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Satirical Allusion and Tug-of-Rattan on Seram

Poetic Form and Informal Social Control in Nuauulu Performance of Sung Verse

Roy Ellen | ORCID: 0000-0002-7349-2419

University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

rfe@kent.ac.uk

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Abstract

Nuauulu tug-of-rattan performances on Seram (eastern Indonesia) are accompanied by collective sung verse. These secular events are infrequent, but the sung verse, which has a quatrain pantun structure, is widely composed and performed outside the tug-of-rattan setting by individuals in private and semi-public situations. The composed stanzas may relate to, or mark, personal life-history events. They are sometimes historical but often contemporary, allusive, and satirical. It is argued that the genre more generally, and the performance of tug-of-rattan more specifically, provides, therefore, not only entertainment but a kind of public commentary, which both sanctions individual behaviour deemed by some as unacceptable as well as marking events that are commendable. Thus, it serves as part of a wider system of informal social control. The article also reflects on methodological and ethical issues relating to sound-recording in the field.

Keywords

Nuauulu – Seram – Moluccas – Indonesia – tug-of-rattan performance – sung verse – satire – social control

1 Introduction

Tug-of-rattan performances accompanied by song were once a widespread part of traditional central Moluccan culture.¹ They have recently been revived in some places in the context of reconciliation efforts between Muslims and Christians following the communal conflict of 1999–2003, particularly in Ambon (Bräuchler 2015). However, understanding their role in other parts of the Moluccas requires a more complex and nuanced interpretation. This article, therefore, offers the first contextualized account and interpretation of this style in a particular place. It describes the elements of Nuauulu tug-of-rattan performances, the sung verse that accompanies them, and what they mean, in particular the incorporation of verse that comments on contemporary local events and relationships, for the period between 1970 and 1990. These latter often involve linguistic indirection, satirical allusion, and mockery, all of which contribute to perpetuating group conflicts but can also equally serve to ease tensions and resolve them. The data also show how the use of tape recorders and the process of ethnography can sometimes alter this social dynamic. Over the period I have been conducting ethnographic research with the Nuauulu (1970–2015), professional as well as local attitudes towards the research process have altered, as all parties have become more reflexive and aware of ‘best practice’ and moral ambivalence. I shall return to these challenges as well as to changes in the social position of tug-of-rattan and its sung verse towards the end of the article.

Early scholarly attempts to make sense of the socio-cultural complex of Indonesian tug-of-rattan performances and the accompanying chanting have sought to place it within the context of wider structuralist approaches to understanding social and cultural patterns (see, for example, De Josselin de Jong 1977). The pioneer Dutch anthropologist G.A. Wilken (1912:175, 181), although an evolutionist by persuasion (an admirer of Edward Tylor, James Frazer, and William Robertson Smith), and whose reports predate the development of Dutch structuralism, repeatedly drew attention to the dualistic properties of certain features of Indonesian social organization, including Ambonese *hela rotan* (tugging rattan). Bräuchler in her study is clearly referring to this self-consciously Ambonese art form, while Sachse (1907:163–4) suggested long ago that the *hela rotan* performances he found in the coastal parts of Seram derive

1 The Ambonese folk song ‘Hela rotane’ has become an Indonesian favourite with an Internet presence. See, for example, ‘Ten 2 five—Hela Rotane’ (Live at Sarah Sechan). <https://lirik.kapanlagi.com/artis/lagu-daerah/hela-rotane/> (accessed 7-1-2020).

from Ambon. However, no speculations are offered here as to the history or diffusion of the Nuaulu tug-of-rattan, which is, in any case, now completely localized.

2 Background

The Nuaulu are a linguistically discrete people of south central Seram in the Moluccan islands of eastern Indonesia who in 2020 numbered around 2,500. They have retained their language and animist cultural identity in the face of a variety of recent pressures, not least those associated with economic modernization, the spread of Indonesian state culture, and the penetration of schooling. It is probable that communal conflict between Muslims and Christians in the Moluccas between 1999 and 2003 reinforced social resilience by emphasizing their neutrality and cultural authenticity as ‘animists’ (Ellen 2018).

Sung tug-of-rattan performances (*ararira*, meaning ‘to pull or tug rattan’, Ind. *hela rotan menari tambang*; and *ararirane*, meaning rattan-pulling dances, Ind. *tarian hela rotan*, *tarian tambang*, thick-rope dance) need to be understood in the context of Nuaulu musical culture, symbolic behaviour, and social life more generally. There are basically three types of sung verse (*kapata*): *kapata ahinae* (which accompany performances of *kahuae* circle dances that take place in sacred houses; Ellen 2008); *kapata Sepa* (essentially work songs, but which can be deployed in other ways and sung in different contexts);² and *kapata ararirane* (which accompany tug-of-rattan performances, and which are secular). However, all three kinds were until recently commonly heard in and around villages on a day-to-day basis, *kapata ararirane* often serving as lullabies or work songs. This was usual in the 1970s and was still relatively common in the 1990s, though it is less so nowadays, having been augmented by modern commercial music played on radios, cassette recorders, and mobile phones. Rosemary Bolton (2022:5–6) provides examples of Nuaulu *kapata ararirane* style songs composed by Christians, to mark the occasion of their conversion. Indeed, it is a form through which individual experiences can be aired for personal pleasure or for public communication and validation. Verses can be sung solo but also as part of a sung conversation in which one singer will ‘answer’ another.³ This may occur repeatedly, forming a kind of dialogic chain, clearly

2 *Sepa* (here with initial capitalization) refers to the Muslim *kerajaan* (kingdom) of Sepa, which gives its name to the modern Indonesian *desa* and which historically held hegemonic sway over the Nuaulu peoples of south central Seram.

