Remembering and Recreating Origins: The Transformation of a Tradition of Canonical Parallelism among the Rotenese of Eastern Indonesia

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Personal Prefatory Remarks

I have been studying an oral tradition of strict canonical parallelism intermittently for nearly half a century. I began my research on this oral tradition based on the island of Rote in eastern Indonesia in 1965, and have continued these efforts, now with greater urgency, to the present. I have also been investigating issues in comparative parallelism for roughly the same period of time. In 2014 I published Explorations in Semantic Parallelism, which marked an important stage in this research. This volume is a collection of papers both new and old. For example, I reprinted my first survey of the field in 1977 published in honor of Roman Jakobson together with a longer paper on the “trajectory” of subsequent and continuing developments in the study of parallelism.

Explorations in Semantic Parallelism also reprints several of my papers on the study of the Rotenese tradition of canonical parallelism together with various papers that continue to extend my study of this tradition. My personal understanding of the Rotenese tradition of canonical composition has grown over several decades, while the tradition itself has been undergoing change. My perceptions of this change are intimately linked to my increasing comprehension of the tradition as a whole.

In this paper I take stock of the work on that tradition to date and to put it into perspective. I also describe the changes that have occurred in the tradition over the course of my research as I gradually gained new perceptions of its fundamental underpinnings. Much of my general research on Rote has been historically oriented. The island has its own extensive oral historical traditions as well as Dutch archival records that date to the mid-seventeenth century.

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1A version of this paper was presented at the “Parallelism in Verbal Art and Performance” Seminar-Workshop held in Helsinki, Finland on May 26-27, 2014. I was initially prompted to write this paper on reading Timo Kaartinen’s paper, “Handing Down and Writing Down: Metadiscourses of Tradition among the Bandanese of Eastern Indonesia” (Journal of American Folklore 126 (502):385-406). Prof. Kaartinen’s paper is a fascinating study of changing modes of discourse in the transmission of the folk traditions of the Eli Banda population—a displaced and dispersed, seagoing Islamic population of eastern Indonesia. This paper could perhaps be considered a study in contrasts. The Rotenese are a long-settled Christian population who retain strong memories of their former “canon” of origin narratives while at the same time, they are actively engaged in the creation of a new “canon” of origin narratives.
century. Some of the changes in Rote’s traditions of parallelism that I perceive as most significant were, on good historical evidence, begun a century earlier and have now taken over as ever more influential.

Introduction to the Study of Rotenese Ritual Language: The Context of Recitation

For a period of roughly four decades, all my recordings of the Rotenese “ritual language” were opportunistic. They were made during the course of ongoing fieldwork, primarily in one domain on the island, that of the central domain of Termanu (see Fig. 1). Recordings often occurred at ritual gatherings but just as often they happened when an individual poet or chanter chose to provide me with a particular recitation. One attraction for such recitations was that I always made certain to have a ready supply of native palm gin, which is regarded by the Rotenese as the “water of words,” and is both a stimulus and requisite for recitation.2

Although these efforts at recording could hardly be considered systematic, they were neither fortuitous nor without plan. During my first fieldwork, I was fortunate in having as my language teacher, an elder master poet, known as Old Meno, who held the ritual office of Head of the Earth. His first male grandson was born shortly after I arrived, and he was taken with the possibility offered by my Uher tape recorder of transmitting his knowledge across generations. More than any other poet whom I have recorded, he had a concern for revealing and thus possibly preserving core traditions of origin.

Other poets were stirred to record by the rivalry that existed among them. The fact that I had recorded from a particular poet and let it be known that I valued that recitation would prompt other poets to want to record. Most recordings were of individuals and, if it was at all possible, I would work through the recording and transcription with that poet. Early in my fieldwork, on the advice of the elder brother of the ruler (Manek) of Termanu, I declared an interest in recording a particular text, *Suti Solo do Bina Bane*. This became a kind of key signature text that I recorded from many poets over the years. I also sponsored particular mortuary rituals at which recitation was required. Chanters would come to perform and, as was once the case throughout the island, I gave rewards to those who performed. As a result, I have a large and varied corpus of recitations.

The chant recitations in this traditional corpus belong to two broad categories. They are recited either as origin chants or mortuary chants. On Rote, all cultural events and many cultural “goods” have their separate origins. Formerly, on ritual occasions of celebration—for house-building, marriage, the payment of bride-wealth, the initiation of weaving or of planting—origin chants would be recited to acknowledge the events that gave rise to these activities. Although all origin chants are related to one another, each chant recounts an episode in the engagement of the Sun and Moon and their descendants with the Lords of Ocean and Sea.

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represented as Shark and Crocodile. What may once have been a single long epic of cosmic involvement is currently told in bits and pieces that only hint at the possible larger whole.

By the time I arrived on Rote, the ritual recitation of these chants was becoming rare. However, among knowledgeable chanters, the memory of these origin chants was preserved and their recitation, though restricted, was considered the highest form of revelation. To avoid ancestral sanctions, those chanters who revealed an origin chant to me would never reveal the “whole” of their knowledge. A portion of the chant would be omitted or elided or the chant might be retold and recited, without fear of retributions, as a mortuary chant. My first publication of a ritual text (1971)—a remarkable mortuary chant from Old Meno that recounts the theft of a child by ritually paired raptors, “hawk and eagle,” the child’s demise, and his eventual return for burial—is a good example of this re-rendering of an origin chant. Years later, I recorded this same chant told as the “origin” of two prominent rock formations—Sua Lai and Batu Hun—that dominate the north coast of Termanu. A key chant—*Suti Solo do Bina Bane*—is another origin chant that can be rendered either as an origin chant or as a mortuary chant (see Fox 2016 for 19 different versions of this chant recited by 17 different master poets).

There is a considerable repertoire of mortuary chants in the traditional canon that were still being performed when I began my research in Termanu. There are chants to fit all social categories: rich and poor, noble and commoner. Each chant has a double-named “chant character,” whose life is recounted generally from birth to death and to whom the deceased is compared. Although there are some general categories of mortuary chant, which rely on the dual figure of “widow and orphan,” most chants are highly specific: for a rich commoner with herds of livestock, for a young girl who dies prematurely, for a young noble who has spent his time chasing women, and so on. In the Termanu repertoire, there are more mortuary chants than origin chants, and these varied chants are incredibly striking and evocative. An important sociological feature of all mortuary chants is that unlike the genre of historical narratives (*tutui tete’ek*), which are owned or controlled by a specific clan or lineage, these chants are an open resource to be told by knowledgeable chanters (*manahelo*) who have acquired their knowledge generally from some older relative—not necessarily a direct genealogical ancestor.

During my first fieldwork in 1965-66 and again during my second fieldwork in 1972-73, I spent most of my time in Termanu and accordingly made my recordings in this domain. I lived briefly in Korbaffo in 1966 but did not manage to record a single recitation. In 1966 near the end of my stay on Rote, however, I was able to record the blind minister/poet, Manoeain, in his home in the domain of Ba’a. More productively, during both periods of long fieldwork, I made excursions to Oe Handi in the southern domain of Thie where I lived with the remarkable poet and teacher, Guru N. D. Pah. Along with his fellow poet, S. Ndun, Guru Pah provided me with a substantial repertoire of Thie’s origin chants, which served for years as my point of comparative reference to the traditions of Termanu.

