Death Rituals of the Ngada in Central Flores, Indonesia

Susanne Schröter

Abstract: – The Ngada, a people of central Flores in east Indonesia practice a successful integration of two contradicting belief systems: Roman Catholicism and adat. Contemporary Ngada religion, therefore, consists of syncretistic and parallelistic elements that were mixed together and readapted to specific occasions. This dynamic process is examined with an example of death rituals which provide a space for reflection and discussion, social action and construction of an indigenous modern cosmology. [Indonesia, Flores, Ngada, religion, ritual]


Contrary to a frequently cited disappearance of autochthonous religious systems, Karl-Heinz Kohl wrote in an essay published in 1988 that they show an astonishing capacity to resist advancing world religions. An eradication of tribal religions, Kohl remarked, did not occur especially in societies with intact social and economic structures. Rather, a parallelism of two overlapping or competing models established itself.

Kohl’s thesis, based primarily on data collected in the Lewolema domain of eastern Flores in Indonesia, challenged me to explore the relationship between adat, the traditional religion, and agama, the belief system introduced by missionaries, in the Ngada area of central Flores. Focusing particularly on death rituals in this discourse, I outline the process by which people in an autochthonous society adapt their traditional religious reference system to a foreign religious orientation. The circumstances under which preferences for the mobilization of a particular system take shape are examined. Whether and how a syncretistic spiritual world is constructed, and the success of attempting to make both worldviews compatible, are also focused upon.

My essay begins with a description of the Ngada concept of death and evil, then moves on to a funeral following a mata ade or ordinary death including a brief examination of kinship and exchange relationships. After this it describes a kēo rado, the ceremony held when a person dies the mata golo, a violent death,1 and finally present some reflections on the cosmic ideas, the social structures, and the changes which both undergo in the missionization and integration process into a global meaning system.

Special attention is paid to communication and exchange structures existing between socially related or allied groups and these groups with diverse supernatural beings. The latter refers to ancestors, spirits, and heroes but also to figures from the Christian pantheon who have become powerful extensions of the spiritual world. Modifications of their culture under the influence of missionary activity have triggered a reflective process among the Ngada. They feel forced to reevaluate their culture and to establish a partially critical attitude towards both the Catholic priests and their ancestors. Recognizing the dramatical changes over the last 70 years, they are now dividing their history into two phases: a static one in which the laws of the original heroes were unquestionably valid, and a “modern” phase. In the latter, they question the guidelines of the former colonial government, the missionaries, and those of the Indonesian state. Therefore, to a limited extent, the analysis of the death rituals includes an indigenous construction of the past.

Ngada Concepts of Evil and Death

Like many societies the Ngada interpret death, when the person was not obviously old and frail as well as illness and misfortune, as a result

1 During my fieldwork (1994, 1995, 1996–97) I participated in three kēo rados, one of which took place in my host’s house in August 1996. As a result of this, I was able to gain particular insights into the preparatory discussions before the rite.
of destructive actions from the malicious forces called ano polo. The concept of polo refers to an extremely complex idea of evil which is an essential part in Ngada religion.

In a very broad sense, the Ngada call all spirits that harm people through magical means polo. This definition includes different types of nonhuman apparitions as well as witches (BI: takung sihir) and ordinary practitioners of black magic (BI: ibnu hitam). The distinctions between them are in the degree to which they are visible and whether they do anything to people. The first category is usually nothing definite to facilitate a clear overall picture. However, there are different ideas which do reveal what polo do, how to recognize them, where they live, and how to fight against them. In the following I try to classify some kinds of polos in order to examine the two different types of death: mata ade and mata golo. I am aware of the fact that such a classification is an abstract model which fits only to a limited extent. The first category is the polo as a human being, the second the polo as a spirit. Between these categories are manifold intersections and interdependencies that can only be briefly examined in this essay.

In many cases, the notion of polos as humans divides people into relatives and allies on the one hand, and suspect strangers on the other. Some villages are avoided as the residences of polos while others are approached with care because nobody should fear any harm. This corresponds to a structure based on old wartime relations. Nevertheless, not only potential enemies of foreign clans and villages can be suspected. People often also regard their neighbours or even members of the same clan as polos. It is not possible to identify a special group which is predisposed to bear out polos more than others, thus poor and rich, nobles, commoners, women, or men. Many of these suspicions can be suspected in the same manner. Rather, individual features lead to a suspicion. Often, a particularly successful or failed life is the cause. For example, less successful neighbours suspect people who have an exceptionally good harvest of not having done so by natural means. In contrast, people who have advantages over others are scared that envious neighbours could harm them through magic. Thus,

pretty children or popula youths are considered to be particularly endangered.

Persons who have an extraordinary lifestyle or an unusual appearance compose another group of polo suspects. I observed one case of suspicion where a man was considered a polo solely because he had long hair growing out of his ears, and another where an old woman was the center of malicious gossip because she had been a coveted beauty in her youth and had thus turned some men crazy. But the list is endless.

These human polos are said to cause damage in many ways: they destroy the harvest, kill the livestock, and bring illnesses and death. To harm someone, magical means and can spread evil simply through evil thoughts. These persons are considered responsible for a large number of all mata ade but only a few mata golo.

Mata golo is the result of the evil actions of the second group of polos, the processional spirits. In Ngada cosmology there are diverse kinds of free spirits which can cause harm, and only few of them are called polos. Polos as spirits include all kinds of special places which are avoided through fear and are referred to as tempat angker (places possessed by evil spirits) in the Indonesian language. They can be seen there at night in the form of black animals like dogs, horses, or birds. In the past they have chased people or birds, or have been part of a buffalo herd around with them. The meat is eaten either in a common giant meal or consumed privately in the polo’s house. This belief, which fits to a worldwide spread witch-patch (cf. Malinvaud 1990: 56 ff; Scherzer 1926), is common to the region why people eat this meat to avoid being afraid of a corpse’s presence in a house. A death inevitably attracted polos and one had to obey special precautionary measures when a corpse was kept in a house. To prevent the polos from taking power of the corpse the stakes of the storeroom (au’bo) had to be covered with bamboo leaves. Huge pools of blood outside the house were evidence of the corpse eater’s work. Never did the people of the region want to see people to be found on the corpse itself so that the flesh-consuming aspect of polos can be seen as a metaphor for the notion that the soul is eaten. Although this refers to all types of death, the fear was far greater in the case of mata golo than in the case of an ordinary death mata ade.

Mata golo is a death inflicted by murder, accident, bleeding wounds (except during childbirth), operations, or following diseases. As every death is a painful loss for relatives, consequently a mata golo is a catastrophe for them. It is considered a bad omen, a curse, and an imbalance in the cosmic order. A mata golo always signals the ancestor’s scorn and only with the practice of a keo rudo ritual, some time after the ordinary funeral, the members of the affected house can avoid repetitions of such deaths.