3 This is sometimes called ‘leader/chorus’ or ‘call-and-response’, referring to a configuration

observable during tug-of-rattan performances but also outside of this context in other recreational settings. Indeed, actual physical performances of tug-of-rattan have always been rare. In one and a half years of initial fieldwork (from January 1970) and over ten subsequent visits between 1973 and 2015, I only witnessed three performances. This is partly because of the requirement to obtain and prepare suitable lengths of rattan of a particular kind but is also due to other organizational logistics.

3 Methodology

This article draws on fieldwork conducted in south Seram in 1970, 1971, 1981, and 1990, but the context is a longer period of ethnographic research involving further visits between 1970 and 2015. The work was mostly undertaken in the village of Rouhua, a Nuaulu settlement located in the village (*desa*) of Sepa. In particular, it used sound-recordings of tug-of-rattan songs (both open-air actuality and prompted recordings inside houses). Sung verse was transcribed in the field in a provisional way, and interviews conducted concerning tug-of-rattan performances in general and about the meanings and social impact of some specific recordings. As we shall see (Section 6), the use of recording equipment—which renders particular sung verse performances permanent, portable, and repeatable—has had consequences for its social role.

The sound-recordings dated 1970–1971, 1973, and 1975 were initially made using a luggable Uher Report 4000 reel-to-reel tape recorder provided by the then UK Social Science Research Council (SSRC). In subsequent years, I used a mini-cassette recorder. In 2002, all my Nuaulu sound-recordings were transferred to mini-disk technology, and in 2012, they were finally digitized. There are 25 discrete episodes, mostly recorded on separate dates between 1970 and 1990. Most were recorded within houses, either at my request or that of the performer(s). There are, in addition, actual recordings of tug-of-rattan events accompanied by sung verse for three occasions: 18–19 June 1970, 14 March 1971,

whereby a solo song-leader is answered by a group. I agree with Philip Yampolsky (personal communication 2024) that Nuaulu singing in this style is similar to what is reported from other parts of Indonesia (see, for instance, Byl 2014) where ‘the group may respond with the same melody or a different one, or with the completion of the one begun by the soloist’. Thus, ‘solo singers exchanging stanzas across a distance’ [say, between individuals tending a garden on either side of a valley, characteristic of Nuaulu *kapata Sepa*], might be described as ‘anti-phonical’, a term which includes ‘call-and-response’ [...] ‘The musical unit encompasses both the solo “call” and the group response, whereas with the individuals singing at each other across the valley the musical unit is the single stanza.’

and 18–21 February 1990. With the first and last occasions both covering two-day events, the recordings thus cover five days altogether.⁴

I do not attempt to perform a systematic ethnomusicological analysis or an analysis of the performance features associated with *kapata ararirane* here; Bolton (2022), however, provides a provisional description, incorporating some of my own research materials. She notes that rhythm is free and performances are homophonous. The timbre of the voice is a cross between speaking and singing, where the tone quality of speech is heightened and lowered in pitch along melodic contours (similar, in some ways, to *Sprechstimme*), while singing also sometimes features trills and melisma (a group of notes sung to one syllable) on notes of longer duration, as well as vocables (syllables with no referential meaning, such as *oo* and *aa*). The tempo is 88–95 beats a minute, except in actual performances of tug-of-rattan, where it decreases to 76 beats per minute, and where the tempo corresponds to the rhythm of the physical bodies involved in tugging the rattan. Bolton (2022:18) has also looked at the melodic structure. My recording of an actual performance of a tug-of-rattan was tritonic, that is, three notes in an octave.

4 The Structure and Semantic Content of *Ararirane* Sung Verse

The poetic structure of *ararirane* sung verse is similar to that of *kapata Sepa* and *ahinae*. All seem to share the general structural characteristics of the quatrain ‘pantun’ form found widely in Indonesia (Salleh 2011), featuring a kind of linguistic parallelism typical of eastern Indonesian cultures and connected to other dualistic features of ritual and social practice (Fox 1980a, 1980b). In addition, eastern Indonesian pantuns in particular have a freer syllable count compared with, say, those of classic Malay. It has been shown that parallelism of this kind is a characteristic of Austronesian languages more generally (Fox 1971a:217–9). All ritual languages of eastern Indonesia, Fox (1971a:215) suggests, are ‘formal, formulaic, and parallelistic’, with special vocabularies, distinctive rhythms, use of metaphor, and word-for-word parallelism (Fox 1988:12). However, Fox (1988:1–2) also notes that the ‘prevalence of strict forms of parallelism in traditional oral communication’ is a worldwide phenomenon, ‘paired correspondences at the semantic and syntactic level form[ing] a kind of dyadic language, important for understanding oral literature, rhetoric and ritual’. He

4 The recordings are not at this time publicly available but can be accessed by contacting the author, with the permission of the performers or their successors, where available. For further discussion of ethical issues, see Section 6 below.

concludes that ‘oral composition in a binary mode is an essential means of social and ritual communication [providing] fundamental metaphoric structures of culture embedded in forms of dyadic language’ (p. 2). Words form paired dyads which join other paired dyads to form parallel stanzas comprising consecutive or alternative parallel lines (for example 1a > 1b > 2a > 2b). Indeed, Fox goes on to suggest that the ‘canonical structure of ritual language composition’—specific word pairing, arrangements of dual classification, metaphors of heat and power (p. 23), and so on—produce what Peter Boodberg (1954–55) has called ‘syntactical metaplasia’. By this is meant not simply a syntactic ‘style’ but, rather, a sonic pattern ‘that seeks to achieve an effect similar to binocular stereoscopic vision, adding subtle semantic depth’ (Fox 1988:28).

