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Felling a Song with a New Ax: Writing and the Reshaping of Ritual Song Performance in Upland Sulawesi

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## Felling a Song with a New Ax *Writing and the Reshaping of Ritual Song Performance in Upland Sulawesi*

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*Recent studies on the interplay of written texts and oral performance have shifted away from “intrinsic” models of literacy and orality in favor of approaches that emphasize the ideological, social, and historical character of oral and literate practices. In keeping with this trend, I discuss how and why a minority religious community in Sulawesi (Indonesia) has incorporated writing and related textual practices into its tradition of ritual song performance.*

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UNDERSTANDING the interplay of written texts and oral performance has been an enduring issue in folklore and ethnology. In fact, the topic arguably merits consideration as one of the longer and better established “settlements” in folklore studies.<sup>1</sup> For example, it is a pivotal concern in decades of scholarship on British and Anglo-American balladry, and in work addressing the rise of national and regional canons of folklore. Other studies have tackled the problem of oral and literate practices head-on. The work of Parry and Lord on the compositional techniques of the Yugoslavian epic singers (Lord 1960), Ruth Finnegan’s studies of African and Oceanic oral literature (1988), Dennis Tedlock’s fascinating look at the ancient texts of the Quiché Maya (1983, 1985), Amin Sweeney’s recent study of Malay manuscripts and *hikayat* recitations (1987), and Mary Zurbuchen’s exploration of Balinese shadow theater (1987) are all good examples. If interest in the topic has flagged occasionally, its relevance to theories of performance, poetics, and translation has not. In fact, as I see it, the complex relations between oral and textual practices pose some of the central questions in the ethnography of oral literature (cf. Bauman 1986a:9–10), especially at a time when it is next to impossible to find a culture untouched by writing. Finding answers to some of these questions should not only lead to a better understanding of verbal art, but also engage folklorists more deeply in the multidisciplinary project that Clifford Geertz (1983) calls the “social history of the imagination.”

The interplay of oral and literate practices is, of course, not a strictly folkloristic concern. Many disciplines, including cultural anthropology, sociolin-

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guistics, history, and psychology have dealt with the issue. My concern here, however, is to suggest how folklorists can best contribute to this field of inquiry. Most readers will already have some acquaintance with the literature on orality and literacy so there is no need for a thoroughgoing survey or critique of the key issues and points of debate. But I do want to map out some recent trends in the literature to show where I think folklorists will make their mark.

Basically, the scholarship of the last ten years has brought about a shift away from what Christopher Miller (1988) calls the “intrinsic” model of literacy to more particularistic approaches that emphasize the ideological and social character of literacies. The first approach treats orality and literacy as distinct technologies with intrinsic differences and predetermined consequences for thought, knowledge, and verbal art. Where I feel this model really gets into trouble is in its near-exclusive treatment of orality and literacy as distinct media, rather than as a complex of interrelated interpretive practices.<sup>2</sup> In effect, proponents of this model view literacy as though it poses a universal set of constraints on communication and interpretation.<sup>3</sup> By the same token, they show a tendency to treat orality as a unitary phenomenon that relies heavily on formulaic speech and repetition (e.g., Ong 1977). I think it is abundantly clear from the work of folklorists, anthropologists, sociolinguists, and other ethnographers of speaking and performing that oral practice has a diversity as wide as language itself (cf. Tedlock 1990).

Many scholars have faulted the intrinsic model for its ethnocentric dependence on Western forms of literacy, its evolutionary outlook, its romantic views toward orality, and its technological determinism. The most comprehensive critique of the intrinsic model is that of Brian Street (1984). In his view, the intrinsic model polarizes orality and literacy and undermines our effort to more fully comprehend the interplay of oral and textual practices. For Street, most cultures thrive on the reciprocal movements between the written and spoken word; a blend of oral and literate practices represents the norm, not the exception. Equally important, Street points out that the intrinsic model fails to recognize that literacy is embedded in and arises from social, historical, and ideological contexts. To correct the generalizations of the intrinsic model, Street argues that we must study the social and cultural construction of historically specific literacies. Dell Hymes and Claire Woods-Elliott make a related point (Hymes and Woods-Elliott n.d. [cited in Messick 1983]). In their view, it is too early to build an ethnology of literacy. For them, literacies vary enormously with respect to their integration into sociocultural practice. As a result, Hymes and Woods-Elliott call for ethnographies of literacy.<sup>4</sup>

It is in the context of just such an undertaking that folklorists and ethnographers of verbal art can make a contribution. First of all, the folklorist's commitment to studying performance confers the advantage of viewing orality and literacy, not just as media, but as dynamic interpretive practices (cf. Basso 1974). That is to say, if folklorists look at writing and speaking as performance, they will be able to grasp these phenomena as acts that shape and evoke

meaning. In so doing, it becomes easier to link questions about orality and literacy to three concepts that have formed the backbone of folklore studies: community, genre, and tradition.

Folklorists, of course, study interpretive communities, communities that coalesce around acts of interpretation. The discipline concerns itself with communities whose members tell stories, argue with proverbs, move the heart with song, find the past in legend, discover the sublime in lyric, and bring pattern and meaning to personal experience through testimonies and other autobiographical genres. It is through the community that folklorists begin to understand the broader sociology of interpretation.

Folklorists also study genres, not as ideal forms, but as historically specific conventions of interpretation through which communities of speakers and listeners guide the imagination and discover meaning (Bauman 1986b; Ben-Amos 1976; Hanks 1987; Williams 1977). It is true, of course, that ethnographers of oral literature deal with particular performance events. But these same investigators keep a firm interest in genre as a way to understand how communities relate to discourse and how they link texts to prior texts (Becker 1979).

