M. Yamaguchi
Nai Kéu, a ritual of the Lio of Central Flores


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Introduction

The Lio live in the mountainous region of Central Flores. Their population does not seem to exceed 150,000 people (Sugishima 1986a). They practice slash-and-burn agriculture; the main crops are taro, cassava, maize and rice. Wet rice cultivation was absent from this region. Except for those living in the coastal area to the South, the Lio used to build their settlements on hill tops. However, in order to facilitate administrative control, the Dutch colonial government made strenuous attempts to force them to leave these sacred settlements, and to settle permanently in the lowlands. As a result, the Lio now live in two types of settlement: in hill top settlements, marked by a sacred house to which the members of a kin group return annually on the occasion of the performance of a ritual called n'gua ria; and in settlements dispersed along the borders of the rice fields.

The Lio never knew a centralized government. Each settlement used to form a unit of political control. The largest political unit of the society was generally called tana (‘land’). Each tana should have a council of seven priests (mosa laki), two of whom were considered to fulfil the most important offices: the mosa laki pu'u as the principal priest, and the mosa laki koe kolu as the priest in charge of the ‘spirit of the earth’. The first priest is the political as well as the ceremonial leader, whereas the second is solely in charge of the ritual devoted to the ‘spirit of the earth’. The office of mosa laki pu'u is transmitted patrilineally, but that of mosa laki koe kolu may be inherited matrilineally.

The family system of the Lio is based upon an extended family that comprises three generations. Whereas property is transmitted patrilineally, the spiritual tie between the mother’s brother and the sister’s son, called ada vuru, is a rather strong one. Marriage used to be organized according

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1 This article is based on fieldwork carried out with a grant from the Wenner-Grenn Foundation, between February and October 1974. I am grateful to Mr. Johannes at Eko Leta and other people who never failed to help. I did most of my work around Wologai, one of the ritual centers. In a sense, therefore, this article presents a picture of the Lio from the point of view of Wologai, even though Wologai is located almost in the middle of Lio territory.

2 I have avoided to use the word ‘village’ and employ the word ‘settlement’ instead to allow for taking varieties in size into consideration.
to the principle of asymmetric alliance. Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, one of the two marriage types associated with asymmetric alliance, used to be obligatory for the first-born son. The latter was supposed to marry his *ana eda* (mother's brother's daughter). As a result of the prohibition of this type of marriage by the Roman Catholic church, it has virtually disappeared.

Between the groups that are linked in alliance, exchanges take place which involve a flow of goods in opposite directions. The wife-givers provide rice, palm wine and textiles, and the wife-takers supply buffaloes, pigs, weapons such as knives and swords, and golden ornaments like earrings and necklaces for male use. When a marriage is contracted between groups which have not yet established an alliance relationship, more goods are exchanged than would have been transferred otherwise. One needs to supply more in order to open up new relations. However, marriage is not the only occasion on which an exchange between allied groups is organized. There is a constant flow of these goods between the groups. They are exchanged in a variety of rituals, such as in the rites of passage performed at childbirth (*vau tana*, 'descending on earth'), the shaving of the hair (at reaching the age of 18 months) and at death, in rituals accompanying the building of a house and the curing of the sick, and in the rituals of the annual cycle which we will describe below. It seems that one conceives these ceremonial exchanges to animate time by punctuating it.

Even though it is no longer allowed to marry one's matrilateral cross-cousin, the fact that this marriage type is part of the system of kinship can be detected from the system of kin terms. Female cousins in Ego's generation are distinguished from other cousins. Mother's brother's daughter is called *ana eda* ('child (ana) of mother's brother (eda)'), and this construct still serves as a term by which to address one's wife (see fig.1).
2. The snake's body as metaphor

The Lio use the image of the snake as a metaphor for a basic social unit. This metaphoric snake possesses a 'head' (ulu), a 'tail' (ékó), and a 'navel' (pusu) as a mediating point. The island of Flores is described as consisting of a 'head' (the East), a 'tail' (the West) and a 'navel' (the sacred mountain Lépé Mbusu located in the center of the island). The village also has its 'head' and its 'tail', while its 'navel' refers to the megalithic monument (tubu musu mase) located in the village center. The same principle is applied to the garden. Two small altars mark its 'head' and its 'tail'. When the Lio open up a new garden, the principal priest mosa laki pu'u goes there early in the morning to set up a rectangular bamboo altar. He places an egg at the center of this altar, and pierces it with a bamboo stick. This altar is thought to be similar to the megalithic monument in the center of the village.