In Fox’s terms (1988:20–1), *ahinae* are recitations, while *kapata Sepa* and *ararirane* are more like dialogues. But whereas *ahinae* in the context of *kahuae* circle dances or *auwoti* (*mauwotie*) war dances might be seen to some degree as the ‘words of the ancestors’ (Fox 1988:13), as some kind of dialogue between spirits and humans, the second two forms also involve active dialogue, but in this case between humans themselves, and inviting interruption and response. While *ahinae* have to be recited perfectly and are sacred, *kapata Sepa* and *kapata ararirane* are more informal and secular, and innovation is expected. Indeed, for the Nuaulu, and apparently for other animist peoples of Seram, on the whole the ‘ancestors spoke little’ (Valeri 1994:195), there being no elaborate formal ‘ritual language’ used or heard much in the performance of most day-to-day rituals (Ellen 2012:67). On those occasions when ancestors do speak directly to the Nuaulu it is through the unelaborated, informal conversational speech of spirit-mediums (Ellen 2019). In all three genres, the poetic creativity of the inventor of the stanzas is important. Particular individuals are rated for the quality of their performance, though in the second two genres, the activity of composition itself becomes more of an individual act, the quality of which can also be judged (compare Fox 1988:17).

I have so far indicated some basic commonalities between *ahinae*, *kapata Sepa*, and *ararirane* and stressed some functional differences. But there are diagnostic compositional differences as well as some overlap. Certain stanzas, particularly those in archaic language, only occur in *ahinae* performed as part of *kahuae* and *auwoti*, while newly innovated stanzas are mostly a feature of *kapata Sepa* and *ararirane*, and those involving contemporary social commentary are almost always *ararirane*. Although the proportion of stanzas found in more than one genre is low, some stanzas and phrases are interchangeable between all three. Thus, in certain contexts it is only the melody, intonation, and context that differentiates them.

We now need to turn to the textual structure of *kapata ararirane* in particular. I recorded texts at various times between 1970 and 1990, but I have no reason to suspect that the basic form has changed since then, though it is no doubt less frequently rehearsed by younger performers. Each stanza comprises two initial lines, followed by repetition of the lines or parts of the lines. There is no rhyming. In all genres of sung verse, a single stanza (*hete osa-osa*, also known as *kapata*) consists of two parts: the *kapata ai ukune* (alternatively, *aikune* or just *ukune*) and the *kapata atue*. These two terms are also those used to describe plant life and growth (Fox 1971b; Ellen 2020:21–34), and the concepts are more-or-less equivalent to *pohon* and *ujung* in Indonesian. They can be glossed, respectively, as ‘(tree) trunk’ or ‘base’ (meaning also beginning or cause) and ‘tip’ (or end point). In the case of *ararirane*, the words of the *kapata ukune* are sung twice and those of the *kapata atue* also twice, but alternately (for example 1-2-1-2), as in:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| (1) a. <i>Wente lesaua</i> | Wente moves far away [that is, marries] ⁵ |
| b. <i>Esa arupae-e</i> | He goes away by canoe |

A and B repeat

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| c. <i>Arupae nima</i> | Five times by canoe |
| d. <i>Nusa senane</i> | He moves to the other side of the island
[lit. in the direction of the sunrise] |

C and D repeat

In this example, (1a) and (1b) (together the *kapata ai ukune*) are the ‘call’ and (1c) and (1d) (together the *kapata atue*) the ‘response’, the first sung by a solo voice, the second by a different solo voice or, in the actual tug-of-rattan performance, by multiple voices. (1c) repeats the melody of (1a), and (1d) the melody of (1b). Lines (1a), (1b), (1c), and (1d) use the same melody whenever repeated. In cases where *ararirane* verse was recorded within houses, both ‘call’ and ‘response’ components could often be sung solo, or by a duo.

In different *kapata*, the basic stanza can be varied and elaborated by shortening and extending the relative length of each syllable; by fading-out of the line towards the end; by re-arranging the word order; and, sometimes, by omit-

5 The translations provided here are literal, incomplete, and sometimes a best estimate. However, given that the allusions are often multiple and flexible, I cannot claim to be comprehensively accurate. Text in square brackets provides a partial interpretation or clarification where possible.

ting the first and/or last syllable or entire words from a stanza. Stanzas may include words from other languages (for example, Ambonese Malay and that of Sepa), employing a variety of synonyms, neologisms, and metaphors. All this, however, must be done according to a recognized and stylized model. In the field, my own attempts to compose variants of traditional stanzas were the cause of endless mirth. In actual performances of tug-of-rattan, the new stanza is introduced by a lead solo voice (*kapata ai ukune*; below (2a), (2b)), followed by a rendering in unison by all tugging participants (*kapata atue*; below (2c), (2d)). Sometimes the *kapata atue* ((c), (d)) simply repeats the *kapata ai ukune*. The extent of variation in form and content is provided in the following examples, which do not necessarily represent a sequence that might be found in a performance of tug-of-rattan:

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------|--|
| (2) | a. <i>Toniao tonio</i> | All the world [as in Indonesian <i>mega</i>] is
glorious |
| | b. <i>Nia loriai</i> | Call people to the village |
| | c. <i>Nia loriai</i> | Call people to the village |
| | d. <i>Mputi oo</i> | All is clean/white ... oo |

- | | | |
|-----|----------------------|--|
| (3) | a. <i>Hasan bawo</i> | The family of Hasan goes to the north-
west |
| | b. <i>Nia ete</i> | The village of the mother's brother |

A and B repeated

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|--|
| (4) | a. <i>O tuho kota o</i> | Oo ... across mountain and sea (to the)
town/house ... oo |
| | b. <i>Rima ituho kota o</i> | Seven branches of the town ... oo |

A and B repeated

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (5) | a. <i>Siwa jasi tulu</i> | Patasiwa people flee and seek help |
| | b. <i>Hatanima jamasa</i> | Patalima people descend |