Rote was politically divided into domains (*nusak*) by the Dutch East India Company beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century. Since the early nineteenth century, there have been eighteen recognized autonomous domains on the island. Each domain celebrates its separate origin and insists that it possesses its own distinct language. In fact, the languages of the domains form a dialect chain from east to west. Neighboring dialects are mutually
intelligible but this intelligibility declines as the distance increases. As often occurs in dialect chains, distant dialects are almost unintelligible to one another. Although my two domain-two dialect (Termanu-Thie) perspective on Rotenese ritual language provided me with valuable insights, I came to recognize that this framework was too limited for a proper study of the diverse ritual language traditions of the island. Therefore, belatedly, on the eve of my formal retirement, I resolved to try and rectify this inadequacy.

“Master Poets, Ritual Masters” Project

With initial funding from the Australian Research Council, I embarked on what I initially conceived as a three year project to identify the master poets in the various domains of Rote and to invite them to Bali for a week long recording session. My suspicion was that, removed from the ritual restrictions imposed by their local situations and in the company of other notable poets, such poets would feel more free to recite. My suspicions proved correct, especially for the most elder of the poets for whom the plane trip above the clouds was both exhilarating and liberating: “like traveling to heaven.” Initially, I traveled to Rote to enlist the first poets: my oldest living friend and informant, Esau Pono, from Termanu, and Ande Ruy, Rote’s most widely acclaimed poet, from Ringgou. These two poets joined subsequent recording sessions, and in the meantime, helped identify and recruit other master poets.

My first recording session on Bali was entirely experimental and included only four poets from Termanu and Ringgou. Subsequent sessions grew larger and more diverse. The second session had six poets, with new poets from Landu and Ringgou. The third session also had six poets, adding new poets from Dengka and Keka.

Fig. 1. The domains of Rote.
By the end of three years, I had just begun. Moreover the recitations in diverse dialects presented a challenge to my understanding, which was based on my knowledge of dialect and traditions of Termanu. Therefore I needed to invite poets, who had already recited in previous years, to come again so that I could work closely with them on their previous recitations. As a result, the fourth session in Bali included poets from Termanu and Ringgou (my old stalwarts, Esau Pono and Ande Ruy), plus a previous poet from Dengka, along with four new poets from the domain of Thie. The fifth session included nine poets, three repeat poets from Termanu, Ringgou, and Dengka plus three new poets from Bilba, two from Korbaffo, and one from Oenale. The seventh session had almost entirely repeat poets, all remarkable master poets from Oenale, Thie, Termanu, Bilba, Ringgou, and Landu, plus one new poet from Oepao. The eighth and ninth sessions included newcomers but concentrated on those master poets who had already provided excellent recitations.

Instead of being able to complete my proposed study in three years, I have had no choice but to continue recording sessions. To date, I have held nine recording sessions on Bali, recording twenty-eight different poets from ten of Rote’s eighteen domains. On the basis of what I have learned, I have tentatively divided the domains into six dialect areas (Fig. 2), several of which would qualify, I believe, as different languages. Over the past decade, I have struggled to translate recitations from all of these dialect areas.

Like all projects, this one was fraught with difficulties. Some poets whom I invited to join the group had to decline on short notice to attend family rituals, or were too ill to travel. Two poets came down with malaria after they arrived in Bali and were in no condition to
recite. A true master poet from Dengka, a man with an enormous repertoire, Simon Lesik, who promised to join our group again for more recordings, died before he could make a return visit to Bali. Other poets from Bilba and Thie also died suddenly. My closest collaborator, Esau Pono, was unable to join us for our ninth recording session and died not long afterwards in his home in Termanu.

However, though this project is still incomplete and with many loose ends, it has generated an enormous collection of diverse recordings. Although I have not yet been able to translate all these recitations and have many questions of interpretation about them, this effort has given me a much fuller comprehension of the tradition of Rotenese ritual language and the developments that are occurring in different local areas where the tradition continues.

**Defining the Contours of the Rotenese Ritual Language Tradition**

All Rotenese ritual recitations can be linked to the performance of particular rituals. The most important of these recitations, which I have described as “origin chants,” are associated with particular rituals that have ceased to be performed almost everywhere on Rote. Previously each domain held an Origin Celebration (variously referred to as *Hus*, *Sio*, or *Limbe*). The practice of holding these celebrations came to an end in most parts of Rote in the first half of the twentieth century. They are still performed each year in only one small village area in the domain of Dengka. Similarly, all of the major rituals of the Rotenese that initiated and accompanied the building of traditional houses, the planting of rice and millet, the processes of weaving and tie-dying, along with various events of the life cycle have also ceased to be performed. Hence all of the origin chants that are currently recited are based on memories of a ritual world that has passed. Only marriage and funeral ceremonies, on occasion, continue to preserve elements of previous performance and recitation.

During my first periods of fieldwork, I occasionally witnessed the traditional performance of some of the life cycle rituals. I also sponsored two commemorative mortuary ceremonies at which recitations occurred, but the second of these ceremonies, some ten years after the first, was a curious adaptation of the earlier performance. I have argued in several of my publications that the Rotenese are rather indifferent ritualists: speaking is tantamount to performance and saying that such and such has occurred is sufficient to making it so (see for example Fox 1979:147-51 and 1988:174-92).

Hence there is a certain paradox, especially among Rotenese poets: for the most part, they remain intensely committed to the remembrance of a traditional oral canon that is no longer a functional part of their everyday ritual life. Yet knowledge of this canon—or rather, the belief that there is such an ancestral canon that must be preserved—remains fundamental to a perception of Rotenese life and identity.

As a consequence, there is an insistent refrain in Rotenese ritual recitations:

*Ndele mafandendelek*  “Remember, do remember

*Ma neda masanenedak*  And keep in mind, do keep in mind…”
The Formation of a Second Canon

In the meanwhile, the tradition of ritual language has not remained static. It has taken on new dimensions and is in the process of creating a new canon—one that is also focused on redefined “origins.”

Rotenese nobility began converting to Christianity in the early part of the eighteenth century. They adopted the use of Malay as a means of communicating with the Dutch; they established local Malay schools in a majority of their domains, and they took on the use of the Malay Bible as their primary source of learning. As Christians, they claimed equality with the Dutch.

For a period of over a hundred and fifty years, schooling, literacy in Malay, and adherence to Christianity were inseparably bound together. Only toward the end of the nineteenth century—and largely as a result of the efforts of a single Dutch missionary, G. J. H. Le Grand, who arrived on Rote in 1890—were the strict bonds of Christian literacy in Malay undone. Le Grand came to the realization that after 170 years of Christianity on the island, less than a fifth of the population was Christian, and even for them, Christianity was little more than what he called “Sunday apparel” (Le Grand 1900:373). He initiated the use of ritual language as a vehicle for preaching Christianity and devoted much of his effort to teaching a new generation of Rotenese church ministers to use ritual language in their preaching.

