

Joao Lere and the Ritual of the Rain

Extracts from Correia, Armando, P. 1934 *Gentio de Timor*. Lisboa

Translated from Portuguese by Christopher Shepherd

Pinto C. João Lere pp. 133-136.

5) The magician João Lere - The Timorese always delight in florescent regional folklore, but their greatest pleasure lies in the magic of João Lere that took place in the early colonial period when a certain Portuguese governor and a Catholic bishop took up residence on the island.

João Lere—his compatriots thought of him as half native, half European—was the chief of Uani-Uma village as well as a thaumaturgist, unrivalled in his ability to perform miracles... One day João Lere left his son in charge of the village, and went to Lautem with the governor, the bishop and the king of Vemassim... The four of them were at the beach when, looking westwards, they noticed that the coastal lands of Uani-Uma were opening up into deep cravasses. Enormous sections of land were splitting off and caving into the sea. João Lere's son did not have the power to deal with a calamity on this scale.

'We must return quickly to my village', exclaimed João Lere. 'I need to deal with this'.

In the blink of an eyelid, the governor, the bishop, the king and the phenomenal João Lere, found themselves lifted into the air by a mysterious force, and before they knew it they were set safely on their feet at Uani-Uma... João Lere proceeded to utter some occult words, and the coast and surrounding villages and plantations suddenly reverted to their former state. Astonished by the fantastic episode yet refusing to believe his eyes, the king wanted to put to the test the supernatural powers which the strange creature seemed to possess.

As it happens, two hundred porters had arrived from Lautem, their torsos doubled under the burden of the governor's luggage. But as the journey had been prepared in haste, the porters had neglected to bring sufficient rations to feed themselves. There was only a single basket of rice which, shared among them all, would not suffice. The problem appeared a formidable one, but at the king's insistence, João Lere readily devised a solution. He ordered the servants to collect two hundred pans, fill them with water, and to place a grain of rice in each pan. A moment later, the servants were amazed to see that the pans were overflowing with rice and hunks of meat—pork, chevon, and chicken. Never had those miserable porters filled their stomachs as they did on that day!

As the men were tired from the long journey it was necessary to replace them with a new force recruited from the very village of Uani-Uma. And although ill prepared for such an undertaking, João Lere succeeded in summoning two hundred men. The king knew that this in itself was no mean feat, but he derived such pleasure at witnessing this superman's magical faculties that he insisted that all the baggage should be delivered to Vemassim that very afternoon. Seeing that the king would not compromise on his demand, João Lere finally obliged: he took a stick, and tapped on each of the suitcases, bags, and baskets. The entire collection of goods rose and moved off, as if carried by the wind, until it came to rest at the king's village. Finally convinced that João Lere was a sorcerer with a devil's contract, the governor had him taken to Manatuto where his arms and feet were bound and two large stones were tied to his neck. Thus restrained, João Lere was placed in a boat. Once at large, the boat was capsized, and the diabolical figure of João Lere would be made to lie and rot at the bottom of the sea. In all this, João Lere did not resist; he let them do whatever they pleased.

Yet he was seen not drowning (my addition) but diving in the salt water, and he reappeared on the surface, free of his bindings, walking atop the waves on his way to the beach as if nothing had

happened to him. In desperation and rage, the governor gave the order to kill him there and then. João Lere was attacked by a warriors wielding machetes and javelins, but the weapons did not penetrate—they didn't even leave a scratch on the body of this extraordinary man! ...

And so it was João Lere himself, smiling, who offered instructions on how best to kill him. He told them to wrap his body in a bundle of rice straw and set it ablaze. And so the governor's men did as they were told. João Lere was engulfed in lashing flames and columns of smoke billowed out; the onlookers were blinded and saw not what happened to his body. When the fire was extinguished, nothing was left of this extraordinary demigod. The body had disintegrated without a trace!

After his death, João Lere reappeared and returned to Uani-Uma. He found his widow and told her that it was his will that the people build a house—without ceiling and doors—in his honour. And so, all the villagers of the kingdom gathered and built the house that he had requested. This became the most important *uma-faluno* of Baucau, and that which holds the grandest of ritual ceremonies—the ritual of the rain. At a certain time of year, hundreds of people from across the region now come to make offerings, and countless pilgrims gather at Bondura Point in order to be sprinkled with the holy water brought from a sacred cave. The house serves as the residence for the soul of the prodigious João Lere.

Gentio de Timor, pp. 108-110.

