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# Celt

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# ACCESS RITUAL IN EASTERN SUMBA, INDONESIA

## B. Retang Wohangara<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *As a particular type of tradition, rituals have been of interest to folklorists and anthropologists. Understood as repeated, patterned, and contextualized performances, rituals could be in “low contexts” meaning that they are less formally, unplanned in advance, and do not demand for complicated performances, or in “high contexts” that they are realized in a highly stylized and formalized occasions, and set as public events. This article attempts to describe an access ritual, called paariyangu (ritual of being a guest and a host), conducted by the people of (eastern) Sumba living in the east part of Indonesia. Visiting somebody’s house is an act of entering somebody else’s private domain. It is therefore necessary for the both parties (i.e. the guest and the host) to abide to certain manners so as to maintain a desirable social encounter.*

**Key words:** *access ritual, Sumba, traditions, low contexts, high contexts*

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## INTRODUCTION

An individual or a group of people often hold ceremonies or performances to enact certain values, beliefs, or experiences. Before entering universities, freshmen have to undergo a process of initiation so as to mark their incorporation into the body of university life. The Lamarean people of Flores carry out a certain pattern of procedural practices before rowing their boats to hunt whales. My masseur always gently blows his already poured with oil palms, and whisper some Arabic lines before doing massaging my back and limbs with his strong hands. The initiation committee, the Lamalerean whaler, the masseur are performing rituals.

The above mentioned acts are called rituals since they are structured in certain ways, frequently framed in particular settings, and marked by special ways of execution. As particular types of tradition, rituals “are repeated, habitual actions, ... frequently highly organized and controlled...” (Simms and Stephens 2005: 95). As formulaic and repetitive forms of communication, rituals are potential sides where one is able to observe cultural ideologies. Through and with rituals people create and express social values and meanings both verbally and non-verbally (Senft and Basso 2009: 1-4).

In general folklorists categorize rituals into low-context and high-context ones (ibid. 98-99). The low-context rituals refer to those less formally designated and usually not announced or planned in advance. In Sumbanese culture, for instance, when a guest falls down from his seat, for example, the host is obliged to carry out a conversion ritual<sup>2</sup> to get back the guest’s temporarily lost soul (*pabelinya na hamangu-na*). A

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<sup>2</sup> Conversion rituals are associated with superstitions or belief behaviors related to back luck. They are performed to cancel bad luck.



fowl or a pig is slaughtered to win back the guest and his host's equilibrium. This ritual occurs for a specific reason in response to a particular event (falling down from the seat). It is not planned and does not call for elaborated performances or complicated verbal expressions. In contrast, the high-context rituals are framed in special occasions, well prepared and frequently public events.

For McDowell (1983), [the high-context] rituals contain three interrelated criteria, those are, accessibility, formalization, and efficacy (36). They bear exclusivity and call for specific treatments in execution. Aspects of accessibility, among others, relate to the people, who may or may not be involved in ritual performance, and to the degree of intelligibility to this special way of communication on the part of audience. The second criterion, formalization, deals with principles to identify these kinds of rituals as formalized events in terms of language use, objects involved, particular settings of time and place, and people assigned to conduct them, and procedures. The last constitution of the rituals (and also applies to the low-context ones) is efficacy. The performances of high-context and low context rituals are for an accomplishment. The rituals are intended to certain goal, a transition from one state to another one. Marriage ritual (*lii manguama*) in Sumba is certainly a high-context one. Although it is exposed to public, not all aspects in the ritual is accessible to the audience due to the special register used (*lawiti luluk*). That only ritual specialists (*wunang*) can take the role as the representatives of both parties (the bride and the groom) signifies the formality of ritual. The traditional outfit of the *wunangs*, the use of local language, the settings of performance in particular time and place indicate this formalized event. A marriage ritual certainly marks a transition from bachelor/bachelorette to married life. It also unites an affinal relationship of two parties or reinforces an

existing one. In a similar vein, some ritual theorists divide rituals in two categories: those with capital “R” and the others with small “r” or ritualization. (R)-itual includes the “fully observable communicative performance that take place in, and create, a special setting in which other activities are suspended,” while (r)-itual is the “routine, minor actions and formulaic verbal utterances when other activities are going on as usual” (Gnerre 2009: 314). The first category includes rite of the passage rituals, while the second covers day-to-day interactions such as greetings and farewells or street shamanistic performance. The so-called access rituals belong to the second category. For Ameka (2009), access rituals are the “verbal and non-verbal communicative acts that mark boundaries at the beginning and closing phases of social interaction” (127). This kind of rituals includes the everyday, routine, and formulaic verbal utterances and specific behavioral poses.

