Soon after he returned to his village in the Kéli domain he fell ill with recurring heavy headaches and was unable to do any work in spite of taking medicine. After a couple of days, it dawned on him that he had in some way denied eating fish in Hona on his way back home. Pitu went to the Kéli head *lakimosa* to ask for help. Ngaji confirmed the cause, denying eating fish in Hona, and the ceremony, using sea water to reconcile Pitu with the environment and ancestors of Hona, was carried out as soon as possible. Pitu became healthy immediately after the ceremony, and the headaches did not return. A month and a half later Pio recorded the *lakimosa* officiating the mentioned *Tata liba* ceremony at his parents' house (SD1-304).

Although *Tata liba* is essentially a ritual of reconciliation, it can also be done preventively, as two of the mentioned recordings suggest; to my knowledge there had not been any specific quarrel, but we all know that human beings can be annoying to one another in daily life. On a five-day visit to the island in early April 2021 I requested to have *Tata liba* performed. This was after I had submitted this article and I was not there to research *Tata liba*. It had been

a long time since my last visit, about 1.5 years, and my leg had been severely wounded from cellulitis (the medical diagnosis) and mistreatment, and the scars kept annoying me; I was not fully healed. Some locals had even thought that I was already lost or dead; add to this the WHO global corona pandemic, which was keeping us all in a limbo, and that it is unsure when we will meet again. In early 2020 local friends had asked a 'wise man' (Ind. *orang pintar*, or *dukun*) for divination, based on a photograph of my wounds. The man saw that I had done something wrong according to the custom of one of the Palu's domains (unspecified), which seemed unpalatable to me, who think I know the medical reasons. Anyhow, I wanted to make good with the environment and my local hosts and friends, and the ceremony can be performed preventively for the maintenance of good relations. I had never quarrelled with my hosts about anything, but there had been times when I felt that the host family was a bit annoying, and the reverse, but that was all.

The location, the house of my former hosts Wongga and Lute, was chosen because I had stayed there during my first field trips; my local 'origin house', so to speak. The first morning of my visit I went to Lena Lue Paso, the wife of the deceased *lakimosa* Paso (1927–2005), who hereditarily had been second in charge and had wielded considerable authority, until this day.¹⁵ Lue is one of the persons who performs this ritual in the Kéli domain, and I was recommended to go to her, if not the head *lakimosa*, Ngaji. The authority of the third person, Sосу *du'a*, does not reach the domain's ceremonial centre. I could also have chosen to have the mentioned *Ka toi dhubu* ceremony performed, and through Lue I would reach the ceremonial centre too, as she has the authority to make a post-ceremony offering there. In addition, Wongga, the former host and father of the house, and his younger brother Pitu, were suffering from arthritis at the time and had been staying in bed for over two weeks. They were planning to request the *Ka toi dhubu* ceremony because the medicines and herbs they had consumed had not made them recover. Another reason was that a couple of weeks earlier, before the onset of debilitating pain, they had done some renovation and moved the House's *kuku lolo*, a box containing bundles of cut hairs and nails from the deceased of their family. The family had neglected to ask permission, by way of a simple cooling ritual, whether sacrificing a chicken (blood) or uttering some *Pa'e*, and offering an egg and ceremonial rice. They saw this error as a possible reason for their current state of unhealth. Three days after the *Tata liba* ceremony *Ka toi dhubu* was performed for them by the same Lena Lue. She offered an egg and rice grains at the ceremonial centre, and a young, yellow chicken was set free there, while at the house a young pig was slaughtered, grilled, and consumed by the family and some neighbours-relatives.

Tata liba was performed in the late afternoon of 8 April 2021 (Fig. 4) like the previously mentioned ceremonies, same ritual materials, and similar *Pa'e-Bhulu wa'o* with equivalent metaphors and a little tailored content, noticeable with the mentioning of my local name (Cawa). The ceremony was recorded on my handphone by Flory, Wongga Lute's youngest son (SD1-320). Sitting on the bamboo facing the east are Pitu Sopune (Flory's elder brother), Lute, Lebi (Wongga and uncle Pitu's younger sister), the aunties-neighbours Meli, Punga, and Nona. Wongga and uncle Pitu were symbolically present on my lap in the form of two shirts. A few other neighbours and children observed the ritual, commenting and joking. When a rooster crows (*manu koko*) during the ceremony it is a good sign that the ancestors receive the request/ceremony, and the rooster crowed several times.