The 'head-tail' principle is applied to kin categories as well. Vuru denotes the mother's brother - sister's son relationship. Mother's brother is called eda vuru, and sister's son ana vuru. Wife-givers are considered to be the 'head', wife-takers to be the 'tail', whereas Ego's own group represents the 'navel'.

As the house occupies a central position in Lio cosmology, it is not surprising that the 'head-tail' principle is also applied here. The rear of the house is called 'head'; it is occupied by the elderly members of the family. This part contrasts with the 'tail' of the house, the opening through which one enters the interior part of the house from the veranda. This entrance is decorated with a boat relief. This relief, which sometimes is attached to the façade of the house, seems to identify the house with a boat (see figures 2 and 3). Inside the house a thick rope is suspended from the center of the
Tusks of deer or disk-shaped planks are attached to its lower end. This rope, which is called *pusu até* ('navel heart'), is the *pusu* itself. It mediates between above and below, front and rear, people and gods, between what is in this world and what is in another one. Because it is under this rope that people should be born and die, one understands how being located under the *pusu até* implies being re-united with the cosmos.

There are two distinguished buildings in the traditional Lio village. One is called *sao ria* ('house big'), and the other *keda kanga*. The *sao ria* is identified with the feminine principle and oriented inwards. It is enclosed by a wall, and its interior is dark. The *keda kanga* is identified with the masculine principle. It is smaller in size than the *sao ria*, does not have a wall, and is located at the other end of the central village place. Here one meets with visitors. It is fully decorated with reliefs, yet no significant rituals are performed there. It serves as a store house for the ritual instruments such as the shields, spears, and musical instruments that are used in the open-air dances performed during the feasts. In the *sao ria*, a rich symbolism is encoded on various dimensions. First of all, it is a representation of the mother's body. Secondly, it shares the structural representations of 'head' and 'navel' with the house conceived of as the body of a snake. A plank which separates the *ulu* from the interior of the house (position B in figure 3) is said to be the breast of the mother. Various reliefs carved into it denote the symbolism of the female, such as the breast, the gong, the buffalo, the new moon, and the boat (see fig. 4). The most sophisticated one displays the mother's womb (see fig. 5).

![Figure 4](https://example.com/fig4.png)

*Figure 4*

When the *sao ria* is expanded, the rooms that are added to the sides are identified with the left and the right 'arm'. The two fire-places located in the corners adjoining the veranda are described as two 'legs'. The entrance, finally, is called the *éko*.

The house is identified with the image of a boat as well as that of the mother's body. Thus the roof of the house is said to be the 'sail of a boat' and the main poles supporting the roof are called *mangu pu'i*. *Mangu* denotes the 'mast' of a boat. Yet when, before the *n'gua ria* ritual begins, the ritual for repairing the roof is performed, people say that one repairs 'the body of the mother'. Furthermore, the house is usually said to be built on the model of the posture of a woman sitting to give birth (see fig. 6). A woman in childbirth employs the same type of low platform as the one that serves as a chair in a boat.
I also came across one house the façade of which was decorated with a plank shaped like a boat (see fig. 7). The veranda entrance to the interior of the house usually displays a boat-shaped panel that is embellished with designs denoting the sun, the moon, and the path (see fig. 8).

3. The myth of Ana Kalo
Light is shed upon the identification of the mother’s body with a boat by the mythical account of Ana Kalo, the first ancestor of the Lio, who arrived at the island in a boat.

