

## Makasae Rice Harvest Ritual

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Translated from Portuguese by Christopher Shepherd

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### 3) Harvest ritual

Supposing that a new plot has been plowed and cultivated, the crop is not harvested without presenting the spirits with a part of a chicken and the necessary rice, and without conducting a final sprinkling of well chewed betel leaf and areca nut.

Two lengths of twine, one with seven the other with five ears attached (espigas=presumably maize ears), are left suspended in a corner of the field, which mean the 'ama buna' (eye of the field, that watches over and guards it; or 'bando' that makes an announcement).<sup>1</sup>

If it is a rice field, the 'ear ritual' (*estilo da espiga*) takes the name of *reça bânî* or *reça lubo toi ili*, to wash the unmilled rice, or to publicly display the respective document that guarantees the right of possession.<sup>2</sup> When the day of the harvest comes, the

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ceremony of '*lia sura*' (lit.: throw in the fire) is carried out, which is among the most colourful and prolix of indigenous liturgy.

This ritual is performed before sunrise in the following way: the rice (still on the stalks=unthreshed rice) is already bundled up and spread along the bunds of which the rice field is composed. The hut (*ria ria*) for the purpose threshing has already been erected. Inside that, on a huge mat of palm leaves, woven together by the women of the house, is where the bundles of rice will be laid.

Before leaving the straw hut which is his dwelling, the peasant farmer cuts, cooks and eats in the cafreal manner, well roasted and spiced with *piriri* (a kind of pepper), a chicken from the domestic henhouse, he takes the sacred heirlooms belonging to the clan—the sword and the spear of the ancestors—and also avails of diverse paraphernalia: a basket containing a cooked egg and a little rice also comes from the cooking pot, a bamboo vessel of water, and another basket in which there is a mixture of betel, *cábe* ('cal' in Portuguese or lime/chalk), ginger and the root of a lode.<sup>3</sup> One of his sons brings him the branch of a thorn bush (*uaa'rua*), tied up with seven blades of *fae-hulo* grass.

Arriving at the field, the man chooses his position beside the hut (*ria-ria*), but on the eastern side, he places all his stuff on top of the mat and on the same side he cuts a piece of the root of the *lode*, chews it with the lime, the betel and the areca, opens the basket, and cuts the egg into four pieces so that it forms a cross shape. Next, the youngest member of the house goes and stands in the middle of the mat

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<sup>1</sup> Buna: to look; lolo buna: to look straight ahead.

<sup>2</sup> This ritual is the same as ate lu'uro tau, also known as uata bua nia bânî. Toi ili: to affix, attach; lubo: warning; uata: coconut; bua: green; bani: to wash; nia: with.

<sup>3</sup> The *lode* root is sacred. When a *lode* tree is felled, it's necessary to sacrifice a dog, in order to be excused...

The peasant then places the spear on his left

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shoulder, holds the sword under his arm, and manipulating it with his right hand he holds and shakes the bundle of thorn bush and grass (*vaa'rua*), and he starts walking around the hut. After counting aloud to seven and, upon reaching this number, he pokes the mat with the bundle and noisily spits on each corner of the mat. Once that has been accomplished, he returns to his original position and orders the young boy to raise the mat by one of its sides. Under the center of the mat he spits out the chew. The boy drops the mat back down, and the tied up thorn branch and grass is placed on the mat, and the owner of the rice field spits on it as well, and facing west he shoots a large squirt (of spittle) in that direction.

His fellow workmen wait, with the bundles of rice already in their hands, until the ceremony is complete.

The peasant now bellows to the spirits in all directions:

*Soro mau, laline mau. Mau dó sera der! Mau dó gata der! Biti muta ici dá! Bitida'e ici dá!  
Olo bassa muto, fifiela muto.*<sup>4</sup>

They see the first bundles as if the spirits in response were the ones throwing them... Always facing west, the owner of the rice field takes one of them, and places it at the front of the mat. Around the mat, they place the other bundles, all tied up. The spear is then removed from his shoulder and it is stabbed into the mat on the edge of the mat that faces south and on the spear they hang the sword. Now the other men carry their bundles forth. They jump into the hut and holding on to the ropes of the palappa which are dangling from the ceiling, they begin as in our grape mills of old: they trample with their feet the stacks of rice jumping and singing in a varied rhythm that oscillates between a jerky and a mournful beat. [remember the video!]

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Olele, Bere Loi!  
Riqui ho-o-o...  
Bere Loi,  
Loi Lode!  
Riqui ho—o-o.<sup>5</sup>

Once the treading has finished, something that can last several days, depending on the harvest and on the people invited to participate in it, the men and the women take a rest, waiting for the cleaning up to start. They lie, collapsed on the straw, exchanging jokes and making deals, gossiping about other people's lives or the actions of the authorities, commenting on the errands someone ran, the words that someone said, the gestures that someone made, and the people with whom someone spoke—everything narrated, dissecting every meaning down to the last detail.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mau = come; dó = in order to; *sera* or *gata* = more; der = throw; bití = mat; muta = to the west or under; bitida'e = front of the mat; ici dá = pass. Olo = pigeon; bassa = stomach; fifiela muto = the earth divides.

<sup>5</sup> Olele: jump up!; riqui ho: chime up!; loi lode: basket for the chew and the tobacco; Bere Loi: personal name the significance for whose inclusion in the song has been lost.

