Creating Time and Society
The Annual Cycle of the People of Langa in Eastern Indonesia
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Abstract. — The essay is based on fieldwork among the Ngada of eastern Indonesia and examines their annual cycle which is a means of creating time, social structure, and collective identity. These processes are related to several crops like rice, maize, and, most importantly, yams which in mythology is traced back to the origins of society and is thus transformed into a mnemotechnical object. Confronted with global impacts since the beginning of the century, the symbols and rituals of the annual cycle have changed their meaning and are used today in order to balance tradition and modernity. [Indonesia, Flores, Ngada, food, religion, ritual, syncretism, community]


1 Introduction

Like other Indonesian people the Sara Langa perform a ritualised annual cycle to increase the fertility of plants and people. The various rites include sacrifices, invocations, communication with the ancestors, and ceremonial meals. They serve as a magical means to control the weather, the process of growing, and keep evil forces like pest and malevolent spirits away. Generally, performing the annual cycle generates life and prosperity. Despite a strong traditional orientation Sara Langa rituals are not static formulas, but underlie processes of change that are initiated by external and internal developments. Since the beginning of this century this means an adjustment to foreign influences like Catholicism, tourism, and national bureaucracy as well as new modes of gaining high status, a weakening of social hierarchies, and the increasing value of money in daily life. Adapting to new times, the Sara Langa modified their annual cycle, eradicated some elements and invented others. The ritual cycle is thus a vivid part of religious life with a great capacity to deal with social developments.

Because the annual cycle is strongly connected to crops, I examine the significance of three different staple foods, namely, tubers, maize, and rice in the daily diet and for ritual purposes. The article is, therefore, also a description of nutrition rules, the economy of food preparation, and gender symbolism.

Strikingly, ritual significance does not reflect contemporary social significance, and the crop that is mostly stressed in ceremonies has little relevance to food. The meaning of this and other apparent contradictions will be analysed with reference to the theories of Frits Staal, Caroline Humphrey, and James Laidlaw who provoked the scientific community with the argument that rituals are rules without meaning. Contrary to the cited authors, I argue that an analysis of rituals cannot focus on small ritual parts but has to take the whole social context into consideration.

Langa is a parish in the Ngada district (kabupaten) of Flores, one of the Lesser Sunda Islands which is divided into five kabupaten, Larantuka
and Sikka in the east, Ende and Ngada in the middle, and Manggarai in the west. The kabupaten Ngada is inhabited by different ethnic groups: Nag, Kéo, So'a, the people of Riang, and Ngadak, a population to whom the Sara Langa belong. The Nag people speak a common language with different dialectical variations. Their culture also differs in various aspects but is connected by the engagement in the same annual cycle and shares also some important common customs.

The Nag people cultivate dry rice, tubers, maize, fruit trees, and vegetables, and they raise chickens, goats, dogs, horses, buffaloes, pigs, and for some years also cows. Most of the people are peasants, but an increasing number of men work on road building projects and everybody who has a good education tries to get a job in local administration, as a school teacher or state employee. Money has got value and it is needed to pay for school fees, the church, modern clothing, and some daily needs like sugar, soap, cigarettes, domestic articles, and other goods that can be bought in Chinese shops in the capital.

Since the beginning of the century, the Ngada have been under the influence of Catholic priests of the Societas Verbi Divini and today everybody is baptised at a young age. Although Catholicism is an important means of constructing collective identity, it has not eradicated the traditional belief system (BI: adat) that is focused on ancestor worship and a series of good and bad spirits who have to be kept in balance in order to prevent the community from illness, death, and misfortune (Schröter 1998a, 2000).

The Ngada area reaches from the coast of the Flores Sea to a highland chain of over a thousand metres height, and encompasses different climatic zones. The small coastal strip is called tana rara,

1 The spelling is sometimes Ngadha, and in older publications also Nada'a or Ngadha'. According to the modern Indonesian orthography it is today written as Ngada.

2 BI = Bahasa Indonesia, the Indonesian language.

3 I could observe the great effectiveness of these relationships in 1998 when the coast suffered a disastrous drought and crop failure. Though their kinship networks the highlanders provided their relatives with maize, the most important staple food, and prevented famine.

4 Since the months are associated with natural processes and work activities, they often have more than one name or are termed by different names. Sometimes my informants even designated different occurrences, for example, changed wula fanaga 'grain' and wula fanaga 'grain'. Here I document the version which could be agreed on by most of my interlocutors.

The annual cycle can not be separated from notions about time and especially from time measuring. Saru Langa divide the year into two seasons and 13 months. The latter are determined by the moon and the first by the rain. The rainy season (wula ratu) lasts from November to April or May, the dry season (wula leza) the rest of the year. This division primarily applies to the situation in the lowlands, but is also valid for the highlands, where a small rainy season in June allows for a second planting period.

The monthly division of the year, the traditional calendar, distinguishes between the following months:

1. It begins with wula reba at the height of the rainy season in January. A lot of greens and cabbages provide vitamins but the staple food needs some more months before it is ready to harvest. The crops from the previous year have already been eaten and the people need to buy rice and maize at the local markets or obtain them from the wet rice cultivating people of the western lowlands. In the old days Ngada women exchanged woven cloth and palm gin for staple food, but this tradition became obsolete because of the increasing money economy. However, since the monetary crisis shook Indonesia and the prices for rice increased dramatically, people have turned back to their proven tradition. Because of the shortage of food, the time before the new harvest is also called the season of hunger (BI: musim lapar). This situation does not change in the following month, wula logé nguca, month of the young sprouts. The young sprouts are also called wula ui nguca, month of the new vegetable. Wula logé nguca is followed by wula ipu wet, a designation that indicates the importance of a former staple crop the weté, a kind of millet. Rain and storm that signify the first two months of the year now decrease, the maize becomes ripe, the rice grows and has to be watched by the owners because of the birds. Ngada do not use scarecrows like the Balinese or Javanese but move from home and live in small bamboo huts
In a pan when older (sa’t tua) or dried and broken up into small pieces (re’u sa’i) which are cooked. Roasted, pulverized, and mixed with sugar, it is even transformed into a sweet.

Usually the meal begins with roasted maize in the morning that can be replaced by baked ones in times of new harvests. The process of roasting is very quick and the preparation is not necessarily done by all women who usually prepare the meals — anybody can do this. The effect is a lack of gendered responsibility for the main food. The meaning of this rather egalitarian aspect in domestic work cannot be underestimated.

Every evening with the exception of very small children and ill people is able to prepare his own food daily: children roast maize when they come home from school, men when they are working in the fields or sit together playing cards and drinking palm gin (tuo), and women when they meet together in a house or a field hut to do some work together. Roasted maize is not only a breakfast but serves as a snack. Often it is eaten with green leaves, either raw like leaves of the coffee tree or boiled like papaya leaves that are also used as a malaria prevention.