7) The ritual of the rain—When the cornfields are already sown and the first rains have still not come—thus prolonging the dry season and causing damage that, it is feared, could turn calamitous—a religious ceremony is celebrated. The ceremony corresponds to our *Ad Petendam Dei Pluviam*: 'Prayer to Request for Rain.'¹ The ritual is enacted in Bai Cai Lale, in the *suco* of Uani-Uma, where the most important [traditional] priest [lia na'in] of the region resides—the *anu faluno* of highest distinction. They call him the *Ira beno gau ha*—meaning the man of water in the hedge, of pelting rain.²

The ritual is preceded by a summons to all the people. The *Ira beno* ceremony stands out because a messenger spends many days traversing the *sucos* of Baucau and Fatu-maca, going as far as Ossuqueli and Vemassim, turning then to the east to enter the lands of Buato and Tequenamata of the *posto* of Quelecai. All the while, he goes ringing a copper bell. Whoever fails to keep well clear of his path, has the sacred duty to follow him. Of the flocks that he encounters along the way, those that accompany him assist in his right to demand a ram. As he passes through plantations and hamlets, he is entitled to request anything that the rain draws forth from the fertile soil: rice, maize, beans, potato, cotton, tobacco, cocoa, betel, wheat, coffee. Every house offers him hospitable lodging, and at certain sacred houses of distinct architectural form—known as *lacasoro* and *mani-meta*³--a chicken must be sacrificed. The messenger is then joined by the various *anu falunos*, forming a long procession as if constituting a priestly college...

As for the other indigenous people, if they don't want to keep company with them and pay the required tribute, they have no other option but to turn back in the opposite direction to that from where the echoes of the bell resound. A sense of awe extends among the population...

"*Defa ai coho!* The dog is barking!"

¹ My note: See <http://shrineofjesus.net/content/oratio-imperata-ad-petendam-pluviam-obligatory-prayer-request-rain>

² Ira = water; beno = full. The ritual is called the *ira naque*.

³ See chapter 4 of this book.

Once the pilgrimage is complete, the messenger and his band retire to the *faluno* house of Bai Cai Lale, the most prestigious of *anu faluno* in the region.

At this point the *Ira Beno*, followed by six *anu faluno* (two of Aubaca, two of Uahe-Osso, one of Tiri-Lolo and the last of Bucoli), each one grasping a beeswax candle one meter in height and as thick as an elbow, head chanting to the subterranean gallery of Cai Huno, which opens out onto the desolate, rocky headland of Bondura Point. Cai Huno is a natural cavern, it is deep, and one part of it drops precipitously into the sea. Inside, water weeps from seven sources amidst the stalactites. Overhead, dripping icy water saturates the cavern sides. They *anu faluno* dig (with their hands) at the clods of earth—they are ‘as sweet as honey’. They then line up behind the *Ira Beno*. Single-file they slip through a narrow crevice, and singing they descend to the depths of the cave, to a place, the most sacred place, where the waters collect. It is here that the great priest fills his bamboo (vessel) with which he has come prepared.

Then, with the *Ira Beno* now at the end of the line, the procession turns on its heels. Retracing their steps, they arrive at the mouth of the great cavern, only to find it blocked by a new wall. A supernatural voice rumbles inside the chamber with an echo that sends a chill through the bones of all who are present.

‘O’ Cai dau, ira lia!’

Enraged, the spirit guardian of the cave protests at the thieves who steal his water. The *Ira Beno* then sings, and offers certain cabbalistic (occult) words, upon which the wall that blocks their passage recedes into the surrounding rock and the mouth of the cave opens up before them.

Above ground, in Bai Cai Lale, the throng waits, and upon the *Ira Beno*’s return, forms a circle behind him to be sprinkled by the water that the leading priest carries in his bamboo.

And after he has blessed the pilgrims, he turns to the skies, and asks:

‘Mata na’a lee assa ara mau do muiiri!’⁴ ‘May your children come and play on the land’.

These are the waters of the rain—that God will order to fall in joyful reunion with the thirsty lands of Timor...

Once the ritual is complete, the people head to the sacred house of Oca Bai where they kill and eat the rams set aside for the magnificent feast, of which there are many in Bai Cai Lale...

Notes.

‘Chover a potes’ means to ‘rain cats and dogs’, so pelting rain seems like a reasonable translation.

⁴ Mata na’a lee = ‘the little ones’ or the children (os pequenos); assa ara = send/order (mandar); do = to (para); muiiri = brincar (play) i.e. Send the children to play.