Finally, folklorists also study tradition, the historical process of reinterpretation through which a community links the past to the present (Smith 1978). As Raymond Williams points out (1977:115), tradition is a selective version of a shaping past and a preshaped present. Thus, it is by way of tradition that a community sustains its social and moral identity in the face of sociohistorical circumstances. Always reenacted, always remade, tradition is the community's framework not only for measuring continuity and change, but for authorizing them as well (Stone 1988:xi; cf. Williams 1977).

There is no question that community, genre, and tradition overlap conceptually. All three have to do with acts of interpretation, and none of them can be thoroughly understood except in reference to one another. To be sure, the way in which folklorists establish ties between community, genre, and tradition will be an issue for theoretical debate and discussion. Nevertheless, it strikes me that the ethnographer of oral literature has a commitment to and expertise with these three concepts, and can thus use them effectively in exploring the interplay of oral and literate practices.<sup>5</sup>

In keeping with the approach sketched above, I offer a case study of a minority religious community that has incorporated writing and related textual practices into its tradition of ritual song performance. Discussion will concern villagers who still embrace *ada' mappurondo*,<sup>6</sup> a ritual tradition indigenous to the western uplands of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Until five to ten years ago, the entire mappurondo tradition was an oral one. Since then, some of these villagers have turned to writing as a means of learning and remembering sacred verse, lyric, and prayer. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on just one genre of ritual song and how writing has come to play an important part in its performance. That genre is the *sumengo*, a form of choral song performed

by men and women during postharvest headhunting rituals—rituals which today are run in “symbolic” fashion only (i.e., villagers use a coconut as a surrogate for an enemy head). It is not the purpose of this study to privilege these songs as a point of entry into the verbal and musical arts of the mappurondo community. Neither do I claim that the sumengo is the most critical genre for understanding the interplay of oral and literate practices that now shape mappurondo tradition. But I do feel that a look at sumengo performance can help us in three ways. First, it can give us a glimpse of how voice, memory, and the written word come together in the social, cultural, and historical configuration we would call the “mappurondo ethnographic present.” Second, it gives us an opportunity to see how a community consciously works at maintaining and reinterpreting a tradition of sacred performance. And last, a look at the sumengo can enrich our theoretical understanding of how oral performance and textual practices shape one another.

### *Ethnographic and Historical Background*

Ada’ mappurondo is the ancestral religion of Pitu Ulunna Salu, an ethnic region located in the rugged hinterlands of Sulawesi’s southwest coast, and the place where I lived and worked for a 30-month period between 1982 to 1985.<sup>7</sup> Followers of ada’ mappurondo do not maintain an autonomous territory or a unified regional polity. Their households are scattered throughout a dozen or more of the villages located along the headwaters of the Mambi and Hau rivers. Most of the mappurondo villagers are farmers who tend rice terraces, swiddens, small garden plots, and coffee groves. Daily life revolves around the household, the household cluster (or hamlet), and the *hapu*, the network of relatives that make up a person’s bilateral kindred. Because of a preference for village endogamy and for marriages with second or third cousins, the mappurondo households in each village form a relatively close-knit group of kin who make up a cohesive moral and ritual polity. As a result, persons experience a deep sense of belonging to their birthplace and homestead, a kinship that extends not only to other people born in the village, but also to its paths, the shade of its trees, and even the breathing sound of the river running below it. The village and its lands thus promote a comforting image through which people recall a common history and a common way of life.

Before the advent of Islam in the 18th and 19th centuries and Christianity in the 20th, everyone in the Pitu Ulunna Salu region followed ancestral teachings and ritual practices. Since the arrival of these world religions, upland society has fractured along religious lines. Muslims and Christians have turned their back on mappurondo rituals. They refuse to take part in what they view as pagan custom and go so far as to prohibit marriage with anyone in the mappurondo fold. The Indonesian government, meanwhile, has not recognized ada’ mappurondo as a legitimate religion. Instead, state policy has been to insist on monotheistic religion as a keystone of solid progress-oriented citizen-

ship. Thus, the modern hegemonic order not only ignores and debases ada' mappurondo, but aggressively supports the alternative ideologies and socio-economic formations that have lured villagers away from the path of their ancestors. As a result, ada' mappurondo has become what Raymond Williams (1977) would call a "residual tradition" encumbered by both the erosion of the practicing community and the pressures of a changing economy. As of 1985, only 4500 villagers—roughly 10% of the region's population—remained in the mappurondo community.

The point I want to emphasize is that followers of ada' mappurondo comprise a minority community with a distinct ideological focus and identity. The mappurondo community exists only insofar as it remains committed to a tradition of ritual performance. That is to say, being mappurondo entails a commitment not only to ancestral teachings and taboos, but also to ritual performance as such (cf. Hymes 1981:87). Struggling to remain the authoritative voice of local tradition, the mappurondo community appears anxious, confused, and occasionally divided over what to draw from the past and how to sustain it. Ritual tradition has become a cultural problem even as it is the necessary basis of mappurondo identity and polity. In this context, ritual performance is arguably the most crucial political act the community can undertake.

Texts and textual practices entered regional history two or more centuries ago. Given the widespread use of Bugis and Makassan syllabaries in Sulawesi since the beginning of the 18th century, it is reasonable to speculate that this form of writing may have been the first with which uplanders were acquainted.<sup>8</sup> If so, I suspect but a few villagers may have been able to use the syllabaries, and then in the context of deciphering divinatory scripts or tables.

Whatever the use of the syllabaries in the highlands, their impact was nothing compared to the arrival of the first Qur'an at Mambi, the settlement that functioned as the hub of mappurondo agricultural ritual. According to oral histories, the very presence of this book at Mambi set off a regional crisis. At first, the uplanders welcomed the Qur'an and Qur'anic readings, but soon after, massive harvest failures occurred. Mappurondo elders reasoned that the Qur'an had startled and enraged local spirits (*debata*), who in turn had abandoned their guardianship over the rice crop. The elders ordered the Qur'an to be moved out of Mambi and downstream where it would not offend the *debata*. Once this was done, prosperity returned to the highlands. That the Qur'an and Qur'anic textual practices posed a serious threat to ancestral religion was clear. So as to prevent Islam from encroaching further into the mountains, villagers declared the region upstream from Mambi as a retreat for mappurondo tradition. Here is that decree, as quoted by one of today's elders:

'Su'buan ada'	Watchpost of adat
tambim dirapa'	a room covered
kulambu malillin	by a dark shroud
talakaita-itaan	not to be seen
talakaringngi-ringngian	not to be heard

With those words, mappurondo ritual tradition became the religion of a social enclave.