In the evening, when everybody belonging to the household is present, a meal dish of the day is prepared. This can be boiled maize mixed with rice (dhe’a sa’i) or beans (soboho sa’i), rice boiled with beans (dhe’a soboho), and sometimes even pure rice. The dishes are served with boiled vegetables, greens, or gourds. Very popular is a hot pot called uta taba made from maize, coconut, papaya leaves, two kinds of gourds (labu pengers, labu best), and black beans (soboho miti). Evening dishes are always prepared by women (although some of the younger men claim that they are able to cook) and are eaten with the whole family present. This responsibility of women for the major part of a household’s responsibility for women subsistence. The ungendered context cited for roasted maize is an exception of the gendered division of domestic labour that includes the preparation of the dishes, the cleaning of dishes, the feeding of pigs and dogs, etc.

Food not only defines gendered spheres but also identity. In the case of maize it is the identity of being about the first things I was told of when I arrived in Langa was a drinking song beginning with the phrase: “People of Flores eat roasted maize and drink palm gin …” (Dont Flores makan jagung goring, minum dengan mokke …). This is remarkable since identity is mainly constituted by kinship, locality, and alliance structures that divide the landscape into friendly regions where relatives live and areas that are described as straw, hostile, and inhabited by people who are suspected to be black magicians or practitioners of sinister rites. Here, with a reference to maize that is eaten by all Flores people, an identity is created that could be extended to the whole island. That this is a modern development can be seen in the language of the song. While traditional Ngada songs use the Ngada language, the text of the Flores song is in modern Indonesian that is used for Christian songs and national hits interpreted by pop singers from other islands. Thus, maize as the major staple food is a signifier for a modern identity.

3.2 Rice, the Ceremonial Food

Although it is so important, maize has no particular place in mythology which explains the origin of plants and customs. Contrary, there are many different myths for the origin of the rice. Story of the primordial rice god who sacrificed himself for the benefit of humans and transformed her body into rice and edible plants, is told all over Flores and belongs to a tradition of oral history in many Indonesian societies. According to this myth a young girl was sacrificed, dismembered and the parts of her body distributed over a field. From every part another plant grew. Thus female fertility was transformed into the fertility of the land. The ritual repetition of this mythical act is the centre of the annual cycle in most Flores societies.

This is not so in the Ngada area. According to a series of myths described by Father Paul Arndt, a Catholic missionary of the SVD who lived in Flores for 40 years and left a great number of articles, collections of oral history, monographs, dictionaries, and grammar books, the person who became the fruits of the field was a man in one story, a child in another, and a woman in the next (Arndt 1960: 63 ff.). Undoubtedly rice resulted from a human sacrifice but there is no special connection between femininity and food in this connection.

In another context, however, there is a relationship - it is centred on the process of cooking. As indicated above the preparation of maize dishes follows a twofold order: roasted maize does not produce gendered spaces of action while boiled
maize divides people into cooking women and consuming men. Rice is a food that is only eaten as a cooked dish. It is therefore in a very specific way associated with women and also with female ritual purity. If the rice sticks together, this can be a sign of wrong behaviour or ritual transgression by the cook. Sara Lange (1992) believe it is even possible to reveal a female witch (poto) by the way she cooks the rice. If it is half raw, half cooked (pededê ngeta mami), she must be a black magician.

Contrary to maize which is deeply profane, rice is ritual food par excellence. Together with meat it is served on all ceremonial occasions and thus also in the annual cycle rites. As well as in daily life women cook the rice. This is their main task. Men are obliged to sacrifice animals, to disembowel them, to boil the meat. In this context we can see a sharp distinction between male and female roles mediated by the responsibility for meat and rice. To be competent in preparing meat also means that a man belongs to the sphere of killing. Traditionally men are thought to be warriors and hunters, while women are seen as providers of vegetarian food and keepers of genealogical continuance.7 Men are symbolised as manu toro, red cocks, who are associated with fighting and war and whose red color signifies aggression and courage. Contrary, women are designated as lalu miti, black hens, which are associated with coyness and fertility.

To eat rice in daily life shows that the household is wealthy, because the yield from dry rice fields (ladungu) is small. The landscape in the Ngada area is steep and there is no irrigation system and terrace building as in Bali or Java. Therefore only a little land can be used as ladungu. Additionally it is possible to be poor continuously otherwise the birds eat all the grain before it ripens. Cultivating rice is labour-intensive. People who do not have their own ladungu have to buy rice in the markets or to exchange it for woven clothes or palm gin. Although rice signifies affluence, it is considered as weak food. People told me that they could not get satiated only with rice, and during festivities that last for several days they usually begin to complain about the feeling of disgust from eating to much rice.

3.3 Yams and Tuberous, the Old Food

If asked about their food by strangers, people answer that they eat rice and maize but do not directly mention the different kinds of tubers they cultivate, although they play an important role in daily nutrition. Ngada distinguish between uwi and dhao. Dhao means sweet potatoes and includes a great number of tubers of different colours, tastes, and usability. Uwi is the name for cassava (uwi kaya) and various kinds of yams. According to Arndt (1963: 45) cassava was introduced by the colonial administration of the Netherlands at the beginning of the century to prevent hunger. It is a frugal plant with a tasty tuber that can be boiled, baked, or fried in oil and served with raw or boiled edible leaves that are mixed with coconut. The other kinds of uwi and dhao are boiled or baked in the hearth ashes and can be eaten at any time of the day. There is nothing spectacular about the tubers, they are neither praised as an identity-producing and strengthening food like maize nor do they appear in rituals. Tubers are background food: needed to stave off hunger because the harvest of rice and maize is not sufficient for the whole year.8 With the exception of uwi kaya tubers are not thought to be very tasty and thus there is no “tuber discourse” in Ngada. Despite this, there is one kind of uwi that has a very special position in the annual cycle: a large uwi nasi (rice uwi) in a mixture of Ngada and Indonesian language also but most of the time only uwi like a primordial symbol, the mother of all uwi. According to the Sara Lange this uwi was their rice when the rice was introduced, and this opinion is also shared by Arndt (1963: 44).

