

History in a Sumba Myth

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In the recent revival of interest in myth analysis (see for example, Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Leach, 1967; Firth, 1967; Middleton, 1967), we have become aware that myth style employs formulas or conventions of time quite different from the methods of history. Aspects of these differences still need to be explored extensively in order to see how and where the formulas, the interpenetrations of structure and event, vary from one culture area to another. This article, based on recent fieldwork in central Indonesia¹ illustrates the characteristic mix of past and present in the myths of the East Sumbanese people who occupy half of the island of Sumba, the third island in the chain stretching east of Bali.

Initially in selecting Sumba for research, I was attracted by the wide variety of plant, animal and human figures in their textiles, which are collected in many European museums. On the island I found that the major vehicle of figurative imagery is language. The ceremonial language essential to the proper functioning of the society consists of poetic imagery drawn from close observation of nature. The narrative style of myths, too, projects vivid and graphic images.

By myths on Sumba, I mean first of all stories about deities which "belong" to a certain group—clan, lineage or community—and which, although commonly known to all, are considered formal secrets of the group, to be narrated by certain elders only on special occasions. Broadly speaking in East Sumba, the group's founding saga or myth of origin accounts for and legitimizes the current status or functions of the group by conventional recourse to a distant sacred past.² However, in a special form, the myths also convey the shape of the past, the particular critical experiences in time which give the group its identity. This special aspect—the way history is incorporated into myth will be

1. I spent two years in East Sumba (one year each in the Melolo and Kapunduk districts) doing research in the arts under a grant from the JDR III Fund, New York. I take this opportunity to thank the Fund and the Siswa Lokantara Foundation in Djakarta for their sustained assistance.

2. see "Myths and Self Image among the Kapunduk people of East Sumba, Indonesia," in *Indonesia* (Ithaca), No. 10, 1970.



Fig. 1 Capital village, *paraingu*, island of Sumba, Indonesia. Stones in center mark graves of past leaders.

Photo: Alfred Bühler



Fig. 2 Ruler of East Sumba capital, with members of his family.

Photo: Alfred Bühler



Fig. 3 Omega-shaped ceremonial ornament called *mamuli*, East Sumba type.
Made of metal alloys (tin, silver and gold).
Drawing by Ineke Heestermans

demonstrated in the account of the founder of a community which has within living memory undergone a critical change of status from capital village to hamlet.

This community, Paraingu Karoku, lies in the region of Kapunduk of the northeast coast of Sumba. As a modern government district, Kapunduk includes several communities which it more or less dominated prior to the establishment of Dutch administrative government in the early 20th century. Each community is centrally organized around a capital village, *paraingu* (Fig. 1 & 2), defensively situated on a hilltop, which serves as a royal seat and ceremonial center for the surrounding area. In the excessively dry and barren coastal plateaus, the *paraingu* is typically established near a river valley, where small fields of corn and rice can be cultivated and cattle, horses and water buffalo belonging to the local ruler are watered.

The creation of each capital with its attendant social organization into patrilineal clans comprising roughly three classes (royalty, householders and servants) is attributed to a Supernatural Being (a Marapu Ratu) who led his companion-founders from an upperworld to the island of Sumba and formulated all the rules for the community. His clan descendants are entitled to rule either as warrior kings or as royal priests whose special concerns are the regulation of rain and the planting cycle. The main Deity (Marapu) of each of the other clans in the community is also its founder. The relationship between the head of the clan and his Founder-Deity is an intimate one. The clan leader's residence serves as a clan temple where treasure is accumulated for the purpose of sponsoring ritual festivals during which the Marapu is invited to visit and to share meals with his descendants.

Although some clan deities are considered more powerful than others, their authority is limited to family matters or to special functions under the leadership of the ruling Founder-Deity clan. In turn, the princely rulers of the several capitals readily acknowledge the supremacy of the Big Capital, *Paraingu Bokulu*, near the Kapunduk River, and its king, entitled Tamu Umbu, who is regarded as a direct link to the region's most powerful Founder, a Priest Deity (Marapu Ratu) named Umbu (Lord) Hamala.

The people recognize that founding a *paraingu* is the greatest achievement in Sumbanese culture. It is the crowning achievement of the popular hero of the harvest myths who, according to the priests, is actually a Deity. The formal enabling act of a capital is the construction of a temple for the local ruler by an official number of eight organized kin groups or "houses" (clans or major lineages). This presupposes the establishment of marriage and other exchange links with

close and distant communities and the ability to maintain them at productive levels over a number of years in order to fulfill the long and complex rituals, common to all East Sumba, which are required for the construction of such a temple and for its periodic renewal. Above all, the favor of the most powerful regional ruler, such as the king of Kapunduk, is essential. (He, for example, permits the leader to take royal brides and thus maintain his line.)