Even if the uplanders sought to preserve the integrity of *ada'* mappurondo, I would argue that the rise of Islam and the textual practices that constitute it effectively redefined ancestral religion. The very term *ada'* mappurondo implies a response to—and a reformulation by—outside forces. Etymologically, *ada'* derives from the Arabic *adat* or “custom,” and mappurondo appears to be an upland variant of the Bugis word, *ma-pura-onro*, meaning “already in place.” Thus, the term incorporates a Muslim perspective, and reflects the effort of insiders to translate their activities into the interpretive framework of an intruding culture.

Colonial administration of the upland region commenced in 1905. The mappurondo enclave subsequently became the principal target of the Dutch mission. While missionaries were not that effective in drawing converts to Christianity, they were successful in founding schools in the decade before World War II. These schools turned out a small cohort of local youths who could use the Roman alphabet to write Malay and Dutch. This literate cohort eventually became the core of the Christian community during its infancy, and provided a cadre of civil servants who could oversee taxation and village administration.

During the years of rebellion between World War II and 1964 the Indonesian government could do little to develop an institutional base for literacy in the upland region. But since that time local schools have been successful in teaching most of the upland youth how to write in Indonesian and local languages. Also, the civil administration has made it necessary for villagers to cope with identification cards, signatures, letters of petition, deeds, tax registration, school forms, and such. The influence of institutional literacy reaches furthest among Christians, Muslims, and those under 35 years of age. By way of contrast, the mappurondo community is made up of a disproportionate number of elders who cannot read or write.

In very general terms, then, the different literacies that appeared in the highlands did so in the context of hegemonic interests and social formations. Thus, the written word is commonly a means for engaging in the discourse of the dominant order. Indeed, the local word meaning to write—*ma'sura'*—derives from Indonesian and Qur'anic sources (*surat/sura'*, meaning “letter,” or “[scriptural] passage”). At the same time, the enormous prestige and authority attached to texts and textual practices have contributed to the demoralization of the mappurondo community and the debasement of its tradition. I painfully recall a mappurondo elder telling me, “Before the Dutch came we weren't human yet. We didn't even know how to talk.” The demoralization of the mappurondo community continues into the present, especially by way of censorious Christians and Muslims who promote the idea that a religious tradition is legitimate only if it is grounded in a book of sacred scripture.

While texts and textual practices have provided a stick with which to beat pagan traditon, a few of the mappurondo community have determined that writing may afford them rescue. So it was that several elders were eager for

me to write a comprehensive account of their ritual practices, turn it into a book, and thereby legitimize their religion. A few others, most of whom are under 35 years old, take a different interest in writing: they have begun to write down sacred materials so as to be able to memorize and perform them. Indeed, the rapid decline of the mappurondo enclave since 1970 has made it difficult to sustain a sacred oral tradition. Many specialists in ritual performance have passed away, or converted to Christianity and Islam without handing down the sacred words of the ancestors. Meanwhile, a vast number of the young have opted for the mosque and the church. Most elders already have a keen sense of loss when it comes to ritual knowledge and ritual performance. For them, writing may be a way to put a check to such losses, especially if the young can use it to master the words of the ancestors.

The effort to master ritual performance through writing is not a blanket one. For instance, no one, to my knowledge, has used writing in composing or delivering ritual speeches such as those made by young men during village headhunting ceremonies. And as one might expect, sacred trance performance is spontaneous and free from the textual constraints of writing. Where villagers have employed writing is in memorizing liturgical or otherwise stable oral performances, performances that villagers consider invariant from one context to the next. Writing did not make these genres invariant. To the contrary, their perceived invariance made them especially suitable for writing down.

It is seldom the case that mappurondo villagers use writing with the idea of preserving or storing ritual texts. Rather the effort is often one in which speakers are trying to learn materials and get their performance right. For example, some persons have memorized written liturgical texts and then discarded them later. Take the case of Ambe Na, a man about 30 years of age who had just inherited his father's role as *babalako*, the specialist who oversees headhunting ritual. I happened to be there the first time Ambe Na had to run the ceremonies. Throughout the rite he kept looking down at a note pad to his left. Toward the climax of the ritual, he put aside his notes, took an offering up into the sacred loft and began chanting to roughly 75 *debata*, all in the proper sequence. Later that day Ambe Na said to me, "When I was up in the loft, I could see the names of the *debata* written in front of my eyes." Although I have no way of being sure, I think his comment is telling evidence that a written text had played a critical part in rehearsing and memorizing his performance sometime beforehand. A year later, during his second headhunting ceremony, Ambe Na worked without a written text of any kind. He was able to recompose the liturgy from memory. Whether he still "saw" the names of the *debata* before him on that occasion, I do not know.

Not all ritual specialists learn their materials this way. Take the case of a young *babalako* from another village and his first time out as leader of the ritual headhunt. This one worked without written notes of any kind. An elder sat at his side throughout the ceremonies and prompted him through key per-



formances. When it came time to invoke the names of the debata, the elder was right there, quietly running off the proper order of names from memory into the waiting ear of the young babalako. The babalako merely called out each name as it was given to him.

