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MÉI NAFA, A RITE OF EXPIATION IN LAMALERA, INDONESIA

The literature on ritual in eastern Indonesia is notably thin when it comes to rites which are intended to deal with personal responsibility for acts which bring supernatural sanction in the form of either individual or collective suffering. Indeed, the Indonesian language vocabulary for this sort of responsibility is also sparse. Other than *dosa*, 'sin' as understood by Islam and Christianity, Bahasa Indonesia offers for ordinary purposes only *salah* or *kesalahan*. *Kesalahan* covers a semantic range of 'mistake', 'error', 'blunder' and 'fault' (Echols and Shadily 1963), terms which in English do not immediately suggest 'an attack on a moral order, prescribed by a Divine Being' (Hertz 1922: 46).

Many Indonesian communities do seem to have the apprehension that improper actions, whether consciously motivated or not, can disturb the proper order of relations between the living and spiritual beings, usually the ancestors. One such community is the fishing and whaling community of Lamalera, Lembata, in the Province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (East Southeast Islands). This community has been entirely Roman Catholic since the 1920s, and has had a resident European missionary nearly continuously in the village since 1920 (Barnes 1986: 303). It has of course undergone a great many changes, including the almost total loss or transformation of its pre-Christian ritual life. Nevertheless, quietly, and more or less out of the missionary's eye, villagers from this and other communities on the south coast of Lembata have retained what is essentially a pagan means of expiating serious forms of misbehaviour.

The local expression for such infractions is *koda kiri*, elucidated in Bahasa Indonesia as *kesalahan*. A European would label some examples as mere mistakes or social blunders, while regarding others as heinous crimes. In some cases a European would not be inclined to recognize any moral blame at all for the person or persons involved. For example, a clan which had suffered repeated deaths recalled that an ancestor had been injured in a trap and concluded that this had led to the descent group continually shedding blood.

A fault of this kind need not rebound on the perpetrator. On the other hand a serious fault is very likely to cause misfortune within his or her descent group for seven generations, even if its members did not know about it. Steps must be taken to correct it ceremonially, if an end is to be

made to its consequences before the seven generations elapse. Since the cause of misfortune may be more ancient than living memory, the services of someone who knows how to search for it must be called upon. Such a person may be deemed a *huper tuber*, someone capable of meeting the soul (*tuber*).

When Vatter visited Lamalera in 1929, he found that if someone died, a sorcerer had to be consulted in order to determine whether the death resulted from some unresolved blood guilt within the descent group.

> 'For this purpose, he sets a cup filled with coconut oil out overnight on a stone. If next morning he finds a red drop suspended in the oil, then proof of the guilt is furnished. In a dream he recognizes the culprit, who must sacrifice a pig or goat in order to atone for his transgression' (Vatter 1932: 206).

An example of the connection which at least some villagers make between a prominent misfortune and an almost forgotten cause is provided by the 1925 disaster to the whaling boat 'Teti Heri'. This calamity is a documented historical event, and I have interviewed the last living survivor. Briefly, on a day when the boats were having unusually good luck in hunting large manta ray (*belelang*), the 'Teti Heri' remained at sea and continued hunting long after the others had returned to shore. Eventually it captured seven of these animals and was too heavily laden when the wind and waves picked up. It capsized, and the five survivors remained at sea for two nights before they were rescued by a search party in another boat. Nine men and a young boy lost their lives.

'Teti Heri' belongs to the descent group Batafor. According to Professor Gregorius Keraf, a son of the village, the people of Batafor determined that the cause of this event was the fact that their ancestors had once expelled a brother and sister, deemed to have committed incest, by tying them to stones and sinking them into the sea. The members of Batafor kept very quiet about this incident, telling not even their own children, who did not know about it. Other villagers have amplified this story. The brother and sister, members of Batafor, were named Ruma and Somi respectively. Upon returning from the sea, Ruma entered one of the ritual houses of the clan Bataona. Soon after he left, a child died. The Bataona group then accused Ruma and Somi of being witches. In front of the assembled elders, the two were tied up and carried out of the village along the simple little path connecting the lower part of the village and the beach and called 'the gate of the path of blood' (*bafa lofé méi laran*).