The annual cycle focuses on uwi only. It involves ritual caring for its growth, magical protection, and the expression of sorrow when conditions are poor. Additionally uwi is related to the mythical heroes, their wanderings, and the introduction of culture. Within the annual cycle Ngada society is enacted as a yams-based culture. This is a contradiction of daily life that is centred on the eating of maize but also of the contemporary ritual practice that is focused on rice. While maize does not play any role in the annual cycle and its consumption is even forbidden, rice serves as the main dish in the yams rite. In the contemporary annual cycle the phases of clearing the land, planting, and harvesting are of less ritual importance for the Ngada. They mainly stress the rainy season from December to February, namely wula pana, wula rebu, and wula

lojé ngaça. In Langa there is an additional ritual called nyegedé doko, the maggots’ death struggle. I never heard of a similar ritual in other parts of the Ngada country nor did I read about it. Thus, it may be a local variation of the great ritual annual cycle.9

4 Rites of the Annual Cycle

4.1 Nyegedé doko, the Killing of the Maggots

I begin the description of the annual cycle with the nyegedé doko which is a two-day ritual held in the wula doko, because it is the first ritual event after the ritual climax called rebu that lasts from December to February in the whole Ngada area, moving from village to village,10 and takes place in the middle of January in Langa. It also reveals an internal hierarchy between the clans and villages of Langa and the superior position of its founding ancestor’s offspring and their main village, Langa Gedha. The ritual I observed in 1996 started in the evening with the gathering of the people of the Langa clan (Woa Langa) in their ceremonial trunck house (saka pu’a). Palm gin and coffee were served, the men smoked cigarettes and women chewed betel nuts. One of the most important persons was a traditional priest, a member of the Langa clan but not of the trunck house. He had been called to lead the ceremonies of the following two days.

After one hour or more of drinking and smoking the attending people stood up and left the house. The main ritual was to take place in the loka nuvi, the village square. Following the traditional village form, Langa Gedha is built in a concentric way. Enclosed by the houses is a big square, carefully cleared of grass and weed. In the centre of it there are two rows of parallel shrines that symbolise the female and male ancestral founders of the village. Opposite the rows of shrines men and boys had collected firewood that was set alight when the priest came out of the door. A procession formed and moved around the shrines and the fireplace singing the song of the maggots, the soka doko. This was also a magical spell, using the rhythmic form of parallel verses that are widespread in eastern Indonesia (Fox 1988). As usual for the Ngada, the priest (P) began to sing the magical phrases and the followers (chorus = Ch) repeated:

P: wai su'a... sasu go mege da bhara zele mala meze da bhara
Ch: zele mala oo
P: koko uwi zele soba oo doko da toro
Ch: zele sobo oo
P: bodha we peze mara mata we mara mato
Ch: mara mato oo
good food unna wanga oo
good food we gheu lau doko oo
good food we gheu lau doko oo
good food we gheu lau doko oo
doko lau
P: ee... mila ti's go topo
ti's toga panu
ch: ti'i baya papa wu'a
P: take two feet (stamp with your feet)
big white (maggot) in the fields
big white
Ch: in the fields
impudent maggots in the lands
impudent maggots
P: must be squashed, must be killed
must be killed
Ch: must be killed
the rami knife of the firstborn child
knife of the firstborn child
must bruise the maggots' body
Bruise the maggots's body
you must bruise the maggots's body
the maggots' penis
P: give the bush knife
give the bush knife for the fight
give the sword for stinging
give the lance for piercing

These phrases were sung again and again, always accompanied by the harsh sounding command: wai su'a (stamp with your feet). The text is full of ambiguity and double meaning. In the beginning there is a rhythmic play with the colour bhara (white) and toro (red) that in this context does not mean courage or the warrior’s status like the term manu toro but has the negative meaning of impudence. The song’s core is an enumeration of ways to kill a maggot: to squash it, to bruise it, to sting it with the sword, to pierce it with a lance.

7 This antagonism is examined in Schröter 1998c.

8 This is especially so in the dry zone where people harvest only once a year.

9 There are specific local ceremonies of other villages at different times that are not mentioned in this article.

10 I selected smaller rites referring to sowing and harvesting because they have less importance and are no longer practised by most of the people.
and to cut it with a bush knife. Ngada believe in the magic of women, and the verbalisation of an action can have the effect of the action itself. Thus, to speak about the killing of the doko is similar to the act of killing, and the spoken imagery of piercing, cutting, and bruising is thought to have deadly results for the maggot. Rêl rêl, dammed are you, is a traditional insult, and so is the use of the term lød, the term for the male genital that was interpreted by an informant in the Indonesian language as maâliâh dikau, shame on you. Mêo, cat, is a reference to the guts of the maggot that is here associated with an evil ghost, called doko pu ‘u tangi.11 Ana wunga, the firstborn child, is an allusion to Sili, one of the primordial heroines.

The act of killing was not only performed as a ritual speech but also as a burning of the maggot’s spiritual energy. This was the meaning of the big fire at the head of the village square. When it had burned down and only a carpet of glowing fire was left, the time came for boys and young men to show their courage. They ran barefoot in and out of the fire, trampling on the glowing wood and each of them tried to outdo the other by being more courageous and staying longer in the heat.

It was a wild scene, a celebration of male power and the victory of young warriors over the forces of evil in the spirits or maggots. When the fire was dead, nobody’s feet were burned and this was interpreted as a sign of success.

While the youth were still enjoying themselves at the loka nua, the members of the leading house of the Langga district rode to their trunk house. The last rite of this day had to be celebrated. Under the leadership of the priest, a chicken was sacrificed to the house’s ancestors for the well-being of their offspring. The priest chanted the entrails, and information from the forebears concerning their relationship with their descendants. He found no hint of a transgression of rules that are thought to be the reasons for illnesses, misfortune, and other effects of ancestral punishment. Everything seemed to be fine, and after an offering of blood, meat, and rice to the forebears the people enjoyed their common meal.

The next day was also dedicated to the youth, mainly the boys and young men and their responsibility to the village against all kinds of enemies. As well as the day before I was the only woman in the group. It began with an exodus of Langga Gedha’s young men who went to every village of Langga asking for some uwi. Nobody could refuse the demands. The tubers were collected outside the village at a place in the fields on the ridge of a hill. A fire was made, the uwi put into the ashes and singing about the fight against evil started. After a while the young men formed two groups and armed with pieces of hot uwi they threw them at each other. The fight lasted half an hour and ended with the throwing of three magical spears in the direction of sunset which is associated with the land of death and also with the Kabupaten Manggarai, the next district to Ngada, an area that is related to the Ngada by an increasing number of intercultural marriages (Schröter 1999b). But as the western neighbour and a strange region it also serves as the land where evil spirits can be sent.

Thus the priest banned the spirits of the doko as well as all the other evil spirits to the Manggarai. After this everybody sat down and ate the baked uwi.

Langa Gedha claims to be the original village of Langa and its name is associated with the notion of a glorious past. In former times, according to my informants, it was a village of nobles (ata ga’ê), of great men (ata mêzê) who were wealthy and famous in military leadership and belonged to mighty houses. Built on the top of a hill, it was protected from the enemy and safe from attacks and safe from enemies from evil spirits of the mountains. After this everybody sat down and ate the baked uwi.