Writing poses some thorny issues when it comes to women's liturgical performance. For men, their words are always their own, or in liturgy, the words of the ancestors. Women, however, are often the mouthpiece for the debata. It works like this: the debata sing or recite their words into the rivers flowing from the Skyworld. These waters then feed the rivers of the upland world. When it comes time for women to hold household rituals, female specialists go upstream from the village and draw water from the river. Just prior to the ceremony, the specialists and all members of their chorus will each take a gulp of water and so drink in the words to the arcane songs and chants to be performed. Villagers say that the most beautiful and effective performance will be one in which the liturgical songs flow like water.

How this ideology of sacred language relates to women's religious authority and to oral tradition in general are questions I cannot address in this article. Here, it is enough to mention that I became acquainted with a chorus member who kept a notebook of liturgical songs dictated to her by a specialist. She was using the notebook to learn the words of women's liturgy so that she could accompany the specialists during performance. The use of the notebook raises all sorts of complex issues having to do with women, debata, liturgical precision, and whether one drinks in words or memorizes a text.

These few examples invite some provisional judgments about textual practice and mappurondo ritual tradition. First, no genre is everywhere inscribed. In one village a genre can be wholly in oral tradition. In another village, it may involve oral and literate practices. Second, it is mostly young initiates who are using writing. They do so with the purpose of mastering oral performance, and not with the idea of hoarding or passing on written texts. Next, they are inscribing genres that are already perceived to be invariant. Last, the cases I have described show that texts have not yet displaced persons as the locus of traditional knowledge and authority.

### *The Sumengo*

When I first explored the sumengo, I thought I was working with an exclusively oral song tradition. Then, just three months before I was to leave Pitu Ulunna Salu, I found a village whose residents had written them down.<sup>9</sup> Not only had they written the sumengo down, but they had crafted them into a song cycle. This song cycle posed all sorts of fresh problems and mysteries and forced me to rethink the local interplay of oral and literate practices. Getting a firmer grasp of the problems will require another round of fieldwork, but here I can begin to convey the complexity of this genre, especially with regard to writing and oral performance.

The sumengo is a key song genre in the string of ceremonies that make up village headhunting ritual (*pangngae*). In fact, it is so prominent in this ritual that it would not be too far off the mark to call the headhunt a kind of sumengo-fest. The word sumengo derives from the lexical root *sengo*, meaning “song,” and the intransitive verb infix, *-um-*. Thus, “sumengo” would appear to mean “singing” or “doing song.” But because villagers use the term only in reference to this particular genre, I feel the best translation I can offer for the term is “the singing.” Sung by groups of women or men (and sometimes both together), the sumengo lyric commonly consists of three octosyllabic phrases performed to a set tune.<sup>10</sup> The first is a solo line, delivered by the *tomantokko*, or songleader. The following two lines are choral, sung by the *tomantokko* and his or her chorus. Here is an example:

#### Lyrics

Malallengko toibirin  
tomatilampe bambana  
lembum matil langkam borin

#### Morpheme-by-Morpheme Gloss

Ma-lalleng-ko	doing, being—anxious, watchful—you
to-i-birin	person—at—horizon
to-ma-ti-lampe	person—being—placed—foot of the slope
bamba-na	hamlet land—the
lembum	heading; moving from the open to a hidden or obscured spot
matil	to there [where you are]
langkam	hawk
borin	blackened from dirt, soot, or grime

#### Free Translation

Watch out you on the horizon  
you low on the foot of our land  
the blackened hawk is heading there

The song warns the people of the coast that the upland headhunters have left downstream in search of a victim. It depicts the headhunter as a predatory hawk weighted with anguish and rage, that is, blackened with the soot and mud used to color mourning shirts. (The tune for this song appears in Figure 1 at the end of this article.)

Like most of the verbal and musical arts in the mappurondo community, the sumengo fall under a rigid set of taboos. Villagers may not sing, rehearse,

or even discuss them except during the annual headhunt—a period lasting anywhere from three to seven days. I should add that it is perfectly all right for someone to sing a sumengo outside of formal ceremonial gatherings, but in my experience, that is seldom done. The main point is that local taboos confine sumengo performance to the specific ritual period associated with the headhunt. By the same token, opportunities to rehearse, learn, or collaboratively reflect upon the songs are very limited.

Because the songs are so tied up with the ritual setting, a sketch of a headhunt may be useful here. In the two weeks prior to the ritual, the last of the harvest rice has been put in barns, and the village as a whole has gone into a state of mourning for the recently deceased. Through the efforts of the babalako, a cohort of headhunters secretly meets at the edge of a hamlet, and then steals out of the village under the cover of darkness. They remain out of the village and in hiding for up to ten days, during which time they procure the coconut that will be treated as the victim's head, and find the right kind of bamboo for their special bamboo flutes (*tambola*). The headhunters return home in the dead of night, and wake the villagers with shouts and low, eerie pitches from the flutes. The villagers descend from the hamlets to give the warriors a hero's welcome on the edge of the terraces. There is lots of laughter, lots of food, and lots of sumengo all night long. Seven evenings later, the entire village convenes in the home of an elder to taunt and tease the head and to sing sumengo. The following morning, the hamlets throb with drumming and the singing resumes. The babalako offers the head to the debata, and the warriors receive enormous gifts of food and betel nut. At the close of the ceremony, each headhunter delivers a speech dedicating himself to the village and mappurondo tradition.

The ritual has several purposes. First, it brings an end to public mourning for the deceased. Second, it opens the season of household rituals that are held under the authority of women. Third, the ritual confirms the political maturity of young headhunters—it turns boys into men. Finally, commemoration itself is a reason for holding the ritual. As such, the ritual fulfills sacred obligations, exalts masculine virtues, celebrates village prosperity, and glorifies village tradition. In this busy intersection of ritual purposes, we also find currents of envy, desire, happiness, and nostalgia (cf. R. Rosaldo 1984). These purposes and dispositions do not come together coincidentally, but emerge through and gain moral cogency from an overriding concern in sustaining mappurondo tradition and the village polity. Without the commemorative headhunt, mappurondo households do not meet together as a community.