Funeral in the Case of mata ade: Sacrifice to the Ancestors and Prayers to the Virgin Mary

Today, both in a case of mata ade and of mata golo, the burial and mourning rites are the same. When death is diagnosed, the relatives begin sobbing and crying loudly, so that everybody in the village and all the ones who pass by know that somebody from the house has died. A gong is beaten to inform the people of the neighbouring villages. The corpse is washed, dressed either in European style or in handwoven traditional clothes, which is the lauwo, called surong, when a woman has died, or a shawl (luw’i) and sarong (sapu) when the dead person is a man. The body is laid out in a coffin or on a bed, white candles are lit at both sides, and a crucifix is put to one side of the head. In two cases I observed the relatives adorning the place with red plastic roses, bought in a Chinese shop in Bajawa, the capital city of the Ngada district. In most of the houses I saw a Christian decoration in the form of sheets torn from Catholic calendars depicting scenes from the life of Jesus, a very popular picture of Jesus who’s bleeding heart was visible through his robe, or that a postcard that shows Jesus II of the Ende. The people inside the house stay awake, mourning and praying to God, calling Tuhan Allah, and the Virgin Mary.

7 My attempt to find a fitting category system is limited in this relationship between spirit and human, but, indeed, this is only a problem for scientists - the Ngada do not feel any need to segregate a vera from the possessed person.

8 This description of the possession was also documented by Fr. Paul Arndt 1925/31: 828.

9 Nearly every person in Langa who had a mental disorder was considered to be a victim of a polo and theirs, according to the situations where they received the human meat were widespread.

10 According to Herman Badner (1968), this idea of eating the corpse is characteristic of the belief in evil spirits (Bi: suangi) all over Flores.

Antropus 93.1998

5 The most popular are the nasu, evil dwarfs, the pontiwa, wild women of the forest, and the niwu, female spirits of springs. (Scherzer 1997b).

6 The traditional calendar has a month called doko and a white maggot with the same name, which appears at this time. The maggot is one of the most important pests affecting tubers (auwi) which were the most important staple food in the past. In 1945, I participated in a doko action to destroy all kinds of doko, the maggot and the spirits. In the Langa area this ceremony is only practiced by a special house in the village which is considered to be a clan related person, person from within, or a descendant of former slaves, an "internal outsider" (Forth 1999a: 117).

11 This death is usually termed a “bad death” in the literature. An informant translated it as a “lot death” which points out that the dead person is considered “hot” and dangerous, or “red death,” an allusion to bleeding wounds connected with the mata golo. In East Indonesian societies, this distinction between ordinary and “violent” death, which bears a special ritual with it, is usual. However, the conceptual definition of a “violent” death varies; what it is, who causes it, and how it is treated varies. (Cf. Barnes 1989; Renard-Clamarigand 1989; Hoskins 1989).

12 Ende is the cathedral town of Flores.
For the next day, a wooden cross is made and inscribed with the deceased’s name, date of birth, and death. It is placed at the upper end of the coffin. While some close relatives move off to mourn in a hidden place, one or two others take over the coffins. The latter can be siblings, parents, grandchildren, or other close relatives. Although the majority of these persons are women or girls, it is not prohibited for men to behave in the cited way.13 The mourners lament in a voice onomatopoeic, appealing to the deceased, crying and singing with a heartrending voice iné, iné (mother, mother) the traditional elegy in the Ngada society for everything that hurts. Up until the coffin is closed, in the afternoon they do not interrupt their grieving to eat or drink nor do they acknowledge the many people who come during the day. Usually, official representatives of the church are not among the mourners. If someone requests their presence, they will be paid. But the money is needed, however, to cater for the guests.

In the afternoon the coffin lid is nailed down, and the coffin carried in a long procession to a nearby village, the visiting place, the temple where the mourners sing Christian hymns and say the prayer Salam Maria several times. They sing at the graveyard also and pray to Mary. This is followed by the profession of faith (Pergauman kesaksian) and name from kuru. To the name of all the mourners, a lay preacher requests the acceptance of the immortal soul into heaven. The grave is dug and covered with cement. At the head of it, a little wall is built and a crucifix is carved on it as well as the initials RIP. Underneath, the dates already on the wooden crucifix are added. For three nights people will come to the house of the dead to pray and to sing. From this day onwards, the dead person’s relatives will include him in their Sunday prayers and light candles on the grave then and on special occasions like the annual rebu-festival14 or the visit of faraway living relatives.

Thus far, the Ngada always follow a Christian codex taught to them by the Catholic priests for every death. The exact compliance with the dictates of this ritual is considered obligatory towards Tuan Allah and the deceased’s explicit wishes also. Neglecting these obligations would be taken badly by the latter and answered by various reactions. They can appear as reminders in a dream or admonish their descendants by causing small accidents or even serious cases of illness. This type of independent movement through the dead with the living belongs to the traditional body of Ngada culture and is a subject which keeps the people in constant, latent tension. They feel forced to check their actions for compliance with the wishes of their ancestors. Only the type of obligations changes when adopting Catholicism, not the communication structure and control of the living by the deceased. That remains unchanged.

Another duty is directly related to the further shaping of the death rituals on the burial day. The deceased has gone to another world, is now an ancestor (ebu musti) and belongs to the ancestral community. In order to have a positive connection between both worlds, the ebu musti must be included in all festivities, thus also in the case of funeral rites where they are offered parts of the festive food. Rice, tua15 and meat are put in special, nearby houses, the sau-mata raagi. The ancestors of the matrilinial descent group (sa’o), the gifts are offered in the kitchen (one sa’o) which is the most sacred part of the house. They are put on the kae, a board above the hearth, in the kula, a woven basket which hangs from the ceiling, and on the mata raga, a wooden rack which serves as a holder for the sacred grave stick (sa’o), the ritual spear, and the ancestral sword (saw). Kae, kula, and mata raga are resting-places for the ancestors of the sa’o. In contrast, the ancestors of the clan (woe) are in the center of the village square (loka nua), and are represented by a miniature hut (bhaga) and an anthropomorphous pillar (ngadhu). The bhaga is the symbol with fresh blood from ancestors while the ngadhu is that of the male ones.