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Langa Gedha is today a village like many others. There is no need for military leadership and the political power is exercised by the Indonesian administration. People of Langa Gedha are not given privileged positions like the village mayor (Bi: kepala desa) or his secretary (Bi: sekretaris desa) and the up-and-coming new elite of well-educated people do not necessarily belong to old mighty houses. Despite this, Langa Gedha holds its old dominant position in the rural annual cycle. In the past, political and ritual power went hand in hand, but today there is a remarkable gap between these spheres. The sector of economical and political power is oriented to modern principles and follows national or regional developments. Part of the ritual sector adhers to the old hierarchies which are rooted in a precolonial order or even in myth.

4.2 Pana

One month before the rainy season starts Sara Langa celebrate a rite called pana. It is a weather oracle and reveals whether the harvest will be threatened by storm in the following months.

Most Ngada oracles use the entrails of sacrificed animals or bamboo sticks as a means for divination. Pana focuses on a third method, that is, on water. Like the taking of the comb in Bina and the cutting in Ngada Gedha, the rite can only be performed by the member of a special house. In Langa it is practiced by the trunk house of the Langa clan which is also the celebration ground for the ngedhe doko. The rite itself is not spectacular; a young bamboo (po’o) is filled with water and put into a fire outside the house. If the water boils over, storm is expected for the rainy season. Storm that often comes together with heavy rain is very dangerous not only for the people who can be killed by falling trees or landslides but especially for the harvest. In the middle of the rainy season, in the months of January and February when bad weather is mostly feared, the crops are already high and thus can be completely destroyed by rain and storm.17

After the divination a procession goes around the ancestral shrines in the middle of the village square and people offer some rice to the ancestors symbolised in megaliths called pana.

4.3 Bu’i uwi, Baking the uwi near the Shrine of the Female Ancestor

Following the pana in the annual cycle is a rite called bu’i uwi. Bu’i means to burn or to roast and refers to the former custom of baking the uwi in a glowing fire. Because there are two very similar ceremonies called bu’i uwi, they are classified according to the places where the ritual takes place: the first one at the loka bhaga, the place of a female ancestral shrine, and the second at the loka soghe. In a mixture of Ngada and Indonesian language they are also divided into bu’i pertu, the first roasting, and bu’i kedau, the second roasting. Both places, loka bhaga and loka soghe, are outside the villages in the woods. These are sacred places connected with the ancestors of the Langa clan who are symbolised by large megaliths, and they are also loka tan, places where palm wine is tapped and where men gather to drink.

The ritual at the loka bhaga I observed began with the cleaning of the place. Four small fireboxes were then added (Fig. 3). The fires and the coals, were made so that the ancestors could climb down from their unseen residences, take a seat on the stones, and enjoy the ceremony together with their descendants. Some of the women began to prepare the meal. They cut the leaves and stem off some of the leaves of the giant bamboo, and the men chopped the leaves of the giant bamboo, and the men chopped the leaves of giant megaliths and added them to the fire, and removed husks from the rice. Palm wine was tapped from one of the sugar palms surrounding the loka. When the rice was ready, the group of men who had already cleaned the megalith place took some salt, a palm gin, and offered it to the ancestors. In ritual speech the latter were invited to eat and to drink together with their descendants. After this, the men sat down, ate a little bit of rice and meat, and drank some palm gin. This was supposed to be a common meal of the living and the dead.

Then the men began preparations for a rice oracle. A big fire was set afloat in front of the megaliths. Rice, a special leaf,14 and water were filled into three large bamboo containers and put into the fire (Fig. 2). Boiling the rice in this traditional manner is an oracle similar to that of

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11 I already discussed this phenomenon that belongs to the complex of polo, malevolent spirits, in Schröter 1999a.
12 According to Daeng (1988), today the social function of competitive feasting has been replaced by competitive marriage payments. This is not appropriate for the Sara Langa whose institution of large marriage payments decreases in parallel to the institution of great feasts.
13 When I was in Langa in 1997 the whole maize harvest was ruined.
14 This was the wana aga, the aga leaf, which has great importance for various ritual purposes including the rites of concluding peace and death rituals. Cf. Schröter 1999a:429, Klavinsius: Wae. 1996.
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the pana. Waiting for some information from the forebears everybody sat down and waited until the rice was done. Standing up is a bad omen and a sign of little respect for the ancestors. Only the ritual leader was allowed to do so. He crawled forward to the centre of the loka and rose up announcing the central message for the reba and the rainy season:

dongo rivawé
dia da bu'i
dia loka ni'í mohlit
go dia neeta pu'a lau woe
ma'ë tolo san'ë
ma'ë go mohlit
go waran bëdla
we kuu keză go tu'i ko
bodha we vaga maa

wait, people
here the roasting (is practised)
lontar palm is banned from this region
fresh fish from the sea
is forbidden to take
don't take things from the lontar
otherwise a storm will come up
will uproot the edible plants
the storm will tear out everything

Because the storms originate from the sea, anything from there is now suspect and prohibited: fresh fish, coconuts, and palm wine. However, the power of the monsoon winds is thought to be encapsulated only in fresh products from the coast, thus older ones, harvested before the stormy season, are not dangerous.

After the announcement the rice-filled bamboo was cut and the boiled rice poured into a woven basket. Mixed with coconut, it was handed round and everybody took a portion and ate it. During the eating the sui uwi was held. The priest took an uwi dug from the sacred uwi land near the loka bhaga and began to cut it singing:

sui . . . o . . . uwi
nana pia . . . nana na'ë
uwi go Sili Anu Wanga
da muka pëna gua
sui . . . o . . . uwi
uwi go Tëru ne'ë Tëna
uwi go Wijo ne'ë Wajo
da pëna go kohbe ne'ë
nana pia nana na'ë
këddla baung wi gua
go reba go sëwa wëla
go tuddù ramu ana wënga
go manu kë ko këlë
go muku riyo riyo java
go muki nari tu tàëne

Sui means to cut and this refers to the priest's action who cuts pieces of uwi during the invocation. In a deeper sense cutting the uwi is a metaphor for calling the yams spirit and the spirits of the ancestors (Arnold 1961: 518). Generally, sui uwi is a magical call for all members of the descend group, mythical heroes like Tëru and Tëna, Wijo and Wajo, Sili Ana Wanga but also the living members of the house who are faraway from Langa. The latter are called by naming their actual living places at the end of the speech. Because many young people emigrate to the urban parts of Timor, Java, or Bali to look for a job or attend a university, it can be a very long list of places.

I have already mentioned Sili, the son of Wajo and Tëru, as a person who is involved at the soka doku. Here he, his parents, and their siblings are associated particularly with the village of Langa. Wijo, Wajo, and Tëru have shrines in one of the villages of Langa and are, therefore, seen as

15 This is another word for the bhuka sau, the little pumpkin, that is attached to the sacred digging stick and contains holy palm gin that is filled in at the time of reba and kept until the next year.