A and B repeated

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| (6) | a. <i>Hua tari-tari</i> | Decorate the betel nut |
| | b. <i>Kam hate hatana</i> | Betel pepper, cut the sago palm |

A and B repeated

- (7) a. *Nusi takanasi* The osprey [the seabird *Pandion hali-aetus*]
 b. *Ararorou anene* Take shelter in a different way
 c. *Loto simba tahi* In the ‘cheek’ of the mountains
 d. *Kom lau sau-ua* *Komu* [a type of fish: the tuna *Auxis thazard*] in the sea waves
- (8) a. *Kalu kam suka turumai* Move the betel pepper [generally *Piper betle*] towards me
 b. *Naita uwa* To us two
 c. *Itu uwa* Seven, two
 d. *Nika bala manu mpake* Play-talk like the *manu* [*m*]pake [the white imperial pigeon *Ducula bicolor*, the vocalization of which is said to be playful and human-like]
- (9) a. *Nia lori amba* Flowing, stop the flowing
 b. *Isa waene* Monitor lizard [*Hydrosaurus amboinensis*] of the river
 c. *Isa waene* Monitor lizard [*Hydrosaurus amboinensis*] of the river
 d. *Nuku bala keu-keu norio* Together, like a *keu keu* touching [reference to a type of design based on the shape of the flying fish *Cypselurus nigripennis*, used in basket-making]
- (10) a. *Kinate kinae* The stickiness (sap) of the *kinae* tree [*Kleinhovia hospita*]
 b. *Kama kinate nate* The resin is sticky
 c. *Buru tai buru*⁶ Bird, bird faeces
 d. *Kama buru tai buru* Bird resin, bird faeces
- (11) a. *Lesi lesi wawe* Pull the thatching thread
 b. *Hatu aie* [*harlai?*] The Anchor Rock [an outcrop east of Rouhua] moves to-and-fro

6 *Buru*[ng] here is Ambonese Malay for ‘bird’. The Nuaulu word for bird is *manu*[e]. It is common for Nuaulu to introduce Ambonese Malay into stories and sung lyrics, especially for the reported speech of non-Nuaulu persons (Ellen 2023b). See also Nivens 1998 on Malay insertions into local-language conversations in Aru.

- c. *Hatu aie* [*harlai?*] The Anchor Rock [an outcrop east of Rouhua] moves to-and-fro
- d. *Nea i* [or *l*] *orie maru-maru* Already the gentle wind [lit. breeze; Ind. *angin sepoi-sepoi* has arrived; but *maru-maru* also refers to the peoples of West Seram, including Wemale, Alune, and the people of Elpaputih Bay]

What is most striking about the *kapata ararirane* form is less the structure than the intentions of the composer. Many stanzas serve as a kind of social commentary, signalling approval or disapproval of individual actions. These often work through allusions that involve teasing and satire. In the context of sung performances, such verse is described as *siru* or *sirumau*, slightly different from allusive and satirical speech more generally (*sina* or *asinai*). The conventions are similar to those described for other parts of Indonesia (see, for example, Phillips 1981; Hendry and Watson 2001), involving combinations of allusion, politeness, indirection, ambiguity, verbal disguise, and rudeness (*sindirani* in Indonesian). When criticizing someone, explicitness is to be avoided and comments should be more by way of hints that insinuate, counter-insinuate, ridicule, mock, sneer, or satirize. Indeed, the meanings of *kapata ararirani* stanzas are often so abstruse, with references to various tropes drawn from Nuaulu cultural experience, that, unless the backstory is known, they are virtually impossible to decipher. Of course, the dramatic irony of *siru* is that despite the opaqueness of the words themselves, most of the audience will know what is being alluded to; and if they do not, they will quickly find out—not directly from the singer or composer, but because the matters alluded to are already the subject of gossip. Fox (1971a:220) notes that in Rotinese, too, there is a similar named category of mocking speech. Nuaulu *sirumau* can form part of any song, though more commonly are a feature of *kapata Sepa* and *ararirane*. Composition and performance of such verse is usually the prerogative of unmarried males, though I found that both married males and females were equally involved in composition, and more so performance, throughout the period of my observations. The subject matter of *sirumau* in *kapata ararirane* often concerns illicit sexual liaisons and unorthodox marriages but may combine with other incidents and issues (for instance, religious conversion) to be a vehicle for factional politics and disputes more widely.

I was provided with a suitable example of how such *sirumau* can work in November 1970, in a case motivated by the expressed desire of Hanue to marry Unsa, the youngest daughter of Hatarai, even though she had yet to go

through her first menstrual seclusion. There may have been other objections too. Napuae, the adopted son of Hatarai following the death of his own parents when young and Unsa's elder half-brother, had taken on responsibility for her welfare. He was very much opposed to the union. This was made very public in an *ahinae* that Napuae composed and subsequently performed during a *kahuae* dance. Hanue replied in several *kapata ararirane* stanzas by satirizing Napuae for his romantic attachment to Silo, who, in fact, Napuae subsequently married. This was Napuae's original *ahinae*:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| (12) a. <i>Nuae (runa) nina waene</i> | The sea seeks (from) freshwater |
| b. <i>Raseu tewasi</i> | We do not go yet |
| c. <i>Re-sene roe Nusa</i> | We hear the <i>sene</i> [voice of the cocka-
too, <i>Cacatua moluccens</i> on top of the
island [meaning here: the <i>suane</i> ritual
house] |
| d. <i>Usa rai nuna honu</i> | The fire there burns again [meaning after
the fireplace has been ritually installed
in the <i>suane</i> , the fire returns] |

The imagery and allusion here appears to lie in the power of the traditional values embodied in the rhythms of nature and their parallel cultural cycles in the life of sacred houses. The proposed marriage between Hanue and Unsa was regarded as antithetical to such values.

