

Ritual and Ontogeny

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Ritual and Ontogeny

*Life Cycle Rites in an Eastern
Indonesian Society*

Gregory Forth



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A Note on Nagé Orthography

English comparisons are approximate. Bau (2018) uses a simpler orthography; in particular he does not distinguish the long /e/ from the schwa, writing both as /e/, the usual practice among Nagé.

Vowels

/a/ (as in “cat”)

/é/ (as in “bay”)

/e/ in the first syllable of bisyllabic words is the schwa, tending sometimes towards a short /e/ as in English “get.” In monosyllables (e.g. *me*, “to bleat (of a goat)”) and in the second syllable of bisyllabic words (e.g. Nagé, pronounced roughly as “Na-gay”) it is pronounced as /é/, as it is when followed or preceded by a glottal stop (as in *leè*, “bow”). In these instances, the sound is written as *e* and not as *é*, in the interests of parsimony but also to accord with the practice of literate Nagé themselves. However, I make an exception for the name “Nagé,” having discovered that some people assume this is pronounced “nage,” rhyming with “page.”

/i/ (as in “fit”)

/o/ (as in “dot,” or somewhere between “dot” and “dote”)

/u/ (as in “root”)

Consonants

All consonants have approximately the same value they do in English, with the following exceptions:

/bh/, an implosive /b/

/c/, pronounced as in “chat”

/dh/, an implosive /d/

/gh/, voiced velar fricative

/ng/, always pronounced as in “singer,” never as in “finger”

/ʔ/, marks the glottal stop, which occurs only initially or between vowels (see *éé*, “ugly, plain”).

Series Editors' Preface

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart**

Professor Gregory Forth is a distinguished anthropologist with a long record of meticulous ethnographic fieldwork among Eastern Indonesian people, matched by a notable series of professional publications based on his in-depth field studies. His focus in the present book is on the description and analysis of life-cycle rituals among the Nagé people on the island of Flores in Eastern Indonesia. The book is based on his own longitudinal field research with the Nagé since the 1980s and with two other sets of people on Flores, the Lio and the Keo, who have cultural practices comparable to the Nagé. Professor Forth is able to draw on his wide knowledge of these two and other peoples to make illuminating comparisons with Nagé culture. He brings to his writing both an exceptional understanding of Nagé culture and a mature acquaintance with ritual theory and with the life-cycle rituals which he makes central to the ordering of themes in this book. The book's title, *Ritual and Ontogeny*, exhibits his interest in the place of ritual in embodied patterns of sociality, energizing and transforming life experiences among Nagé across the domains of conception, birth, initiation, marriage, child-bearing, and old age and death, within a distinctive framework of cosmological and ontological ideas of what constitutes life and living by contrast with death, and with the idea of 'soul' as distinguishing humans from other beings such as animals. Professor Forth gives each category of being a careful discussion, focusing on the idea of 'soul' attributed to humans and distinguishing them from most other animals. Ontological assumptions or premises undergird all aspects of Nagé thinking. Spirits,

for example, are said not to have bodies, but they do have intentions and feelings and thus mind.

Professor Forth's focus on ontogeny enables him to concentrate at length on how rituals are employed to build up character in initiates for their cyclical pathways through life and death. He adds depth to the idea of the lifecycle, by making ritual the key to his exposition. Ritual determines the effective movement of the human soul between stages of being, such as initiation and marriage. Throughout, the role of marriage practices is important in linking stages of being across kin lines, through the rule of marriage to a mother's brother's daughter. Such marriages have in the past been a favorite site of controversy among anthropologists, but the main point here is that these marriages set in hand an intergenerational force for social continuity, linking together payments of wealth between wife-givers and wife-takers across generations that can be thought of as stepwise matrilineal obligations between kinsfolk in a way similar to extended life-cycle payments among Wiru-speaking groups of the Southern Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea, known as payments to *opianali*, 'those who have borne them.' Among the Nagé, payments of this kind are made after the death of a person, which triggers renewal of obligations to matrilineal kin as historical wife-givers. (The same is true of Wiru *kioli* death payments.)

Other themes that are integral to Nagé ritual behavior expressing ontology have to do with the symbolic structure of houses, separated into female and male spaces, while embodying an overall idea that the dwelling house as a whole is considered as associated with females. At death a person's head should not be allowed to point seaward, for fear of the body being attacked by witches coming from the sea. There are rules for the handling of the placenta following a birth inside the house. There is also a practice of offering a ritual sacrifice of valuable items to wife-giving kin whenever wife-takers visit their house. Outside the house ideas concerning forest *nitu* spirits operate to constrain behavior, since such spirits are understood to be either helpful or dangerous to people.