Unlike the ancestors buried according to Christian rites, the forbears symbolized by ngadhu are not attended by rituals or without blood but with sacrifices. They come from a different period of time and require other signs of respect from the living. Like the ancestors of the sa’o, who can be Christian or not, they are attended by the territory’s ritual blood. A number of domestic sacrificial animals in addition to the gifts of food. Chickens, pigs, and buffaloes are suitable for killing in this context but the buffalo is the most prestigious sacrifice. This animal’s “black” blood is a sign of his nobility16 and in many respects, buffaloes are considered to be the alter ego of humans.17 Buffaloes are killed at ceremonies only and in a stipulated manner. One rope is drawn through their noses and they are tied to the ngadhu, their throats are cut with the sau so that a stream of blood wets the base of the ancestral stake. If the artery is open, the men collect some of the blood in a bamboo bowl and cover the ngadhu and bhaga with it. The forbears are not only honored by gifts but also by acceptance as advisers for their progeny. Their names are mentioned in appeals and they are requested by the other one to give their opinions on the intentions of their descendants in oracles. While the Indonesian language is used for intercessions, Christian hymns and prayers, direct communication with the ancestors is always in the Ngada language. Both, the appeals in Ngada and the prayers said in modern Indonesian show a parallel verse technique18 which is considered characteristic of the traditional eastern Indonesian ritual language (cf. Fox 1988).

Social Structure and Exchange

In the Ngada society alliances are established through marital exchange and constantly revitalized and strengthened by gift transactions at burial ceremonies and other rituals. In contrast to birth rituals which are held only in the presence of the next door neighbours and closest relations, funeral and lineage ceremonies are major ceremonial occasions. All members of the matrilinial descent group, as well as those of the houses allied through marriage, are expected to contribute to the death and the symmetrical references to most important organizational structures of the Ngada: the house (sa’o) and the clan (woe). The sa’o, the matrilinial lineage, can be traced back to a named trunk house (sa’o numa), the bhaga, a group of uterine relatives or parents who cooperate with each other in everyday life and hold all ceremonies together, regardless of whether they are based on the adat or on Catholicism. According to the adat, the members must look after each other, can be called upon in the event of debt, and are in a close social and economic interdependent relationship. The sa’o has a rather egalitarian structure with a pronounced tendency to level differences in wealth. All sa’o are related to others through marriage alliances and usually have a far flung network of allies in other woe.

The woe is also unilateral and is based on a famous pair of ancestors. It is meaningful when distributing rights of land use and is also a salient orienting point of identity. In everyday life it is of lesser importance.

Unlike the sa’o, the woe are hierarchically organized and consist of various titled groups. They are comprised of two trunk houses (saka lobo, saka pu’a), several houses of mid hierarchy (kaka, dat), and other houses without any particular attributes. Saka pu’a embodies the feminine and saka lobo the masculine aspects of ritual leadership. Both of these houses are associated with several other kinship names, the sacred house for the ceremonial occasions. Other houses are derivatives of one of these houses. In addition to this ritual hierarchy most of the woe are divided into nobles (ga’et mece), commoners (ga’et kisa), and low class burghe or for low.

In modern everyday language the Indonesian concept of family (keluarga) is also used. This linguistic innovation is not due to the increasing infiltration of society, even certain Indonesian, but it is also an attempt to adopt a mode of social organizations dictated by Catholicism. Since the Christian family and the Ngada descent groups are totally different phenomena, it does not come as a surprise that the two have different terminologies. By adopting a different set of terms, they reflect totally different social structures when using the Indonesian concept. Thus my interlocutors use the term keluarga sometimes for the sa’o, sometimes for the woe, and usually for the bhaga, relatives of uterine relations or parents who cooperate with each other in everyday life and hold all ceremonies together, regardless of their importance. In contrast to this obvious terminological confusion, the members of the sa’o, the woe, and all those allied with the host sa’o bring rice, tua, and pigs with them. Even faraway groups whose only connection to the mourning sa’o is through a marriage a few generations ago, provide these gifts.

Burial renew and uphold alliances that were tied through marriage. Unlike marriages where the flow of goods is given mainly to the wife’s group,
Death Rituals of the Ngada in Central Flores, Indonesia

then those of the pai tibo are given priority. The bamboo sticks represent the bodies of the ancestors and the divination is the first means of contact with them. They have to agree with every part of the intended consolidation of the kēo rado and every person previously designated for a certain function. The divination reveals their agreement or disagreement to all participants of the celebration. Until the end of the kēo rado this communication between the ancestors and their offspring through animals’ entral and bamboo will accompany the whole ritual.

A lot of emphasis is placed on identifying the cause of the mala goro. The ritual spiritualists question as in a ritual language:

dia kami we tana
mi’a ma’u da dela
pusa lema
wi puru dia kediri banga
ano zwu
ano kede ano denge
we ask now you are the one with an oracle, when we all members of the sa’o have arrived and the rice, tua, and the animals to be sacrificed have been brought together. An oracle priest, tries to find out the reason for the ancestor’s scorn and thus the exact cause of death. Then the various phases of the coming day have to be decided upon. Two different divinations are used for this purpose:

the pai tibo and the zi’u ura manu or zi’u ura ngana. In the pai tibo, young bamboo sticks (tibo) are placed in the fire where the heat causes them to split. Accordingly this can be taken as affirmation or denial of a certain question asked beforehand. The zi’u ura manu or zi’u ura ngana is an examination of the liver or the entrails of a ritually killed pig (ngana) or chicken (manu).

If the results of the divination are contradicted, the exchange of gifts during death celebrations is based on equivalence. At weddings parts of the goods become the possession of the wife’s matrilinial relatives and increase their wealth, but everything is consumed at funerals until nothing is left. This consumption is usually a huge feast. Everyone eats and drinks almost incessantly and the guests can take home any leftovers for the next day. Reminders from government officials and Catholic priests to reduce the waste are rejected by the majority of the Ngada. They feel this would be breaking with the adat and consider it an offense against the laws of their ancestors. A small part of the modern scholarly elite condemns this regular destruction of wealth by consuming it, only to participate in it afterwards themselves.

The kēo rado Ritual

In the case of mata ade the ceremonies are over after one full day of eating and drinking. The pigs are all slaughtered, the tua drunk, and in the evening dinners of guests are more or less inebriated and go home with full stomachs.

It is different when a person dies the mala goro. A mata goro is always considered a climax in a chain of accidents, illnesses, or other kinds of misfortune leading to and before a kēo rado and ritual is held. In the time before missionization the kēo rado was the only funeral rite in cases of violent death. Today it is a separated rite, sometimes held many years after the burial.