— Ana Kalo came to the island of Flores in a small boat.
— He sat on top of the mountain Lépé Mbusu, which at that time was surrounded by water from which only its summit emerged. There was so little space that he had to crouch. Putting his food into
his hand he had to eat straight out of the palm; it was impossible to use his fingers.
— He made a garden. However, someone stole the fruits at night.
— So he watched the garden during the night in order to catch the thief. It was a red pig (vavi mera; this name also denotes a star). When Ana Kalo chased the red pig, it fled to the heavens along the cosmic tree which connects these with the earth.
— Ana Kalo cut the cosmic tree in anger. Then the heavens started to ascend, whereas the water receded, allowing the mountain to display its shape.
— Ana Kalo had many children with his sister. Yet all the infants died because Ana Kalo did not know how to cut the umbilical cord. Then he decided to fashion the mast of a boat into a knife with which to cut the umbilical cord.

Since, according to the Lio, the boat of Ana Kalo represents the mother’s womb, the two first parts of this myth relate the condition of the foetus surrounded by the primeval water in the mother’s womb. The sao ria is identified mythically with the primordial boat in which Ana Kalo arrived at the top of Mount Lépé Mbusu. Moreover, the cosmic tree is identified both with the navel and the umbilical cord, and with the pusu até, the rope that is suspended from the ceiling in the Lio house. The importance of this mythical episode will be demonstrated below in our discussion of the annual ritual cycle.

There is a huge banyan tree on the side of the main part of the central place in the village. People explain that this is the tree that supported the heavens and was cut by Ana Kalo in the myth. Therefore, we can perceive the symbolic association of the mast of Ana Kalo’s boat, the cosmic tree, the pole that supports the ceiling of the house, and the pusu até.

4. The Nai Kéu ritual

Having established the image of the woman-mother as a primordial model of the world, we can now proceed to analyze the dynamic way in which this model is employed in a ritual called n’gua ria. This ritual is performed in the ritual center of the sao ria house. Actually the term n’gua designates an annual ritual cycle that begins after the harvest. This ritual cycle, which lasts for a week, is centered around a particular ritual called nai kéu, upon which our discussion shall focus.

The preparations start with the collecting in each compound of the newly harvested rice, and end with attaching small baskets, each representing a kin group, to the central rope in the sao ria. This act serves to restore the communication with the primordial state of being which Ana Kalo had disconnected when he cut the cosmic tree. Ana Kalo’s act had resulted in the disjunction that was the source of the logical order separating above from below, the heavens from the earth, ‘head’ from ‘tail’,
etcetera. Attaching the small baskets to the rope (called nai kéu, 'hanging the rice containers') should be considered as a ritual act of conjunction vis-
da-vis the disjunction effectuated in the mythical stage.

On the third day, the principal priest mosa laki pu'u sends a pig to the house of ine ame (a term that, like ada vuru, refers to a relation with one's wife-givers) so that it can be sacrificed. Usually, the symbolic wife-givers of the mosa laki pu'u reside in another village (although this position is rather fictitious now that MBD-marriage is no longer practised). After the sacrifice has been made, two women perform a mimic ritual in which they pretend to pound rice. Afterwards, the rice is brought into the sao ria house. A monkey is sacrificed in the keda kanga, the masculine counterpart building of the sao ria, and a ceremonial meal, in which monkey meat forms an important dish, is offered by the wife-givers (ada vuru) to the wife-takers (na mbu). It is unclear whether this monkey meat, presented to the wife-takers, should be contrasted with the pigs offered by the wife-takers to the wife-givers.³

The nai kéu ritual, being the main part of the n'gua ritual, begins around ten o'clock in the evening. Inside the sao ria, the lights are extinguished. The seven mosa laki priests are crouching alongside the wall facing the fire-place. A bowl is given to each of them. Then the priest who is in charge of the cooking draws a cross upon his forehead and his hands with a white powder, presumably in order to mark the passage to an altered state of being. An informant stated that the cross is the symbolic sign of death.⁴ After he has boiled taro tubers in a small pot, he puts them straight into the hands of the participants, who start to eat them from the palms of their hands without using their fingers. Thereupon the priest in charge of the cooking throws the bamboo knife used during the cooking, the rind of the taro, and the water kept in a gourd through a hole in the bamboo matting on the earth. The participants break the silence which reigned during the ritual, and begin to sing a song in praise of the village. The fire in the fire-place is extinguished, and the charcoal is also thrown down on the earth. Then the principal priest mosa laki pu'u descends to the ground underneath the floor to look for the bamboo knife that was thrown there. As soon as the principal priest exclaims: 'the new moon has returned' (vula gélé pu'u kasa dova), lights are lit and people start to shout.

