

Uma Asurate Renu

The day I started fieldwork in Babulo in 2006, a traditional house was being rebuilt in the settlement of Uato Kele Tobu. The main posts, platform and roof structure had already been erected. Children clambered all over the wooden frame. A group of men laid out the palm leaves and fibres used to cover the roof, another group sat on the veranda of a nearby house smoking, drinking palm wine and playing cards. A few women chewing betel nut and leaves sat chatting in the shade near the kitchen house . There was a festive mood among the workers who were keen to show me the building and explain the significance of their house. The *badae* (E: skilled craftsman), a local carpenter charged with overseeing the building, surveyed the progress. It would not be long before the walls of the house would be up and the roof ridge (N: *hudi uatu*) with its decorative tips in place. Once this final act was complete, I was told, the official inauguration described as 'entering the house' (N: *sae uma*) could take place.

The house being rebuilt was an origin house (N: *uma kain*) called the *Uma Asurate Renu* (House of the helpers of the people), a subsidiary house of the Daralari origin group.¹ Previously located in the upland settlement of Baduria, the earlier structure was destroyed at the time of the Indonesian invasion. Most of the men working on the house were house members. When I asked them why they had chosen to rebuild their house at this time, I half expected them to answer that it had not been possible to do so during the Indonesian occupation, due to restrictions on movement and assembly or lack of resources, and that only after independence was it feasible. But no mention was made of the past. Instead, I was told that the main reason was they were concerned that their house was dying out.

¹ In all likelihood this is a corruption of Portuguese *ajudante do reino*.

Later, I learnt that elders of the house had consulted a local diviner (N: *malu rae*, literally, betel vine leaf) to ask why so many house members had fallen ill or died, why there were so few births and what they could do to reverse this trend. The elders were told that failure to rebuild their lineage house coupled with the loss of one of their sacred heirlooms, a rattan staff (N: *kai ua*, T: *rota*) received from the Source of the Land (N: *rea netana*), were signs that the house had strayed from their customs and forgotten their ancestors. The diviner diagnosed this perceived loss of direction and identity as the cause of dwindling house vitality. To re-invigorate house membership, the people of *Asurate Renu* had to rebuild their house, reinstate the lost rattan staff and repair their relationship with the Source of the Land.



Photograph 1: Laying palm leaves and fibre on the roof of the house of *Asurate Renu*. Credit: Susanna Barnes.

Marriage as a metaphor for politico-religious relations

The headman of the house of *Asurate Renu* stated that one of the main reasons for rebuilding their house was to re-instate the lost rattan staff (T: *rota*, N: *kai ua*), which was originally granted to them by the Source of the Land. Indeed, the house of *Asurate Renu* is also described as an *uma rota* (a house which is the recipient of a *rota*). A *rota* or *rotan* is a Tetun word used to describe a type of ceremonial staff or sceptre (N: *kai ua*, T: *rota(n)*).² In re-building their house, the people of *Asurate Renu* sought not only to restore relations with their ancestors, but were engaged in a process of re-affirming their politico-religious allegiance to the Daralari Source of the land.

Members of the house of *Asurate Renu* claim to be the descendants of a male Daralari ancestor who ‘married out’ and had numerous children and grandchildren. According to their origin narratives, senior members of this sub-lineage requested and were granted a *rota* (ceremonial staff) from the Daralari origin group ancestors to ‘rule over its people’ (N: *renu* derived from Tetun *reinu* and Portuguese *reino*) and ‘assist the king’ (N: *liurai* derived from Tetun).³ Following a dispute over where the *rota* (N: *kai ua*) should reside, the sub-lineage split into two lines, creating the houses of *Asurate Liurai* (Assistant/Helper of the King) and *Asurate Renu* (Assistant/Helper of the People).⁴ The

² The staffs I saw in Babulo were between 50cm and 1m long, sometimes engraved with names and dates on their trunk and tipped with gold or silver caps which were sometimes decorated with human figures or botanical motifs.