Unlike the festivities described above at funerals which certainly are compatible with Christian ones, the kēo rado is definitely not a Christian ritual. It is an expression of the belief that Catholicism is not seen as fulfilling two important functions which are in the center of every denomination, namely, spiritual care of the deceased’s soul and the fight against the forces of evil. In the context of kēo rado the latter appear as spirits who can be seen by particularly magically gifted persons. In order to characterize them, my interlocutors often used the Indonesian term setan which refers to the biblical concept of the devils. However, the people do not see such a struggle being waged to the Christian God, but rather take the affair into their own hands. The dead person is termed a prisoner of the polos and has to be freed. Today this idea refers primarily to the dead person’s spiritual body, though in the past, it meant the physical body also. The latter was subjected to all kinds of fearful fantasies because of this affinity. People did not dare to lay out a corpse inside a house and it was placed outside instead.

I got no information about the time-span between death and the burial, but according to my interlocutors decay of the corpse was often already advanced. In contrast to ordinarily deceased persons, burying a tobo golo was not permitted in the villages. In the case of the elderly one was buried in a place in the woods which was located through divination.

Today the burial ritual is divided into two parts: the real funeral on the day after death and the kēo rado, which can be celebrated many years later. In the kēo rado the dead body is replaced by the tobo maku, the banana corpse. It consists of the trunk of a banana plant wrapped in a cloth which is tied to a bamboo stand called taga tobo maku. If the dead person is a man or a boy, a man’s plaited bag (lega) is hung on it and in the case of a woman or girl, a woman’s bag (bēre).

Like most Ngada rituals a kēo rado begins on the eve of the ordinary house divination, when all members of the sa’o have arrived and the rice, tua, and the animals to be sacrificed have been brought together. An oracle priest, tries to find out the reason for the ancestor’s scorn and thus the exact cause of death. Then the various phases of the coming day have to be decided upon. Two different divinations are used for this purpose: the pai tibo and the zi’u ura manu or zi’u ura ngana. In the pai tibo, young bamboo sticks (tibo) are placed in the fire where the heat causes them to split. Accordingly this can be taken as affirmation or denial of a certain question asked beforehand.

The zi’u ura manu or zi’u ura ngana is an examination of the liver or the entrails of a ritually killed pig (ngana) or chicken (manu). If the results of the divination are contradicted, Dēwa zeta Nitu zule
Oha nē’i Nangi
Térus nē Nêna
Kumia Toro atu ga’i ngadu nê’i bhago
ehu tujo iné ame
susa keri
asa ka’u
ringa lika
tewe da pai tibo
tobo X da golo dia
wi mai dì’u utu
letz mogo
wi dì’i nau kasa
wi donga dia toko logo
sona wi pēra go dara
kamī wi nuna ruka
go pu’a
dia tobo golo ra’ala la?”
ka’u manu kau
ba ura z’u
ba go zula kau
ba le goda rai
la’i le wea nesa
let’u’s look at this chicken buffalok vein we want to give
Dēwa up there, Nitu down there
Ohu and Nanga
Tēna and Tēna
Kumia Toro, ata go’i ngadhu and bhago
ancestors
the roof’s straw
bamboo stand in the inner sanctuary of the house space between the stones of the hearth?26

kami wi ghoa le neku
wi page nūna zala
la’i nuno weua
ala wi ma’u ma’u
kasa ma’u’u bana
we are ready to take the right path
to walk on a straight road
to go the right way
so that the head doesn’t warm up
so that the chest doesn’t heat up

Apart from the ancestors and the polos, the godly beings such as Dēwa and Nitu as well as different mythological heroes and heroines are sometimes appealed to with following recitations:

zi’u ura kaha manu dia
kumia wi t’i”
Dēwa zeta Nitu zule
Oha nē’i Nangi
Térus nē Nêna
Kumia Toro atu ga’i ngadu nê’i bhago
ehu tujo iné ame
susa keri
asa ka’u
ringa lika
tewe da pai tibo
tobo X da golo dia
wi mai dì’u utu
letz mogo
wi dì’i nau kasa
wi donga dia toko logo
sona wi pēra go dara
kamī wi nuna ruka
go pu’a
dia tobo golo ra’ala la?”
ka’u manu kau
ba ura z’u
ba go zula kau
ba le goda rai
la’i le wea nesa
let’u’s look at this chicken buffalok vein we want to give
Dēwa up there, Nitu down there
Ohu and Nanga
Tēna and Tēna
Kumia Toro, ata go’i ngadhu and bhago
ancestors
the roof’s straw
bamboo stand in the inner sanctuary of the house space between the stones of the hearth?26

21 In his article Smood referred to a similar information (1996: 46 f.). In many societies in eastern Indonesia the waiting for signs of presence is an integrated part of funerals and memorial rituals. Cf. Barnes 1974: 179; Forth 1993a: 40; Traube 1986: 206 ff.

22 Tibo means “corpse.”

23 According to government instructions, the corpse has to be burned within 24 hours after death.

24 Arndt wrote in a short report entitled “Totenfieren und Bräuche der Nagdahu” (Death Ceremonies and Customs among the Ngadas) that the practice of substituting a banana corpse in a ceremony originated from the cases where it was impossible to bring home the corpse of the deceased. He writes: “It is a very important feature of the Nagda ceremony that a substitute for the body is used.” (Arndt 1905: 86).

25 In his essay Smood (1996) dealt in detail with this aspect of acquiring knowledge by divination.

26 Smood, who emphasizes the aspect of gaining knowledge through divination (1993: 40), sees the Ngadas as ancestors or persons with a “privileged access to the truth” (1996: 66) that is gained by means of intestinal divinations.
it is time for the tibo night
X has died the golo we want to meet
to come together settle down on our shoulders
stay at the bottom in our back open to show light
we want to catch them quickly to start
someone has died the mata golo here
you chicken buffalo look for the vein
look for the proper way take the right path
Once the animal is dead, the godly beings, heroes and heroines are offered meat, rice, and tua and invited to eat:
ka ulu mane ate mane
ka maki nara
ins tua term
ka si pelu pu'a
insi si deke tiku
sewe dia tan ngenga pai tibo
X da golo dia
tazu ni go zola
kami wi numa raka
go pu'a apa
X da golo dia
miu wi d'li dia nau kata
wi dongo dia toko logo
eat the chicken's head, the chicken's liver
eat the sweet rice
drink the plentiful palm gin please, drink with your arms (on the table)
please, eat with crossed legs
it is time to begin the night of tibo
X has died the mata golo show the road
we want to catch them quickly to begin something
X has died the mata golo settle down our shoulders
stay at the bones in our backs