Therefore, when I inquired about the Deity myth or story of the Marapu Founder of Paraingu Karoku, it was with some astonishment that I learned of a deviant tradition. According to informants in the Big Capital, Paraingu Karoku was founded some generations ago by Umbu (Lord) Padjodjang, a member of the Priest Deity clan at the Big Capital who broke away from the king of Kapunduk. "Why did Umbu Padjodjang leave Kapunduk?" I asked an Elder in Kapunduk. He gave the following account:

There were many sons in the house of Umbu Hamala. One of these Umbu Padjodjang, declared, 'I am the one who brings down the rain.'

'You are talking nonsense,' said Umbu Hamala, 'for I am the one who brought the gift of rain.'

That's why they quarrelled, because U. Padjodjang said he was the more powerful.

'He's just giving himself magic powers,' said U. Hamala. 'He's not the same as I who descended directly from the heavens.'

U. Padjodjang was taking the right to supernatural powers unto himself. What was the sign of his gifts? If he said, 'Let there be water,' then there was water. In the front of the temple, there appeared a mudhole for buffalo. 'How come there is a mudhole in front of your house?' asked U. Hamala. 'I am supernaturally gifted,' replied U. Padjodjang.

'Where will his powers lead to?' said U. Hamala.

The quarrel reached a crisis and U. Hamala chased U. Padjodjang out. That's why he went to found Paraingu Karoku. At P. Karoku he found his destiny. He received a gold *mamuli* (omega-shaped ceremonial ornament (Fig. 3)) from the edge of the heavens.

Another Kapunduk Elder added these comments:

What the Elder said was true but he left out something. Umbu Padjodjang was supernaturally gifted from his mother's womb. One day and one night he would be there in her womb; another day, another night, he was gone. Then as an infant, one night he would be lying beside his mother; the next night he wasn't there! From the womb he went in search of lasting life (*djulu*=ever-renewing life). That man, he had the gift of rain all right. If he came back from a trip even at the height of the dry season (when every plant is dead), he would bring fresh green peanut and corn plants. When he was old, he finally reached the edge of the heavens; there he obtained the gold *mamuli* all right, but he wasn't able to cross over.

From these accounts I received a compelling image of a man driven by desire for fame, for I first took the phrase "lasting life" as a symbol for fame. The desire for lasting life for an individual appeared incompatible with Sumbanese attitudes and their emphasis on values of family and group continuity. That this desire formed the dominant and essential nature of U. Padjodjang is shown vividly and aptly by his beginning to search for *djulu* from his mother's womb where the intangible desire is the sum of his presence. His drive led to the establishment of a new capital village in a barren area, an achievement represented in the story by the extremely productive and fertile nature of his gifts. The third point in the story, however about his experience at the edge of the heavens was not clear to me. I determined to go to Paraingu Karoku to hear the local version.

The trip on horseback led through exceptionally barren valleys, stony hills and burnt grasslands. Late in the afternoon, from a high ledge, I saw the *paraingu* laid out on a fairly low spur of a plateau in the midst of several narrow valleys, made fertile I was told by heavy dews. Not a single house stood at the site. Among the dry shrubs, only scattered stones characteristic of house sites and several heavy stone tables marking graves at the center of the former village were visible. Because, when the present Elders (now in their sixties) were youths, the village had burned down twice in succession,³ most of the inhabitants had deserted the area. A few houses dispersed on the various slopes are all that remain of the community.

The inhabitants proudly pointed out that thanks to Umbu Padjodjang's supernatural powers, they had the benefit of not the usual one but three springs and all were close by the settlement. However, the main temple was dedicated to Umbu Hamala and I heard outspoken expressions of loyalty to the king of Kapunduk, whose numerous cattle were grazing on the slopes.

One of the Elders at Paraingu Karoku, who is widely known as an expert on royal funeral ceremonial, was to be my informant. He gave a version of the myth which stresses a power struggle with the rulers of Kapunduk and a desire for ever-renewing life. "Why did Umbu Padjodjang leave the Big Capital at Kapunduk?" I asked. He began:

They quarrelled and he came to Paraingu Karoku. Why did they quarrel? Every day his hens laid eggs in all the baskets, his buffalo gave birth to two at a time.

3. According to informants in Kapunduk proper, the village was destroyed on the orders of a former king of Kapunduk at the Big Capital.

Because I'd heard this before, I interrupted, "Wouldn't it be good to have a priest (*ratu*) like that?"