The nai kéu ritual is again performed early next morning before dawn by a group of women led by the mother's brother's daughter. Then follows a day's rest, called pire. Three ritual acts conclude the n'gua ria ritual cycle. First there is a ritual called ola méko consisting of an offering made to the 'great demon' (polo ria) at the outskirts of the settlement. Then one per-

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³ Wife-givers are associated with feminine goods, wife-takers with masculine goods. The circulation of goods on ritual occasions ensures the union of the two principles and the movement of time. The sao ria is the main example in which these ideas are achieved.

⁴ Extinguishing the light in the ritual house is already the sign of the 'death' of the participants and of the cosmos itself.
forms *po’o teu*, a ritual — marked by inversions — in which evil, symbolized by a rat, is chased from the settlement. Finally one sends the negative element away to the sea in a ritual called *gaku*.

This *nai kéu* ritual has several symbolic components: the house being represented as a womb, the ritual enacting a return to the womb, coming into being inside the womb in silent darkness, the use of a bamboo knife shaped in the form of the new moon and similar to the one with which the umbilical cord is cut, throwing away the rind of taro that represents the amniotic fluid with the placenta, and finally a return into a world of lightness and joy. These components demonstrate that the basic structure of the ritual is the death and the rebirth — at the end of the annual agricultural cycle — of time and space, of the world and of the individual. The exclamation of the principal priest and the shape of the bamboo knife testify to the fact that this process of death and rebirth is impregnated with a new moon symbolism.

According to informants, this act is a repetition of the one performed by Ana Kalo; as the myth relates, Ana Kalo, having arrived at Flores, ate out of the palm of his hands. The ritual act also represents the posture taken by the foetus in the mother’s womb. Thus both the myth and the ritual of *nai kéu* display the following polarity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>original land beyond the sea</th>
<th>the land of the Lio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>womb of the mother</td>
<td>the outside world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>primordial chaos</td>
<td>cultural order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-temporal</td>
<td>temporal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crouching posture</td>
<td>ordinary posture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heaven and earth not separated</td>
<td>heaven and earth separated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world flooded</td>
<td>world no longer flooded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whereas the right-hand column refers to the mundane order, the left-hand column refers to a theatrical ritual performance enacting the death and rebirth of time and of the world by means of a return to the state before the birth of the individual and of the world itself. More light is shed upon this process by the myth dealing with the death of the goddess Iné Paré.

5. The death of the goddess Iné Paré

In the village of Nida, near Mount Keli Ndota, another mythical dimension is added to this ritual, that of the killing of a goddess. As the following myth explains, Mt. Keli Ndota is associated with the goddess Iné Paré (‘Mother rice’).

A long time ago, a goddess arrived at the land of the Lio in the company of her three younger brothers. Having run out of food they

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5 I have discussed the semiotic aspect of the *po’o teu* and *gaku* as rituals of expiation and reversal in an unpublished paper (Yamaguchi n.d.).
Masao Yamaguchi reached Mt. Keli Ndota. The goddess hurt her foot. She asked her brothers to kill her, to wrap her corpse in a mat, and to bury it in the earth. [A different version tells how she asked her brothers to cut her corpse into pieces and scatter these over the field.] As she had predicted, after four days seeds issued from the parts of the corpse.