5 The *Ararirane* Performance

Nuauulu tug-of-rattan performances usually accompany other events that provide the incentive to undertake the necessary preparation. Such events can be major rituals connected with the construction of buildings for the shared *suane* or for individual clan sacred houses, the lead-up to marriage celebrations, and—nowadays—also political events connected with the state, such as Tujuh Belas Agustus (Independence Day) and Hari Veteran (Veteran's Day).⁷ Either way, events involving tug-of-rattan performances tend to differ from most Nuauulu rituals in being organized at a village rather than at a clan level, partly for logistical reasons. Although *ararirane* sung verse is commonly heard

7 In other parts of Indonesia, *tarik tambang* (tug-of-war) is customarily a part of Independence Day celebrations but usually conforms more closely to the sporting event that in English is called 'tug-of-war'. However, local versions of tug-of-rattan are reported as happening elsewhere in Indonesia, some involving women.

within the village and in work areas in the gardens regardless of the occurrence of tug-of-rattan, actual performance is infrequent, and perhaps since 1990 increasingly so. This is because the event requires planning, including finding a rattan plant of the right species which can yield a cane of suitable length and width. Group construction of sacred houses can provide opportunities, as these often involve the collecting of rattan from a far-away forest in substantial quantities. Another consideration, as tug-of-rattan takes place at night, is that there should be a 'good' moon (that is, a full moon or close), and, if possible, it should take place during the dry season.

In 1990, some days before the scheduled event men went to the forest to cut and strip rattan with a sufficiently thick stem (3–4 cm) and length (generally between 15 and 50 metres) to be suitable for the game. This is generally *meu onate* (most likely *Daemonorops calapparius*, *D. robusta* or *D. beguinii*). The rattan was laid out along what in 1990 was the main coastal path running through Rouhua between Sepa and Tamilouw, parallel to the sea, which here happens to be in a sunrise-sunset direction. The two teams are described as *ranie reisa* (sunrise) and *ranie erenusa* (sunset), in Indonesian *matahari naik* and *matahari turun* respectively. This immediately suggests congruence with a pattern of conceptual opposites typical of sung verse in eastern Indonesia more widely, and it was this that had impressed Wilken. Moreover, in the context of the Nuaulu sacred clan houses along the south coast of Seram, the sunrise end is always male and the sunset end always female, with gendered seating arrangements consistent with this symbolic orientation. Thus, when the two tug-of-rattan teams are recruited by gender, it is usually the female team that is *ranie erenusa* and the male team that is *ranie reisa* (Ellen 2012:40–4).

Kapata ararirane stanzas are sung one at a time, often alternately by men and women, women at one end of the rattan and men at the other. Traditionally, tug-of-rattan is played between the unmarried men and women of the village, but in the performances that I witnessed recruitment was always more flexible. In the 1990 performances (Figure 1), two groups (one predominantly female) began by sitting on benches opposite each other on different sides of the main east-west path through the village, separated by about 20 metres. The women tended to be on the seaward side and the men on the mountain-ward side, again reflecting the symbolic geometry of the house and its seating arrangements; for not only do men sit towards the sunrise end and women towards the sunset end, but men also tend to sit towards the mountains and women towards the sea. In 1990, the women taking part in the singing seemed to be mainly married. The two groups began to sing where they had first congregated, alternating stanzas between one group and the other, joking and teasing as they rehearsed different stanzas. This phase of the proceedings



FIGURE 1 *Kapata ararirane* performance in Rouhua, 19 February 1990: (a) women pulling rattan (90-04-28); (b) men and women pulling rattan and singing (90-04-29); (c) men and women pulling rattan together (90-04-30); (d) women and children watching a performance; a rattan length lies on the ground (90-04-34)
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was a kind of warm-up, exciting the teams and building up momentum in the exchange of alternating stanzas.

The singing begins with all participants in relaxed postures, most sitting around and with a few holding the rattan loosely and not pulling. After about half an hour or sometimes longer, the groups start pulling gently at the rattan,

still singing. Gradually more and more people participate, one team walking with the rattan in one direction and then the other team walking with the rattan in the opposite direction. There is a light stamping of alternate feet and much swaying in time with the singing, the stamping echoing a feature of the *kahuae* circle dance (Ellen 2008). This continues for some time. As the tension grows, the rattan becomes tauter and the real pulling begins, with few holds barred. Each party tries to wrench the rattan from the other and rush to one end of the village. The rattan may be tied around trees to secure it and frequently the teams swap ends. This exhausting game, coupled with intermittent singing, continues for about half an hour, before being stopped by an impartial observer and the cycle repeating. The whole affair may continue from dusk (6.30 P.M.) till dawn (6.30 A.M.), though a performance that I attended in 1990 (19 February) did not start until 10.30 P.M. and had ended by 2.00 A.M. Performances may continue for many nights in a row if the participants are sufficiently energized. All the while, the event provides a context for other activity. It is an opportunity for young, unmarried girls to experiment with make-up, and for men to flirt and forge relationships with their sweethearts. Also, if available, *tuae* (arenpalm liquor; *sageru* in Ambonese Malay), purchased from Christian villages, is consumed, mainly by men. Performances are always accompanied by the audience chewing and sharing betel (Ellen 1991).