It is in the context of commemoration that the sumengo take on special significance. Virtually all the sumengo deal with the headhunt and headhunting ceremony. Some—like the example provided above—depict moments from the headhunters' journey downriver. Others describe the terror and havoc of the ambush, the felling of a victim, or the miraculous signs that accompany the headhunters on their trek homeward. In essence, the songs describe epi-

sodes from a headhunt that takes place in the terrain of myth and history. But the vast majority of songs have to do with ritual celebration. In effect, sumengo performances comprise a running commentary on the ritual activity taking place. To put it somewhat differently, the singers weave a tapestry of song that commemorates commemoration. As a result, the ritual taking place becomes consubstantial with the headhunting ceremonies of the past. The songs clearly traffic in the heroic, the astonishing, and the sublime. Performed with artistic clarity and elegance, the sumengo not only bring pleasure, but also invite villagers to reflect on a virtuous and heroic past. As such, the songs help villagers to grasp the tensions and ironies between the world as it should be and the world as it really is.<sup>11</sup>

Villagers do very little talking about the sumengo. Part of this has to do with the taboos surrounding performance. But as a rule, the songs do not much interest the villagers as a subject for critical appraisal. Still, they have a way of distinguishing a good performance from a poor one. Villagers draw an analogy between singing a sumengo and felling a tree. Cut correctly (*rua' lellen*), a tree “falls into the village” (*loe tama ri bamba*), that is, it falls to a place where it can be used or enjoyed. Felled poorly (*sala lellen*)—whether due to haste, lack of experience, or unforeseen circumstances—a tree “drops into the water” (*loe tama ri uai*). The timber becomes unusable or is washed away. It is no different for a tomantokko, who as leader of a group of singers must know how to fell a sumengo. That is, the tomantokko must know how to “cut” the lyrics and the melody of the sumengo so that other singers can follow along. If the songleader falters, hits the wrong note, forgets the words, or jumps to a different set of lyrics, the sumengo is liable to “fall into the water” and be washed away. The performance is beyond retrieval.

Wherever the sumengo are in oral tradition, song choruses are small, usually no more than four or five singers. Gender also plays a part in the makeup of the singing group. While men and women occasionally come together to form a chorus, it is more useful to see groups consisting solely of men or solely of women. These groups are quite informal, and there is no sharp boundary between singers and listeners. People routinely drop in and out of the groups during the course of headhunting ceremonies. Those songleaders with a strong voice, a sharp memory for lyrics, and a practiced feel for sumengo melody will naturally draw singers and hold them together as a group.

It is typical for the choruses to compete with one another during ritual. Part of the game is to come up with a clever or fitting response to the song of another group. If one group sings a sumengo riddle, another will try to remember the customary answer, or may even reply with a sumengo riddle of its own. Or if a chorus sings about the handsome headhunters, another will answer with a song about the warriors' bravery. But the other part of the game is to simply outsing the other choruses. By singing louder and singing more songs a chorus can put the others to shame. In these moments of contest there is no set pattern of turn-taking. In fact, outsingings other groups involves

“chasing” or “stepping on” their songs with a clever or fitting rejoinder: no sooner does a tomantokko start up a song than another leads his or her group in a different sumengo. When several choruses join in, an exuberant, swirling overlay of song fills the ceremonial house. The songs pulse like the buzzing of cicadas, and it is just such moments that bring villagers delight.

Whether the setting is an informal gathering or ceremony proper, the sequence of sumengo is relatively loose and unfixed. With the exception of a lone sumengo that figures into the ritual liturgy, song choice is wholly up to the tomantokko. The songs do not follow a set narrative line nor are they performed in thematic or topical clusters. Of course, given the ludic dialogue of choruses it is not surprising to find specific songs paired together. But even these are a rarity.

The related processes of learning, rehearsing, and interpreting sumengo by and large take place in the song performances that make up ritual. To my knowledge, people do not set aside time outside of ritual to memorize or discuss lyrics. Villagers build up their repertoire of songs simply by listening to the tomantokko and the choruses and singing along. It is worth noting, too, that the composition of new sumengo has more or less come to a halt. To be sure, recomposition is always taking place, and this can be a source of lyric variation. But the collaborative performance of the tomantokko and the chorus favors the repetition of well-known songs. Indeed, retrieving the songs of the past is the key work of the tomantokko.

### *The Written Sumengo Cycle at Saludengen*

On the face of it, the mappurondo community in the village of Saludengen should be an ideal shelter for sumengo oral tradition. The community is determinedly endogamous, admitting no males from other villages as sons-in-law, and letting no daughter move off in wedlock. The community has also sequestered itself topographically. After several years of bitter dispute with Christian residents of the village regarding ritual and ritualized planting practices, it exchanged terraces and moved upstream along the banks of the Salu Dengen, while Christians occupied contiguous sites downstream—a tactic not unlike the one used to check the advance of Islam during the last century. Historically, the community has been a center of resistance to exogenous forces that threatened mappurondo tradition. For example, it refused to accommodate Dutch-sanctioned leadership in the district (Smit 1937), and it served as headquarters of local resistance during the rebellions of the late 1950s. Saludengen, then, is the most striking case in which a mappurondo community has resisted social and ideological admixture from without.

The piety and resolve of this community would suggest that it might be a good place to discover a sacred oral tradition, unsullied by writing. That is not the case. Since 1980, villagers have put down sumengo lyrics in writing and forged them into a song cycle, a form that has dramatically changed sumengo performance.