<sup>6</sup> For the indigenous people, one of their favorite pastimes is to gossip about the authorities, and there is no aspect of character nor physical detail that escapes their scrutiny, registering it in their memory and

Meanwhile the owner of the rice field has not yet found peace of mind. There are still two ceremonies to be performed, which he needs to carry out right there and then. One of them is the *deto guíni, raga guívi*.<sup>7</sup>

He's going to perform it now in a place called *faluno*: a stone, a tree or a spring nearby. He kills another ram and he extracts its liver and an ear, which are consecrated to the relatives or neighbours who in remote or recent times died in the vicinity of the rice fields, or were hanged, or were the victims of homicide, of a disaster, or a fall from a high rock, or one of those frequent falls when indigenous people climb palm trees or **arvores de culo** in order to collect palm wine or to gather fruit.

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A little chick is also sacrificed intended to appease any wizard who may have been killed as payback for his misdeeds when he was still in this world.

Then we have a kind of *via sacra* (way to the cross), in which the planter must go around the *faluno* places of the area, distributing in each of them the liver and the gizzard of the chick, added to bread crumbs and boiled rice, placed in a dish made of palm leaves. Part of this mixture is thrown far away, towards the farthest sacred points. And the chant with which he presents his offerings, so that the spirits may receive them and benefit from them, is sung in an imperative tone: *Sêu ere tia; naque! Nána er tia ; naque! ; Ni lima fala! Ni queri fala*.<sup>8</sup>

The other ceremony is called *ânu fan* (*Fan* means to feed, *anu* means people) and the animal slaughtered in sacrifice is still a ram. One starts by placing seven betel leaves near the mat of the *ria ria* and on each of those leaves one places a slice of areca and a few grains of rice, removed from their husks, but raw. One cuts the right ear of the animal and this is added to the seven leaves. One takes a basket of unmilled rice (*neli*), one throws a little of this to the mutilated ram and invokes the name of the first man who worked in that rice field. If this man is not known, one calls him *omarahe laidá*:

*Omarahe laidá, ai gau bibi u lé ere!*<sup>9</sup>

Afterwards the ram is killed and autopsied, with the details already described in the tale of the ritual of the maize field. Then one waits for the wind and when this blows, one cleans the *neli*, lifting and stirring

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divulging it in conversation. They like having fun by giving nicknames to each other and particularly to whites.

<sup>7</sup> In Macassae it means killed by stabbing is *uta-uta*; *nâma umo*: being hanged.

<sup>8</sup> *Sêu*: meat; *naque* : throw; *tia* *naque*: to receive ; *naua*: to eat or, alternatively, boiled rice, because this is the primary dish in the rice growing areas of Baucau ; *fala*: to hold, to support or to receive ; *Ni lima*: the palm leaf folded on two of its sides with Timorese are often seen utilizing as a plate ; *ni queri* : the same as above, but folded on one side only.

<sup>9</sup> *Laidá* : old; in tetum *katuas*; They have the idea of authority so firmly associated with the image of old men who were their chiefs in patriarchal times, that an authority, even if young, is always 'the *katuas*'. *Bibi*: sheep (or ram); *u* : one.

so that the grains will drop through the breeze. To bag them, there is also a special protocol which is followed with similar rigour. One chews again the lode, the lime, the ginger, and areca and the betel—and this is just in preparation (uu guini) to make the neli swell and to make it more abundant. . . . Men take the *tada* (small baskets), the owner of the rice fields spits into them the virtuous (or sacred) chew<sup>10</sup>, he also spits into the hands of his companions, each of who spreads his legs, passes the basket between them, from behind to the front, and each man with his right hand fills the basket, which is then emptied on to the *dofe* (big bag made from leaves and of a cylindrical shape).

Once the mat is emptied, the farmer hands to the *faluno* the egg and the meat, he shakes with his right hand the seven grasses of *fae-hulo* with the seven ears, and he says that everything is over: they will reassemble when the sky starts to thunder, a sign that we will again have rain, which feeds the springs, fills the streams, and the irrigation pipes which make the rice fields fertile.

Hai sai! Hai goba gâna la'ara! Ua ne'e lacururu uainó muniduguro dete fi munitá sorúnu.<sup>11</sup>

The ritual is not yet fully over because the next dawn, a girl of the same family will leave the rice field to go home carrying a basket of neli on top of her head and on top of it, another smaller basket, with milled rice (or de-husked rice...) She must walk quickly and in silence. Whoever crosses her path will guess her mission. They must turn their back to her, so that she does not succumb to the temptation of speaking to them... When she arrives at the paternal dwelling, she puts the basket of neli down on the ground, she opens the basket of clean rice and pours the latter into four little heaps in the four corners of the house.<sup>12</sup>

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It is after this final ceremony that the owner of the rice field, the family and friends, who have spent the night together at the *ria ria*, begin to transport the harvest.

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<sup>10</sup> This is to prevent the harvested neli from shrinking. Then, it is said, that they already “have faluno in their hands”.

<sup>11</sup> Hai sai: it's finished; All (goba); can (gana); go away (la'ara). Let us hope (dete) that we (fi) will meet (munitá sorúnu); when (ua ne'e); the thunder (muni du guro) is heard from the southwest or south side (Lacururu).

<sup>12</sup> To those little heaps people will return later when they perform any ritual dedicated to the family's *faluno*.