³ The origin of such staffs is the subject of debate. Forman proposes that in the eighteenth century the Portuguese sought to expand their tribute relations through a system of ‘telescoping authority’, symbolically represented by the conferral of a staff or ‘sceptre’ (Forman 1977, Gunter 2008, 41). Suggestive of this relationship is the fact that these staffs carry names that are corruptions of Portuguese military ranks e.g. *Kabu* / *Cabo*, *Asurate* / *Adjudante*, *Maioro* / *Maior*. However, in Babulo, house groups claim to be either the recipients, or givers, of ‘indigenous’ or ‘original’ staffs. Interestingly, people generally used the Tetun word *rota* rather than *kai ua* when speaking about these staffs.

⁴ ‘*Asurate*’ is a corruption of the Portuguese ‘*ajudante*’. In Naueti, the word *dasu* means dog and is

houses are classified as elder/younger brother in relation to one another, where *Asurate Liuari* is 'elder' (*kaka*) brother and *Asurate Renu* is 'younger' (N: *wari*) brother.

The spokesperson for the Daralari Source of the Land and his younger brother, deny any direct genealogical connection between their founder houses the *Uma Buta* and the *Uma Ita* (White and Black houses), and the houses of *Asurate Liurai* and *Asurate Renu* and suggest that links are assumed or prescriptive rather than real. In fact, they claim that the ancestors of the houses of *Asurate Liurai* and *Asurate Renu* were members of a neighbouring group with whom the Daralari ancestors were at war. Once the group was defeated, rather than let them return to their place of origin (they might well attack again) or sell them as slaves (rebel or mount a counter-attack), the Daralari ancestors offered to incorporate them into their clan. They did so by granting them a *rota* as a symbol of subsidiarity, conferring the titles of *Asurate Liurai/Asurate Renu*, delegating certain ritual and governance responsibilities to them, and offering them land on which to settle.

The central act of the inauguration ceremony (N: *sae uma*) of the house of *Asurate Renu* was the symbolic [re]-granting of the original *rota* and its [re]-placement in the special place within the newly built house where ancestral heirlooms are stored (N: *klobor lale*; T: *klot oan*). I was offered conflicting stories regarding the destruction/loss of the *rota*. The 'original' (or possibly another copy of the original) *rota* was partially destroyed (or perhaps lost) sometime in the 1950s or 1960s. I was told that it had been destroyed by an over-zealous missionary who preached against 'idolatry' and 'paganism' and one day, in his shock at discovering that one of the church caretakers, a *zelador* (watchman), was also the custodian of the *rota* of *Asurate Renu*, he charged into

used as a self-reference on formal, especially ritual, occasions, i.e. at the inauguration of a sacred house or during the maize and rice harvest ceremonies.

the house, grabbed the *rota* from the ancestors room and broke it into pieces.⁵ Only the metal tips on either end of the *rota* were salvaged. It was not until the 1990s that a replacement *rota* was made.⁶ However, at that time the ancestral house, which had been destroyed during the Indonesian invasion, had not yet been rebuilt and therefore the replacement *rota* could not be 'officially' reinstated.

The granting of titles and symbols of office to these houses was and continues to be [re]enacted within the framework of affinal relations. I was told that during the house-building process representatives of the Source of the Land were responsible for tasks similar to representatives of *Asurate Renu's* original fertility-givers. The *rota* itself was described to me as being like an out-marrying daughter of the house (N: *ona ata hu'un*, bride / new woman) and the Source of the Land accompanied the granting of the *rota* with a gift of feminine goods like those presented to fertility-takers.

The ceremony began at the house of the eldest son of the Liurai Source of the Land, located in Aliambata.⁷ The Liurai Source of the land and elders from the main Daralari houses (the *Uma Buta*, *Uma Ita*) were all present. The headmen of both *Asurate Renu* and *Asurate Liurai* were called to 'receive' the *rota* which was presented to them by one of the Daralari elders. On receiving the *rota* the headman of *Asurate Renu* had to

⁵ In another version of events, the gold tips were sold and in another the *rota* was not destroyed but lost on Matebian during the war. The custodian of the house of *Asurate Liurai* claims their *rota bo'ot* (big staff) was lost on Matebian.