They were then taken to sea, weighed down with stones and sunk. However, their ropes broke and they floated on driftwood until reaching Sika on Flores. The true cause of the disaster would have remained unknown, it seems, had not Father Bernardus Bode, the missionary of the day, known about it and also known of the existence of descendants of Ruma and Somi in Maumere, Sika. Professor Keraf had no idea how Bode

acquired this knowledge (the possibility that someone may have told him about the legend during confession or at some other time did not come up for discussion). Nevertheless, some seem to be inclined to credit Bode with the powers of a *huper tuber* in this instance. Most of the information given above was collected in 1979 and 1982. However, it was materially supplemented in 1987, when the story of Ruma and Somi was again very topical. Bode had wanted to effect a reconciliation of the two families. In 1987 one of Ruma's descendants became Bishop of Sumba. In 1986, his family exchanged elephant tusks with Batafor. They also agreed to join surnames, so that both the Pereira family of Maumere and the Batafor families of Lamalera will henceforth be known as Pereira-Batafor. Allegedly, the Bishop intended to enter the Batafor ceremonial house, *lango béla*, someday, which would indeed signal the end of this very portentous set of events.

The above may sound like a just-so-story, but it should be taken into account that there are several semi-legendary causes of estrangement within the village and between the village and unknown persons on distant islands, which the missionaries have done their best, usually unsuccessfully, to resolve. I have been acquainted with a young seminarist from Timor temporarily stationed in Lamalera, who claimed descent from a villager sold into slavery on Timor in the distant past. Both his family tradition and the Lamalera tradition generally coincide on the course of events. There is a *koda kiri* involved, and he was keen to resolve it and to be permitted to enter the relevant clan temple. No such resolution has yet proved possible, and the relevant clan head, though friendly and courteous to him, did not permit him to enter the temple, for fear that it would cause his death.

The organized search for a cause of misfortune is called *méi nafa*. *Méi* means 'blood', and *nafa* derives from a proto-Austronesian root meaning 'soul' (Dempwolff 1938: 109). One person glossed the phrase as referring to the return of hot blood (Bahasa Indonesia: *darah panas*) to oneself or one's clan, if one murders someone else and nothing is done to set it right. Retribution for murder would of course be only one of several exemplifications of *méi nafa*.

Some such procedures can be relatively modest and uncomplicated. How they are performed depends on the conventions of the experts called in to carry them out, and as is to be expected there is a good deal of variation in the requirements of individual ritual leaders. One acquaintance told me that he merely requires that a red pig be found. This animal he brings in through the front door of the ritual house of the descent group. Everyone in the family has to confess his faults. The pig is then led out the back door to be prepared for a feast. Everyone who has confessed must eat some of the pork. Understandably, people are often reluctant to hold such a ceremony or to make a candid confession during the ritual, which may at times degenerate into a struggle by the expert to force information

from the participants. He is prone to blame failure of the ritual on the incompleteness of the confessions.

Rather contrasting methods were used in a very large *méi nafa* which I witnessed in September, 1982. During my absence following my previous visit in 1979, the young *tana alep* (a familiar Indonesian ceremonial office conventionally rendered in English as 'lord of the land') of Lamalera died (in 1980) by falling from a tamarind tree, where he was cutting leaves in order to feed a goat, leaving a young wife with a few months' old baby. His descent group then determined to hold its *méi nafa*. When word spread of this impending event, families from several nearby villages requested permission to participate.