Change was slow, but by the 1920s and 1930s some of Rote’s leading poets were Christian ministers. Churches became the venue for ritual language recitations. As such, it was often difficult to disengage the Christian elements from those of the older tradition in ritual language recitations. Many of Rote’s finest and most fluent poets became eminent preachers, even without formal Christian theological training.

The entanglement of the two traditions was initially somewhat perplexing for me. During my first fieldwork, I gathered two superb examples of ritual language from the blind poet-minister, L. Manoeain, when I visited him in Ba’a: one was a beautiful version of Suti Solo do Bina Bane; the other was a long recitation on possible life-pathways marked out on the branches of the banyan tree. Only after I had translated it and considered it carefully did I realize that it was a Christian admonition in a wholly “traditional” mode. Peu Malesi was one of the first poets of Termanu from whom I recorded a number of ritual chants. One day, during my second field trip in 1972-73, he came to recite for me the chant on the origin of death. Most of those who heard him took his recitation as a revelation of traditional knowledge; only one school teacher recognized it as a retelling of the Biblical narrative of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.3

In many of my publications, I have pointed to the Christian dimension that has been grafted onto Rotenese ritual traditions (for example, Fox 1982, 1983, and 2014). This transformation has involved the “borrowing” of numerous recognizable formulaic phrases and

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3The majority of Rotenese poets are versatile. Samuel Ndun from Thie was one of the most remarkable, utterly fluent poets I ever recorded. He, too, was a local preacher. I remember overhearing his initial question at a wedding at which he had been asked to perform: “What do you want, a Christian or traditional (that is, coconut) ceremony?” I discuss and illustrate this formation of a Christian canon at greater length in three chapters (Fox 2014:317-64).
themes whose metaphorical meanings have been extended to new contexts, but it has also involved the creation of a considerable body of new “theological terms” in strict parallelism. This theological lexicon is still in the process of creation, and its creation is occurring in different dialects of Rotenese. Hence there is no standard lexicon; rather, there are many family resemblances among lexical elements. In approaching this lexicon, it is best to identify terms by domain dialect and poet.

**The New Theological Lexicon in Rotenese Ritual Language**

The following lines, quoted from the poet L. Manoeain’s description of life’s journey to heaven, provide an idea of a recitation in this new canon. I have translated these as literally as possible to retain the sense of the metaphorical parallelism:

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Te dala sodak nde ndia
Ma eno molek nde ndia
Fo nini o mu losa kapa-sula soda daen
Ma mu nduku pa-dai molek oen.
Dae sodak nai ndia
Ma oe molek nai na
Fo o hambu soda sio
Ma o hambu mole falu
Ma dua lolo ei
Ma kala ifa lima
Fo ifa limam no limam
Ma lolo eim no eim.
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For this is the road of well-being
And this is the path of peace
To bring you to the buffalo-horn land of well-being
And to the flesh and bone water of peace.
The land of well-being is there
And the water of peace is there
For you will find the well-being of nine
And you will find the peace of eight
And with legs outstretched
And with arms cradled on the lap
Cradle your arms upon your arms
And stretch your legs over your legs.

In these lines, heaven is referred to as “the buffalo-horn land of well-being // the flesh and bone water of life”; or more simply, it is “the land of well-being // the water of life” where one finds “the well-being of nine” and “peace of eight.” The phrases are all adaptations of dyadic (that is, parallel) sets of the kind that regularly occur in traditional origin chants: *kapa-sula // pa-dui*: “buffalo-horn” // ”flesh-bone”; *dae // oe*: “land” // ”water”; *sio // falu*: “nine” // ”eight” (these numbers signify wholeness or completion). On the other hand, the paired terms *soda // mole*: “well-being” // ”peace” are intimately connected with Christianity—they are in fact used as a greeting among Christians—and do not appear in “traditional” origin chants. Use of these terms is a clear sign of a recitation in a Christian mode.

The poet Esau Pono from Termanu prefers to refer to Heaven as *Nusa Soda ma Ingu Tema: Bate Falu, Tema Sio*: “The Domain of Well-Being and Land of Fullness of Eightfold Abundance and Ninefold Fullness.” In describing the Biblical creator, the poet Yulius Iu from Landu speaks of:

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Tou Mana Sura Poi a
Ma Tate Mana Adu Lai a
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The Inscriptor of the Heights
And the Creator of the Heavens
By contrast, the poet Ande Ruy from Ringgou describes the Biblical creator as follows:

*Tate Mana Sura Bula*  
*Do Tou Mana Adu Ledo*  

The Inscriber of the Moon  
Or the Creator of the Sun


Christ, for example, is the *Mana-Soi ma Mana-Tefa*: “He who freed and He who paid, that is, “Savior and Redeemer.” This designation is based on the pairing of the verb, *soi*: “to open, to let loose, to free” and the verb *tefa*: “to pay.” Together as a formal dyadic set this pair attempts to capture something of the Christian idea of redemption.

There are numerous expressions used to refer to Christ. Virtually all of them are metaphorically dense and theologically complex. Many of these expressions, which are now taken for granted in ritual language, require careful exegesis.

Christ, for example, can be referred to as *Maleo Lain Pua-na // Masafali Poin Tua-na*: “The Heavenly Lord’s Areca Palm [son] // The High God’s Lontar Palm [son].” Or using another botanic idiom, Christ can be referred to as *Huni ma-lapa litik // Tefu ma-nggona lilok*: “The Banana Stalk with copper blossoms // The Sugarcane with golden sheaths.” Using yet another botanic expression, Christ’s crucifixion can be compared to the withering of taro and yam (*tale // fia*), which is likened to a “temporary death” before these plants revive. Even Golgotha, the place of Christ’s crucifixion, is given a specific dual ritual name, *Lete Langaduik // Puku Pakulima*: “Hill of the Skull” // “Mount of the Nailed Hands.”

There is great variety, and considerable ingenuity, in the creation of this new theological lexicon, but it is always in strict parallelism and invariably draws on traditional formulaic expressions for its effect.

**Older Origin Chants and the Creation of New Christian Origin Narratives**

All origin recitations concern relations between the Sun and Moon, *Ledo Holo // Bula Kai*, and the Lords of the Sea and Ocean, the Shark and Crocodile, who are known by the exalted titles *Danga Lena Liun // Mane Tua Sain*: “Chief Hunter of the Ocean” // “Great Lord of the Sea.” Each specific recitation recounts an episode in the account of these relations that gave rise to the cultural objects that form the basis of Rotenese life: the knowledge of fire and of cooked food, the seeds of rice and millet and of other crops, tools for building the house and the equipment for tie-dying and weaving—including the knowledge of the patterning of cloth.