An important part of the book's argument lies in its discussion of death, taboos observed at death, and the efforts of prominent men to complete mortuary payments prior to their physical demise. Spirits may be seen as dangerous, as we have seen, and they may bring destruction into the lives of pregnant women. Professor Forth leads readers through a dazzling vortex of field observations, in which the importance of fostering the healthy growth of human children is a salient aim.

Another important focus is on the functions of ritual in creating separations between states of being among the Nagé. Professor Forth points out that accounts of ritual events often lay stress on their function of enhancing solidarity among participants, yet the rituals themselves highlight processes of separation from former statuses as the main object of their action.

At a more general level, Professor Forth looks into the category of neo-animist conceptions of reality attributed to peoples like the Nagé, who have complex views both linking and separating ontological aspects of humans, non-human animals, and spirits. At issue here is the work of theorists such as Philippe Descola, contrasting Western naturalistic ideas of reality in the world, and indigenous animistic views. For the Nagé Professor Forth argues that their views do not belong to a solely naturalistic or animistic ontology, but that in their culture there are concepts that partly correspond to the one ontology while others do not. He is thus taking up a view that rejects globalizing generalizations that too neatly confine cross-cultural ontologies in constructions of a dichotomous kind. As his final topic, Professor Forth takes up the point of the category of Ritual itself. Here he simply advises caution, saying that ideas embodied in Nagé ritual practices may express the coexistence of different ideological schemata that do not correspond to any single modality, adding in his characteristically laconic way that he expects this observation would hold for numbers of other human societies also.

This a superbly crafted book built on wide ethnographic and comparative knowledge gathered in a lifetime of enduring high quality scholarly work among Eastern Indonesian groups. It will add to and enhance the scholarly profile of the books in our Ritual Studies Monograph Series.

Angkemam House, Scotland Branch, 2024,
AJS and PJS, The Stratherns

Note

*Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Andrew J. Strathern are a wife-and-husband research team who are based in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh and codirect the Cromie Burn Research Unit. They are frequently invited international lecturers and have worked with a number of museums to assist them with their collections. Stewart and Strathern have published over 50 books, over 80 prefaces to influential books, over 200 articles, book chapters, and essays on their research in the Pacific (mainly Papua New Guinea, primarily the mount

Hagen, Duna, and Wiru areas) and the South-West Pacific region, (e.g., Samoa, Cook islands, and Fiji); Asia (mainly Taiwan, and also including mainland China and inner Mongolia, and Japan); Europe (primarily Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and the European Union countries in general); and New Zealand and Australia. one of their strengths is that, unlike some others working in Mount Hagen among the Hagen people, they learned the language, Melpa, and used it to understand the lives of the local people. Their most recent co-authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); *Kinship in Action: Self and Group* (Prentice Hall, 2011); *Peace-Making and the Imagination: Papua New Guinea Perspectives* (University of Queensland Press with Penguin Australia, 2011); *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (Bloomsbury Academic Publications, 2014); *Working in the Field: Anthropological Experiences Across the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); *Breaking the Frames: Anthropological Conundrums* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); *Sacred Revenge in Oceania* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); *Story of the Kuk UNESCO World Heritage Prehistoric Site and The Melpa, Western Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea: Pride in Place*. (Angkemam Publishing House, 2018); *Sustainability, Conservation, and Creativity: Ethnographic Learning from Small-Scale Practices* (Routledge Publishing, 2019); *Language and Culture in Dialogue* (Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2019); and *Heritage: Tradition and Contestation* (Carolina Academic Press, 2021). Their recent co-edited books include *The Research Companion to Anthropology* (Routledge Publishing, 2016, originally published in 2015); *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008); *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009), along with the updated and revised Chinese version (Taipei, Taiwan: Linking Publishing, 2010); *Dealing with Disasters—Perspectives from Eco-Cosmologies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, with Riboli, Diana and Davide Torri); and *The Palgrave Handbook of Anthropological Ritual Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). Stewart and Strathern's current research includes the topics of Eco-Cosmological landscapes; Ritual Studies; Political Peace-making; Comparative Anthropological Studies of disasters and Climatic Change; language, Culture and Cognitive Science; and Scottish and Irish Studies. They are inter/multi-disciplinary scholars. For many years they served as Associate Editor and General Editor (respectively) for the *Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania* book Series and they are Co-Series Editors for the *Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia and the Indo-Pacific* book series. They also currently serve as Co-Editors of four book series: *Ritual Studies*, *Medical Anthropology*, *European Anthropology*, and *Disaster Anthropology*. Their webpages, listing publications and other scholarly activities, are: <http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/> and <http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/>. We are writing this Preface while in Scotland on study leave.

Preface

This book has a brief but unusual history. It likely would not have been written without the inspiration of a book published in Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia, the national language) by the late Cyrilus Bau Engo (Bau 2018). A Nagé man born and raised near the central Nagé village of Bo'a Wae, on the Indonesian island of Flores, Bau (as I refer to him in my text) or Pak (Mr.) Cyrilus (as I knew him in the field) was a retired teacher at an agricultural college who occasionally assisted me as an informant and consultant on linguistic matters, especially during field visits I made to Flores between 2005 and 2017. Mr. Bau's book was published in 2018, sadly also the year of his sudden death. But owing to other demands I was not able to read it carefully until 2020.