This paper is intended to give a brief description on how the eastern Sumba people practice one of their access rituals- which can be either in low or high context-, that is, social visit (*paariyang*). *Paariyang* is a speech event when there is a news exchange between an owner of the house and his/her guest. This social interaction can be causal or formal, and the nature of social visit will determine the realization of the encounter. Before proceeding to a description of an access ritual of the Sumbanese, it is necessary to provide some information of the people where this particular type of tradition is practiced.

### **(EASTERN) SUMBA IN BRIEF**

Sumba, one of the three big islands (Flores, Sumba, Timor) of the Nusa Tenggara Timur province Indonesia, lies to

southeast of Bali, west of Timor and south of Flores. However, Sumba is often confused with the island of Sumbawa, which in fact sits to its northwest. Sumba Island covers an area of 12,297 km sq. (Forth 1981: 17), and consists of four districts, i.e., East Sumba (*Sumba Timur*), Central Sumba (Sumba Tengah), West Sumba (*Sumba Barat*), and Southwest Sumba (Sumba Barat Daya) with Waingapu, Waibakul, Waikabubak, and Waitabula as its capital respectively. This island is well known as the *Sandalwood* island for being long involved in breeding *Sandalwood* horses. In addition to sandalwood horses, Sumbanese people take pride of the huge megalithic tombs and ikat-woven traditional fabric.

Topographically, Sumba is a hilly, dry and infertile land. The open and wide savannah makes Sumba see her way for breeding cattle, horses, or buffalos, although the scarcity of rain has been the major obstacle for the development of animal breeding. Forests spread sparsely and the ongoing effort for to plant more trees fails due to the long dry season and barren soil.

The traditional religion of Sumbanese centers on the cult of *marapu* that refers to the ancestors of clans (*kabihu*). Although many ‘natives’ of Sumba have converted into the state approved religions, they retain their native religious belief and keep carrying out *marapu* practices in social interactions among their own and inter-clans.

While the people at the western part of Sumba speak ten different languages (Hoskins 1996: 223) and therefore are only able to pick the Indonesian language as a lingua franca, those of eastern Sumba speak *hilu humba* (Sumba language) with slight variations in some areas. The major dialect used in daily life and rituals by the majority of the eastern Sumbanese people is *Kambera*. While there are certain variations in custom,

beliefs, and dialects, the culture of eastern Sumba is sufficiently homogenous.

Though it is not strong as it was used to be, a social stratification still colors the life of “native” people in eastern Sumba. The three basic classes are the nobility (*maramba*), commoners (*tau kabihu*), and servants (*ata*). The classes are ideally endogamous, although intermarriage between nobility and commoners, and between commoners and *ata* may occur. Marriage between nobles and slaves is formally impossible. What follows is further information about this social strata existing in eastern Sumbanese society, and for the sake of a better explanation, the order is as follow: *ata*, *maramba*, *tau kabihu*.

*Ata*, euphemistically called the “children in the house” (*anakiada la umma*) or “the children doing errands” (*anakiada pa paliawa*), is the lowest rank in social class. This class belongs to nobility, though certain large and wealthy commoner clans and lineages also own some. *Ata* is also classified into two: *ata bokulu* and *ata kudu*. *Ata kudu* is the lowest and humblest group in eastern Sumba, and derived mainly from captives of local feud. In the past, they could be bought and sold. *Ata bokulu* can be characterized rather as a class of retainers or hereditary servants. They cannot be bought and sold. *Ata bokulu* are better treated than *ata kudu*, and many attain considerable influence as advisors and companions to their masters. Unlike *ata kudu*, they often live in the same house with their masters and form a strong bond of affection and loyalty. Female of *ata bokulu* serves as *ata ngandi*, those are, slaves brought along, who accompany their *tamu rambu* (mistress) when marrying and serving her in her husband’s house.