The Sun and Moon have numerous children, all of whom are identifiable by the inclusion of “Sun” and “Moon” (*Ledo* and *Bula*, respectively) in their names. One of the most important origin recitations recounts the initial encounter between *Mandeti Ledo // Patola Bula*, sons of the Sun and Moon, and the Lords of the Sea and Ocean. They encounter each other in a hunt for wild pig // civet cat. When they have succeeded in their hunt, they argue whether to hold
the sacrificial feast of these animals in the Heavens or the Sea. In the end, the Lords of the Sea prevail and they all descend into the Sea.

When Patola Bulan and Mandeti Ledo descend into the sea, they discover there the use of fire and the cooking of meat with rice and millet. This is described in a recitation that I recorded from the poet Peu Malesi in 1965. A brief excerpt from this long narrative is as follows:

Besak-ka dilu leu liun dalek
Ma leo neu sain dalek
Ma leu Man’tua Sain lon-na
Ma Danga Lena Liun uman-na.
Nana-sini kea louk
Ma nana-heu hai iko.
De na-ndela liti data
Do na-sa’a engge oe.
Boe ma ala dilu doli nai liun
De finsa kue nai liun
Ma tutu lutu nai sain
De fati bafi nai sain.
La’a te feo filu
Ma linu te poti latu.
De leni fe Ledo Holo
Ma leni fe Bula Kai.
Besak-ka Bula Kai na’a nita
Ma Ledo Holo ninu nita.
Boe ma nae:
“Ladak ia nai be
Ma lolek ia nai be?”
Boe ma lae:
“Ladak ia nai liun
Ma lolek ia nai sain.”

In another telling of this origin chant, also recorded in 1965, but from Old Meno, the poet Stefanus Adulanu describes the discovery of the lontar palm juice, which they take with the cooked food to the Sun and Moon (in this version, however, the sons of the Sun and Moon are identified as Pala Ledo // Ndu Bulan). Meno then goes on to describe what occurs in Heaven when the Sun and Moon have eaten and drunk the food from the sea. In this version, when they have eaten, the Sun and Moon propose making war upon the Lords of the Sea to obtain tasty cooked food and sweet lontar juice, but they are counseled against this idea by their sons:

De Bulan no Ledo
La’a ma linu lita.

The Moon (Bulan) and Sun (Ledo)

Eat and drink and they see.
Instead of war, a marriage is proposed with the sea. Here, however, versions differ significantly. In Old Meno’s telling, the Sun and Moon marry with the woman *Lole Liuk “Goodness of the Ocean,”* and the girl *Lada Saik, “Tastiness of the Sea.”* This pair brings a rich dowry, including the tools (ax and adze) for building the house. In Malesi’s version (and other versions I have gathered), the Sun and Moon give one of their daughters to marry with the Lords of the Sea. In these versions, there occurs a long passage on the negotiation of bridewealth. The following passage is from Malesi’s recitation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Tok Pisin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Besak-ka ala fifino neu liun</td>
<td>Now they make a way to the ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De tu neu liun dale</td>
<td>To wed within the ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ala lelete neu sain</td>
<td>And they bridge a path to the sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De sao neu sain dalek.</td>
<td>To marry within the sea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Besak-ka ana sao Danga Lena Liun</td>
<td>Now she marries Danga Lena Liun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma tu Mane Tua Sain</td>
<td>And she weds Mane Tua Sain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boe ala doko-doe fæe-tena</td>
<td>They demand a payment of livestock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ala tai-boni beli-batun.</td>
<td>And they claim a bridewealth of gold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De ala fe lilo ma-langa menge</td>
<td>They give a gold chain with a snake’s head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ala fe kapa ma-ao foek.</td>
<td>And they give buffalo with pied-white bodies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te ala bei doko-doe</td>
<td>But still they continue to demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ala bei tai-boni.</td>
<td>And still they continue to claim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Besak-ka ala fe bo pa’a-bela</td>
<td>Now they give the bore-tool and flat-chisel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ala fe taka tala-la.</td>
<td>And they give the axe and the adze.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ala fe sipa aba-do</td>
<td>They give the plumb line markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ala fe funu ma-leo.</td>
<td>And they give the turning drill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te hu ala bei doko-doe</td>
<td>But still they continue to demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ala bei tai-boni.</td>
<td>And still they continue to claim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boe-ma ala fe nesu maka-boka buik</td>
<td>They give the mortar whose thudding shakes its base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma alu mata-fia tongok.</td>
<td>And the pestle whose thrust blisters the hand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te ala bei doko-doe</td>
<td>But still they continue to demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ala bei tai-boni.</td>
<td>And still they continue to claim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Besak-ka ala fe kutu-ana nau-poin</td>
<td>Then they give the little flint-set with loose tinder grass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All versions of this origin chant—whatever the direction of marriage—continue with the building of the house. This is seen as a central creative activity in Rotenese culture. Although I have heard parts of this chant recited during a bridewealth payment ceremony, it is probable that the recitation of this chant, in some form or other, was once critical to the building of the house. This particular origin chant provides the background to other episodes that involve relations between the Sun and Moon and the Lords of the Sea. As an account of origins, it is fundamentally different from various Christian origin narratives and, in particular, from the telling of the Genesis narrative.

Not surprisingly, the chief origin chant now recited among the Rotenese is that of Genesis but, as in all oral cultures, the telling of Genesis among the Rotenese varies from poet to poet. In some instances, it is a richly metaphoric interpretation of Genesis with curious cultural interpolations, while in other instances, it is a relatively close retelling of the Biblical account.

Two illustrative recitations follow (see Fox 2014a:317-41). The first of these is by Ande Ruy, an extraordinarily capable poet from the domain of Ringgou (but not someone who would, in Rotenese terms, be considered a preacher). I have selected three passages from a long recitation that continues on to the creation of Adam to whom he gives the ritual name, **Tou Manupui Dulu // Tate O’oro Laka.** (The name is obtuse and translates literally as “The Man who is the Manupui-bird of the East” // “The Boy who is the O’oro-bird of the Headland.” The name implies someone at the dawn of time.)

### 1. The Initial Creation: Darkness to Light

*Hida bei leo hata na*  
At a time long ago

*Ma data bei leo dona*  
And at a time since past

*Bei iu-iu kima lou*  
Still dark as the inside of a clam

*Ma bei hatu-hatu data feo.*  
Still gloom wrapped all round.

*Ma lua bei taa*  
And Sunlight was not yet

*Ma makaledo bei taa*  
And Daylight was not yet

*Ma bei pela oe leleu*  
Still surface water throughout

*Bei tasi oe lala.*  
Still the water of sea surrounding.

