

**Extracts on Baucau from**

**Dos Santos, E. (1967) *Kanoik: Mitos e Lendas de Timor*, Lisboa: Ultramar.**

**Correia, A. (1935) *Gentio de Timor*, Lisbon: Agência-Geral das Colónias.**

**(translated by Christopher Shepherd)**

*Introduction to the myths on Baucau*

As follows are two very different legends about Baucau: one refers to its founding, the other to its conquest.

In the first legend, Timor's most highly-esteemed animal appears, which the owner sacrifices to serve up as a meal to his famished father.

There are three brothers: one possesses a pig; another has a ram; and the third owns a dog. One day, the father goes to Cai-Huno—a term that in Uaimá means 'place where white wine is drunk'—to wait for his sons to bring him lunch. Cai-Huno is some 300 meters from where the first village of Baucau was settled.

The youngest son goes east to a palm plantation to fill his bamboo cylinders with white wine, while the other two sit down to gossip and chew betel nut with their father.

When the younger boy arrives, with the bamboo cylinders of white wine strapped to him, the father realizes that there is no meat for him to bite into. When the older sons hesitate to kill their animals, the youngest son proves his determination and commitment; despite the high regard in which he holds his own dog, he sacrifices it for the sake of his father's appetite. His father is impressed by his youngest son's demonstration of selflessness and filial love.

In the second legend, the theme of the hoax reappears as a group of newcomers aims to take Baucau from the original inhabitants, whose superstitious natures facilitate their deception. Persuaded that the courage of the newcomers derives from their headdress, whose cockatoo feathers have been inserted into their craniums, they ask the newcomers to submit them to the same operation. Their intent is to become equally powerful and courageous, and thus defeat them and expel them from Baucau.

Convinced that the foreigners' bravery derived from the fact that, as children, they had had their heads perforated and cockatoo feathers inserted into them, they chose to submit themselves to the same surgery, so great was their desire to emulate them in belligerent zeal and courage, in order to defeat them in turn.

But the crafty newcomers, taking advantage of the dark of the night, drive metal spikes into the heads of the original inhabitants, and so they fall one by one, bleeding to death, leaving Baucau defenseless.

*The founding of Baucau*

Long ago there was an eccentric old man, already a widower, who had three sons: Uono Lói was the eldest, Tai Lói was the middle one, and Léqui Lói was the youngest.

Léqui Lói was a passionate hunter and no night would pass without him leaving his house, accompanied by his shepherd dog, in search of a civet cat (*Iaco*) or some other creature. But there came a night when he was sick or perhaps tired from the day's work, and the lad lay himself down in the bamboo bunk (*lantém*) and fell asleep. He didn't go out that night.

The next morning, the father, believing that his youngest had been hunting as usual, headed to Cai-Huno, and waited there as he always did for his sons to bring him food.

The elder sons arrived first. They too had grown accustomed to relying on the hunt of their younger brother. They sat at their father's feet, conversing and sharing betel nut.

Meanwhile, Léqui Lói had climbed a palm and filled his bamboo cylinders with white wine.

As Léqui Lói approached, his old father saw that he carried no meat.

'And what do we do now? We have white wine, but we have no meat!', exclaimed the father.

'Well, I have a pig here, but it's a skinny runt', Uono Lói responded.

'And I have a ram, which I do value very highly... but I could do without it', muttered Tai Lói unconvincingly at his brother's side.

Léqui Lói was now only a few feet away when he intervened: 'In truth, it will be better to save the pig and the ram. Let's slay my dog'.

And without hesitating, he picked up a stick that lay at his feet and delivered a violent blow to the animal. The dog's head was struck so strongly and squarely that the animal immediately fell dead.

They skinned him, cut him into pieces, and roasted him there and then.

They ate. They drank. Once they had finished the sumptuous meal, the father, reflecting on the situation, addressed his sons:

From now on, you, Uono Lói, since you are so attached to your well-fed pig, will now be called Ua-Bubo (pig's tail); you, Tai Lói, will be called Cai-Uada (the indecisive/indifferent one); and you, Léqui Lói, will be called Tiri-Lolo (direct and resolute man), which is what you have proved to be.