Fig. 1: Preparations for the bu'ät uwi: coconut and chick are used for sacrifices, the small bamboo ladder is for the ancestors to climb down from their unseen residence.

Fig. 2: Rice is boiled in bamboo containers at the bu'ät uwi.
direct forebears of a particularly local clan. The shrine of "Tufi" is in Bu'i, a coastal village to which the people of Langa have extensive marriage alliances. All of the named are referred to as cultural heroes once teaching the adat and bringing the kobbe 'se', a symbol for the ritual animal cycle itself.

The references to China and Java are hints of the Ngada story of origin that is suspected to begin in China according to one myth. Java is a synonym for unspecified island not identical with the Indonesian island Java. There are several stories concerning the persons who came by boat to the coast of Flores, usually related to a history of a special clan (Arndt 1954:253ff.), Téra, Ténu, Wigo, Wajra, and Sili are claimed to be some of the most famous ancestors. Having finished this rite, the priest performed a rice blessing, put raw rice into a bamboo container, shook it six times, and then threw the rice into the air. Everybody tried to catch as much as possible, because getting plenty of rice means to get a lot of luck. This was repeated three times.

4.4 Bu'i loka soghé

The second bu'i was held in Langa on 14 January, again at a place that usually serves as a loka tiau, a drinking place for men. The strict gender separation was removed for this day and women and children gathered at the place, again under the auspices of the Langa clan of Langa Gedha.

Most of the attending were children, females, or very old men because the younger men fulfilled another ritual task. Dressed in traditional costumes and adorned with a red headband like warriors, they scour through the villages of Langa looking for chickens to kill. They were armed with wooden sticks and tradition permits slaying every chicken they see. This was interpreted as a gift from the inhabitants of Langa to their leading village. Before the rite started, I was told that everybody agreed to this custom and liked to offer a chicken to the roaming youth of Langa Gedha for the benefit of the whole community. In reality, however, there was often anger rather than acceptance. Maybe the people thought it was more a tribute than a sacrifice or they feared the financial loss. Anyway, when they got the information of the nearing warriors, they tried to catch their animals and locked them indoors. Despite this, the young men obtained rich booty and got into more than one conflict with angry housewives.

While the men were hunting domestic chickens, the women, children, and old men cleaned the ritual place and built the ladders for the ancestors. After this male clan leaders went to another place some hundred meters away from the loka soghé, called wa'atu namu. Waatu means stone, namely a megalith, and this one was a single, erect stone symbolising Bawa Rani, the founding ancestor of the Langa clan. The place was cleaned like the loka soghé. After doing this the men returned. Early in the afternoon the young men came back from their hunt, each of them carrying several dead chickens. They were greeted with a big hullo especially from the children who were happily expecting a delicious meal. Immediately the men began to sing off the chickens’ feathers and cut them into small pieces. Heads and hearts were separately thread on a bamboo string. The meat was then cooked together with coconut and a special kind of green leaf (wuwu fiso). In the meantime one of the elders dug an uwi from a little ceremonial field. A meal was prepared, chickens were slaughtered, and offerings made to the ancestors, everything in the same manner as at the bu'i pertama. After finishing the meal, the men returned to the loka soghé for a repetition of the traditional rice oracle.

While they sat down at the fireplace to watch the bamboo container for a sign of good or bad weather, another ritual was celebrated inside the bhaga. A chicken was sacrificed by cutting its neck and then boiling its entrails were extracted also as a weather prognosis for the following months (ce' uwa namu). Then a traditional priest took two bamboo sticks, symbolising the land of the clan, and spat red betel juice upon them. He cut one of the dug uwi, spat on a piece of it, and spoke a sui uwi.

After a common meal, some of the men including the elders of the two most important houses of the Langa clan aldered their su'a, ceremonial digging sticks that symbolised the house’s land. Attached to each su'a was a bhoka, a little pumpkin filled with palm gin. The party went to the waatu namu again to celebrate a second meal with the ancestors. Having finished eating, a young man climbed a tree and announced the beginning of the reba festival the following day. He shouted in every direction and from some villages he got an answer.

4.5 Reba, the Ceremonial Climax of the Year

The reba festival has a duration of three days and starts in Langa with the misa reba, a ceremony that contains elements of the traditional reba, those derived from a Catholic codex, and integrates even bits that indicate secular rituals like rites of the state.

The year I participated, several bamboo shelters covered with plastic sheets were erected along the longitudinal axis of the village square to protect the spectators from the rain. Chairs were fetched so that honoured guests could sit comfortably. In front of the place a big tribune, also made from bamboo, had been constructed and beautifully decorated with flowers and coloured stripes of paper. But these were only final preparations. For weeks women and men had practised for a public dancing performance and catechists had prepared their speeches.

The festival began in the late morning hours with the arrival of special guests. Official’s (BI: pergenait) dressed in uniforms, village chiefs and their secretaries, and well-dressed people from the capital took their place on the seats. Catechists came and sat down on the tribune. As a special guest the Polish missionary of Langa and his colleague from a southern village attended the spectacle. But unlike a usual Sunday mass they kept strictly in the background and participated only in the communion distributing out wine and eucharistic wafers together with the catechists. The misa reba was performed by catechists and structured as succeeding sequences of speeches and dance performances. While all songs were sung in the Ngada language, some of the speeches were in Bahasa Indonesia, as happens in usual Sunday masses. The texts combined Christian sermons, the profession of faith with ritual speeches and combinations of both. The latter referred to Jesus and also to Sili Ana Wanga. Generally the texts

16 Another myth, that is not referred to in the bu'i, sees the Ngada coming from the mainland of Southeast Asia.
17 Other myths concern persons who are related to sun and moon, hills, trees, or crops which are not of importance in the Langa context.
18 The literal translation means “reba mass,” however, the ceremony is different from the Catholic mass.
stress the community’s belief in the Christian God and his son, and in the mythical ancestors as well. Reba is denoted as a feast of peace and togetherness, an interpretation that fits into the traditional and the Christian context.

During the whole ceremony male and female dancers, dressed in the traditional costume (Fig. 3), performed slow dances with a prescribed choreography and sang Christian hymns. Compared with the dances at the loka bhaga or loka soghi, the performances during the misa reba were a little bit stiff and lacked spontaneous elements that made the traditional dances so charming. The dancers behaved seriously being careful not to destroy the image of dignity and gravity.

The next day began by making contact with the ancestors. As all Ngada rites include an official addressing of the forebears, the misa reba which lacked this element completely was obviously a modern invention of rituals. Contrary to this was the succeeding rite, called bama waka, that means honouring the memory of a house’s forebears.