The cycle consists of 67 songs, arranged so as to form a story that depicts a ritual headhunt from start to finish. As a story, the cycle has no plot in the conventional sense of the word. The arrangement of episodes is in concert with time rather than causality; there is no development of character, no moral tension, and no foreshadowing of events. It begins with an invocation to the debata and then poses the conditions under which the headhunters will either succeed or meet failure and humiliation. The story then opens with the headhunters departing for the coast—the song translated above. The 24 songs that follow recount the felling of a victim, the headhunters' trek homeward, and their sudden arrival at the village. Next, the sumengo shift to a long conversation between the headhunters and their wives. The men tell of their exploits and then seek flattery from the village women. Soon after, the husbands and wives engage in a riddling contest. With the end of the riddling contest, the cycle moves on to depict the ritual celebration that follows the headhunt. Finally, the story closes with a melancholy coda: the song and music of head-hunting ritual must be put away for another year. As one sumengo describes it, tears of sadness swirl at the place of sleep.

Villagers have also imposed a dialogic counterstructure on this narrative. The entire cycle unfolds through the alternating voices of headhunters and village women. Thus, the perspective on each episode and scene shifts back and forth between men and women. In a sense, this song dialogue not only encompasses the cycle narrative, but enters into its very constitution. The dialogue that narrates is also the dialogue that is narrated.

While the sumengo cycle has roots deep in oral tradition, it blossomed in the context of writing. Elders at Saludengen told me that the main reason for writing down sumengo lyrics was simply to keep them intact for a community that was increasingly literate. As one explained: "The ancestors remembered well but these children like to read." Some youths had already begun writing down sumengo lyrics so as to be able to sing along with older performers. Around 1980, elders in the community decided to help younger singers shape a collection of lyrics in notebook form. No effort was or has been made to inscribe sumengo melody; the tune remains in oral tradition.

In the context of passing on these lyrics, songleaders began to craft an invariant song cycle in and outside of performance contexts. While song performance remained both a reference point and the ultimate end of the effort to preserve lyrics, skilled singers had to step outside of performance to contemplate and discuss the songs. From the start, then, there emerged a dialectic between oral performance and the work of inscription. In my brief time in this village, I was unable to find out precisely how the villagers set about selecting and organizing the lyrics into a narrative whole. Judging from the oral sumengo traditions elsewhere, singers rarely did more than couple lyric triads into song pairs. Also, no community of singers working in the oral tradition makes an attempt to sing all sumengo known to them in the course of one ceremony. Yet I think it is safe to say that the songleaders at Saludengen were



conscious of a narrative waiting to be put together. Thus, writing did not bring about a narrative or narrative logic previously missing. Instead, it facilitated the work of reclamation. The entire project of dictating, copying, comparing, and recomposing lyrics provided a context in which collaboration could retrieve a narrative scattered through the memories of individual songleaders. What the project of writing did do is produce an authoritative text that has since supplanted the memories of songleaders. In effect, writing allowed the villagers to produce a canon of song. Ironically, the making of the sumengo canon led the tomantokko to drop those songs that would not fit into the cycle. What began as an act of preservation ended in the narrowing of the genre.

The canonical text typically appears in small, paper-covered notebooks—much like the bluebooks used for exams in American college classrooms. In the several manuscripts I was able to examine, writers invariably put down each set of lyrics as a sentence of prose, unmarked for meter, pauses, or vocal part. It was customary for writers to arrange the songs in the order of their performance in the cycle. A few people went so far as to number them. Also, it was common to find each song marked so as to be able to tell who was to sing it—men or women. The greater number of books were in the hands of children and teens. Of the three tomantokko remaining in the village, only the lone male and a young female counterpart kept a notebook of sumengo lyrics close at hand during performance. The senior female songleader did without.

A good place to begin measuring the impact of the written sumengo canon is in the chorus. Gender rigidly determines the makeup of the choruses at Saludengen. When performing the cycle, villagers divide into two large semichoruses, one throng exclusively male, the other exclusively female. Gone then is the chorus that combines the voices of men and women. While this division of voices is not the only way to accommodate the dialogic structure of the cycle narrative, it appears to be the simplest means of doing so. Additionally, the organization of the singers into two semichoruses strikes me as a good way to take advantage of the proliferation of song scripts. Indeed, the proliferation of scripts opened the way for young singers to swell the ranks of the chorus. The scripts also made it possible for larger numbers of singers to perform together smoothly and cohesively. In particular, the scripts brought the tomantokko and chorus into greater concert.

The song cycle also has changed the role of the tomantokko. The songleaders still have an important part to play in leading off each song and driving the melody. The sequence of songs, however, is completely out of their hands and is dictated instead by the authority of the cycle text. Indeed, the memory and performance of the songleader are subordinate to a “correcting” and determining written text. While visiting Saludengen, I witnessed a moment when the tomantokko leading the men’s chorus jumped songs, despite the notebook of lyrics beside him. The sumengo fell into the water, as they say. When the chorus did not join in, the tomantokko broke off his singing. After a moment

of muted conversation, the *tomantokko* took up the opening strains of the correct song.

As one might expect, the ludic or agonistic song exchanges so typical of the oral tradition are wholly missing in performances at *Saludengen*. There is no impulse to challenge and outperform. In fact, playful behavior seems antithetical to the smooth completion of the cycle narrative. Yet I should point out that the narrative itself has incorporated the ludic element. While ludic behavior is inappropriate to the performative frame, it reappears as the riddling session that constitutes part of the cycle's story line.

Organizing the *sumengo* into a coherent narrative, dialogic, and cyclic structure demanded that the singers at *Saludengen* rethink the performance setting. Where oral tradition is strong, *sumengo* performances comprise a sort of "soundtrack" for the ritual so long as liturgical activity is not taking place. The *sumengo* cycle poses a problem: it is too long to squeeze in between liturgical acts. Thus, the villagers at *Saludengen* run headhunting ritual in a somewhat different way. On the eve of the closing ceremony, they gather at the host household and sing the cycle three times. This takes about eight hours. By way of contrast, villagers rarely sing *sumengo* during the other ceremonies that make up headhunting ritual. In effect, villagers put some distance between the songs and the ritual activity that make up their subject matter. I would argue that this distance potentially affords the villagers an opportunity for deeper and more prolonged reflection on the songs, and on the headhunt in general.