After some time, the old man died, and his sons separated, each going his own way. Ua-Bubo, the eldest, settled down adjacent a spring and there he had a family. This was where the village of Baucau was first established. Cai-Uada, the middle brother, settled further to the east, giving birth to the suco of Ci-Bada. The youngest, Tiri-Lolo, headed to the southeast, and there he founded the village that took his name.

According to the dialect Uaimá that came to be spoken by the natives of that region, Ua-Bubo moved to Uau-C'au, from where the name of Baucau is derived.

*The conquest of Baucau*

The settled area kept expanding. Additional villages were forming behind Baucau. At a certain point, there were six villages in total; all were embroiled in war, two on one side against four on the other side.

It happened that on the far side of the peaks of Mt. Matebian, in Maca-Dique, there lived three brothers.

One day, each of them put beeswax in a cooking pot in order to melt it. They placed the pots on the fire. Only the youngest of the three took care to place a piece of twine in his pot of wax.

The older two had been playing distractedly, and when they returned to the fire, they were amazed to find that their pots were empty, while in their brother's pot the wax had adhered to the twine.

The elder two believed that their younger brother had played a malicious trick or had performed some witchcraft. They became enraged and accused him, and they had a fearsome quarrel. The youngest, however, kept his composure, and he persuaded his brothers of the absurdity of the altercation and explained why things had so happened.

Ashamed, the elder brothers decided they should leave Maca-Dique forever, in order to forget the trouble that had broken out between them.

And so it happened. Shortly afterwards they left that place and headed north, in search of a spring like the one they left behind in Maca-Dique. They took with them a pig, a dog, a chicken, and a blacksmith's bellow. They passed Ata-Lia (now called Fatu-lia) [pass near Venilale] and they crossed Ossuala. As they journeyed, others joined them, and they formed a veritable troupe. Finally they arrived at the plateau of Ossuquéli, where they struck a marvelous underground spring—Uai-Nique—whose waters poured onto the sands of Cai-Sido.

In Baucau, the six villages remained at war. As soon as one of the rival groups learned that a group of newcomers was camped nearby, a woman was sent to offer them a ram and a goat in exchange for their assistance. They agreed to assist, but they declined to accept the gifts until after their services had been rendered.

Those of Baucau were unaware that the newcomers knew to employ the cruelest of war tactics. They would hack off the heads of adversaries, remove the brain, and smoke the skin and the skull. This was warfare without truce or mercy.

In truth, until now such satanic customs were unknown in these parts. Enemies in flight were not even pursued. The ransacking of dwellings was not permitted—only the pestles, the cooking pots, and the food stocks could be pillaged.

So the outsiders' approach to combat worried even the very group who had asked for the help. One of men objected: 'We don't want to wage war like this. It's not fair nor is it chivalrous to decapitate the enemy! Here we don't do things that way.'

'Well, that's the way we do combat. We don't know any other way. Either you allow us to fight our way, or you yourselves will have to deal with us.'

And so it was not possible to convince the new mercenaries to renounce their ferocious traditions.

Eventually, the group achieved victory. They sought to reward the newcomers generously with rams, horses, buffalos, jewels, storehouses, and many slaves. But the newcomers refused their offers. They desired another form of compensation:

‘We don’t want cattle or gold or slaves. We only ask for the right to drink these waters’, said their leader pointing to the crystalline spring that gushed from the crevice a few steps from where they stood.

With water, the newcomers knew they would be able to settle permanently in Baucau. And the original inhabitants had neither the power nor the courage to refuse them.

The newcomers did not delay in building their houses. There was no doubt that they were here to stay.

The first inhabitants remained curious about one thing. Why did the newcomers wear that feathered headdress? They suspected that from this headdress the newcomers derived their bravery.

‘Well, it’s like this: when we were kids, our heads were perforated and they hammered these feathers into us, and we have never stopped wearing them since. Our strength and valor is thus derived. But if you wish to become fearless warriors like us, we will initiate you.

‘Yes, we want to!’, exclaimed the old owners of Baucau, anxious to take from them their secret so they could turn it against them and expulse them from the land.