People from every house took rice mixed with coconut, meat, and palm gin and went to their fields where erected negalithis symbolized the ancestors. They put the dishes on the stones and invited the spirits to eat:

*ebu nasi*
*ka maki nari dia*
*itu tua*
*we’i sii gami kedi banga*
*ula ma’et mu*
*kasa ma’et bana*

ancestors
eat this sweet rice
drink the sweet palm gin
bless us your descendants
that the head doesn’t warm up
that the chest doesn’t heat up

After their meal the ancestors were thought to follow their offspring and come into the house to talk part of the festival.

The night after the misa reba is called kobet dheké, the first night. Unlike the misa reba it is a very private event, comparable to the bama waka.

Members of all houses gathered in their particular ceremonial houses, bringing pigs, chickens, rice, coconuts, and palm gin with them.

The evening in my house began with the cooking of rice and the killing of a pig in the traditional manner cutting the head of a pig with a bush knife (sopo). It was then singed, disembowelled, and boiled together with coconut. Coffee and palm gin was served to the hungry party. When the meat was ready, a small group of people took some rice, a living chicken, and some palm gin and went to the shrine of the female clan ancestor. The chicken was killed and its blood smeared on the shrine’s wood. The meat was roasted in an open fire under the shrine and portions of it together with rice and palm gin offered to the ancestors. The attending people ate inside the shrine and returned then to the house.

Another chicken was sacrificed in the sacred manner and its blood smeared on the sacred digging stick (sua’s) of the house and some other sacred places inside. An uwi was cut and also fed with blood. Then a ritual leader chewed some areca nuts, sirih leaves, and lime, spat the red juice on the su’a and began to perform the su uwi that was already held at the loka bhage and the loka soghi. This was followed by an opulent meal and the singing of the soka uwi.

The next day was dedicated to the growing of the crops, not only the uwi. A little ceremonious field was visited and every plant fed with meat, rice, and palm gin while the priest said:

*ka si maki dia*
*itu si tua dia*
*kami wenga kiti go wunu uwi*
*kami wenga kiti go wunu seko*

please eat this rice
please drink this palm wine
we will pick the uwi leaves
we will pick the seko leaves

Leaves of uwi and seko were picked and fixed at the su’a, the ceremonial digging stick. A sacred gourd (bhoaka) was opened. It contained the palm gin (tua) from the previous year which some other offered to the pos. Then new tua was poured in.

In the afternoon people gathered at the village place (loka nui) of one of the Langa villages, sang the soka uwi, and performed the jai rebu, the reba dance. This was very similar to the performance at the loka soghi. After several hours of singing, laughing, and dancing the people went home continuing the sacrificing, cooking, and eating.

On the third day of the reba people traditionally exhibit their gold treasure (we’a). Gold was a part of the bridehood, especially for high-ranking people. For several decades, however, wealthy people have spent their gold to pay for the education of their children or the building of modern stone houses with tin roofs and cement floors.

Therefore, in Langa most of the noble houses no longer have any treasure and only some of the women own a pair of earrings. Thus, the displaying of the gold is no longer an important part of the rite.

The last day was again spent eating, drinking, and giving offerings to the ancestors. In the evening the bones of the sacrificed animals were collected and thrown in the woods towards the direction of the sunset. This final gift was dedicated to the evil spirits. Feeding them was a covet action carried out by two elderly men and not acknowledged by the festive community. Nobody liked to speak about the dark side of the cosmos on such a joyous occasion but, however, evil forces are seen as eternal as God or the ancestors, and giving them a little bit of the splendid meal could make them content and keep them outside of the village.

5 An Interpretative Attempt

5.1 Rituals with Methods and Meanings

Ritual is one of the major issues for anthropological study and there are numerous theoretical attempts to differentiate ritualised action from non-ritual action. Here I shall discuss a theory of Frits Staal who in 1979 provoked the scientific community with the statement that rituals are pure rules without any meanings, and those of Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw who reinterpreted Staal’s theory in 1994.

The latter developed their theory with reference to the Jain puja ritual and argued that “ritualization severs the link, present in everyday activity, between the ‘intentional meaning’ of the agent and the identity of the act which he or she performs” (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 2). To elucidate their argument they presented the example of a flower-offering rite, asked several people about the meaning of this rite and compared the number of very different and even contradicting answers. Evaluating this Humphrey and Laidlaw conclude: “... we are not just dealing with a limited range of meanings ... to an act, ... from their experiences of it, from official teaching, and so on. It is worth noting that there is nothing one might call a single core meaning, such that the variations could be explained away as more or less approximations to a norm or ideal. ... Our informants were certainly deferential to the religious authority of renunciants and religious specialists, but they also referred confidently to their own understandings and opinions. Equally readily, they might admit that they knew no rationale behind the meaning they assigned to an act, or indeed that they knew no meaning for it at all. ... To the observer, the problem appears to be a superabundance of meanings – meaning untamed” (35 f.).

This concurs with the theory of Staal who noted numerous different answers when he asked a Brahmin why he performed a ritual (1989: 115). Humphrey and Laidlaw reflect on Staal’s observations with the Jain interpretation of diversity that is meaninglessness: “All rites and rituals ..., we were told, are mere ‘empty ritual’. They are ‘external’ actions and therefore irrelevant to an understanding of the transformation of the soul ... this is the heart of Jainism” (1994: 2). Frits Staal comes to similar conclusions: “The meaninglessness of ritual explains the variety of meanings attached to it” (1989: 135). He argues with a look at the intended effects of ritual action and points out: “In ritual activity, the rules count, but not the result. In ordinary activity it is the other way around” (1989: 132). It becomes clear what he means, if one takes the kind of rituals into consideration he focuses on. The subtitle of his book is “Ritual, Mantras, and the Human Sciences.” Mantras, he notes, have remained unchanged for 3,000 years, a time-span with immense social changes. This can only be because theory of Staal’s “Lakshmi change because they express meaning, are functional and constantly used. Meaningless sounds do not change; they can only be remembered or forgotten” (1989: 135).

Having a look at the core of the cited theory one can divide between two different arguments: the first is dealing with the ethnographer’s confusion about indigenous interpretation, the second refers to Indian philosophy. The result of both is an image of ritual as a terminal that is not influenced by historical processes.

In the following I criticise this ahistoric approach turning first to problems with ethnographic methods.

Since the early 70s anthropologists have no longer been speakers for the people they studied while those kept muted, but have carefully recorded their opinions. This was to grasp the natives’ point of view,” as Clifford Geertz (1973) called it and thus to come to a deeper understanding of culture. However, the intended cooperation was not always successful and confronted the ethnographer with some limitations of method that produced helplessness and sometimes also ethnographic amnesia. Anthropological literature is full of complaints that informants do not answer the ethnographer’s question, do not understand them, or are not willing to give the expected explanation. Instead of an eloquent indigenous comment on Anthro...
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Thus today uwi serves as a ritual object, not as a food. As an object it is a transmitter of history, ideas of origin, and cultural identity. When the dancers sing: “uwi of Sili Ana Wunga,” they evoke memories of the past.