Oba, Nanga, Têta, Têna, and Kami Toro are heroes of origin. Their stories tell of the creation of the world, the settlement of the land, and the introduction of Ngada culture. Đêwa can be translated as God in a wider sense of the word.
The offerings to all these spiritual beings close the ceremonial part of the first day. A meal is served to the participants and everyone enjoys the food and drink the supernatural beings had before them. Usually now the atmosphere becomes relaxed, gossip is in the air and while some women begin to prepare the rice for the next day, men sit down in different corners and start playing cards. Usually nobody sleeps much on nights like these and before sunrise one can see the first women waking up against the creeping coffee for all.
Early in the morning another tibo is practiced. If the ancestors agree, the day starts with a dramatized demonstration of alliance structures. The rite is called ema tane inê (father asks mother) and means the official welcome of all the partners of marriage alliances, who are already there but had left the house very early to reneact their arrival ritually. They behave like people who come from afar because of an invitation but do not know anything about the reason. Like the members of the sa'o who meanwhile gather in front of the house, everybody of the group of affinal relatives wear ceremonial dress. The men have bushknives (topo) or ceremonial swords (sasu) and march ahead of the women who carry plaited bags of rice on their heads. In ritual language they ask the reason for the meeting and refer poetically to the ceremonial dress:

| ind | ind31 |
mia ulu nga tuto toro |
inê | inê |
go ripa da ege beke |
meo de moe de moe |
inê | inê |
mia punu si |
miu posa si |
kami wenga to'o |
miu posa si |
mia punu si |
kami wenga duhun pura pa'u |

mother ... mother
your head is bound with red cloth
mother, what is the reason for?
mother ... mother
white chains on the chest
why, why?
mother ... mother, reveal, please speak, please
we want to start
speak, please
reveal, please
we want to finish everything

The allusion to the head covered in red cloth refers to the bhoko, a turban that the Ngada men wear on ritual occasions. The white chain is a wall - a huge necklace made from snail shells and tied with a piece of ratan. Only men of the

Religious Life in the Ngada Area (Schröter 1998)

Anthropology 93.1998

Death Rituals of the Ngada in Central Flores, Indonesia

highest ranking-group ga'e mene can wear walli. The other pieces of clothing are indicative of the extraordinary occasion. They include the tu'ë, a woven scarf worn around the chest and another woven cloth called sapu. This is held by a belt and fastened at the hip to the ankles. The men's appearance is indicative both of a ritual and battle. It is Ngada war dress.
The arrivals hear the following reply as they approach the house:

| ema | ema32 |
kami ta da tore |
kami wenga këo wenga rado |
ema | ema |
le buhur da ege beke |
da wa da lau |
dia da tuka lenga zëta |
mai si |
këo wenga pengo këo penga rado |
këo nga penga podûa |
we ulu ngopo |
këo wenga dhoror |
këo wenga këo wenga rado |
mai si |
father ... father
we are wearing the red scarf
we want to carry out a këo rado
father ... father
the whole chain on the chest
someone is lying there with outstretched legs with the belly upwards
come on
we want to carry out a këo rado
let's sit together
put our heads together
we want out
we want to hold a këo rado; come in

The parallel stanzas da wai da lau and da tuka lenga zëta point out the burial position of those who died a violent death.32 These are synonyms of the mata golo and were recited repeatedly throughout the day.

Soon after their entrance a fat pig is slaughtered for the guests. It must be killed ritually by splintering the head open, and the mixture of brain and blood is put into a bowl. The këo rado has now officially started (sêga ringa).

Anthropology 93.1998

Once those groups related through marriage alliances have come together officially, a way has to be found of let the dead person's soul participate. This is done by establishing the tobo muku which is hung up on a bamboo stand (tage tobo muku) outside the house. The ancestors are then requested to appear physically. The men positioned themselves outside the house and call them:

| inê | inê |
sasu mîi |
sasu mîi |
kau ngodo |
kau ngodo |
ema | ema |
sasu wlu toro |
sasu wlu toro |
kau ngodo |
kau ngodo |
mother ... mother
you black chicken come here, come here
father ... father
you red cock come here, come here

The phrases suzu mîi and lau toro are common metaphors for the ebu nusu. Chickens belong to those animals associated within the symbolic system of the Ngada. Stylized chickens are an important motif for wood carvings decorating houses and bhage, and, in the past, chickens' feathers were woven into flat cloths (tawo). Portrayals of chickens can also be found on the front walls of the inner sanctum of the traditional house (one sa'o). The colour red stands for heroism, courage, and the heat required for the battle (cf. Arndt 1961: 550). The meaning of the black colour of the female ancestor was interpreted quite differently. One of my informants translated the phrase "as mother fall of love" (BI: bunda penuh suyaing). Another elder, who had a reputation as an ritual leader, pointed out the sufferings (BI: penderitaan) of women who spend their lives having children and rearing them. In both cases femininity was associated with feeding, caring, and sacrificing their own needs for those of their children. Masculinity on the other hand was associated with battle. This symbolic dichotomy is characteristic of Ngada culture (cf. Schröter 1998).

The invocation is accompanied by stamping and singing and the ancestors in question are expected to appear, usually coming in the shape of a butterfly or bird signaling their ethereal nature. Once they have arrived, the whole group of men run to a location in the woods (previously determined by divination) to bury the tobo muku (tage tobo muku). On the way there they appeal to the dead person's soul to be brave (bani bani). At
The grave there is a dramatic confrontation between the polo and the dead person’s soul. Directly after ending the burial the polo is expected. He appears in the same shape as the ancestors, namely, as a butterfly. As soon as the men see him, they storm off and hit him with their swords. Then they seek contact with the deceased.

kau lau witu bhemu lua kiri toro kau talo nga’o sweiwi you under the reeds under the red grass answer me with one word

Contrary to the Catholic belief that the soul goes to heaven after death, this dialogue reveals the idea that the deceased is still in this world. The restless, wandering soul is now unified with the tobo muku and finds a place under the earth with him. “Under the reeds, under the red grass” is a place in the wilderness, faraway from human dwellings. From the moment of the burial people would no longer cross the area for firewood to get water or anything else. During the tane tobo muku the sacred place is marked in order to warn anyone who approaches it by chance. The deceased is asked for a sign but usually a polo answers instead. The reply mostly sounds like an animal’s cry, but sometimes it is a human voice, which is considered a foreboding that this person would also die a mata golo death soon.

The men return to the sa’o where the women already sat with another meal. After having some more meat, rice, and tu is time for the ritual phrase called bhara pa and bhara zo,34 a confrontation lasting several hours with the polos who are expected to enter the ond sa’o, the inner sanctum of the house. Special branches (wita) are stuck into the ground near the lapu, the fireplace, and ginger and eggshells are tied to them. The arrangement symbolizes evil and is thrown into the woods afterwards. Then a member of the sa’o (usually the B, MB, MBS, or MZS of the deceased) who is confirmed by the ancestors begins playing a bamboo tube called regaha. It is beaten with a thin stick and causes a rattling sound. The playing

can not be interrupted until the end of the rite as it protects the audience during the following confrontation with the malicious spirits.