Figure 4. Lue Paso wipes the author's limbs with water (*wae rita*) during the *Tata liba* ceremony. Nara, Palu'e 2021. Still image by the author from SD1-320.

Tata liba is often followed up with an immediate offering of egg(s) and ceremonial rice, and a little money, on the ancestor stone (*rate*) located outside of the house. But here, Lue spoke and offered to the ancestors by the *kuku lolo* inside the house just prior to the ceremony. After the ceremony I accompanied Lue

to her house in the adjacent village where she spoke *Pa'e* and offered eggs and ceremonial rice by the *lakimosa* family's *kuku lolo* and inherited ceremonial artefacts, which is equivalent to an offering at the ceremonial centre. As for the results, I had a happy, smooth stay and managed to do what I wished to do, and left the island with a lasting good feeling, but it did not noticeably speed up the healing process of my scarred leg. Also, while I cannot say that my local relations were improved, because they were never in a poor state, that good feeling surely had something to do with the mutual support and display of care through the participation in the two health-related ceremonies and spending time together.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this article is on describing and understanding the *Tata liba* ceremony in its local paradigm, drawing on other health-related local ceremonies, particularly *Ka tara* and *Ka toi dhubu*, where a patient's illness is cured by sacrificing a pig and eating a communal meal. The latter involve offerings at the ceremonial centre by the *lakimosa*, just as the *lakimosa* can do after having officiated *Tata liba*. The two ceremonies have similar value or effects, and in some cases either of them is appropriate, but *Tata liba* pertains more to human relations and *Ka toi dhubu* more to the customs of the land.

Traditional ceremonies can be used as viable alternatives to modern institutions for conflict resolution, and the introduction mentions a few shared enabling traits. *Tata liba* is a time-proven ceremony oriented towards reconciliation, including the maintenance and improvement of familial and social relations. The main objective is harmony, to *liba* means to become one, and *Tata liba* restores peace and harmony in families and communities by overcoming animosity and negative feelings. Reconciliation is not achieved through argumentation or chronological issues, but through the ceremony itself, which aims at a better future together. The mutual relationship is emphasized, with *weta naja* ('family' in its wide sense) in the quoted examples, and the participants are reminded to not become separated by quarrels. What unites and reconciles the participants is the belief in the living dead, which also invokes a shared past. The informal context, which is understood by the community, enables participation and the resolution of the problem. The atmosphere is relaxed and the ceremony neither takes much time nor does it need much preparation, unless the participants are many as in the first example. The traditional structure is familiar and the approach is less frightening than a court or any institution or approach which focuses on chronology and right or wrong. Furthermore, there is no issue of restitution, but a win-win situation for all sides or participants. The resolution

mechanisms based on the principle of mutual respect, internalised by the community, produce positive results. The main function of *Tata liba* is to heal the impaired bonds between people, removing feelings of revenge or anger. In the villages of the small island the border between friend and family is blurred, and alliances exist between families to help each other with the continuous dowry exchange. Life becomes difficult under such close conditions if there is tension and potential conflict.

Tata liba is simple, the only difficult ingredient is *Pa'e*, a poetic speech genre characterised by semantic parallelism, with rhyme, allusion, metaphor, and salient features of mantra. The meta-human persons called upon (*Bhulu wa'o*) interfere in the ceremony and daily life, and they listen more to *Pa'e* than to common language. *Pa'e*, a bit strange and archaic, has a noticeable sublime, mantra-like effect on the participants, but the metaphors are understandable and remind the participants of who they are and how they should live together.

Tata liba is neither a shamanistic ceremony, if shamanism must involve an ecstatic state of the officiate, nor must the officiate of *Tata liba* be a shaman, which the head *lakimosa* is, unless any officiate can be defined as a shaman. The main requirement to officiate is linguistic ability, and that is how a non-*lakimosa* can perform the ceremony. Spiritual forces influence and sustain Palu'e social life, also through *Tata liba*, in which the deceased are called upon to heal the participants' suffering relations and consequential ill health, and this is the shamanistic element.