Does this imply that these rituals can be reduced to “model[s] of action” as Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 88) assume or can we trace the thesis from this that syntax is more important than semantics as Frits Staal claimed? I have reached a dead end with either conclusion but take an approach into consideration that was developed by Ivo Streeker in his book “The Social Practice of Symbolization.” (1988). Attempting to find an initiation ritual of the Hamar in southern Ethiopia, he understood that his interlocutor’s silence was related to the inadequacy of his questions. He wrote that he did not only pose the wrong questions but recognised that his expectation of getting an exegetical commentary was impossible in the Hamar context. The dilemma’s solution, he argued, is the development of a theory of symbolisation that is able to take the so-called “said” and the so-called “unsaid” in the sense of Stephen Tyler (1978) into account and asks for implicatures and displacements within the ritual practice.

Cultural decontextualisation in which uwi is decontextualised, transformed from a daily food into a metaphor, and put into a ritual context. Uwi was the most important food in the past, but today it has been replaced by maize and rice. What does it stand for, when its meaning as a staple food has been lost? Is it wrong to assume that it has no significance any more, rather, I suppose, its meaning has changed with the change of nutrition and the change of society. Cutting the uwi, the priest recalled the memory of Sili, Wijo and Wajo, Têru and Têna. Sometimes these recitations initiated a common reminder of the stories of origin, the world before the days of maize and rice. What does it stand for, when its meaning as a staple food has been lost? Is it wrong to assume that it has no significance any more, rather, I suppose, its meaning has changed with the change of nutrition and the change of society. Cutting the uwi, the priest recalled the memory of Sili, Wijo and Wajo, Têru and Têna. Sometimes these recitations initiated a common reminder of the stories of origin, the world before the days of maize and rice.

The change of meaning and spinning a time warp

In the Sara Langa case one of these confusing moments was the fact that the annual cycle was primarily related to the growth of yams, but that yams have lost their function as a major staple food. In a kind of sympathetic magic yams are compared with mountains, big drums, and the way to the sky. Harvey Staal, uwi, according to its intrinsic meaning of ritual texts, guarantees the people’s survival and therefore must be the main aim of agriculture. Despite this, uwi does not play any role as food in these rites but does it play an important role in daily nutrition. With the exception of the boys’ meal on the second day of the ngōdè doko, it is not eaten at any of the rituals. It is dug, collected, cut, spat on, and roasted but not eaten. Asking the people about uwi, they stress the point that it is related to the past, to the time of the ancestors.

5.3 The Sense of Life and the Meaning of Ritual

For Indian religion meaningfulness and eminence are central terms that characterise spiritual notions of the cosmos and the movements of all beings in it. Animals and humans, demons and gods are seen as entrenched in karmic, the continuous wheel of suffering, illness, and death. The highest goal is related to an idea of paradise or better life on earth but to the wish to escape from the chain of birth and rebirth. Success is connected to the fulfilling of one’s desires of the life of love on earth which should not be understood but performed in the right manner. Rites and mantras which are several thousands years old need not have a meaning relevant to a modern Indian society. Thus, theories of scholars like Staal, Humphrey and Laidlaw may be appropriate in the Indian context where meaningfulness has a meaning, but are they appropriate for societies with different philosophies and, finally, does their thesis work as a general ritual theory?

A comparison between Indian and East Indonesian ethnography shows that ritual is a main theme, for example in India as well as in East Indonesia. Ritual is a main theme in both that the latter does not fail to include the same questions. East Indonesian ceremonies were analysed in order to explain aspects of culture like the relationships between politics and ritual and its cultural symbolism and internalisation of social structure (Graham 1999, Keld 1996), to mention only two. Many publications discuss life-generating rituals that are performed when death threatens the ongoing life of various occasions in an individual’s life cycle or in course of annual cycles. Generation of life includes fertility rites, magical fights against evil spirits, and, generally, rites to keep the balance within the community, between allies or the life of the nation. This is not the case to Indian societies East Indonesian societies do not cultivate life-negating models and the escape
from the life cycle is never intended. Consequently, people undertake great efforts to keep the cycle vital.

For the Sara Langa life itself has a sense, especially a life full of happiness. They are not ascetics nor is asceticism an ideal. A person’s ability to enjoy drinking and eating, dancing, singing, and joking increases his renown, and even among the Catholic priests those, most admired, are those who know how to drink a lot of palm gin. Generally, joy of life is highly valued. Taking these differences between Indian and East Indonesian societies into account, I argue that the diverse ways of looking at life produce diverse religious ideas and, finally, also diverse ritual meanings. For the Sara Langa this means that generating good life is the most essential meaning of all rituals. This includes harmony between nature and culture, between the living and the dead, and within society.

5.4 Ritual Action versus Profane Action

One might say that there can be many actions to increase fertility and stabilise social relationships that are not called ritual, and of course there are many in Langa, but I believe it is the recognisable difference between ritual and mere action. Rituals refer to spiritual beings, especially to the ancestors who are predominantly responsible for the well-being of their offspring. Sara Langa ritual practise agreed with Victor Turner’s definition of rituals given in “The Forest of Symbols” (1967: 19) where he defined them as actions directed to supernaturals beings and therefore stressed the contrast between the sacred and the profane. Sara Langa ritual is always determined by communication between humans and spiritual powers. The forebears are thought to be jealous beings, who demand not to be forgotten, who require that sacrifices and respect, and who watch if the living keep the tradition alive. Neglect and transgressions are feared because they can be punished by misfortune and illness (Schröter 1998a, 1999b). Thus it is necessary to know the ancestor’s wishes and their agreements or disagreements with their offspring’s life. However, there are only few possibilities for dialogue. Apart from the dreaming, which is highly individual and accidental, communication with the ancestors is only practicable in the strictly structured context of a ritual. It needs mediating objects like a bamboo container which is filled with water (in the case of pana or bu’i), the entrails of a sacrificed animal or small bamboo sticks which are used in another oracle. These objects that are only profane in daily context become sacred media in ritual. They serve as the ancestors’ voices and reveal their opinion. While communication in dreams is only a one-way channel, which offers no opportunity for the dreamee to pose his questions, divination is a real dialogue. This dialogue differs from daily speech and uses a specific, highly metaphorical speech, the cited ritual language.

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annual cycle, it becomes obvious that Sara Langa define two kinds of social structure. The first one is the community, the division into lineages (saka pu’u) and the second is the kinship of the participants who gathered in order to celebrate their community. The second focuses on the superior role of Langa Gedha, its leading clan, and its first house.