‘Then we can insert the cockatoo feathers and you will become as courageous as us, or even more so.’

The offer was accepted. Each newcomer took a man of Baucau. Taking advantage of the dark of night, the newcomers drove sharp spikes into their heads. The poor men shrieked in pain. The newcomers teased them, just as they pretended to console them:

‘It is an ordeal, but it is worth it. Take courage! The pain will soon be over! Now you have to jump and dance!’

A few tried to dance. But soon all were drenched in blood. They stumbled, fell to the ground, and there they came to rest, and never rose again. And so it was that these terrible warriors (*assuais*) came to settle in Baucau.

*Introduction to the myth on Behale, Lequiçá and Vemassee.*

Here we bring together two legends: The War Between Behale and Lequiçá, and, by virtue of that war, The Founding of the Kingdom of Vemassee.

According to the first legend, long ago the island belonged to two royal rulers (*régulos*): one who ruled over [the province or confederation of kingdoms called] Lequiçá and another who ruled over [the province of] Behale. The war that broke out between the two, caused by a marriage contract [contrato de barlaque] whose terms were violated by the King of Behale, eventually led to the founding of the kingdom of Vemassee.

After that, more kingdoms formed, and by 1868 their numbers had attained 47.

The storyline of both legends revolves around the superstition of sacred objects—the *lulics*—and Timorese people’s insalubrious fascination with mystery.

Once captured by the enemy, the only weapon that can kill the Behale warrior is a sacred herb. No sword can decapitate him, no spear can penetrate his body. Only the sacred herb can choke him to death.

The *lulic* of the kingdom is a golden snake, the supernatural protective power for the people of Liquiçá, which keeps them free from persecution or enslavement by enemy forces, and brings them safe and sound to a distant place of refuge. And the same *lulic*, transformed into a man, impregnates the sister of the King (of Behale) to bring a heir to the royal line.

The Timorese attraction to mystery and magic induces those of Liquiçá to succumb to the hoax prepared for them by some astute Behale warriors, and many of the former are slaughtered as a result. The hoax runs as follows: The tricksters go to the forest and hunt as many snakes as they can. They bring them to the soldiers and people of Liquiçá, promising them that if they can hold the snakes in their hands and keep them in a state of absolute docility, they can expect abundant harvests as they have never seen before. The gullible Behale are unaware that this is a hoax. This is what this legend is about...

In 1929, a Timorese man was arrested in Manatuto for selling grains of corn, convincing the people of the region and in Dili that one single grain was sufficient to produce a whole field of corn.

At the same time, a clairvoyant [*matan dook*] of Aileu, who gave himself the title of Governor Negro, prophesized that the Portuguese would be leaving the land within days.

In 1931 a religious sect formed around a miracle worker who performed the whole range of 'miracles' by means of his crystal ball. Under the command of this inspired individual, a swarm of followers raising a blue and white flag, arrived at the Catholic Church, circumnavigated it, and went inside as far as the alter.

Such is the superstition of the Timorese. Anxious and tormented by beliefs far removed from the Christian God, the Timorese, with an appetite for any kind of superstition, are left at the mercy of evil spirits, of *lulics*, of lost souls.

### *The war between Liquiçá and Behale and the Founding of the Kingdom of Vemasse*

#### *The founding of the kingdom of Vemasse*

The King of Liquiçá was not satisfied with the death of the ruler of Behale. The vanquished were also obliged to pay various taxes (*finta*) and relinquish five of their most courageous warriors (*assuais*) to be conscripted into the victor's army.

But the Behale people did not feel humiliated or defeated. On the contrary, they saw an opportunity to avenge the indignities inflicted upon them. From among their ranks they chose the wisest and most daring of warriors and dispatched them to the court of Liquiçá.

Trained in the art of war and masters of cunning and trickery—which had always characterised Timorese warfare—the five warriors wasted no time once they arrived. They set to work, studying the traditions of the kingdom, the superstitions of its people, and their habitual ways of acting.