The performance is clearly unlike the tug-of-war familiar from the European tradition, a sport that pits two teams against each other in a test of strength, pulling on opposite ends of a rope with the goal being to bring the rope a certain distance in one direction against the force of the opposing team's pull. Neither is a midpoint marked on the rattan or a centre line marked on the ground, nor is there a set number of people in each team, individuals joining whichever team engages their sympathy, gender, or kinship allegiance. People join and leave the teams as the night proceeds and the centre of gravity of the rattan moves up and down the path as one team's efforts exceed those of another. Sometimes women holding young babies will join in. Sometimes teams are composed of mixed sexes. Sometimes the rattan is just held rather than strenuously pulled. In purely physical terms there is no winner, but in symbolic terms one team may be appreciated as rising above the other through the effectiveness of its *sirumau* and as measured by the delight of those watching. On the second night of the 1990 performance, there were many older (that is, traditional) stanzas that did not make reference to current events and relationships, and the consensus amongst the younger participants who I spoke to was that, as a result, it was not as enjoyable as it had been the previous night.

On the third night in 1990, it was the turn of Menai, who had then recently converted to Christianity as Yohanes (later changing his name to Petrus), along

with his wife Petronella (Patima) and all but two of his children. He sang verse that ridiculed Napuae, who afterwards made it clear that he resented the ridicule and would not allow Menai to get away without a response from him. Indeed, there had been competitive tension for many years between Menai and Napuae, who before both were married had competed over women. Thus, in 1990, I recorded stanzas from a *kapata ararirane* that alluded to events in Menai's life that had taken place shortly before I first arrived in the field in 1970. These events were his elopement with Patima before he had gone through the puberty ritual and received his red headscarf; and, later, his throwing away of this headscarf and departure from the village. The stanzas that follow were recorded by Napuae solo later in my house, using the same melodies as in the tug-of-rattan performance, in the same continuous sequence and with lines (a and b) and (c and d) repeated:

- | | |
|--|--|
| (13) a. <i>Ia ama naku tewa</i> | Father is not barren |
| b. <i>Tutu pesi ne sinuhu</i> | He is able to disperse (spread) his fruitfulness |
| c. <i>Pele Pele i-asī'o</i> | Pele [he is still ...] ... oo |
| d. <i>I-au nohu sounea</i> | I make a shelter spoken |
| (14) a. <i>Sou ne yau noho sounea</i> | Words make a shelter, they are spoken |
| b. <i>Osine kapana rati</i> | [To the one who guards the clan house] |
| c. <i>Ihete putuki renete</i> | We obstruct the unbecoming singing [of Christians] |
| d. <i>Onea agama renete</i> | We obstruct the stars of religion |
| (15) a. <i>Nehite ereuni oimo waimo agamanea</i> | Sick now—(he) has taken on religion |
| b. <i>Rai pusi pusi re kahue manue inae oi</i> | This finishes the <i>kahue</i> ['maku-maku' circle dance] mother bird |
| c. <i>Manue inae wai[uae]mo inoso</i> | Mother bird [hen] goes forward [Menai here is described as a chicken] |
| d. <i>Sia nima noi</i> | Nine-five dancing [reference to the Pata-siwa Patalima groupings of peoples of the central Moluccas] |
| (16) a. <i>Pesi nesi nuhu</i> | Throw away the head cloth |
| b. <i>Pesi ne sinuhu</i> | Throw away his fruitfulness |
| c. <i>Reni mata nima</i> | We (have) five eyes |
| d. <i>Nani weu sianimo</i> | Nine/five eyes [go wandering] |

All of this goes to the nub of the *kapata ararirane*. There is always strong pressure to respond in kind, and despite the annoyance it causes individuals, it is this give-and-take, echoing the physical to-and-fro of the tug-of-rattan itself, that is the reason the performance is so enjoyable for others. In effect, it works as a form of social control, sometimes dramatic and obvious to all, sometimes allusive, with stanzas ideally referring to—or having relevance to—current situations and relationships. Otherwise, they are poorly received. So, by the third night of the February 1990 performance, quite a head of steam had built up. The tug-of-rattan went on until dawn, and many more women took part as it increasingly established a reputation for providing vicarious pleasures akin to gossip. Moreover, what participants found pleasing as an oral performance also seemed to be more socially effective as a tease, suggesting a connection between aesthetics and moral argument.

Successive nights devoted to dusk-till-dawn tug-of-rattan, like other Nuauulu nocturnal performances such as *kahuae* dances and healing seances summoning ancestral spirits, have their inevitable consequences. Subsistence activity the following day is less than it might otherwise be, as participants sleep off their tiredness and generally recover from the excesses of the previous night. However, a lot of time is also spent during the day devising new stanzas and rehearsing them. By 1990, some younger, literate Nuauulu were even writing them down.

The melodies used in actual tug-of-rattan events for particular textual stanzas appear to be fixed, the same or similar to many of those recorded in individual sessions in my house. There may be some melodic variation, but the singing does not significantly change with each performance. A particular ‘call’ melody always gets the same or a similar group response. The leader for the *ai ukune* will vary throughout the night, introducing new stanzas, but there is no particular leader in the sung response. Repetitions sound mostly identical. All of the stanzas will have been composed beforehand and experimented with in recreational singing outside of the tug-of-rattan context. There is little or no textual improvisation on the day.

6 New Technology and Verbal Contestation by Other Means

Most of my recordings of *kapata ararirane* were made as a result of requests from various individuals, mainly younger men, and after a while—and more hesitantly—by young women. In 1970–1971, luggable tape recorders were a new technology for the Nuauulu, who had no previous experience of voice-recording, but who did have some access to radio, public-address systems, and mechanic-

ally recorded music. By the end of my first fieldwork period in 1971, individuals of all ages and both sexes would regularly ask me to record them singing and then listen to the playback. Often days or weeks later, they would ask to listen to the recordings again, and, as such, occasions were often quite crowded and lively events taking place in my house; there were opportunities for teasing, embarrassment, and worse. Sometimes the problems created were not because of what was said, but because of whose voice was heard. Thus, when Inane requested to hear again the voice of his dead wife, it just happened that his wife's brother's wife was present and heard her too. This is a *sau monne* relationship, in which the individuals concerned must avoid interacting in various prescribed ways. As the volume of requests increased to a point where I was unable to manage my time reasonably, and as the problems encountered multiplied, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of having to decline or defer requests and provide excuses. Moreover, like Seeger (2004), who was engaged in ethnomusicological fieldwork at around the same time, I was to discover other unintended consequences of using tape recorders. Seeger (1986:264–70) notes, for example, the difficulty of anticipating the consequences of improving equipment both in and beyond the field and, even more, changing expectations of best practice for obtaining consent and handling material placed in the public domain, including changing attitudes as to what can be public knowledge.