*Ma tate mana sura bula*  
And the Inscriber of the Moon

*Fo nai Tema Sio*  
In the Fullness of Nine

*Do tou mana adu ledo*  
Or the Creator of the Sun
Fo nai Bate Falu
In the Abundance of Eight
Bei ise-ise leo apa
Still isolated as a buffalo
Ma bei mesa-mesa leo manu.
Still lonely as a chicken.
Bei iku nonoi
Still in the heights
Dula Dale namaleu
The Patterner of the Heart comes
Bei malalao
Still hovering above
Do Malala Funa bei leu-leu
Or the Former of the Core still comes
Do bei lala-lala rae
Or still hovering over the earth
Pela oe leleu
Moving over the water
Do tasi oe lalama.
The waters of the sea extending.
Ma Tate mana sura bula
The Inscriber of the Moon
Do Tou mana adu ledo
Or the Creator of the Sun
Lole hara na neu
Raises forth His voice
Fo hara eke na neu
The leaden voice comes forth
Ma selu dasi na neu
Lifts forth his words
Fo dasi lilo na neu, nae:
Golden words go forth, saying:
“Makaledo a dadi ma
“Let there be sunlight
Ma malua a mori.”
And let daylight appear.”

II. The Creation of the Earth

Selu dasi na neu
He lifts forth his words
Ma lole hara na neu
And raises forth his voice
Fo hara eke na neu
The leaden voice comes forth
“Dadi mai Batu Poi a”
“Let there be the Rock’s Point”
Ma dasi lilo na neu
And the golden words come forth:
“Mori mai Dae Bafo a.”
“Let there appear the Earth’s Surface.”
Boe ma mana mori, ara mori
What appears, appears
Ma mana dadi, ara dadi.
And what comes forth, comes forth.
Fo biti ne ara dadi do mori
Plants come forth or appear
Fo mori reni hu ana
Appear with tiny trunks
Ma dadi reni hu ina.
And come forth with large trunks.
Boe ma feli nade neu
So He gives them their name
Ma beka bon, rae:
And their aroma, saying:
“Hu mana rerebi do
“Trunks that grow thick
Do mana sasape ara
Leaves that hang down
Fo rabuna bitala
That flowers bud forth
Ma raboa bebeku
And that fruit droop
Fo buna nara, mafa modo
Flowers of half-ripe green
Ma boa nara, latu lai
And fruit of over-ripe yellow
Fo ono rule Dae Bafo a
Coming down on to the earth
Ma refa feo Batu Poi a.”
And descending round the world.”
This recitation of Genesis is suffused with expressions from the traditional canon. One striking example is the reference to the Creator as “isolated as a buffalo” // “lonely as a chicken”—a common ritual language phrase. It also includes references to the creation of particular fish species, Moka Hulu and Dusu Lake, that are ritually significant in recitations from the traditional canon. These ritual fish are required for the performance of the annual origin ceremony after the harvest. As a recitation, this rendering of Genesis resonates with older origin chants.

For comparison, I quote passages from an equally long recitation by the poet Yulius Iu from the domain of Landu, who is considered as much a poet as a preacher. In fact, he is a lay preacher in the Evangelical Church on Rote. His recitation is also suffused with expressions from the traditional cannon. The passages I quote tell of the creation of the world and then of the creation of first Adam, then Eve, and then of God’s injunction to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Fox 2014a:334-36):

I. The Initial Creation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Au tui ia nana, nae:</td>
<td>I tell of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tui dae ina dadadi</td>
<td>Tell of the creation of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masosa na le mau lu a</td>
<td>Its beginning and commencement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tou Mana Sura Poi a</td>
<td>The Inscriber of the Heights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma Tate Mana Adu Lai a</td>
<td>And the Creator of the Heavens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adu neme lalai no dae ina.</td>
<td>Created heaven and earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boema adu do tao nalan</td>
<td>Then He created and made them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tehu bei kiu-kiu kima rou  
Ma bei hatu-hatu do tafeo  
Bei nafaroe dea ei  
Bei nafadama latu lima.  
Basa boema adu nala malua a  
Ma riti ndala makaledo a  
De malua nala dulu  
Ma makaledo nala laka.  
Basa boema adu do tao nala  
Tada nala oe mamis a no tasi oe.  
Basa boema adu do tao nala  
Adu do tao basa-basa  
Hu marerebi ma ara ma do masesepe a.  
Basa boema adu do tao nala  
Malua a do makaledo a  
lalah bula a, fandu ara, ma ledo a.

But still there was darkness like the inside of a shell  
And still there was gloom all round  
As if still groping in the legs of a fish weir  
Still fumbling in the arms of a fish trap.  
When he created the brightness  
And generated daylight  
The sun rose in the east  
And the daylight appeared at the head.  
When this had been created and made  
He separated fresh water and sea water.  
When this had been created and made  
He created and made all  
Tree plants and leaved plants.  
When this had been created and made  
There was daylight and sunshine  
That is the moon, the stars and the sun.

II. The Creation of Adam and then the Creation of Eve

Basa boema adu tao  
Laihenda daebafo a  
Ma hataholi batu poi.  
Adu tao nala Adam  
Tehu tou a kise apa  
Ma tate a mesa manu.  
De neu fai esa nai ndia  
Ma ledo dua nai ma  
Boema Adam suku dodoko lakan  
Ma ana peu ailunu lima.  
Boema Tou Mana Adu Lai a  
Ma Tate mana Sura Poi a  
Neu leo de hai na Adam ai usu kise na.  
Boema adu na neu lahenda  
Ma tao na leo hataholi.  
Boema mon nai Adam neu  
De neu de nahara ma nadas  
“Nai ia nana hu nata ndia na so  
Ma ndana nasarai na ndia so  
Dadi neu sao uma a leo  
Ma mori neu mo tu lo a leo.  
De leo matalolole  
Ma iku matabebesa  
De losa duas

Then He created and made  
A person on the earth  
And a human in the world.  
He created Adam  
But he was a man like a lone buffalo  
And a boy like a solitary chicken.  
Then on a particular day  
And at a certain time  
Adam fell asleep  
And napped with his hands as a pillow.  
Then the Creator of the Heavens  
And the Inscriber of the Heights  
Went and took from Adam a rib from his side.  
Then He created a human  
And made a person.  
Then He brought her to Adam  
Then he spoke and said  
“Here is the proper trunk  
And branch to lean upon  
To become a wife in the house  
And to live as household spouse.  
Such is a proper life  
And an ordered living.  
So that (you) both
### III. The Creator’s Injunction to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rotenese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tehu, mai fai esa nai ndia</td>
<td>But on a certain day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boema ledo dua nai na</td>
<td>And at a particular time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boema Tou Mana Adu Lai a</td>
<td>The Creator of the Heavens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma Tate Mana Sura Poi a</td>
<td>And the Inscriber of the Heights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana hara no heke ne</td>
<td>He spoke with binding command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma dasi no bara tada</td>
<td>And he gave voice to a prohibition:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“De basa-basa hata”</td>
<td>“All things growing there”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nai oka ma nai dea dale ia</td>
<td>In that garden and in that precinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bole upa ma tesa tei a</td>
<td>You may eat to your full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma minu a tama dale a</td>
<td>And drink to your satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te noi ai esa nai oka talada</td>
<td>But there is a tree in the middle of the garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nai ia nade ai pala keka</td>
<td>Its name is the Keka tree of prohibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma batu ndilu ndao.</td>
<td>And the Ndao stone of regulation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boso tai lima</td>
<td>Do not lay your hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ei na neu.</td>
<td>Nor your foot upon it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De fai bea o tai lima ma neu</td>
<td>On the day you put your hand on it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ho dua kemi upa sama-sama</td>
<td>So that you both drink together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma mia sama-sama</td>
<td>And eat together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sono neu ko fai esa na ndia</td>
<td>Then on that day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma ledo dua nai na</td>
<td>And at that time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te lu mata mori</td>
<td>Tears will grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma pinu idu a dadi neu ko emi dua</td>
<td>And snot will emerge for both of you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dadi neu tu e tei</td>
<td>Becoming a heart’s regret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma mori neu sale dale...”</td>
<td>And growing into inner disappointment…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These passages are a good illustration of the rendering of Genesis in the Christian canon. The narrative is recognizable but the parallel language, and indeed most of the imagery, harks back to an older tradition. In this version, it is Adam who is like “a lone buffalo” // “a solitary chicken” until he is presented with Eve. Rotenese traditional religious practices were based on the “union of rock and tree.” Hence the tree in the garden of Eden is transformed into “the Keka tree of prohibition” and “the Ndao stone of regulation.” The language, for the most part, is that of strict canonical parallelism.
Creative Additions to the Canon of New Origins