*Maramba* sits on the highest position in Eastern Sumbanese social system, taking roles as socio-political leaders, holding the capacity to impose their will and perpetuate their power by means of different strategy. Traditional recognition on their ability as being born leaders and their possession of economic capital give them power to control other groups. A *maramba* family is likely to be able to finance their children for higher education which facilitates them to work as governmental employees, and even involve in competition for modern political leaders. In this context, being a traditional leader and educated provide them more opportunity to chair high position in governmental offices compared to those coming from the so-called common people, and let alone the *ata*.

*Maramba* displays their status symbol in form of houses, wealth, and the numbers of *ata* possessed. Although it is not very common in the present day for they build modern brick house, the houses of *maramba* in the past were big, characterized by peaked roof built on stilt. A noble family needs big houses because they have to accommodate several *ata* families. A spacious house is also necessary since it is noble families who are responsible for hosting rituals attended by people. The frequency of conducting rituals and the number of people gather determine the degree of a noble's greatness (*maramba bakulu*). In addition to the big, high, and soaring house, the amount of cattle, buffaloes, and horses (*banda la marada*: wealth in the pasture) and gold items (*banda la umma*: wealth in the house) and of *ata*(s) possessed symbolically mirror the status of *maramba*.

*Tau kabihu* are, unlike *ata*, maintain their independence from *maramba*'s power, yet have no claim to nobility. In the past, they served the nobles as military allies, and in many

cases until the present time, act as advisors in regular matters. Despite of being good speakers mastering aspects of tradition, *Maramba* never becomes ritual speakers. Sumbanese ritual speakers mainly come from this *tau kabihu* class. Being assigned as *maramba*'s ritual speaker means climbing the ladder of social class for ritual practitioners. However, based on his research on the inter-class relationship among Rindi people, Sumba, Forth (1981: 230) claims that, although having independent status, the *tau kabihu* tend to reinforce a dualistic representation of class (*maramba-ata*) "by occasionally referring to themselves as *ata* in the presence of a noble person in order to effect humility". However, it should be recognized that the existence of social stratification has gradually lost its grip in the life of most Sumbanese. The advance of education, the introduction of democracy, and the big influence of the Church have played active role in creating more egalitarian society.

A part of communities still living their oral tradition, the people of Sumba mostly rely on orality and customary imitations in transmitting their traditions. One form of traditional practices still observed by Sumbanese either those already embracing world religions or still adhering to local religion, Marapu are rituals. The following is a kind of day especially the highly-performed and complex burial and marriage rituals.

## **AN ACCESS RITUAL OF SUMBANESE**

To govern the behaviors of its members in social relationships, a society, and on a smaller scale, a community, possesses values translated in rules, customs, and laws. Everyone is expected to conform to the shared values in order

to maintain harmony and stability. In the scale of Sumbanese's custom, somebody violating the agreed and shared values are metaphorically described as "*na njara tindung; na wei kawanga* (the stubborn horse, the deaf pig) or "*na njara rubi rapa, na karambua tanggajir* (the horse breaking its harness, the water buffalo destroying its fence) for he has disturbed the organic whole of society. The social life of the people of Sumba is therefore directed by traditional custom/way (*hori*). In terms of having the desirable behaviors, or etiquette in social encounters, the members of this society hold a self-concept, which constitutes their difference from non-Sumbanese, as they put it in the expression "to behave like a Sumbanese" (*pa hori Humbang*) vis-a-vis "to behave like strangers" (*pahori Jawang*<sup>3</sup>). Among the Sumbanese themselves, are binary, cultural ideologies: either behaving like a slave (*pa hori atang*), which has negative connotations, or behaving like a noble (*pa hori marambang*), which refers to expected behaviors<sup>4</sup>.