This brings me to a final point about the performance of the *sumengo* cycle at *Saludengen*. The work of reclamation and reflection that goes on as villagers write and perform the cycle is a process that has restored further honor and virtue to the *mappurondo* past. Outsiders made the most telling statements in this regard. A few elders from other villages for whom I played the *Saludengen* tape were impressed, not only by the intensity of the song performance but by the cycle's narrative coherence as well. As one remarked, "Straight and in place. I think our ancestors once sang [the *sumengo*] just that way." What these listeners were doing was to reimagine a past peopled by fine singers, singers who could articulate heroic virtues with clarity and vitality, singers whose very songs were an index to the well-being of the highland villages. But recognizing and aggrandizing the virtuous past also had some less comforting results. These listeners grew uneasy about their oral tradition, for it reminded them of loss and decay. These elders longed for that perfect past heard in the cycle, and debased their own oral practices as failed attempts to reproduce the ways of the ancestors.

In sum, writing not only has served as a new ax for felling the *sumengo* at *Saludengen* but also has played a part in reshaping this genre of singing. Did writing bring about those changes? With respect to most of the changes, I think not. Writing did not restructure the performance setting. Neither did writing bring about the cycle narrative, the elimination of ludic song ex-

change, or the formation of the semichorus. Singers did these things because of their experience with writing and their desire for lyric and liturgical precision.

Without question, villagers used writing as a method for making recall of the sumengo easier. Aside from this consciously pragmatic effort, younger singers had already begun to trust and favor writing as a way to “handle” song. After all, in the context of their schoolwork, writing (or print) appeared as the authoritative and outward mark of critical knowledge. In that light, writing down sumengo lyrics formed a strategy for turning the songs into a genre of “critical knowledge,” or to put it somewhat differently, for incorporating the sumengo into a body of inscribed “critical knowledge.” That strategy of cultural reproduction is wholly consistent with the village ethos at Saludengen, an ethos aimed at recovering and strengthening local mappurondo tradition.

Writing did not free villagers from habits and views shaped by oral tradition, but came to their service in a more detailed and thoroughgoing organization of oral performance than the “ecology” of an eroding oral tradition allowed. Those people who shaped the cycle had to take into account singers and songleaders who could not read. Indeed, I would argue that the narrative and dialogic structures in the cycle have more to do with the traditional arts of storytelling and ludic song exchange than they do with an innovative “logic of writing.” Furthermore, writing catered to the desire to get performance right, to fell the sumengo so that they dropped “into the village.” Putting a check to lyric variation was one way to coordinate song performance. But it was not the intrinsic function of writing to bring a stop to variation. Rather, villagers had to oversee the writing, standardization, and distribution of lyrics. In short, the authority of the written cycle text was not an intrinsic one, but one ascribed by performers themselves.

The dialectics of oral performance and writing within the sumengo corpus at Saludengen are fairly consistent with those that characterize other ritual genres in the broader mappurondo community. Where they differ is in the emergence of the written text and the displacement of the performer as the locus of authoritative knowledge. That difference is not the result of writing, but of the traditional practices constitutive of, and peculiar to, each genre of performance. Choral song has the need and potential to make use of writing in a way single-voice liturgies do not.

### *Conclusion*

Let me conclude by returning to some of the issues I posed at the beginning of this essay. As I see it, oral and literate practices cannot be radically divorced from one another. First, the interplay of oral and literate practices, rather than their isolation, probably typifies communication in most contemporary societies. Second, oral performance and textual practices are both modes of inter-

pretation and translation. In as much as this is true, it may be best to map their convergence and divergence against a hermeneutic theory that attempts to account for all the semantic possibilities of discourse that has achieved some kind of fixity, whether through ritual repetition or through writing. For example, Ricoeur (1976) has provided one of the most thoughtful and illuminating statements regarding the impact of writing on hermeneutic activity. But in making his general claim for the distancing effects of writing, Ricoeur resorts to descriptions of genres that are specific to the social, historical, and ideological formations of Europe and the West in general. He collapses these historical phenomena into an evolutionary scheme that moves from a situational and oral primitive to a pancontextual and inscribed modern. That scheme, in my view, obscures the point made by Street: that oral and textual practices exist as mutually shaping contemporaries embedded in social, ideological, and historical contexts.

In reconsidering Goody's notion of "restricted literacy," Brinkley Messick (1983:50) has argued that we may never need a general theory of literacy which can be applied to all cases. I would agree. Further, it seems to me that any such theory of literacy would beg a theory of orality as a counterpart. As of yet, a sufficiently strong theory of oral practices has not been developed. The best course, as I see it, is to undertake contextual accounts of the interplay of oral and textual practices (cf. Bauman 1986a). The program for doing so has already been spelled out in works that pioneered the ethnography of speaking and performing. But I also think it will be the mark of the folklorist to set about such explorations with an eye and an ear turned toward community, genre, and tradition.