The Bible is not the only source of new narratives of origin. Equally prominent are recitations that recount the origins of Christianity on Rote. In 1905, in his collection of Rottineesch Verhalen, probably gathered before the turn of the century, the Dutch linguist J. C. G. Jonker published a seven-page tale of how certain Rotenese rulers sailed to Batavia and purchased the knowledge of Christianity with a payment of thirty slaves, acquiring at the same time the knowledge of how to distill gin. This tale, which has more than a century’s historical provenance, has itself been “distilled” and disseminated through most of the island as another crucial origin narrative in the new Christian canon.

The narrative has the ritual name, Sanga Ndolu ma Tunga Lela: “To Seek Counsel and To Stalk Wisdom.” Versions of this narrative have now become part of the repertoire of poets in most domains. As an illustration, I have selected several short passages of this chant from a version that formed part of the Yubileum Liturgy of the Evangelical Church of Timor performed on October 1, 1997 in the village of Fiulain in the domain of Thie, the place credited with the first Christian congregation on Rote.

In this origin narrative, the three Rotenese rulers from the domains of Thie, Loleh and Ba’a are identified by the ritual names of their respective domains. (The whole of the Rotenese landscape, including all of its domains, have well-known dual names.) Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Dula Dalek // Le’u Teik “Patterner of the Spirit” // “Inscriber of the Heart,” these rulers conceive the idea of a perahu (“boat”) that will take them to Batavia. They sail to Batavia and confront Dutch officials, lena-lena nai ndia // lesi-lesi nai na “the Great Ones there” // “Superior Ones there,” and announce that they have come Tui Sodak ma Bau Molek, that is, seeking “the Tui-tree of Well-being and the Bau-tree of Peace” to plant and sow on Rote and on Kale.

Although the Tui and Bau trees are prominent botanic images in the traditional canon, here in this recitation, the Tui-tree and Bau-tree are invoked as botanic icons for the knowledge of Christianity. As such, this recitation, like many Christian narratives, involves a reinterpretation and reestablishment of older imagery in a new guise.

Having obtained these trees, the three rulers return to Rote and begin a process of planting. What follows thereafter in this recitation is a long topogeny—a recitation of specific (village) place names—that begins in the domain of Thie and extends throughout the island.

This “topogeny of the planting of Christianity on Rote” follows closely the topogeny of the planting of rice and millet in the traditional canon of origins. Here I quote only a short segment of this long topogeny:

Sanga Ndolu ma Tunga Lela

Faik esa manunin On one particular day
Ma ledo dua mateben And on a second certain time
Mame dua lakabua Two rulers gather together
Ma boko telu laesa And three lords gather as one
Lakabua fo lamanene Gather together to listen
Ma laesa for lamania
And gather as one to hear
Benga neme Dula Dalek
The word of the Patterner of the Spirit
Ma dasi neme Le’u Teik.
And the voice of the Inscriber of the Heart.
“Ita lakabua sanga ndolu
“We gather together to search for knowledge
Ma ita laesa tunga lela
And we gather as one to seek wisdom
Nai Batafia ma Matabi.”
In Batavia and Matabi.”
Mane dua ma boko telu
The two rulers and three lords
Neme Tada Muli ma Lene Kona
From Tada Muli and Lene Kona [Thie]
Neme Ninga Lada ma Heu Hena
From Ninga Lada and Heu Hena [Loleh]
Neme Pena Bua ma Maka Lama
From Pena Bua and Maka Lama [Ba’a]
Boe ma ala lakandolu tona ofan
They conceive of a sailing boat
Ma ala lalela balu paun.
And they think of a sailing perahu.
Tehu latane:
But they ask:
“Ita fe tona nade hata?
“What name will we give the boat?
Ma ita fe balu tamo be?”
And what designation will we give the perahu?”
De ala fe nade Sanga Ndolu
They give the name: “To Seek Counsel”
Ma ala fe tamo Tunga Lela.
And they give the designation: “To Stalk Wisdom”
De malole nai Lote
This is good on Rote
Ma mandak nai Kale.
And proper on Kale.
Faik esa matetuk
On one determined day
Ma ledo esa matemak
And at one appropriate time
De ala laba lala tona ofa
They climb upon the boat
Ma ala tinga lala balu paun.
And they board the perahu.
Ala hela tuku telu-telu
They pull the oars three by three
Ma ala kale kola dua-dua.
And shake the oar-rings two by two.
Ala pale uli titidi
They guide the splashing rudder
De leuma ala la kukulu
They go and they maneuver the flapping sail
De leufo sanga ndolu sio
They go to seek thorough counsel
Ma tunga lela falu
And to stalk full wisdom
Nai Batafia daen
In Batavia’s land
Ma Matabi oen.
And Matabi’s water.
Losa meti Batafia daen
Arriving at the tidal waters of Batavia’s land
Ma nduku tasi Matabi oen
And reaching the sea of Matabi’s water
Ala leu tonga lololo
They go to meet
Ma ala leu nda lilima
And they go to encounter
Lena-Lena nai ndia
The Great Ones there
Ma Lesi-Lesi nai na, lae:
And the Superior Ones there, saying:
“Ami mai neme Lote Daen
“We come from Lote’s Land
Ma ami mai neme Kale Oen
And we come from Kale’s Waters
Sanga Tui Sodak fo tane
Seeking the Tui-tree of Well-being to plant
Ma tunga Bau Molek fo sele
And stalking the Bau-tree of Peace to sow
Nai Lote Daen ma Kale Oen.”
On Lote’s Land and Kale’s Waters.”
Hapu Tui Sodak ma Bau Molek
They obtain the Tui of Well-being and Bau of Peace.
The Beginnings of a “National” Canon

As Christian ceremonies have come to replace traditional ceremonies, so too ritual language of the island has followed suit. Since Independence poets have been called to recite at national ceremonies in addition to Christian ceremonies. For these ceremonies, particularly the annual Independence celebrations on August 17, the beginnings of a new canon are taking further shape. As in the traditional canon as well as the Christian canon, these recitations must have an essential “narrative” component.