Tata liba, mainly a ceremony of reconciliation, is also a healing ceremony for health. The healing or improvement of social and familial relations has a positive effect on human health, just as the reverse can be detrimental. Palu'e medicinal practises and healing are holistic, like they are in indigenous cultures around the world; neither the individual nor the solutions to health problems are set apart from the community and the Universe. The elaboration shows that the Palu'e believe that the human's behaviour toward fellow human beings or the land influences their health, including that of the family's. The values of social cohesion, harmony, openness, peace, and humility flow through the mediation and the ceremony. After the conflicting parties have had a ceremony, perhaps hugged one another, and shared a meal together, they feel relieved and happier. In the Palu'e universe, and likely elsewhere, this can cause the ill to recover. The feel-good, and even recovering from illness, is understood also by people with modern ontologies, which acknowledge the link between psychological and physiological wellbeing. What is more difficult to understand from that perspective is the ancestral intervention, which like the rest is understood as placebo, because it occurs in another paradigm. On Palu'e, people often take both herbs and modern medicines for various symptoms, and if it does not

help, there is the option of the ceremony, which reveals a pluralistic health system. Pitu, according to the culture's 'island of stability', had transgressed the ancestral rules of Hona and had to make peace with the environment and the ancestors of Hona. This case and others mentioned confirmed that when neither pharmaceuticals nor herbal remedies bite, the cause of pain or illness is sought in one's actions or behaviour, and the solution in a ceremony.

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ARCHIVAL SOURCES

SD = Stefan Danerek Collection Palu'e Audio. Kaipuleohone Digital Ethnographic Archive. Honolulu: University of Hawaii. Available at <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/38830>, last accessed on 17 February 2022.

NOTES

- ¹ All translations are by the author.
- ² The Indonesian definition of 'oral traditions' (*tradisi lisan*) is similar to Western definitions of 'folklore'. It refers specifically to non-written traditions which have existed for several generations, or at least 50 years (see MPSS 2015). The study of oral traditions (*kajian tradisi lisan*) is an academic field/study program at Indonesian universities.
- ³ Items in the Stefan Danerek Collection Palu'e Audio typically consist of a WAV-file, an EAF-file with annotations, sometimes one or more JPG-files. Video clips are compressed to MPEG (MP4). EAF annotation files open with the computer software ELAN (2022). Items are numbered consecutively upwards from SD1-000.
- ⁴ A shaman is a "person regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of good and evil spirits Typically such people enter a trance state during a ritual, and practise divination and healing" (OUP 2021).

- ⁵ “Human societies are hierarchically encompassed – typically above, below, and on earth – in a cosmic polity populated by beings of human attributes and metahuman powers who govern the people’s fate. In the form of gods, ancestors, ghosts, demons, species-masters, and the animistic beings embodied in the creatures and features of nature” (Graeber & Sahlin 2017: 2).
- ⁶ Michael Vischer’s dissertation about origin structures in the Palu’e domain of Ko’a includes a wide ethnographic description of Palu’e.
- ⁷ See James Fox (1989: 44–48) for comparisons with other eastern Indonesian peoples.
- ⁸ Personal communication. Ropi, *lakimosa* of Ndéo, 2014.
- ⁹ Personal communication. Mangge, a Kéli elder (Nangahure, November 2019).
- ¹⁰ Ratu interviewed *lakimosa* and elders of Ndéo in 2014.
- ¹¹ *W* should be pronounced /v/.
- ¹² *Du’a* is honorific for elders.
- ¹³ The word *nu’a* is a respectful form of address (lit. ‘rich’), here given as ‘elders’.
- ¹⁴ The genitive *hé’e* is shortened to *e*.
- ¹⁵ A folkloristic anecdote: At Lena Lue I was greeted friendly, had coffee and chatted in her kitchen. I stated my intentions and went to her husband’s grave, next to her house, to light a candle, a Palu’e tradition. I spoke some improvised *Pa’e* according to my humble ability, explaining that I wanted *Tata liba* performed by his wife and that I wished my own and my local family’s and friends’ good health. After this I returned to Lue’s kitchen, leaving behind my host Pitu and a grandson of Lue’s by the grave, sitting chatting. A few minutes later Pitu ran to Lue’s kitchen and reported that the grandson had seen the fire of the candle extinguish, then chatted with Pitu again, and when he looked behind his back a minute or so later, the candle was burning again. He swore, crossing his chest to Pitu that it happened. A good sign.

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