Inside the sa’o, the doors are now locked so that no one can enter or leave. The people there begin a chant in which both phases are held optional. The ikel pebha is held either at the ngadhu and bhage36 or in front of the sa’o and consists mainly of another cycle of ritual poetry accompanied by sacrifices and divinations.

Dia go ikel muluenga pekwa muluenga kami wengu tana dia kami wengu le kezu pu’a dia wengu le sweiwi we la’a wela polo gazi bodha we mata golo sama nê’le M ma’ê ré ma’ê weje kami wengu wela we lali mel kami we pu gazi bodha we mara pu’u bodha we dhuatu ng’ê’l polo kami bodha we lali we wela mata kubha sweiwi langa sweiwi let’s tie tightly bind tightly we will ask we will tear out the root of the evil we will talk here go to kill the polo he must die the mata golo exactly like X don’t deny cheat not we will kill we will go we will hunt until he is dead until he is caught must follow him until his death we must take revenge will he you of the same roof the same bamboo roof

The last two lines refer to the strength of the lineage and their allies who are gathered under the roof of the sa’o mëte. As invariably existing forces who have an eternal place in the cosmological belief.

However, the following two rituals are marked by confrontation. The first is the ikel pebha (tie tightly) and secondly the wela polo (killing the polo), both sequences in which both phases are

While the ikel pebha is effective through language, the wela polo is a dynamic ritual full of movement. Again the men rush through the village into the woods with their sau in the hands and kill the invisible one, yelling war cries all the while. On the way back they are accompanied by one or two women carrying the sacred lance (golu) with a plaited shield (gili). This is the only time that women take an active role in këo rado other than cooking and serving the men. To equip women with weapons is unusual for women in the Ngada gender dichotomy.37

The battle is over once the group returns. On their way back to the house the dancers jump over a sau, the weapon which is used to kill the polos. The latter have to be hit with the blunt edge of the sword since, when the cutting edge is held upwards, they can turn the weapon towards the person holding it with lightening speed. This aspect is a hint to the notion of inversion, which is associated with the polo phenomenon generally.38

The conquest of the polos is followed by a ritual, which refers to nurturing alliances again and thus resumes the opening theme when the arriving affinal relatives greet the members of the sa’o. Now, towards the end of the këo rado, a reverse situation is enacted, namely, the beginning of a marriage alliance.

The ritual niu bu’ê këddhi (to call the young maiden) is the enacted story of Kumi Toro, a young warrior who comes to his bride’s sa’o mëte to arrange the marriage. He is accompanied by armed men of his descent group. Once arrived, his bride’s descent group gathers behind the closed door of the house. They also hold swords in their hands. Both parties express a deep mistrust towards each other and are prepared for an armed struggle. Kumi Toro tries to enter the house and is asked who he is and what he wants.39

34 These are autonous ceremonies. Nowadays, however, they often combined into one ritual phase. The argument in favour of changing the tradition was one of brevity; the whole ritual is shorter now and people can go home earlier.

35 Bupa is a synonym for polo, but refers stronger to the necrophagous aspects of the spirit.

Anthropos 93.1998

36 In other rituals it was held in front of the sa’o. The location depends on the ancestor’s decision.

Anthropos 93.1998

37 The participating women showed an obvious feeling of embarrassment in this unusual action at the wela polo I attended. Ngada gender relations are examined in Schütter (1993a, 1995b, 1998).

38 Inventions are also reminiscent of the aitu porho of the Ende (cf. Nakagawa 1986) or the Roteanese “spirits of the outside” (cf. Fox 1973). Both are, like polos, considered to cause “bad deaths” which are similar but not the same phenomena as the mata golo of the Ngadas.

39 Olaf Smelrad documented a ritual text of the niu bu’ê këddhi in his essay written in 1996. This text differs in many decisive phrases from the text that I recorded, and I interpreted the text in a way that is comparable to the whole ritual in a toto legele way. Therefore I have decided to write down my recording of a bu’ê këddhi text in spite of initial doubt.
In the nia bu’ë këdhi the girl’s group\(^4\) accepts
the suitor’s pretensions and signals that the maiden is
already part of his household. She sits at the
bhoko, the women’s place in the sa’a, under
the mata raga, which shows that she has become a
member of her husband’s house.

One of my interlocutors interpreted the mar-
rriage as a peace treaty between two warring par-
ties. The maiden has the function of a gift to seal
the peace. During the enaction she is symbolized as
a special plant which is wrapped in a cloth. One
of the men carries it as if it were a baby. In a
pristine context ngasu plants are used to lay down
land boundaries. In the past trespassing such a
boundary caused an armed conflict and today still
leads to serious ones. In a literal sense ngasu was
translated as “peace making.”\(^42\)

Kumi Toro is a well-known hero from the
belligerent Ngada wanderings. Thus, the ritual of
the nia bu’ë këdhi is a commemoration of Ngada
history during which the Ngada weave a strong
connection between the past and the present. In
a more general way the whole këo rado is to honor
and remember the past. On this occasion the partic-

pants wear their traditional costume, for the meals
it is forbidden to use fork or spoon and the tua
is filled into a se’a, a little coconut bowl instead of
a glass one. Rice and meat, which are prepared in
a special manner, are served on plated dishes (waiti)
and everybody eats with his or her fingers. Like
all ritual events which follow the adat, every këo
rado creates a space of timelessness. The battle
against the polos can only be fought out in a
state of liminality,\(^45\) which allows an integration of
spiritual being for a limited time. After the ritual
ancestors, deceased, and polos are banned again
from the actual life of people.

Once the Kumi Toro and his followers have entered
the sa’a, the last big drama in the këo
rado is over. Now the house is sealed (asau sa’a
sina pegha moë womu miti) and one last large
against the polos can only be fought out in a
state of liminality,\(^45\) which allows an integration of
spiritual being for a limited time. After the ritual
ancestors, deceased, and polos are banned again
from the actual life of people.

Once the Kumi Toro and his followers have entered
the sa’a, the last big drama in the këo
rado is over. Now the house is sealed (asau sa’a
sina pegha moë womu miti) and one last large
against the polos can only be fought out in a
state of liminality,\(^45\) which allows an integration of
spiritual being for a limited time. After the ritual
ancestors, deceased, and polos are banned again
from the actual life of people.

Once the Kumi Toro and his followers have entered
the sa’a, the last big drama in the këo
rado is over. Now the house is sealed (asau sa’a
sina pegha moë womu miti) and one last large
against the polos can only be fought out in a
state of liminality,\(^45\) which allows an integration of
spiritual being for a limited time. After the ritual
ancestors, deceased, and polos are banned again
from the actual life of people.