One point of interest is that when the ceremony eventually took place, *all* who took part were at least nominally Christians, and a great number of those present had modern employment as school teachers or government officials. The site of the ceremony was on a prominent outcropping just above the village boundary where this descent group has built its dwellings and its descent group ritual house. From this spot there is a clear view overlooking the large poured-concrete Catholic church constructed in the 1970s. No greater visual contrast than this could have been made between the covert and overt sides of Lamalera belief and practice.

Two men of the hamlet Lamanuk, lying farther up the side of the Labalekang volcano behind Lamalera, were in charge of arrangements and acted as principal spokesmen, *ata marang*, for those whose cases were being presented. They had intended to bring in skilled officiants from the village of Semuki some miles to the East, but the ritual had to be postponed when these persons backed out at the last minute. Their reasoning was that if they were to make mistakes in conducting the ceremony, they might experience deaths too. Recently they had lost a descent group member after making a blunder while conducting a *méi nafa* in the nearby village of Tapobali. In fact they had set out to Lamalera to make good on their commitment, but a child fell while they were walking, which they deemed sufficient warning to turn back.

A replacement group was drafted from Puor to the North, but another postponement was required when this delegation also pulled out. In this case the problem was that one of the participating descent groups from the neighbouring village of Lewotala was remotely related to the Puor ritual specialists and in fact shared the same descent group name.

By this time those who were arranging the ceremony were beginning to get worried. Not only had preparations been made, involving the provision of great quantities of raw foodstuffs, but many government officers had obtained special leave in order to be present. Also hundreds of people had gathered on the site, waiting for the ceremony. Many eventually spent two or three days and nights without shelter there in anticipation of the performance. Most had already brought their goods and deposited them in the descent group ritual house (*lango béla*) of the lord of the land. These goods

should have been deposited in the village temple (*koker*, a modest and unimposing structure in this case since it is strictly prohibited by the Catholic authorities to build them), but that soon filled up and the excess went into the *lango béla*.

Eventually the event attracted fourteen cases of bad death in all, with people bringing their problems from Lamalera, Lamanuk, Lewotala, Wolo Wutung and Tapobali, all villages situated within easy walking distance of the site. Bad deaths are called *melung* or *melung beléong* (*beléong* means 'to be shot with a bow'). Vatter (1932: 206) specifies that *melung* means the souls of those who have died in battle, while persons who have died after falling from a tree are distinguished as *mahol*. He was informed that while *melung* go to Lera Wulan (God as the male heavens), the *kewoko* (normal souls of the dead) and the *mahol* remain near the village.

Although what is deemed a bad or unpropitious death is not standard, the recognition of a special category of this kind is common and occurs far beyond Indonesia (for comparative examples see Sell 1955, Fox 1973, and Barnes 1974: 174-175). In Lamalera they are sudden and unexpected deaths (Bahasa Indonesia: *kematian dengan tiba-tiba*), but do not include deaths during childbirth or from illness, however much these deaths may sometimes be experienced as being similar to them. Among bad deaths are deaths from falls, such as from trees, deaths at sea, murders, disasters, and snake bites. *Koda kiri* may eventuate in a broader range of kinds of deaths than these, including death from illness.

After the delays just described, an officiant was finally found who was willing to perform the *méi nafa*, and so on the following evening he and his companions were met and given a meal in the dark just outside the village before being brought in front of the waiting crowd. It was imperative that they arrive after dark and leave again just before sunrise, for their identity was not to be general knowledge. They came not as known persons with their everyday identities, but in the guise of witches or dead souls of those who have died bad deaths. For this reason they had to stay out of the light and away from fires, and chairs were set up for them in a darkened area in front of the descent group ritual house. Before they arrived, the *Kapitan* of the ceremony admonished everyone not to shine flashlights on the visiting group or to point the flash attachments of their cameras in their direction.

Instead of the large delegation which had been expected, only a middle-aged man and two younger men showed up. They came into the area provided for them after the lamps had been removed. I attended at the invitation of the lord of the land and was specifically seated to the fore. My anxiety about using a tape recorder, which I was explicitly enjoined to do, was assuaged when I discovered that it was one of four in use.