As will soon become apparent, Bau's book is entirely concerned with the traditional life cycle rites of the people of central Nagé, which are also the subject of the present volume. A feature of the book that particularly drew my attention was his brief description of two long defunct rituals I had first heard about during my initial years of field research among Nagé in the mid-nineteen-eighties. Actually, Bau describes the two rituals as a single performance. Yet other details he provides matched my own records to such an extent that it seemed worthwhile to compile all the information I had collected about the ceremonies over a period of three decades, and to construct an analysis and interpretation of their significance. This I was partly able to do in connection with a similar ritual I had written about, in the neighboring Keo region, and included in an article published in 2009 (Forth 2009a).

A good place to publish the new article, I thought, would be *Journal of Ritual Studies*. But when I approached the editors, Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart, I learned that the journal had been discontinued. At the same time, Professors Stewart and Strathern suggested I consider

publishing the paper together with others on the same or a related theme as a book, and more particularly as a volume in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series issued by Carolina Academic Press. And this I decided to do. Originally, I had thought of addressing life cycle rites or other rituals from other parts of Flores Island or eastern Indonesia. But it soon became clear that a fuller understanding of my original topic, the two ceremonies that Nagé no longer perform, could only be gained by viewing them in relation to all rituals that comprise the Nagé life cycle. Doing so, I also realized, would provide an opportunity to investigate their life cycle as an ontogeny, or process of ontogenesis, that could further be interpreted in relation to their ontology—that part of Nagé cosmology that concerns relations between humans and other categories of beings, notably non-human animals and spirits—a topic I’ve dealt with in two previous books (Forth 2016, 2019).

Called *tau ae* and *tau ngi’i*—names I gloss, respectively and somewhat provisionally, as “making water” and “replacing teeth”—the two defunct ceremonies are now discussed primarily in Chapter 4. As will soon become clear, I cite Cyrilus Bau’s book throughout the present work, either where he provides details of specific rites that I did not record or where what he says does not accord with what I observed or was told in the field. In the latter case, I then endeavor to explain the discrepancies. On the whole, though, I have found that what I recorded coincides with Bau’s descriptions to a substantial degree, which I naturally find pleasing. At the same time, I should point out that Mr. Bau’s book is almost entirely descriptive, whereas the present volume is largely given over to analysis and interpretation, and by the same token Bau cites no other authors—understandably as he was not an anthropologist and what he writes derives either from his own experience as a Nagé person or what he learned from conversations with kin or other Nagé. Very possibly, one of the latter was his birth father, Lazarus Lewa Usu, a man of the patrician Tegu, but as will become apparent, much else likely derives from people of Saga ‘Enge, into which clan Bau was adopted shortly after birth. Accordingly, the author often refers to life cycle rituals performed by Saga ‘Enge, which as I explain differ from those of other Nagé clans.

A number of rites I discuss below have been covered in previous publications (Forth 1993, 1998a). These, however, are almost entirely practices and accompanying local interpretations comprised in Nagé mortuary ritual. In addition, after 1998, when the second publication appeared, I conducted fieldwork during 13 more visits, of varying du-

rations, to central Nagé, and partly on the basis of new information and new experiences, my understanding of certain specific mortuary practices has changed. In one or two instances I have therefore discussed older and newer interpretations in the text. Obviously, this is the way it should be with any sustained and systematic anthropological study, and if the practice seems less common in cultural or social anthropology than in the natural sciences, this may be in part because earlier generations of anthropologists were able to conduct field research in given communities only on a single or a few occasions and were therefore obliged to draw solely on these when publishing their findings. By contrast, between 1984 and 2018 I conducted fieldwork in Nagé country on twenty separate occasions, albeit often with a focus on matters other than life cycle rituals.

This I was able to do only with the support of several bodies, whose help and generosity I hereby acknowledge. At various times, funding was provided from grants awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the British Academy, and the University of Alberta. Also on different occasions, visits to Indonesia were made possible with the sponsorship of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), Nusa Cendana University in Kupang, and St. Paul's Major Seminary in Ledalero, Flores. I am grateful to all of the foregoing for their support and assistance. However, my greatest thanks must go to the people of central Nagé, including of course Cyrilus Bau. Thanks are also due to my wife, Christine, who read the final draft of the manuscript and assisted me in preparing several figures, and to Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart for their publishing advice. Finally, I want to thank Ryland Bowman, Tasha Gervais, Sara Hjelt, and others at Carolina Academic Press for accepting this book and assisting me in editing the text and in other ways preparing it for publication.

Gregory Forth
5 November 2023