Once the Kumi Toro and his followers have entered
the sa’a, the last big drama in the këo
rado is over. Now the house is sealed (asau sa’a
sina pegha moë womu miti) and one last large
against the polos can only be fought out in a
state of liminality,\(^45\) which allows an integration of
spiritual being for a limited time. After the ritual
ancestors, deceased, and polos are banned again
from the actual life of people.

Once the Kumi Toro and his followers have entered
the sa’a, the last big drama in the këo
rado is over. Now the house is sealed (asau sa’a
sina pegha moë womu miti) and one last large
against the polos can only be fought out in a
state of liminality,\(^45\) which allows an integration of
spiritual being for a limited time. After the ritual
ancestors, deceased, and polos are banned again
from the actual life of people.

Once the Kumi Toro and his followers have entered
the sa’a, the last big drama in the këo
rado is over. Now the house is sealed (asau sa’a
sina pegha moë womu miti) and one last large
against the polos can only be fought out in a
state of liminality,\(^45\) which allows an integration of
spiritual being for a limited time. After the ritual
ancestors, deceased, and polos are banned again
from the actual life of people.

Once the Kumi Toro and his followers have entered
the sa’a, the last big drama in the këo
rado is over. Now the house is sealed (asau sa’a
sina pegha moë womu miti) and one last large
against the polos can only be fought out in a
state of liminality,\(^45\) which allows an integration of
spiritual being for a limited time. After the ritual
ancestors, deceased, and polos are banned again
from the actual life of people.
the construction of traditional houses or ancestral symbols ngadhu and bhago). Most of the ceremo-
nies, however, consist of several separate parts which are along the lines of either Catholicism or
the old tradition and include births, marriages, and
death rituals.

In the case of death rituals we can observe two
different modes of funerary cult. The Catholic
influences, which separate the deceased as a
melange of Christian and traditional symbols and
rites from the kedo rado that has remained relatively
unchanged. The regular burial can be differenti-
ated into three sections attached to three kinds of
space:

1) The room where the deceased is laid out:
This situation is determined by a strict parallelism
of traditional and Christian elements. Catholic
pictures on the wall, cross and candles show an
obvious dominance of Catholic symbols while the
form of mourning follows the adat. Other
segments like the prayers, the beating of the
gong, or the clothes of the deceased are drawn
either from tradition or from the Christian
codex.

2) The cemetery and the way from the house
to this place: Up to the closing of the ceremony is
the main celebration of the Christian one. Songs and
prayers are of Christian content – translations from
the Latin into modern Indonesian language and the
burial itself is adopted to a Western mode.

3) The space in front of the deceased house, the
courtyard, the ong su'a, and all the other rooms
inside the house except the one where the corpse
is laid out: These are places where the old tradition
is celebrated. Marriage alliances are revitalized
and funeral superstitions made. A greater number of
pigs and chickens, sometimes also buffaloes,
sacrificed their blood and meat offered to the ebu
nusi. However, restrictions from the government
and apparitions of people who may have let to a
decrease in the number of animals for sacrifice.

Today burial is a composition of modern
and traditional elements which may be seen as
a proof of the power of the Ngada people to
drop out from the outside while keeping
their own culture. But despite some ethnographers
hope that autochthonous societies continue to resist
Western influences, one does not forget that a major
part of the traditional rural life has completely
vanished. Even the knowledge of the old buri-
cal custom has disappeared, thus my information
about details of the past is not predominantly based
on information from my interlocutors, but on the
writings of Fr. Arndt (1959). Not only have the
rites of dismissal, the recitations, and the burial
itself been replaced by Catholic rules, but also
the old practice of setting megaliths on graves is
now no more. The custom of installing different
kinds of great stone arrangements in the villages,
which serve as multifunctional places such as locations
for remembering the ancestors, foundations for
drying rice, corn or betelnuis, playgrounds
for children, and resting places for the dead
and which gave the Nagda settlements a special appearance,
will probably vanish in the near future. In most nu'a
the megaliths (turé, nábé, and wàtu lana) still
form together with ngada, bhago, and pédé
the village's center, but in some settlements where
the administration from the district capital, Bajawa,
removed the great stones and used them to construct
a stadium, they were never replaced. Today nearly
everybody is buried in a public cemetery and only
a small minority of dead have a grave in front of
their house. These new graves in the villages are,
nevertheless, Christian graves which have neither
symbolically nor aesthetically anything in common
with the old megaliths. The aspect of Nagda
culture as megalith culture (cf. Arndt 1932) is no
more a living part of their adat.

In comparison with this the kedo rado has re-
mained unchanged to a greater degree. It contains
no Christian part, not even a Christian prayer
at the opening or the end, as Molnar (1997: 401)
observed in the case of traditional agriculture
in the Matatalo parish. Catholic priests
condemn this pagan rite, but, however, to
the Ngada people appeared unimpressed. In
conversations I never recognized any doubt that
the kedo rado should be practiced, even in the case
of persons with a strong relationship with
the church. One ceremony I attended was
held vis-à-vis the church of Langa and another
was practiced with the participation of a
dughter of the household. A woman went
there. The Ngada assume that there is no antagonism
between adat and Catholicism in the case of mata
golo, rather a problem between indigenous people
and strangers and therefore of cultural
misunderstanding. The White fathers, they argue,
cannot appreciate the Ngada tradition and their
constraints because they are rooted in another
culture. In Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands
there is no need for celebrations like a kedo rado. They assume
that there can be no solution of the tensions resulting
from the opposition between church and adat.

The foreign priests are replaced by clergymen
from the Nagda area.

46 Peo is a small megalith that is always set behind a ngadhu.

Anthropos 93: 1998

Though the kedo rado is a real unchristian cere-
mony without modern elements, it is no more the
one old people remember as the rites of their child-
hood. Because of the separation between burial
and kedo rado, corpses are no longer kept outside
the houses, but are buried without clothing,
covered only with leaves. The ritual's duration
is shortened to two nights and one day while it
had to be at least three days and four nights in the
past. A segment of time that in the past the number
of animals for sacrifice has also decreased.
In discourses which were sometimes, however,
triggered by my inquiry, Ngada elders reflected on
the changes of their ritual life. Although most of
them distanced themselves from the amputation
of the corpse in old times which was supposed to
be unworthy behavior on one hand, on the other
hand they expressed the opinion that the ritual
of their forebears had been more glorious and
effective than those practiced today. The latter
corresponds to a often expressed notion that life
in the past was better than now. This idea of the past
being a golden age, a time when life was
greater, people richer and stronger, and the
feasts really marvelous, concurs with ambivalent
feelings towards the recent development. Many
Ngada think that they now have a growth in material
and in life qualities.