⁶ Interestingly, it was the son of the Daralari headman who took the metal tips of the original *rota* to Bobonaro, where a local gold/metal-smith was able to re-set the tips on a new staff. It seems that the Daralari were also particularly keen to see that relations with *Uma Asurate Renu* were restored.

⁷ I was told that for practical reasons it was decided that the ceremony should start out from Aliambata rather than Uato Soba. The original settlement of Baduria was closer to Uato Soba but now that *Uma Asurate Renu* was rebuilt in Uato Kele Tobu, that it was too far for the elders. I was also reminded that during the Indonesian occupation, the *Uma Buta* and *Uma Ita* were symbolically represented by the 'substitute' house next to the Daralari headman's house.

'explain' why his house had requested a 'new' *rota*. The exchange took place in muted tones, the headman held his head low without looking at the Daralari elders.



Photograph 2: Headman of the house of *Ahabaidela* (branch house of the Black House) delegated to hand over the *rota* to the headman of the house of *Asurate Renu*. Credit: Susanna Barnes.



Photograph 3: Wife of the Liurai Source of the Land prepares feminine goods to be brought to the house of *Asurate Renu* on behalf of the Source of the Land. Credit: Susanna Barnes

After the speech was made, the *rota* was then carried to the *Uma Asurate Renu* in the settlement of Uato Kele Tobu. Acolytes carrying traditional lanterns (N: *wai-iki*) flanked the bearer of the *rota* who was followed by representatives from the senior Daralari houses, young men carrying a pig and women carrying rice, woven cloth (*tais*), betel nut and betel leaves and other 'feminine' gifts that typically accompany a bride (N: *ona ata hu'un*; E: new woman/daughter-in-law) on the 'path' to her husband's house.

As the procession drew closer to Uato Kele Tobu there was a palpable change in atmosphere as gravity gave way to a sense of anticipation and celebration. Waiting on a palm leaf mat, which had been spread out at the base of the stairs to the men's room, were the eldest sons of the headmen of *Asurate Liurai* and *Asurate Renu*. These young men in their late teens or early twenties were living in Babulo at the time because they had fled the on-going violence in the capital Dili. Elders of the houses of *Asurate Liurai* and *Asurate Renu* took the opportunity of the presence of a younger generation to 'teach' them about 'their culture'. The headmen passed the *rota* to the young men for them to handle and examine. The young men had never seen, let alone touched, these objects.

The Daralari *rota* was given pre-eminence throughout the ceremony and members of senior Daralari house, in particular the wife of the Liurai Source of the Land, seemed to be most knowledgeable about the general order of the ceremony and the roles and responsibilities of the various participants. Senior Daralari men appeared to be more concerned with the wording of particular speeches, the position of various participants

in the procession and their movements ensuring that ritual precedence was enacted and maintained throughout.⁸



Photograph 4: Sons of the headmen of the houses of *Asurate Liurai* and *Asurate Renu* examine the ceremonial staff (*rota*) before it is placed in the house. Credit: Susanna Barnes.

⁸ Fertility-givers and fertility-takers present were not as attentive to the details of the ceremony but waited to receive their portion of the ritual feast. There was much consternation about the tardiness of food and gossip surrounding the keepers of the house who had both been previously married (and widowed). It was generally thought that a woman could not be 'a keeper of two houses' and this accounted for the 'disoriented' nature of the keepers wife.



Photograph 5: The headmen of the houses of *Asurate Renu* and *Asurate Liurai* enter the men's room to place the ceremonial staff (*rota*) in the 'ancestors place' (*klobor lale*). Credit: Susanna Barnes.

The gift of the *rota* (or in this case the restoration of the original gift) [re]confirmed the exchange relationship between the Daralari Source of the Land and the house of *Asurate Renu*. As in a marriage exchange, this relationship is asymmetrically weighted. Like a daughter given in marriage, the *rota* carries the life-giving qualities bestowed on the descendants of the founder-ancestors. The structuring of politico-religious relations within the framework of affinal relations recalls Sahlins' assertion that the 'social incorporation and distribution of external life powers is the elementary form of political life, and marital alliance is its experiential archetype' (Sahlins 2008, 184). The Source of the land achieve their authority by commanding 'external sources of vitality and mortality' (188).