I offer this abbreviated study of the sumengo in order to show some of the steps a folklorist might take in exploring the contextual relations that join and encompass oral and literate practices. By relating the sumengo as a genre to a community and a tradition, I have attempted to capture some of the diversity and complexity that characterize the interplay of oral performance and writing. Part of that effort comes from a conviction that a look at the sociohistorical contexts surrounding writing and oral performance can turn up some of the factors that determine pattern and particularity in a community's verbal arts. At the same time, the effort is one aimed at making the study of oral and literate practices part of a more general exploration of social and cultural diversity.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup>Folklorists sometimes remark that "oral literature" is a poor label for the spoken arts. Some even have tried to come up with new glosses, like "tellantry" (Adams 1979). Yet in my view, the radical divorce of oral and literate phenomena—if such a divorce indeed can be effected in theoretical terms—will do folklore studies more harm than good. For all its problems, "oral literature" does a good job of alluding to the innumerable genres that are spoken and inscribed. Insofar as folklorists devote themselves to the study of oral literature, they should make a commitment to understanding the interplay of oral *and* literate practices. The idea of an intellectual "settlement" in folklore studies goes back to Bauman (1977), who suggested ways in which the theoretical frontiers of the field could be refined, elaborated, or otherwise "settled." Limón and Young (1986) make further use of the "frontiers and settlements" metaphor in their review of folklore studies for the period 1972–85. Interestingly, they do not mention work on the confluence of oral and literate practices as a folklore settlement. Their silence is understandable in light of the rush to explore the frontiers of performance theory since 1972. If the rush to understand performance left the study of orality and literacy as something of a ghost town, I think there are now signs that performance-centered folklore studies will bring us back to repopulate that settlement.

<sup>2</sup>As regards literacy, the approach also tends to focus on inscribed texts to the point of overlooking the process of inscription.

<sup>3</sup>A key advocate of this approach is Jack Goody, whose work has been enormously influential in shaping the current debate about the "consequences of literacy" (Goody 1968, 1977, 1986, 1987). Goody shows some signs of moving away from this perspective (1986:xi).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Keith Basso's call for ethnographies of writing (1974).

<sup>5</sup>If I were to fault the recent scholarship on literacy and orality, including Street's fine book, it would be for failing to deal with the subtle details of genre. By and large, anthropologists have done their work with respect to community and tradition. Sociolinguists, meanwhile, often remain tied to questions concerning cognition and the acquisition of communicative skills, and rarely address the issues of community, tradition, and genre. Still, the sociolinguistic studies that appear in Cook-Gumperz (1986) and Tannen (1982, 1984) suggest that literacy pertains most directly to genre-specific discourse strategies.

<sup>6</sup>I use an apostrophe to indicate a glottal stop.

<sup>7</sup>For a detailed account of that study, see George (1989).

<sup>8</sup>The Bugis and Makassans are the two principal ethnic groups occupying the South Sulawesi peninsula. Their syllabaries are virtually identical and show a great deal of similarity to those found in the Philippines. I use the term "writing" in a narrow, conventional sense. As a matter of fact, the uplanders had ways to "inscribe" speech prior to the advent of the syllabaries: special baskets, beads, weapons, cloth, and the like were used to represent or invoke whole narratives. For example, a basket might "carry" the story of how a village obtained its political authority.

<sup>9</sup>Villagers have yet to adopt or devise a way to inscribe the sumengo melody. In local practice, then, writing has to do with words, and does not yet extend to the realm of music. In connection, it is worth remarking that villagers do distinguish text from tune when talking about the sumengo. While literacy hardly gave birth to this distinction, writing has been able to "capture" song lyrics and further distance them from the melody. Inasmuch as this is true, writing enters into the distinction between text and tune. For the sake of theoretical understanding and analysis, it is important to keep the concept of literacy open and flexible, so as to include the inscription of musical phenomena. For essays that address this issue, see Tokumaru and Yamaguti (1986).

<sup>10</sup>There are, in fact, three sumengo tunes, each based on an equidistant pentatonic scale. Two of them have very similar melodic contours and are said to have their origin in the Salu Mambi watershed. The third tune is familiar only to villages inhabited by settlers from the Salu Mokanan watershed. While different villages may use different tunes, their lyric repertoires overlap significantly.

<sup>11</sup>With the exception of Michelle Rosaldo (1980), commentators usually have overlooked the role of song in headhunting ritual. In every case with which I am familiar, a headhunt must end in song. As I see it, these rituals may have far-reaching implications for a theoretical understanding of the relationship between song and ritual violence.

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### Explanatory Notes for Figure 1

1. The tempo is free, but the song becomes increasingly rhythmic in the choral phrases. There is no regular underlying meter.
2. A bar line marks the end of a musical phrase.
3. A rest corresponds to a pause of 1–1.5 seconds.
4. It takes roughly two minutes for the singers to perform the song in its entirety. The song-leader usually takes 13–14 seconds to deliver the opening solo line. The chorus enters the song as soon as the songleader completes the first eight-syllable lyric phrase.
5. The notes show only relative duration to one another in the context of a musical phrase (e.g., an eighth note is about half as long as a quarter note). Blackened notes without stems are grace notes.
6. Pitches indicated are rough approximations of equivalent pitches in a G clef. The actual choice of pitches appears to follow an equidistant pentatonic scale. By arbitrarily assigning the pitch value of D from the Western diatonic scale to the first pitch of the pentatonic scale, we may correlate the scalar material as follows: 1—(D); 2—(E, F, F sharp); 3—(G); 4—(B flat, B); 5—(C). Variation on the second and fourth pitches does not appear to be significant, and probably reflects a variety of musical factors at play.

The musical score is written on a single staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. It consists of two main parts: a Solo and a Chorus. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span multiple notes. Arrows pointing up or down from the notes indicate pitch deviations, such as a quarter tone sharp or flat. A slur indicates a glissando between two pitches. A specific time interval of 1-1.5 seconds is marked above a note in the third line.

**Solo**  
 Ma lal le — — ng ko — to i — bi ri — — n

**Chorus**  
 to — — ma — ti — — la — —

— mpe — — ba — — mba — — na

nye — le — — e — — mbu — — m ma ti

il la — — ng ka — m

ti — — l la — — ng ka — — m bo

o — ri — — le — — e — m bu — — m ma ti

il la — — ng ka — m

Figure 1. The Common Melody for *Malallengko toibirin*.

7. Arrows show a deviation from the pitch indicated, as much as a quarter tone sharp (arrow up) or flat (arrow down).

8. A glissando indicates a slide between two pitches; the microtones in the interval receive articulation. A slur also indicates a slide between two pitches, but the microtones in the interval are not articulated.