## A SOCIAL VISIT

To describe the Sumbanese people's social visit, I adopt the frame of speaking model proposed by Dell Hymes (quoted

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<sup>3</sup> The self-concept in Sumbanese's perspective is in two categories. The Sumbanese are insider and the rest the outsider. The term Jawa refers to any non-Sumbanese, either from Jawa or from other regions in Indonesia. White people are called "white Javanese" (*tau Jawa bara*).

<sup>4</sup> (Eastern) Sumba society is generally stratified into three classes, the nobility (*maramba*), the commoners (*tàu Kabihu*), and the servant (*ata*). The noble is regarded as source of ideal manners. Although the ideology of this stratification has gradually weakened, especially with the advance of education and the progressive idea of egalitarian democracy, the issue of social stratification remains lively discourses in the domain of political leadership.

in Ameka 2009: 131). A social visit can be divided into three parts: *Opening Sequences*, *Central Sequences*, and *Closing*. The participants can be a host and a visitor, and in a more formal visit, includes another person functioning as a spokesperson.

### A. Opening Sequences

The opening of a social visit in eastern Sumba commonly follows the following sequences: attention calling, the welcoming, the offer of sitting on a mat, the offering of *pahàpa*<sup>5</sup> and tobacco, and the host's identification of the guest.

*Attention-calling.* When a visitor arrives to a targeted house- usually in the morning or in the afternoon, he announces his visit for a good intention by attracting the host's attention. He uses the vocative stocked cry: "Hello, the owner of the house" (*hoo, màngu ùmang*). In addition to drawing attention, this action is also intended to make sure whether the host is available or not. If the host is at home, he will give an exchange response by saying: "Hello ùmbu/ràmbu<sup>6</sup>, please enter [to our house]" (*hoo ùmbu/ràmbu tama ko na*).

*The welcoming.* By responding to the guest's inquiry, the host implies his willingness to accept the visitor's for-a good purpose visit, and officially welcome him in the house. Shaking hands (*patambi*) or rubbing nose (*papùduk*) are common body languages of greeting.

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<sup>5</sup> Pahàpa is betel fruit and areca nuts chewed with lime.

<sup>6</sup> *Umbu* and *rambu* are titles used to show one's respect to male and female respectively. In the past the titles were used exclusively for the noble class.



Picture 1: a “traditional” house

guest mat (*topu*)<sup>8</sup>. The wife also performs the same response by hurriedly fetching a mat and then spreading it over on the left raised platform (*kaheli*) of the house, a spot reserved where a respected guest to be seated. A traditional house has got two raised floors with two doors of access.

*Seat Offer.* Knowing a guest’s arrival, the host (if it happens to be the husband) will display his panicky response<sup>7</sup> for the “unexpected” visit (even if he has already known it before) by asking his wife to find a

In many occasions, however, the left door is closed, so an access between the floors is only through the right door of the house. The right side of the house is regarded as a hot realm, while the left one a cool realm. A guest is always seated at the left section of the house, and I think, the reasons are not to disturb the moment of social visit with unnecessary nuisances, and also to welcome the guest on the best-cool place.

*Betel-nut Offering.* Exchanging betel-areca nuts is a very important non-verbal communication among the Sumbanese people. It is a display of friendship. After the guest has been seated on the mat, the immediate sequence was the host’s offering of betel nuts, which is replied by the visitor’s



Picture 2: betel and areca nuts

<sup>7</sup> This kind of response in Sumbanese’s etiquette is sign of modesty. It is a semiotic display that the visitor is a respected guest and that the host doesn’t actually deserve to have him in his “inappropriate house.”

<sup>8</sup> In addition to having mats for family members, every Sumbanese traditional household specifically provides a mat for guest.



reciprocal action. In this context of situation, exchanging tobacco pouch is also common.