One day, they ventured deep into the forest in search of snakes. They caught as many as they could find. They returned with the snakes, convincing the local residents and soldiers that if

upon handling them the snakes remained quiet and passive, the people would be assured of abundant harvests like they had never witnessed before.

So susceptible was their mentality to superstition, they fell for the bluff.

And when they least expected it, the five warriors climbed over the gate and pounced on them. The surprise and violence of the attack [coupled with the frenzy of the snakes] sent them into a panic.

The King and his men fled like they had never fled before. When they reached the beach they made off in small boats, maintaining direction by staying parallel to the coast, seeking a safe place to land. The majority of the inhabitants, meanwhile, had run after the King, but arriving at the shore and finding no boats, they were forced to follow along by foot.

The King and his subjects reunited near a saltwater spring, Ué Massim, which gave rise to the name Vemasse. There, a new kingdom was born that spread to the east and to the south, extending to today's regions of Baucau, Lautém, Ossu and Ussuroa.

The King did not forget to bring the skull of the ruler of Behale, with the brains removed via the occipital bone and the skull already smoked. Nor did he neglect to pack the kingdom's most sacred object (*o lulic*)—the golden snake. They attributed the good fortune of their safe arrival in Vemasse to the potency of the *lulic* object.

Years went by, but for his advancing age the King found no bride. Now an old man, the people felt shamed that their royal master had no descendants.

And it was the *lulic* of the kingdom that once again saved the people of Liquiçá. One dark, tranquil night, the golden snake slipped out of the sandalwood box, assumed the form of a man, muscular and virile, and went to impregnate the King's sister, the widow of the ruler of Behale, who slept peacefully in her bamboo bunk. She did not repel the divine embrace. Nine months later, from this supernatural matrimony, triplets were born.

The triplet boys grew, always anxious to know their father. And every time they enquired, their mother changed the subject. She remained evasive in her responses until such a time as the boys had grown into men. Then, one day, the mother led them to the sacred box, opened it, pointed to the *lulic* and revealed that this was their father.

The men were astonished. One knew that it was true, and he saluted the sacred father. The other two made fun of the piece of gold.

And at that very moment the *lulic* returned to human form, and, beholding the first, said to him:

‘Since you showed respect for me, acknowledging that I gave you life, you will become the King of Vemasse [after the passing of your father], and through your descendents the royal line will continue. Your brothers and their descendents will never be anything but plebeians. As punishment for their sacrilege, they will live in poverty and servitude until the end of their days.’ And having spoken those words, the *lulic* resumed his reptilian form and crept back into the box.

The prophetic and irrevocable order of the omnipotent god was accomplished. One of the sons of the widow of the ruler of Behale—the son who had recognized his father—inherited the kingdom of Vemasse. The two brothers were expelled from the court and were destined to live in poverty and serve noble men. And even today in Timor their descendents still suffer under that divine curse.

Note: [I added what appears in these brackets for clarity]

*Extract from Correia, A. (1935) Gentio de Timor, Lisbon: Agência-Geral das Colónias.*  
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.’<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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*<sup>3</sup>--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!”

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 4 of this book.

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 muiri!<sup>4</sup> ‘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.

*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.

---

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

‘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.

*João Lere (dos Santos + introduction)*

The legend is about a famous magician named João Lere, half Portuguese, half Timorese. He was the chief of Uani-Uma village at a time when a governor and a bishop resided permanently on the island. The legend is a curious one, well worthy of being recounted here.

After securing peace with Holland on 6 August 1661 and negotiating the respective territories of the Portuguese and the Dutch with the East India Company (*Companhia das Índias Orientais*), it was decided that a location would be chosen for the construction of a forte, which would serve as a sovereign Portuguese base. Until then, the ships that sailed to Timor anchored in Mena.<sup>5</sup> However, this kingdom had been a great worry to the Portuguese, and a stream of naval expeditions from Larantuca had been sent there to resolve problems. It was thus deemed necessary to erect a forte that could affirm the sovereignty of Portugal in Timorese territory, and could prevent and repel attacks from abroad. The area of Lifau was chosen; advantageously surrounded by high mountains, Lifau formed a cove with a salubrious climate and abundant water. The area was named *Praça de Lifau* and it remained the capital of the island until 1769.