Sometime in August 1970, Kaisa asked me if he could sing some *kapata ararirane* with the aid of the tape recorder. We went to his house—as he requested—and began. He sang the stanzas alternately with Inane. Although it was not clear to me at the time, I was to learn afterwards that the stanzas they had composed made implicit reference to Napuae and his proposed marriage to Silo. Both Kaisa and Inane disapproved of the marriage and the stanzas accused Napuae of having already ‘sat with’ (a euphemism for ‘slept with’) Silo, in theory something forbidden for betrothed Nuaulu. The verse also implied that Silo did not really want Napuae and that Inane would be a much better match for her. Napuae later told me that he had ‘spies’ at the recording session who informed him what had happened, and which made him angry. His liver was ‘hot’, and he sought to take revenge on Kaisa and Inane. However, he knew that it was safer to avenge his humiliation and loss of honour through counter-accusation using *kapata* rather than more overtly. So, having been unwittingly misled by Kaisa and Inane in the first place, I agreed to accompany Napuae to his house so that both he and his half-sister Unsa could seek redress through the singing of counter-insinuating verse. Various people present composed suitable stanzas. In replying to the accusations, Napuae teased Kaisa by claiming that he had been ‘exhausted’ by a recent trip to Sepa (a distance of no more

than 3 km), where he had bought three cigarette lighters from 'Ince' Sun at the Chinese store. These were for Kemai, a girl Kaisa was wooing, and who happened to be Inane's younger sister. The verse also accused Inane of lusting after Silo. Although Inane had been married for some years, his wife (Aharena) had not yet born a child. Following on from this recording session there were further requests from others for repeat plays of the relevant tracks. This continued for several days until the village head Komisi intervened and decided that enough was enough and that from then on only standard stanzas should be sung and heard.

Throughout my ethnographic research among the Nuaulu (1970–2015), although the commission, composition, and singing of allusive *kapata ararirane* verses has normally been permissible—either by individuals within households or during work outside the village—excesses have sometimes been difficult to control. Indeed, there have been occasions when things got out of hand. On such occasions, a higher authority within a clan or government village officials may seek to calm things down. Accusations made in the context of the tug-of-rattan events, however, are afforded some protection through the shared values and expectations surrounding the performance. It is acknowledged that it is culturally legitimate to make public moral judgements about the behaviour of others and in the tug-of-rattan there are opportunities to retaliate in kind. The cultural legitimacy of the art form, and the acceptability of public teasing regarding certain kinds of social offence limits, therefore, the extent of any offence caused.

The very clear and unanticipated impact that tape-recording had on my research situation provides an opportunity to comment on the (post)colonial and ethics dimension. This is especially significant given my discomfort about some of the consequences, both the immediate effects during my 1970s fieldwork and how it looks after half a century of debates around research ethics. These include those relating to the epistemologies and politics of postcoloniality, which emphasize researcher positionality and the need for reflexivity, and which acknowledge the power dynamics of the research relationship. In 1970, fieldwork was conducted in the context of conventional ethnographic methods and then emerging ethical protocols associated with participant observation. By 1990 and later, fieldworkers of all stripes, including those studying performance art, were ever more aware of the difficulties involved in applying codes of ethics too mechanistically in particular instances. Such codes, while obviously necessary, were organized at a professional level, in the context of international and political discussions with different kinds of 'gatekeeper'. While local populations have become more politically active around research and issues relating to prior informed consent, protective of their intellectual property, and savvy

concerning the potential consequences and opportunities of research activity, general guidelines are sometimes at odds with the personal wishes of individuals and groups of performers or research subjects, who prefer recognition and openness over anonymity as a basic requirement for effective and equitable local collaborations.

For the researcher, once verse has been performed during a tug-of-rattan, and has become accepted as public knowledge, the ethical issues attached to its further dissemination might thus seem to be moderated. Nevertheless, names in this article have been anonymized by removing clan affiliation, even though the majority of those mentioned are no longer alive. Oral consent for recordings was always sought from singers and composers prior to a performance, though in many cases of performance in my house the recording was actively solicited. With collective performances of tug-of-rattan, I sought permission from the village head or their deputy, and after the event obtained precautionary permission to reproduce verse from those subject to allusive commentaries. Until the 1990s, most adolescents and young people—those mainly involved—were still largely illiterate, with schooling beginning only during the 1980s (Ellen 2023a). Nowadays, of course, written permissions are expected in the research community, and conditions generally are more stringent.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

Nuauulu tug-of-rattan is situated within the traditional logic of social and spatial orientation as this applies to, for example, gender. This and the compositional style of the sung verse that accompanies performances suggests that the art form must be understood in a wider structural matrix. Although not always, or necessarily, a competition between teams defined by gender, tug-of-rattan provides a vivid physical representation of the struggle between male and female, among men for the affections of women and among women for the affections of men. I have also shown here how, when they do occur, performances are not easy to classify as an art form, having features of song, poetry, dance, game-playing, and ritual (see, for example, Finnegan 1992:135–42). To place them in a thoroughly modern context, there are several—though non-rhythmic—functional and poetic similarities with rapping, with the allusive to-and-fro of social media styles on smart phones, and with pre-industrial verbal contestational arts, such as ‘flyting’ (Parks 1986), which also defy easy genre classification.