As an illustration, I quote from a recitation that I gathered from my closest friend and informant, Esau Pono, who began as a preacher but, as he grew older, came to be regarded as Termanu’s most respected poet. It is a recitation in honor of Sukarno and Hatta, the founding fathers of independent Indonesia—a ritual chant that would be appropriate for August 17 celebrations. It describes a struggle not against the Dutch but against the Japanese, who are given the dual ritual name Funu Feo Doko // Fuji Ama Lete. Further, it uses a device common in many mortuary chants when the deceased is explicitly compared and identified with a specific named chant character. In this recitation, Sukarno and Hatta are compared to the chant character, Lopa Boe // Mau Boe. The narrative tells of their physical opposition to the Japanese. Much of the chant is filled with exhortations to fellow Rotenese to rise up and join in the struggle to create a prosperous Indonesia. Here I quote just one of several such exhortations in the recitation:
Hida bei leo fan
Ma data bei leo dona
Ita bei ta fiti-fulik
Do ita ta selu soek
Hu ndia de ita nana lumu esek
Do ita nana tuni ndeni
Neme Funu Feo Doke mai
Ma neme Fuji Ama Lete mai.
Te hu main amanga Bung Karno
Do to’onga Bung Hata
Fo sama leo Lopa Boe
Fo Lopa buna tetein
Te Lopa malanga sak
Ma deta leo Mau Boe
Fo Mau ba’u nanasun,
Te Mau matene besik.
Ma adu neu sisilo.
De silo feon tenen ta naka bebe
Poka ndulen paun ta ma lini.
De ala tati mila ana le
Ma ala lo’o o ana fui
De tao neu kokouk
Ma lele poum neu lungu langam
Fo lungu langa fafa’en
Fo ma ue ma le’di
Fo ta fo’a ita nusan
Do ita namon ia,
Fo na napu ta-ta
Do na lole seku-seku
Losa nete na neu.

At a time past
And at a time long ago
We did not yet shoot marbles
Nor target the coconut
Because of this we were pressed
Or we were put down
By the coming of Funu Feo Doke
And the coming of Fuji Ama Lete.
Then came my father, Bung Karno
Or my mother’s brother, Bung Hata
Just like Lopa Boe
Lopa with a flower belly
But Lopa had a head of stone
Just like Mau Boe
Mau with the swollen face
But Mau had ribs of steel.
He was not fearful of guns near his chest
He was not afraid of shots at his thighs.
They cut pieces of river bamboo
And they hewed pieces of wild bamboo
Then made them into bows
And formed them into rifles.
They shot at Funu Feo Doke
Or they fired at Fuji Ama Lete.
They attacked Funu Feo Doke
Or they fell upon Fuji Ama Lete
So that we would not be pressed
And we would not be oppressed.
So roll up your shirt to your arms
To your elbows
And raise your sarong to your knees
To the knee caps
Working and tapping
Let us raise our land
Or our harbor here
Whose excellence continues
Or whose beauty carries on
To this period forward.

Unlike recitations in the Christian canon, this patriotic poem relies on dyadic sets that accord with the traditional canon. It does not have to introduce new dyadic sets for theological purposes. The names Bung Karo // Bung Hata are appropriately presented as dual names and
names for the Japanese, Funu Feo Doko // Fuji Ama Lete, also follow traditional naming patterns. (Fuji Ama Lete alludes to Mt. Fuji, that is, “Mountain Father Fuji”).

Conclusions

I have tried to present here a brief case study of a ritual tradition of composition based on strict canonical parallelism. When I first arrived on the island of Rote in 1965, I was told with some regret that I had come too late to be able to record several of the greatest poets of the past. Despite my late arrival, I have never in the course of nearly fifty years of recording failed to find master poets of enormous ability. My renewed efforts since 2006 in the study of this tradition have brought me into close contact with a great number of new poets from different parts of the island, some of whom I would not hesitate to call true masters of Rotenese parallel composition. In fact, I would argue that some of the recitations I recorded as recently as 2014 are as well composed as the recitations that I first recorded in 1965.

In a recent publication, Master Poets, Ritual Masters (2016), I examine seventeen recitations of what is considered the same ritual composition. I gathered these various recitations over a period of fifty years from sixteen separate poets from different dialect areas. The composition that I focused on for this comparison, entitled Suti Solo do Bina Bane, recounts the journey of two shells—a nautilus and baler shell—that are cast out of the sea onto land and make their way through a human landscape before, in most versions, returning once more to the sea. The composition is intended as an allegory of the human condition. Certainly, judging from these recitations, some of the present master poets are as clear, fluent, and consistent—and possibly as versatile—as their predecessors whom I recorded years earlier. As I have indicated in this essay, however, the subjects of many present day compositions, though steeped in the language of the past, are new creations intended to fit different ceremonial contexts. Over the past century, an entirely new Christian canon has been created and a new lexicon of theological pairs has been added to an earlier dyadic lexicon. A new “national” canon has also begun to appear. The formulation of these new canons is an achievement in local creativity.

I have now held ten recording sessions on Bali between 2006 and 2017, and have recorded 28 different poets during this time. What has impressed me most about the poets whom I have recorded is their diversity and individuality—they come from different backgrounds, different ritual communities, and different dialect areas; they share much in common, yet each has his own personal style. A good number of the best poets are equally capable in reciting from both traditional and Christian canons. Some of the true masters insist on reciting only from the traditional canon, while one particularly fluent poet-preacher insists on reciting only from the Christian canon and endeavors to produce recitations that paraphrase specific passages in the Bible.

Surprising, too, is the fact that ritual recitations remain oral recitations despite the consultation and occasional readings from the Bible that generally mark the ceremonial beginnings and endings of our recording sessions. The Rotenese are one of the oldest literate populations in eastern Indonesia. They began using the Malay Bible in the early eighteenth
century, and by the nineteenth century they had created the most extensive schooling system in
the Timor area (Fox 1977b). Despite this intimacy with writing, ritual language remains an
oral tradition. I discovered two poets, whom I recorded, who kept simple school notebooks
that they consulted. One notebook had more genealogies than it had ritual texts. Interestingly,
evertheless, both notebooks contained abbreviated versions of recitations in their repertoire. The
poets used their notebooks as a kind of aide-memoire. The oral recitations that they produced
were far more extended than what their notebooks contained.

Perhaps even more surprising is that the “ritual” recitations of the Rotenese traditional
canon have, for as long as I have been recording them, been largely disassociated with the
performances with which they were supposed to be associated, such as house-building, first-
planting, weaving and dyeing, and the various specific annual “origin” ceremonies that were
once conducted in each domain. Instead, these recitations are told as revelation, ancient
knowledge of the first beginnings. Their ritual settings may have disappeared but they
continue to be valued and recited.