When the time has come to perform the ritual of *n'gua ria*, the chief of the village of Nida sends a mission to Mt. Keli Ndota. The emissary takes a marked bamboo stick with him, which he dedicates together with some rice at the spot where the goddess Iné Paré is said to have taken a rest after she had hurt her foot. The meaning of this mission, sent shortly before the annual ritual of *n'gua ria*, can be interpreted against the background provided by the myth of Iné Paré. Moreover, when a lamenting voice is heard during the time of dissemination of the rice, it is said to be the voice of those who mourn the death of Iné Paré.

One observes, therefore, a correspondence between three levels of facts:

1. the myth about the death and the generation of crops out of the body of the goddess Iné Paré;
2. the symbolism of death and rebirth in the *nai kéu* ritual that is part of the *n'gua* ritual cycle;
3. the concept of the entire cycle of rice cultivation as representing the death and rebirth of the goddess Iné Paré.

Against this background, it is remarkable that a female member of the wife-giving group participates in the *nai kéu* ritual. Indeed, the mother’s brother’s daughter (*ana eda*) — representing the real owner of the *sao ria* house — of the principal priest (*mosa laki pu’u*) of the settlement, is entitled to stay inside the house and observe the performance of the ritual. It is said

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6 Going into the house (*sao ria*), considered to be the mother’s womb, means going back to the state before birth, that is, death. Extinguishing the lamp inside the house and marking the hand with a white cross sign also symbolize death. The cross is not necessarily related to the cross as the Christian symbol.

7 Sugishima, who worked among the Lio between 1983 and 1985, gives a somewhat different version of the myth of Iné Paré. In this version two sisters are the heroines of the story. They were the only ones who knew how to produce rice; all other people lived on wild plants. Merely by shaking their long hair the rice fell from it. Many young men came to court them. One day one of the sisters asked a young man to catch the lice in her hair. He got one grain of rice and took it home where he planted it. It grew rapidly, and people harvested and ate the rice not knowing what it was. They found it extremely delicious. Then the young men of the village, who courted the two sisters without success, killed them in the hope of obtaining more crops. They took the corpses of the sisters to Mt. Keli Ndota, that is located near the village of Nida Nua Pu’u, where the tragedy took place. Various crops grew out of the pieces into which the corpses had been cut; flesh turned into rice, teeth into maize, bones into cassava, blood into red maize, liver into pumpkins, breasts into water melons, fingers into peas, etcetera. The myth continues by telling how the chiefs of the various areas of Lio came to have a share in the seeds of these crops (Sugishima 1986a). The structure and the motif of this myth correspond with the type of myths known as Hainuwele, reported from Seram and discussed by Jensen (1966). Mabuchi (1964) also discusses this myth.
that this mother's brother's daughter is the true owner of the fire-place of the house. Yet unlike in former days, when the wife of the mosa laki pu'u used to be latter's mother's brother's daughter, nowadays the wife of a principal priest is not related to his mother's brother. Therefore, it is not the priest's wife, but his mother's brother's daughter who witnesses the nai kéu ritual. In fact, it is because the mother's brother (eda) has the right of ownership of the fire-place in the sao ria that the presence of the mother's brother's daughter is required. This tells us that the real owner of the sao ria is not the patrilineal group of the principal priest (mosa), but the matrilineal group of eda vuru. We can hypothesize that the sao ria house, which during the nai kéu ritual is identified with the whole land, is owned by an autochthonous matrilineal group, whereas the patrilineal group represented by the principal priest mosa laki pu'u are strangers to the land.8

8 The sao ria in which the mosa laki pu'u resides is symbolically owned by the mother's brother's daughter. The house is the symbolization of the mother's body, therefore it belongs symbolically to the wife-givers. Continuity of the sao ria was manifested by the mother's brother's daughter taking care of the fire inside the house. Formerly, there was no problem, because the wife of the mosa laki pu'u was his mother's brother's daughter. However, nowadays, this is impossible because of the prohibition by the Roman Catholic Church authorities of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage. It is for this reason that the mosa laki pu'u requests the presence of his mother's brother's daughter as the observer. There is a ceremonial ine ame of the mosa laki pu'u from another village. Today, because of the abolition of cross-cousin marriage, this position seems only nominal. The mosa laki pu'u's actual mother's brother's daughter is not his wife but her presence is required. Formerly, it seems that the mosa laki pu'u's ceremonial and nominal ine ame and his wife's father were one and the same person.