A further difference between the old and the new
kedo rado is related to the supernatural be-
ings addressed in invocations. In most kedo
rados in the Nagda area appellations address only
the ancestors, the polos, and the deceased's spirit.
The invocations of Dédé and Nitu, Oba and Nanga,
Tém, Téna, and Kumi Toro, which I cited before,
have become somewhat old-fashioned and are only
mentioned when a ritual priest is very conscious
of tradition. Before I examine the meaning of a
shortage of cosmological figures in the kedo rado,
I shall introduce briefly the Ngada cosmology, inso-
far as it is important for the topic discussed here.

Ngada Cosmosology

Kumi Toro, Oba and Nanga, Tém, and Téna are
legendary heroes of origin who are mentioned in
various rites, especially the annual reba-ceremony
where the Ngada remember their past. Integrating
them into the communication with the supernatural
beings does not only mean to extend the number
of mighty allies who fight in the same battle, but
it produces a situation where past and present can
not be separated. Hence only the ancestors but also
discourses from the very beginning are asked to come
together with the people gathered in the adat
development which leads to a renunciation of
the heroes might be interpreted as a loss of historical
consciousness, but I think it is early for such
callusions, since they are still an integrated part in
other aspects of life.

The same occurs in the case of Dédé and
Nitu. I shall examine these two beings at some
length because of their importance in a long-term
development of traditional belief; mainly the discus-
sion of a traditional supreme being of the Ngada.
Dédé, a being which Ngada elders translate today
as "God," was considered by the Catholic priest
Paul Arndt, who did extensive ethnographical
fieldwork and was an ardent follower of the
original Ngada monotheism. Arndt (1936: 37)
collected lots of stories about "Dédé, das Höchste
Wesen der Ngadhas" (Dédé, the Ngadha's Supreme
Being) and wrote some essays about this top-
ic. In most of his collections, the missionaries'
influence is clearly visible. Dédé appears as a
person "with a very long beard which reaches
from heaven to earth, with tall contours and a
huge stomach" (Arndt 1936: 7: 900) "with a white
skin" (Arndt 1929/31: 822) and he "punishes those
people who "steal and commit adultery" (Arndt
1936: 7: 896). He is an allmighty creator who
"created the people, the flora and fauna, the earth
and the people, the animals and everything else"
(Arndt 1936/37: 901). Occasionally his informants
mentioned many Dédés but always with the ad-
dition that someone reigns over the army of the
many – the analogy to God in the Old Testament
who is head of a pantheon consisting of demons
and spiritual beings is more than coincidental.
Only the anthropomorphic characteristics (cf. Arndt
1936: 7: 904) of Dédé, who points out the similarity between man and buffa-
fores, does not fit into a Christian framework. But
here too, one of Arndt's informants describes how
such pictures are interpreted in a Christian context:
"people get the wrong ideas, that Dédé will kill or
eat him; that is not true; that is only figurative"
(Arndt 1936/37: 895).

Today some Ngada philosophers who have
read the anthropological works of Arndt and
other priests argue, based on the thesis of an
original Ngada monotheism, that Ngada culture
was not "primitive" before missionization. One
of my informants argues that the so-called
monothestic Tuhan Allah and interpreted the Ngada
tradition according to missionary teachings and
the doctrine of the Indonesian state where only
monotheism is seen as a "proper" religion and the
lack of such a belief a culturally primitive-

Thus, a clear shift in the gender parity has occurred in Ngada cosmology. Of the pair Dèwa Niut, only Dèwa has become Tuhan Allah. He has retained his godly status and even extended it. The feminine godly force has been replaced by the male. The Virgin Mary. Motif: the power of life and death is in the hands of Tuhan Allah, not that of the mother of Inuith although she has a completely different character. In the perception of the Ngada she is not an independent person, rather a mediator between the people and Tuhan Allah. Her name, Inuwari Marria, Santa Maria, bunda Allah, dukunlali kami yang berda lost, sekarang dan waktu kami mati ("Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death"). The detached nature of the faithful and their mediator is mainly passive. The people pray to Mary, Mary prays to God for the people. This type of passivity is uncommon in the non-Christian belief of the Ngada. Here people beg for the support of spiritual beings and follow their commands — but they do act independently of those appealed to.

The most important beings in the Ngada cosmology are the ancestors. In a Christian context, the ebu nusi appear as martyrs of Ngada to God, and as a result Galen does not have this mediating function. The ancestors are autonomously active spirits who are not obliged to a higher being. In the invisible world they fight the same battles that their descendants have to overcome in the visible world. Their opponents are free flying spirits, ghosts, and other types of evil powers. The ancestors can protect the living from attacks by the invisible world and are the real poles of the Ngada.
of the Ngada people is both a parallelistic addition of two meaning systems and a partial eradication of their tradition. Today many indigenous philosophers interpret their own culture according to the principles the White fathers laid down as indicators for civilization, but add the notion that their own religious tradition and Catholicism are related in a deep manner. This may be a reason for their success in integrating rites like the k elo rado into a Catholic view of life.

Although some modern Ngada intellectuals try to unite both beliefs in a clear-cut ideological framework and place the history of their ancestors in biblical history, the majority of my interlocutors were aware, however, not only of the ideological differences between the two religious systems, but also the difficulty of pleasing all spiritual powers. In the case of mata golo, they always opted for the adat without exception in spite of the Catholic priest’s condemnation of the k elo rados. If death befalls a community, it is interpreted as the ancestor’s lawful sanction for offenses against the adat. Active recognition by the Catholic priests can only mean a continuation of the chain of misfortune at this point. Tuhan, whose integration in the belief system diminishes the fear of polos in daily life on one hand, is not imagined as mighty enough to stand by the people when the ancestor’s revenge befalls them. Fear of the ebu nasi as defenders of the adat proves to be the strongest preserving element in the competition between two belief systems and thus guarantees the maintenance of religious parallelism.

The paper is based on fieldwork 1994, 1995, 1996 –97 (totally 15 months) in several villages of the Langa compound, conducted under the auspices of Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIP) in Jakarta and the sponsorship of Universitas Nusa Cendana in Kupang, Timor. Financial support came from the Deuts- sche Forschungsgemeinschaft. I am grateful to these institutions who made my research possible. My appreciation also goes to Karl-Heinz Kohl for his assistance, to Willema de Jong for some critical remarks, and to Karl-Heinz Pumpus for helpful linguistic comments. I would particularly like to thank my Langa friends Moses Dos, Beda Nono, Monika Wonga, Yohanis Renge, and all those who cannot be mentioned here.

References Cited


Kolbe, Andreas 1997 Christianity and Traditional Religion in the Hoga Sura of West-Central Flores. Anthropos 92: 393–408.