The elder man assumed the role of *kaka ama* (which essentially means 'elder'). He did not reveal his name or that of his descent group, but gave himself the name Au Bala (the dog named Bala), supposedly the name of

his descent group's sacred stone (*nuba nara*). Although he lives in Puor, he derives from a descent group in Semuki which has a tradition of performing this ceremony. In his introductions he went out of his way to make this point. He insisted that he was not a twig, branch or leaf, but from the trunk itself.

In his introduction he said he was from Lepan Batan (the sunken land of origin for so many Lamaholot groups, between Lembata and Pantar), that it was dark, and that they wanted to spend the night. The *ata marang* answered that they might stay, but that we had filth. If Au Bala had brought a broom like iron and if he would sweep up the filth, they might stay. 'Tomorrow morning early you must sweep up all the filth in the house so that in the future our descendants will have no more misfortune'. Au Bala replied that his younger brothers and children must have a contrite heart. He had brought an iron broom and an iron field knife. 'Whether stiff or strong, we will cut it.' He then enjoined them to hide nothing and to confess everything. This portion of his speech ran roughly as follows.

> Open your place so that I may enter. I am Au Bala. Do not hide anything. Confess all faults clearly. Do not hide anything below the tree or in a hole in stone. Put it down, I will take it, whether a louse or the high and mighty, I will sweep it up and throw it away. I will carry it and put it at the tamarind tree, hang it from the banyan in the village. Sira Pagi Laga Doni, if there is any fault (*méi nafa*), blood from a killing, quickly confess so I may carry it and put it on the tamarind tree, hang it from the banyan. Do not hide anything.

Following this introduction, the *ata marang* began to list the fourteen cases, and Au Bala then cross-examined the spokesmen from each family. The exchanges continued all night long and were punctuated by, sometimes angry, exhortations to confess, accusations that the confessions were not complete, passages of obscene humor, and periods of singing traditional songs. At times Au Bala would talk, while the elders on our side would sing, sometimes interrupting him. Au Bala and his assistants all the while were sitting on palm leaves in the dark at a distance permitting conversation and facing the rest of us.

At one period of staged anger, Au Bala complained that he had been given palm wine in a bottle that had previously been used for coconut oil. Then he began to be annoyed by noises. A ship passed by in the dark near the shore and could be clearly heard. A spirit sitting in the top of a tree near us began talking to him. This spirit was the *pung lango béla*, there to help the members of the descent group of the lord of the land, but he insisted that the faults were not being completely revealed. One of the elders who kept interrupting with his singing was trying to cover up a fault. Finally, Au Bala lost his temper over the tape recorders (mine as it happened was off at the time). Others had recorded the singing and then

taken their recorders off to groups around camp fires at the edge of the crowd, where we could hear them being played.

There was no break in the singing and conversation until it was time to leave just before dawn. At that point there was confusion arising from the fact that the visitors were so few in number and completely incapable of carrying off by themselves all of the accumulated foodstuffs. A minimum of twenty persons had been expected, but only the three arrived. The sponsoring descent group alone contributed thirty eggs, thirty chickens and three goats. Others brought the total to over one hundred chickens, any number of eggs, nine goats, and great amounts of uncooked rice and prepared maize (known in the local area by the Indonesian expression *jagung titi*, crushed maize).

All of this food must be taken away from the village, along with the faults. Those who have impersonated the witches or dead souls must eat all of the food outside their home village before they can reenter it. This stipulation in itself may be regarded as a hardship, since it may entail spending extended periods living in small field huts. If they get tired, they may let the animals loose in the wild, but they may not raise them.