He showed his powers too openly. The forefathers of Tamu Umbu were angry. 'Don't be like that,' said the princes of Ana Matjua (the king's clan), for it wasn't they who intended he should be so powerful. If he opened up his fist like that, it would rain. 'Let's talk together,' said Ana Matjua; 'Don't be like that,' they said. But if he slaughtered a buffalo in the evening, the next morning a new baby buffalo was already in the pen. So he displayed his supernatural gifts.

When he came to Karoku, he founded a *paraingu* there. Then he went off to look for lasting life. 'So I won't die,' he said. He went to the edge of heaven. The Elder nodded to me, 'that's on the other side of your country,' and he continued:

At the edge of heaven, a voice spoke to him: 'Why did you come?' 'I came to look for lasting life.' 'It is not possible for you to become eternal, for you come from a land where men die. There is a sign of lasting life and I will show you the sign of death.' And he blew his breath so that the heavens parted a little and his hands appeared on the outside but his feet were still in the heavens. In one hand he extended a gold *mamuli* from the darkness. In the other he offered an exceptionally long spear.⁴ (Gold ornaments and long spears are characteristic possessions of Marapu, Deities). 'Show me your hand,' he said and U. Padjodjang spread out his fingers. There were five of them. 'Come, let me see your hand,' said Umbu to the person from the beyond. He extended his fingers. U. Padjodjang looked, there was no ring finger. That was the finger which caused death. 'That is the finger that digs your grave. A digging stick⁵ is a part of your body,' said Umbu Taingu la Palindi, Palindjingu Hau Tama, said the One with Big Ears and Broad Face (euphemisms for the Deity as Creator). 'Return to die, only then will you be lasting.' Upon returning to Karoku he went into seclusion. For eighteen days he didn't eat. Then he rose, dressed himself in the style of the dead, laid down and died.

At the end of his narration the Elder paused, held out his hand with fingers spread. "Fingers have names, you know," he said, "the thumb represents royalty; the pointing finger, clansmen; the mid-finger, the priest (*ratu*); the ring finger is the 'one without name'; the little finger, the servants. The 'one without name' means witches. That's why royalty die."

His explanation stemmed from the traditional belief that royalty only die because of evil forces directed at them. However what struck me was the story of the community that loomed in the myth. The present situation is that this leaderless community honor a founder to whose gifts they feel they owe their existence, but their main worship is

4. Called "a Surabaja spear" (Surabaja=a city in Java), that is, it had a higher value because imported. Gold for ornaments is also an imported luxury.

5. *kahonga hakangu*, digging stick, the traditional agricultural tool.

directed to the Priest Deity of Kapunduk and their loyalty to the king of Kapunduk. This anomaly is delineated in the myth. Umbu Padjodjang succeeded in establishing a capital and was—and still is—honored as a clan “house” Deity (Marapu) within that community. This is indicated in the story by his receiving the gold ornament (*mamuli*) and the long spear, characteristic signs of a Marapu. Nevertheless he failed in his main aim which was not an individual’s desire for lasting life but his yearning to be divine, to achieve that which would guarantee his joining the ranks of the great Marapu, founders of lasting capitals who are ranked as divine by nature. His failure to cross over to the upperworld is comparable to the failure of Paraingu Karoku. His magic power in relation to water and fertility which I interpret as signifying his having chosen among the interminable, barren hills a site favored with dew springs—is still relevant to the surviving community. Only this brings to his name what was promised in the myth—after death, a lasting life.

If this interpretation is accepted, the myth can be said to illustrate what Firth (1967:284-292) has called the “plasticity” of myth, meaning that myths change in response to recent situations or needs. In so doing—in incorporating the ultimate failure of the community into its myth of origin—the sacred account offers essentials of a history of the community.

The way objects figure in the myth reinforces the proposed interpretation. First, consistent with the broad scope of a community myth, the objects form a complete set, the digging stick, a tool, constitutes a mid-point between the extremes of nature and culture represented in the plants and animals and the man-made ornaments. More significantly in another coding, the tool, a simple wooden stick with a sharpened point, forms a contrast to the exceptional fertility of the organic elements and the luxurious character of the precious, ornamented metal objects. Linking the digging stick to Umbu Padjodjang’s final phase parallels the course of events for the community has moved from its earlier position of power and affluence as a capital to a hamlet whose people, unable to mount more than local rituals, are limited to their seasonal rounds of gardening work.

This myth provides an imaginative structure within which both the past and the present can be contained and further a form in which they can be *felt*. In a society which closely identifies with its Founder-Deity, the story affects the psychological tone of the community; it keynotes the place of the community and its powerlessness in the region. The myth of their Founder-Leader makes the members aware of their ‘history’ as a community who tried for independent leadership and failed.

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