I shall first make a brief excursion on the structure of hierarchy. Flores societies are stratified along the lines of clans and houses and are additionally divided into nobles, commoners, and descendants of former slaves. Ritual and social prerogatives, status, and special rights are often traced back to mythical times and are represented in ceremonies. I have shown the precedence of the Dhüzi clan of Bénä for opening up the rebaru in 1993 and conducting the caliendar. For Langa the Langa clan has the most important position. Its leading house has the duty of fulfilling the ngedé doko, the pana, and the two bu’i rites. Like the leading house of Béña it is not only a house which gives something to the community but also takes something. The members of the Sa’o Sobbi in Béña are allowed to plunder the villager’s gardens and bring home as much as they like when they return from the morning. And the people of Langa have to bring gifts of uwi to Langa Gedha at the time of the ngedé doko. During the bu’i young men of the Langa clan rove all over Langa and gather in the villages. The young men’s behaviour was that of robbers or of people who come to demand a tribute. Although the inhabitants of Langa recognised all the rites as necessary parts of the annual cycle, and also esteemed the special position of Langa and its leading clan, they expressed anger and even hostility at the moment when the young men entered the village. Thus the hierarchy between the clans and villages of Langa caused ambivalent feelings.

Another hierarchical axis is that between a clan’s houses. Every clan contains six great houses, a female and a male leading house (saka pu’u = "female" house, bu’i = "male" house), and in each case two following houses (kaka pu’u, dai pu’u, kaka lobo, dai lobo). The female house is superior to the male one, and the leading houses and dai or kaka houses are associated with the hierarchy between elder and younger siblings. The ritual precedence of the rites cited above is always the sapa pu’u or bu’i.

The third line of stratification divides nobles, commoners, and former slaves, groups that are ideally endogamous. Unlike the hierarchies between clans or houses which have only ritual consequences, the division into nobles and slaves is determined by social status. Nobles feel superior to the other groups whom they call riuwa azi (younger people) and behave with the arrogance of aristocrats. There is great pressure on the younger generation not to marry hypogamy, and it is the past the rules of endogamy had been enforced with the threat of being executed (Schröter 1998b). Since punishment by death is forbidden, intercaste marriage is increasing, and some economic developments have made the old, land-based economy and created well-paid jobs for craftsmen, the nobles are constantly finding their power base eroded. Additionally, ideas of democracy have found their way into the Ngada hills, and the superiority of a noble caste is no longer accepted by everyone.

Unlike the hierarchies between clans and houses that is displayed within the annual cycle, the stratification between nobles, commoners, and former slaves is not. This depends on the fact that most of the houses contain people of different ranks.

However, the stratification of society causes some tensions that have to be integrated for the sake of stability. This leads us to the enactment of community that is so dominant especially in the annual cycle.

It was Victor Turner (1969, 1982) who stressed the mutual influences of hierarchy and egalitarianism or, as he called it, structure and anti-structure or communitas in human society. According to him the latter can be experienced in religious and social movements, and in rituals. Because of its effects of releasing people from social constraints and eradicating hierarchies in social relationships for a while, communitas is significant as a means of reducing tensions between members of a group or a society and stabilising the social structure.

Thus, for Turner, analysing ritual means looking for the source of social tensions, for the intrinsic risks of imbalance between persons or groups who are bound together by cooperative needs. By relating the division to conflict to the Sara Langa, it becomes obvious that one hand the society’s unity is constantly threatened by hierarchical differences, but on the other hand it can see common efforts by the people to integrate groups of diverse status and to harmonise existing tensions. Therefore, the annual cycle is a good means for anthropologists to get deeper insights into important centrifugal and centripetal powers of the society.

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5.6 Keeping Social Structure in Changing Times

I shall now come to my last point: the fact that the annual cycle of the Sera Langa is a lively sequence of ceremonies which are continuously changing with the changing of society. I have shown that the time plan has been changed in order to prevent a clash between Christmas and reba, that the old yams rite has been complemented by rice rites, and that a syncretistic part, the misa reba, has been invented. I shall discuss what this means to the aspects of togetherness that is pointed out as the central significance of the ceremonies by my indigenous informants.

Community in a traditional context refers primarily to kinship structure, that is, the house, the clan, or a big alliance network. A further important principle of social organisation is locality. Neighbours are often invited to join ceremonies, and there are some festive occasions like war-ceasing ceremonies or feasts on the occasion of the relocation of villages, where togetherness refers more to a local unit than to kinship. However, there are no ceremonies which include all the villages of Langa.

In the case of the annual cycle single rituals concentrate on kinship and village structures. The people who perform the ngedho doko were inhabitants of Langa Gedha and some affidavits of the leading houses and this was also in the case of the pana and the bu‘i rite. Most of the rebas stress the houses’ kinship networks and the house as the most important social structure.

The enactment of togetherness has also a topographical aspect and is related to special objects. Any tur’s shrines, megaliths, and sacred objects are the altars where sacrifices and offerings take place and where people remember their dead and the house’s forebears. One of these objects that is prominent not only for the reba is the mata raga, a wooden rack in the ono sa‘o, the inner sanctuary of the house. The place beneath the mata raga is dedicated to the elders of a line and very honoured guests. During the reba rites they sit here under the shelter of their forebears and feed them with blood, rice, and meat. The mata raga is an object explicitly connected with kinship structure. Strikingly during the misa reba it is used as a symbol for togetherness on the scale of the whole parish. A catechist used it as a symbol in a syncretistic speech that refers to Jesus and Sili Ana Wunga and which ended with the verse: Mai si kita gudhe sana-sana di mata raga (Come on let’s sit down together at the mata raga). Of course, the attending people would not gather at one mata raga, but split into their various kin groups after the misa reba, but the concept of a new community has been pointed out in this speech.

The misa reba underlines the parish structure as a new social structure that opens up the traditional ones. However, this new structure does not compete with the traditional one rather integrates it using the same symbols and referring to the mythology of the merchants and referring to the mythology of the merchants as the redhead. The mata raga is a sacred object related to ancestor worship, and the preacher during the mass confused the communities’ relatedness not only to the misa reba, but also to the ancestors of the people. The last rite of the speech makes this clear: Mai si kita anu ma‘u i bi‘e bu‘i nasi, mai bi‘i waku au ‘u (Come on, we young people will call the ancestors, come on we will announce the au). Here a new collective identity is appearing. It is an identity that goes beyond the narrow line of kinship structure and is therefore comparable with the identity constituted with reference to maize. Enacting these two kinds of identity through the reba rituals is also a demonstration that it is possible to integrate new forms into a traditional context and, at the same time, to traditionalise new structures.

Sara Langa do not practise archaic rites without meaning, as Staal would argue, rather modernistic rituals, contextualise ritual symbols, and create new meanings, if required by social developments. Confronted with modernity ritual practise is an effective means to successfully integrate influences from outside and thus, participate self-determined at the modernisation process. Finally the annual cycle shows that Sara Langa are no passive victims of global history but creative actors who are able to appropriate the mighty strange, transform and integrate it.

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