Eventually ten reluctant young people from Lamalera were pressed into service to help take the food and animals from the village. Beforehand the *Kapitan* of the ceremony took an egg and palm wine out to the canyon for a brief ceremony to protect these carriers. Subsequently, he conducted a short ceremony at the right housepost of the *lango béla* with an egg to gather the 'dirt'. Au Bala then entered the *lango béla* for the first time, where we waited until the very last of the goods were carried out. He then departed into the dark.

Some of the cases confessed to concerned fights between husband and wife in which the women took revenge by putting filth on sacred places, and so on. Others involved killings in battle. Some were identified by the resulting misfortunes, such as the man who was killed in Lewoleba during the 1965 coup because he had delivered a letter entrusted to him by a member of the Communist Party. Some were clear cases of concealed responsibility, faults 'below the tree and in a hole in a stone' (long ago a child had been killed and thrown away). One was a self-poisoning by the village head of a nearby village in 1965 because of a rumour that the army was going to kill not only communists, but also all witches. This man regarded his own wife as a witch, and deeming himself affected expected to be taken to Lewoleba (the main town on the island, where the government offices and police station are located). Rather than being killed there, he killed himself at home.

In another incident, a man who had died in 1981 after a long illness had previously assisted by holding a lamp in the murder of a person by his Adonara in-laws while working in Tewau, Borneo. They had beaten their victim without being able to kill him. They then cut him with a field knife,

with the same result. Finally they had held a ceremony and cut him in half, burying the two halves in separate places.

The problem in the descent group of the lord of the land, which was addressed first, was complex. One of the brothers of the young lord of the land had died while the family were living in Larantuka, Flores, in the 1950s. He had been dilatory in lighting a lamp. His older brother beat him and killed him accidentally. This brother, by the way, was instrumental in making arrangements for the ceremony and showed me a good deal of friendly hospitality during it. An earlier namesake of the dead brother, an ancestor, had once gone out to put glue on a tree branch in order to trap a bird. He slipped and fell. A week later, he died, but a *méi nafa* ceremony was not quickly arranged for him. Thus guilt has accumulated, and the consequences have cycled through the generations.

Among the interests of rites such as the *méi nafa* in south Lembata culture is that they provide an unusual opportunity to glimpse social values obscured by public commitments to Catholicism. Such large *méi nafa* are not held by the neighbouring ethnic group in Kédang, although they too feel they must search for the cause, *wangun-léan*, of illness, misfortune and bad death (Barnes 1974, index: s.v. *wangun-léan*). Like other Indonesian ethnic groups (cf. Smith Kipp & Rogers (eds) 1987), the Lamaholot are under extreme pressure to abandon or modify religious practices central to their way of life and history. Lamalera has not, as yet, taken the millenarian option (Fox 1980), nor have the missionaries permitted them to maintain public, ancestrally based ceremonies at the expense of private rituals related to free spirits of the forests, fields, seashore and ocean (Hoskins 1987: 151).

In certain respects these rites represent a 'tendency to keep, together with the readiness to borrow' such as Dumont (1952: 83) attributed to India, in other words, the resilience which the Leiden group identified in their field of anthropological study (de Josselin de Jong 1984: 2). The keeping in more covert form of social values not sanctioned by Catholicism but which nevertheless occasionally become manifest parallels the retention of non-monetized forms of economic exchange in the face of increased integration into the national economy and a growing shift toward modern forms of employment (see Barnes and Barnes 1989). Other rituals, such as the annual ceremony opening the fishing season in May, which have been coopted for the 'inculturation' of Catholic doctrine and belief are sometimes reperformed in secret by local adepts in order to secure continued support and assistance by the ancestors (Barnes 1988: 245). Despite appearances, the ancestors continue to be part of daily life and society, punishing breaches of custom, providing positive support to descendants, and occasionally, as seen in some of the cases involved in the *méi nafa*, passing on misfortunes caused by their own past transgressions. *Méi nafa* appear in every respect to be at variance with the tenets of

Christianity. The more remarkable, therefore, is their survival and continued vigour.

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