An additional claim made in this article is that a tug-of-rattan performed over successive nights airs grievances, serves as a forum for retribution through

subtle symbolic violence rather than physical aggression, and can be seen as acting as a safety-valve in disputes. It is all about reputation management. To use the language of functionalist sociology, *kapata ararirane* and its performance seems to be an informal means of social control, after the fashion sometimes claimed for gossip (see, for example, Gluckman 1963; Cox 1970).⁸ A recent body of literature has drawn inspiration from such ethnographic studies and, using agent-based simulations and—more controversially—theory from evolutionary biology, supports the claim that gossip reduces the costs of social control without lowering its efficacy (Dunbar 1996; Giardini and Conte 2011). However, Nuauulu tug-of-rattan is a highly structured form of gossip and is very public, while *siru* are a recognized and accepted tool of disputation and redress. In *kapata ararirane* enactments, initial public humiliation can be countered with response stanzas in which the accused seeks to outmanoeuvre the challenge, with both parties running the risk of being further embarrassed.

Conflict is arguably averted through the clever and tactical use of implicit criticism. While public humiliation of this kind, with its shared symbolic values, may safely air, diffuse, or even occasionally resolve conflicts, it can also sometimes exacerbate them, with the possibility that they might even spiral out of control. In the few examples examined here, particular episodes of contentious *siru* in *kapata ararirane* performances can be seen as a continuation of often longstanding rifts between clans and village factions.

But while the linkage between satirical *kapata* and physical tug-of-rattan may serve to confine episodes of tension to particular moments in space and time under the supervision of traditional authority in the form of those clan elders who sanction performances, the widespread singing of the stanzas outside this context liberates individuals from formal social control and makes their singing arguably more subversive. Moreover, given the confined geography of Nuauulu living areas, the singing of *kapata ararirane* has historically always been public, even if undertaken within houses, or in the context of garden work. Verses mocking others may have had the effect of preventing or mollifying behaviour of the kind satirized, but on occasions it may become part

8 Between 1970 and 1990 (and maybe more recently), formal rebukes for the kind of behaviour mocked or ridiculed in *kapata ararirane* might sometimes take the form of interventions by parents or other senior relatives, by a clan or house head, or, in more serious cases, by the government village head. These behaviours seldom led to interventions from state functionaries, though in elopements or marital disputes the police were sometimes involved. The attraction for many of satirical allusion is that it is an opportunity for public criticism or comment without resort to official institutions.

of a process by which grievances and conflicts are aggravated or prolonged, if not accelerated.

I conclude with two further observations that relate to changes that have taken place over the last 50 years. The first is that Nuaulu *kapata ararirane* sung verse has become semi-detached from tug-of-rattan performances. The second extends my earlier comments on how the data show the use of tape recorders and the process of undertaking ethnography have subtly altered local social dynamics.

Firstly, we should note that actual tug-of-rattan performances nowadays (we could say: after 2015) occur only intermittently, partly for logistical reasons and partly because of time constraints in a world where so much else is competing for people's attention. It is possible that the singing of *kapata ararirane* has always been mostly detached from the physical performance of tug-of-rattan, if only because of the difficulties of organizing performances. But the composition and singing of stanzas of various *kapata* outside of the contexts for which they were originally designed has no doubt long been a feature of Nuaulu customary practice, not only for recreational purposes but also because they provide an opportunity to comment on, and sanction, the behaviour of other people (usually young people), and because they provide opportunities for non-violent retribution.

Secondly, I was probably the first outsider to introduce tape recorders into Nuaulu villages (even before the availability of cassette recorders), and through this inadvertently extended the social utility of *siru* as part of the *kapata ararirane* genre. During my early periods in the field (1970–1975), people would seek me out and ask if they could record themselves, and sometimes themselves with others, in my house. It usually had to be in my house, as that provided neutral ground and sometimes the requests had a conspiratorial air to them. Mostly, singers just wanted to admire and display their own rendering of any one of the three styles of sung performance, though on one occasion a widower wanted to hear the voice of his dead wife who had recorded previously. But in a good proportion of cases, individuals wanted to record innovative stanzas of *kapata ararirane* that in the Nuaulu aesthetic scored points over others. The problem was that such recordings were difficult to suppress, and others were keen to listen to everything that had been previously recorded. Thus, the use of recording equipment quite literally 'amplified' the way in which sung verse worked as social commentary and in some cases may have had negative consequences. If anything, the subsequent introduction of cassette recorders—and, thereafter, mini-cassette recorders and, most recently, smart mobile phones—has made this potentially even easier. But by then, my research interests had moved on and, for the Nuaulu, my recordings (just like my photographs and videotapes)

were no longer as exciting as they had once been. In contemporary Nuaulu villages, mobile phones, cassette players, and other devices have become almost commonplace, so that the recording of satirical verse, its later circulation, and playback together with any social consequences have become fully localized, without requiring the intervention of outside researchers or documentalists.

Finally, it is helpful to clarify the timeline of the research to underline its current relevance. During my main periods in Rouhua, between 1970 and 1990, *kapata ararirane* was commonly heard, sung by mainly young people. Tug-of-rattan performances were probably always intermittent because of the organizational constraints described, while opportunities for collective performance have become increasingly difficult over recent decades. Religious conversion and the availability of other pan-Indonesian musical forms through electronic media have had a massive impact. *Kapata ararirane* and performances of tug-of-rattan have had to compete with other, newly introduced youth events, such as *pesta joget* (Ellen 2023a:14–6). But as the recordings made recently by Bolton (2022) indicate, even young people have adapted the style to modern contexts. While the genre is arguably in decline, it is not obsolete; it is adapting to the contemporary world and remains a significant aspect of Nuaulu cultural heritage.

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