This situation stands in contrast to other traditions of ritual speech in eastern Indonesia,
such as those on Sumba, for example, where the use of ritual language is intimately associated
with particular performances (Kuipers 1990 and 1998; Keane 1997). As a consequence, the use
of ritual language on Sumba seems to be in decline as the social performance of ceremonies
gradually recedes.

While it is possible to glimpse aspects of the development of the Christian canon since
the end of the nineteenth century, we have no record of the even longer (almost 300 year)
accommodation of the traditional canon to the presence of Christianity on Rote. It is possible
to speculate that the traditional canon came to be treated as a local equivalent to the Christian
scriptures—to be preserved as a powerful sacred knowledge rather than as performative
recipes.

A Postscript on Comparative Parallelism: Rotenese to Tetun

Even as the recording of Rotenese poets is coming to an end, the next phase of my
study of regional parallelism has begun. In 2013 at the eighth of our recording sessions, I
invited three Tetun speakers to join us, two of whom were master poets from Wehali, the ritual
centre of the Tetun-speaking people on Timor. Tetun is one of the languages closely related to
Rotenese.

The Tetun poets fit into the group with consummate ease and took part with the
Rotenese poets in comparing particular dyadic sets, many of which they shared in common.
They grasped one of the underlying notions of the Rote project, which was to bring poets from
different domains and dialect areas to compare their recitations. The recitations they provided
for their part were considerable!

On their return to Timor, these poets contacted me through a spokesman and asked me
to convene another recording session with more master poets from different Tetun dialect
areas. They promised to select their contemporaries beginning with poets from the dialect to
the north of Wehali. I urged them to be patient, explaining that I needed to conclude my
recordings of the Rotenese poets. They persisted in the request and so it was decided that we would hold our first all-Tetun recording session in October 2015. The Tetun recording can be considered as a further extension of the study of parallelism under conditions of local dialect divergence or, in this case, language divergence.

This situation points to another fundamental feature of canonical parallelism: the distinction that can be made between lexical pairing and semantic pairing. Rotenese ritual language, for example, retains many basic semantic pairings even as lexical pairing continues to diverge. Semantic pairing is categorical pairing; lexical pairing is the contingent aspect of semantic pairing. The canonical pairs in Rotenese are categorically based on semantic pairings made up of various, often different, lexical pairs. This distinction is fundamental to an understanding of the continuing traditions of canonical parallelism. Here one can draw a comparison between the traditions of Rotenese parallelism and that of the Mayans who also possess formidable traditions of canonical parallelism.

In an examination of the opening stanzas of the Mayan “Book of Counsel” (*The Popol Vuh*), Munro Edmonson (1973) attempted to assign the canonical pairs that begin this composition to a categorical continuum from universal to particular. Some pairs he classified as “widespread categories” and thus common to many but not all cultures. Many of the canonical pairs in *The Popol Vuh* were, in his view however, distinctive to the traditions of Middle America, while others were more specifically categories pertinent to the culture of the Quiche Maya of the sixteenth century.

Kerry Hull and Michael Carrasco have recently edited a critically important publication in the comparative study of Mayan parallelism, *Parallel Worlds: Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Maya Literature* (2012). In his crucial contribution to this volume, Kerry Hull has traced the continuity—or what he calls the “poetic tenacity” of various general Mayan canonical pairs from the now deciphered early Mayan hieroglyphic inscriptions through texts preserved in the colonial period to present-day Mayan ritual performances. Although the lexical items that make up these canonical pairs may vary, the continuity of these general Mayan categories provides evidence for a tradition of shared parallel categorization that extends over more than a millennium (see Hull 2012:73-132).

A similar exercise can be done with the canonical pairs in Rotenese ritual language. For many canonical pairs, the semantic pairing could be considered universal: “sun” // “moon,” “head” // “tail,” “rock” // “tree” or “trunk” // “root.” The numerical pairs “two” // “three,” “seven” // “eight,” or “eight” // “nine” could be considered as general categories, though most traditions of parallelism rely on only a few possible numerical pairs. In other cases, this categorization is less general but certainly widespread, and thus could be common to many Southeast Asian cultures: “pestle” // “mortar,” “drum” // “gong,” “spear” // “sword,” “betel” // “areca nut,” or “orphan” // “widow.” For many other canonical pairs, however, pairing is more specific. Thus, for example, “shame” forms a pair with “fear,” “lung” forms a pair with “liver,” while a great number of specific plants and animals form specific (and highly symbolic) pairs: “banana” // “sugarcane,” “yam” // “taro,” “friarbird” // “parrot,” “turtle” // “dugong,” or particular trees: “dedap” // “kelumpang.” This list of specific pairs could be substantially extended to particular Rotenese verbs, adverbial terms, and many other nouns (see Fig. 3 for a more extensive list of canonical pairs).
Many of the more general pairs are shared by all the dialects of Rote, but they may have different lexical constituents. Many of these same canonical pairs are also found in other languages of the Timor region. Rote’s tradition of canonical parallelism is thus part of a larger regional tradition. As evidence of this wider regional tradition, I provide here a short, select list of shared canonical pairs in Rotenese (Termanu dialect), Tetun, and Atoni (Uab Meto). These canonical pairs contain many shared lexical cognates since both Tetun and Uab Meto are languages related to Rotenese, but the lexical pairs may also be different:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rotenese</th>
<th>Atoni</th>
<th>Tetun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “sun”//“moon”</td>
<td>ledo//bulan</td>
<td>loro//bulan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “rock”//“tree”</td>
<td>batu//ai</td>
<td>fatu//ai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “trunk”//“root”</td>
<td>hu//oka</td>
<td>hun//abut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “areca”//“betel”</td>
<td>pua//manus</td>
<td>bua//fuik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “seven”//“eight”</td>
<td>hitu//walu</td>
<td>hitu//walu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “eight”//“nine”</td>
<td>walu//sio</td>
<td>walu//sio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “pestle”//“mortar”</td>
<td>alu//nesu</td>
<td>alu//nesung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “shame”//“fear”</td>
<td>mae//tau</td>
<td>moe//tauk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “banana”//“sugar cane”</td>
<td>huni//tefu</td>
<td>hudi//tohu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “tuber”//“tales”</td>
<td>ufi//talas</td>
<td>fehuk//talas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “lung”//“liver”</td>
<td>ba//ate</td>
<td>afak//aten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. “thigh”//“navel”</td>
<td>pu//puse</td>
<td>kelen//husar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “turtle”//“dugong”</td>
<td>kea//lui</td>
<td>kea//lenuk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. “dedap”//“kelumpang”</td>
<td>delas//nitas</td>
<td>dik//nitas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. “waringin”//“banyan”</td>
<td>keka//nunu</td>
<td>hal//hedan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. “spear”//“sword”</td>
<td>te//tafa</td>
<td>diman//surit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. “drum”//“gong”</td>
<td>labu//meko</td>
<td>bidu//tala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. “head”//“tail”</td>
<td>langa//iku</td>
<td>ulun//ikun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This kind of comparative evidence points to a shared tradition that links the speech communities of the Timor area and perhaps eastern Indonesia more widely. The study of ritual language extends beyond the boundaries of any particular speech community.

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