It was now necessary for Portugal to officially take possession of Timor and send there a military governor. The Dominicans presided over the spiritual domain, but the growing number of Christians and the expanding needs of the clergy made it imperative to attend to the role of the two governments. Therefore, the Superior himself wrote to the Vice-King of India observing the status of the new possession and expressing the need for a military leader. In 1702 Antonio Coelho Guerreiro was sent there to govern as the Captain-General of the islands of Solor and Timor. With the defeat of Malacca, the bishop, too, came to be based in Timor under the order of Dom João V (1745); the cathedral was located in Lifau.

Earlier, D. Frei Manuel de Santo António, through the Ordinance of the Vice-King of India, dated 7 January 1718, obtained 'license... to build a church in Lifau, where as a bishop without diocese he would reside and execute the divine office, not only at this church but also at other churches, which in the absence of Dominicans would employ clerics.'<sup>6</sup> Dom Fray António de Castro, appointed Bishop of Malacca in July 1738, also settled in Timor, where he died on 9 August 1743 and was buried at the church of Lifau.

Therefore, we know that the events surrounding the legend occurred after 1718.

---

<sup>5</sup> Today a modest village bordering on the enclave of Oecusse, Mena was the centre of a famous kingdom in the period of occupation. A legend relating to the first baptism administered in Timor, tells that the pure waters were received by a daughter of the local queen, Filomena, in honour of the young female Christian martyr. [Reverts to the other guy's translation...] of Christianity and the fact then became the prestige of the newly baptized woman. The neighbouring peoples called the kingdom, the land of Mena, short form for Filomena, used in familial language. Cata for Catarina, Tina for Florentina, Anto for António, Bastian for Sebastião...

<sup>6</sup>Mitra Lusitanas no Oriente, II parte, p. 238, cited from TEIXEIRA, Manuel *Notícia Histórica das Missões de Timor*, Ecclesiastical bulletin of the Diocese of Macau (Macau) year XXXVI, numbers. 414-415, September - October 1938, page 188.

*The legend of João Lere*

JOÃO Lere—such was the name of the chief of Uani-Uma village who soon became famous by virtue of the miracles he performed.

Once, he went to Lautém in the company of the governor, the bishop and the *liurai* (king) of Vemasse. He entrusted the leadership of the village to his son.

The four of them were standing on the beach. When they looked towards the west, they were astonished to see great tracts of coastal land around Uani-Uma splitting off and sliding into the sea.

João Lere was not the kind of man who sat idle when disaster struck his village. Without a moment's hesitation, he seized the two Portuguese men and the king of Vemasse, and flew off, (?- I added the fly bit) and set them down safely in Uani-Uma. Then, he confidently examined the affected coast, uttered some mysterious words, and soon everything reverted to its former state.

Everyone watched with mouths gaping open. The king now had his suspicions confirmed that João Lere was indeed a strange creature possessing supernatural powers.

In the meantime, some 200 porters had arrived from Lautém, carrying the baggage of the governor and the bishop. As it happened, there were no rations to feed so many people. There was only one basket of rice. The king fixed his gaze on João Lere as if he were interrogating him, challenging him to find a solution to the predicament.

The famous thaumaturgist ordered that 200 pots be filled with water and placed on the fire. He then took the basket of rice and placed a single grain in each pot. The fire brought the water to boil and the pots were now brimming with rice. The pots were taken off the fire; now they were full of food: ample rice and large chunks of pork, lamb and chicken. The porters ate more than they had ever eaten before, and for years to come that meal was all the porters spoke about.

The king was a mercenary animal, eager to exploit every situation to his advantage. The porters, exhausted from their long trip, needed to be replaced by a new contingent. And so the king proposed to João Lere that he recruit fresh people from the village of Uani-Uma. But unprepared for such a momentous task, João Lere explained that it was not easy to recruit so many people at short notice.

The crafty king knew this all too well. But what he wanted to check through and through was João Lere's magical powers. Understanding what the king was trying to get at, João Lere didn't wait to be asked twice. He looked at the bags there on the ground and he hit each of them with a thin, rattan, palm stick, making them fly off to the king's village.