*Identification.* While chewing betel nut and smoking, both parties exchange information on clan background, affinal relationship, or what they have been up to in recent times. This sequence is usually in effect when the host and the guest have not met for a long time, or if the background of the guest is vague on the part of the host. For a non-Sumbanese guest, identification can be about the geographical information of the guest's origin. However, this sequence is escaped if the visitor is living in the same village, or a frequent visitor.

## **B. The Central Sequence**

After the exchange of betel nuts and tobacco, the following sequence is an inquiry about the purpose of the visit. In Sumbanese's etiquette, it is the host who initiates this action. This segment is named "to make clear of something" (*pakaluakang*). The language used in inquiry of purpose and the guest's explanations depend on the degree of the subject matters involved. When it is a casual or a more personal visit (*tadal*), daily-routine speech will be used. However, if a visit has a high degree of seriousness, meaning that it is a clan's business, formal speeches will be delivered. To give some examples: if the visitor is a messenger of one's death, he will not simply say that "your so and so passed away last night." The formulaic metaphorical expression will be "*Na wàlaha-ndàka lunggi, na bata-ndàka kajia, na bokumu/or ...*" (He has untied his hair for us, he has turned his back on us, your grandfather/ or... ) to imply that the grandfather has passed away. Or in another context, if the visitor is a representative of a young man who is looking for a girl's hand in marriage, he

will use the expression: “*Ka imbu-manya kalu ma ìhi, ka namat-manya tibu ma wàla*” (we are looking for ripe banana, we are searching for ready-to-harvest sugar cane) to imply that the visitor is looking for a mature girl ready for marriage.

After the visitor’s mission spelled out, the host will give responses. In a casual visit, the host may express his happiness: that such a visit confirms and strengthens their affinal relationship, and that some day he will visit his guest back. In another context, like the death news or a prospective bride inquiry, the host can outline his broad plan. He may promise to summon other members of his clan as soon as possible to talk about their participation in burial; or in the case of “looking for a bride,” he will talk to his close relatives, and give an answer if there is a potential wife among the family<sup>9</sup>. In formal social visits, and especially if the guest is a respected one, or a relative coming from a distant village, the host will slaughter a fowl or a pig to formalize their encounter. After the main business is settled, having lunch together will conclude the encounter. Eating together is a mark unity.

### **C. The Closing**

Betel nuts chewing or smoking after lunch is a kind of pre-closing. After some time, the guest will initiate the action to terminate the encounter. The host usually asks his guest to stay a little bit longer for the day is still long, of which the guest may accept or not. If the guest insists on leaving, the host

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<sup>9</sup> Although the host (the man) obviously has a mature girl, and the prospective husband’s side already knows about it, the host’s delay of answer is a matter of decency. Giving a definite answer: yes, we have or no, we haven’t, will be considered rude. The host may also give a prediction of time when his guest will get an answer. When this happens, the host will have a spokesperson to represent his interest.

will express his regret for being unable to serve his guest in a more appropriate way<sup>10</sup>, while the guest expresses his thankfulness, that he has already received more than he deserves. In formal social visits, the host will spare meat of the slaughtered pig (*tanggu*), usually its rear legs, for his guest to carry home. Later on, the guest will do the same thing when he in turns becomes a host himself.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have so far given a broad outline of how an access ritual is practiced by the people of Sumba. The description of this behavior ritual process above is indeed too general. Although it follows a certain kind of patterns and sequences (formality), in reality, the skeleton of the ritual is filled with more various and richer speech exchanges. In more serious events, like in marriage negotiations, the procedure of access ritual is more complicated and highly metaphorical language exchanges are used.

Like in other societies, people of Sumba share common values, and are expected to obey certain desirable behaviors to keep a social bonding and harmony. There is a clear line to separate public and private spheres of life. When one wants to enter or to have an access on a private domain (a house), he should engage in particular actions or behavior in order to be considered as an individual abiding to traditional etiquette, the one who possesses the desired noble qualities, *pa hori marambangu*. *Paarinyang* is a ritual on how a Sumbanese may

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<sup>10</sup> The common expression to express humility is *malangu, mai mia la lumbu ài- a* (We do apologize since we merely have you under the shade of tree)

display either his conformity or unconformity with the shared social values.

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