In order to commemorate the symbolic position of his ine ame, the mosa laki pu'u sends a pig, as a sacrificial animal as well as a ritual gift, to his wife-giver, which is a reminiscence of the practice of former days. This at least is the practice in the Wologai area. However, I am not sure whether the presence of this symbolic ine ame from another village signifies that the people are conscious of the wife-givers being the autochthonous people. The myth states that Ana Kalo, the first ancestor, came from an overseas territory. It does not tell about the existence of autochthonous people before his arrival. The only thing we can ascertain is that one of the goods given by the wife-givers' side is moke (a kind of palm-wine). The moke tree that produces the juice that will become the wine is considered to be a female body. The earth is thought to be ruled by a great goddess called ine le pu'u, whose figure is a snake. The association of the rice and of the moke tree with the earth is natural. The fact that the whole agricultural procedure is considered to be the burial of the mother's corpse and her rebirth also shows the association of wife-givers with the real ownership of the land.

The existence of the kin group is asserted by the range of kin involved to collect the exchange goods. An individual cannot always gather all the required goods by himself. He usually asks the members of his patrilateral kin to help him. The latter can therefore claim their share of the gifts received. This sort of cooperation can be observed in all rituals, in the construction of houses and in the agricultural activities. I had the chance to observe a family head carry out the simple ritual (sharing a meal) required to renew the relationship with his ine ame. This shows the fact that people are conscious of the mother's brother - sister's child relationship on a rather abstract level. Wife-givers are referred to as ada vuru and wife-takers as ana vuru (the same words are employed to designate the sister's children). Vuru is the word which emphasizes the mother's brother - sister's children relationship.
This hypothesis enables us to analyze the symbolism of the center of the Lio settlement, as is expressed in the combination of a phallic megalith (*tubu*) and the circle of flat stones (*musu mase*) surrounding it (see fig. 9).

![Figure 9](Image)

This whole cyclical ritual process is accentuated by the flow of exchange goods. Rice, palmwine and textiles are presented by the wife-givers, and pigs (buffaloes in former days), weapons and golden ornaments are contributed by the wife-takers.

The cycle of the *n'gua ria* ritual thus appears to restore the tie between the heavens and the earth, and to return the cosmos to its primordial state, characterized by chaos, the mother of every creation.

6. Conclusion

In the present paper, I have tried to reveal the parallelism that exists between the cosmology, the lay-out of the village, the house form, the image of the human body, agricultural activity and the social structure. The *nai kéu* ritual is the occasion on which the levels are made explicit and people are integrated in the most comprehensive totality.  

I have also tried to demonstrate that in Lio society the house is not primarily conceived of as a functional space, but as a means to relocate people within an extended cosmological setting. This setting is marked by a complementary structure, which the Lio express in the metaphors of the 'head' and the 'tail' of a snake, with the 'navel' as a point of mediation.

If culture were to be understood as a text, the root metaphor of the snake connects the human body with various sub-texts such as the structure of the house, the lay-out of the settlement, the exchange system, the system of kinship, myths and ritual. The Lio decode these domains through the metaphor of corporality and by a performance that is not necessarily conscious. The Lio individual enacts a cultural text which defines his identity in a cosmic drama that is set on stage in the *sao ria* house during the performance of the *n'gua ria* ritual. However, in Lio culture, any space would be a potential stage.

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9 There have been several studies of the house in relation to cosmology and the social structure (e.g., Cunningham 1964, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1977). Cunningham made an analysis of the house and of the allocation of the inside and the outside of a house to wife-givers and wife-takers on ritual occasions. He shows the cosmology implicit in the structure of the house. Reichel-Dolmatoff made a similar analysis against the background of myth and of explicit cosmology, as the latter is made clear in myths as well as in rituals.
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