Being accused of black magic and of complicity with the devil, João Lere was taken to Manatuto where his feet and hands were bound and two heavy stones were tied to his neck. They put him in a boat and headed for deep waters; there, they overturned the boat and sent each of the magician to the seabed forever.

You can imagine how astonished everybody was upon seeing João Lere free of his bindings and walking calmly on the waves towards the beach!

João Lere's enemies were furious. As he stepped from the surface of the sea onto the sand of the beach, they swung machetes and pitched javelins, but the weapons did not so much as leave a scratch on his body.

'What do you possess such that it impossible for anyone to kill you?' asked one of the bystanders angrily.

'I have a secret. There is only one thing to which I am vulnerable', he responded with a smile. 'Kill me if you will. I will tell you how. Bundle me up in rice straw, and set fire to it'.

They wasted not a moment. They wrapped the straw around him and set it ablaze. A column of flames and smoke filled the sky in an instant. And when the fire subsided his assassins went to scratch the place where they had burnt the body, but no remains of the extraordinary man could be found! The body had disintegrated without a trace!

Later, João Lere reappeared to his widow to tell her his last wish: to make a house, without ceiling and doors, in his honour. The villagers from across the kingdom assembled to build the holy house for him.

After that, the holy house became the most important place for holy matters—the *uma falunu*<sup>(7)</sup> of Baucau, where the people gather for the ritual of the rain.

When the plantations lack sunlight and there is no rain, the most prestigious priest of the region, the *ira-benu*,<sup>8</sup> sends a messenger to summon the people.

Ringing a copper bell, this messenger leaves Uani-Uma village of Ponta Bondura, and passes through Baucau, Fato-Maca, Ossuquéli, Ossuala and Vemasse. Then, he turns back to the east and continues the summons in Buato and Tequenamata.

When he passes a shepherd tending his flock, he takes a ram. When he crosses villages and plantations, the messenger demands a portion of everything that the soil produces, that the rain nourishes: rice, potato, beans, cocoa, tobacco, cottons, betel, coffee... Every house he enters he is offered food and a bed for the night. At certain huts (**cubatas?**) he is presented with a chicken.

After such a salutary pilgrimage, finally the messenger returns to the sacred house of Bai-Cai-Lale.

Then, the *Ira-benu*, followed by six other priests of the highest distinction—each holding a thick beeswax torch—file slowly to the cave of Cai-Huno above the rocky headland of Ponta Bondura. The acolytes file along behind while the crowd waits in Bai-Cai-Lale.

The gallery is high and deep, and part of it is submerged in marine waters. Water trickles from seven sources above in the stalactites.

They enter the cavern, the head priest always in the lead. They descend deeper into the cave, singing. At a place, the most sacred place, where water pools, the *Ira-benu* fills a bamboo. Then they make their way back.

But they discover that their passage is blocked by a new apparition in the form of a wall. From the depths of the cave, an angry and sinister voice bellows; it is the owner of the cave:

---

<sup>7</sup> *Uma* – house; *faluna* – holy things

<sup>8</sup> *Ira* – water; *benu* – full

Ó *kaydaw, ira lya!*—‘Thieves, you have stolen my water!’

The *Ira-benu* and his religious cohort are not scared. As they calmly approach the wall that blocks their way, the great priest whispers the cabalistic words and the wall is magically destroyed!

They now leave the cave and make for Bai-Cai-Lale where the crowd stands silently. The people encircle the *Ira-benu*, who proceeds to raise the bamboo (vessel) and sprinkle them with the sacred water. And then, with his gaze turned towards the heavens, he asks: ‘Let your sons come and play on earth’—by which he means ‘may the rain pour down’.

So ends the main part of the ritual. Everyone then leaves the spot and heads to the sacred house—which has been renovated many times since it was first built for João Lere—where a banquet and festivities await them... providing that the offerings that the messenger collects during his mission are sufficient...

And in the coming days, if the rain falls, it is the work of the ritual; if it doesn’t rain...<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> CORRÊA, Armando Pinto – *Gentio de Timor*, pages 133 -136