G. Forth
The Pa Sése festival of the Nage of Boa Wae (Central Flores)


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When Kodhi Têki heard that the buffalo belonging to Wonga Wea was named Kodhi Têki, Kodhi rushed home and slaughtered his own buffalo. Wonga Wea then died. (Summary of a passage from a Nage narrative.)

Located in central Flores between the culturally and linguistically related Ngadha and Endenese-Lionese, the people who have collectively become known as the Nage are among the least described populations in the whole of eastern Indonesia. Of the few scattered publications dealing specifically with Nage society and culture, probably the most accessible are a pair of short articles in Dutch (Beker 1913, Van Suchtelen 1919-21) and a chapter in a book by the English travel writer H.S. Banner (1929). These three pieces are also similar in that all focus on a single institution, the festival the Nage call pa sêse, which involves the slaughter of a large number of water buffalo.

Considering the many other matters of ethnographic interest to which these early authors might have turned their attention, this repetition may seem unfortunate. Yet their single, shared focus turns out to be most fitting, for not only is this ritual a spectacular event — for which reason, clearly, it, rather than other Nage usages, drew the attention of these foreign observers — but as my recent research among the Nage of Bo’a Wae indicates, the ceremony is a central institution of their society. In a Maussian sense, it is a total social phenomenon, manifesting simultaneously structural, economic, and religious or cosmological aspects. It is also, for the Nage themselves, probably the most salient element of their traditional
culture and, in their own conception, among the most important criteria of their present ethnic identity. While I was among them they would regularly refer to it, even in spite of the fact that, when I first came to know them, the festival had not been held in the principal Nage village of Bo’a Wae for over 25 years.²

In these respects, pa sése provides an obvious starting point for an analysis of traditional Nage society. Owing to spatial constraints, the discussion that follows will necessarily be limited to the general features of the ritual, local meanings which inform it, and its relationship to social structure; and many details must be excluded. Since the topic is fairly complex, this paper should be regarded as a preliminary report on pa sése, and I hope to present fuller ethnographic support for the conclusions to be drawn in future publications.

**Instances of Pa Sése**

The ritual I shall examine is commonly known simply as pa (cf. dialectal and Ngadha para, Riung paras), a term that refers to the usual Nage method of slaughtering a buffalo by inflicting numerous wounds so that the animal dies gradually.³ In this sense, pa can denote any one of several, individually named rites in which a buffalo is thus killed. But its most usual reference is to what the Nage specifically designate as pa sése, a large-scale pa involving the slaughter of numerous buffalo. The modifier sése was in this context translated for me as 'one by one' and 'connected, successive', 'one after the other'.⁴ As I was told, sése — which can in fact be used alone

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² My study was centred in Bo’a Wae and the immediately surrounding area. As I have never myself seen pa sése, the information I have on this infrequently performed ritual mostly comes from informants' accounts. In 1985, however, I was fortunate in being able to view in detail a videotape that had been recorded of a pa festival held in the village of Menge, about 10 kms. to the northwest of Bo’a Wae, earlier that year. The film had been borrowed by E.Waso Ea, my main host in Bo’a Wae, from its maker, whose full name I have not yet been able to determine. I am nevertheless grateful to both men. The film was especially useful in that it allowed me to put many questions to Nage who viewed it with me. As I was seated comfortably throughout the showing, this experience arguably lent a new meaning to the old notion of 'armchair anthropology'.

When I revisited Bo’a Wae in 1988, I was also able to investigate the preparations that were being made for a performance of pa sése that was to take place in late August, in connection with the rebuilding of a cult house (sa’o waja). Though I was unable to stay long enough to witness the ritual itself, the information I gained on this occasion was invaluable.

³ This method is also employed by the Ngadha (see Arndt 1954: 351), who however also have other ways of slaughtering buffalo, and among the Toraja of Sulawesi (Volkman 1985: 96). A tradition that explains the separation of the Nage and Ngadha (or Orang Bajawa) peoples, who are thought once to have been united, recounts how the Nage gave up slaughtering buffalo by delivering a single blow to the throat with a parang (toa) while the Ngadha retained this method. The Nage then adopted pa instead. The toa method is also practised in at least some parts of the Keo region.

⁴ I was told that sése might be a reduplicated form of sé, in the sense of 'to slice'.
to denote *pa sése* — thus refers to the slaughtering of a large number of animals in succession. Otherwise, Nage thought that the word might allude to the practice of tying the buffalo to a long rope attached to the sacrificial post known as *peo* and then pursuing it with spears and parangs, or to the practice of fencing off the village plaza to facilitate this custom. Both of these usages indeed distinguish *pa sése* from other instances of *pa*, as does the practice of killing many animals in succession, so that, regardless of their linguistic worth, all these interpretations are relevant to the definition of the ritual.

Informants differed with regard to which named instances of *pa* should be classified as *pa sése*. One specialist claimed there were four. Most often, however, Nage speak of just two kinds of *pa sése*. One is *pa peo*, the festival held after a new forked, sacrificial post (*peo*) is erected in a village or when an existing post is removed from one village to another. The other is *pa sa'o*, the *pa* performed after the completion of a new ‘cult house’ (*sa'o waja*; *sa'o*, ‘house’, *waja*, ‘old’, etc.) belonging to a local descent group. By ‘local descent group’, I refer here to an unnamed localized segment of the larger grouping Nage call *woe*. This term, which I provisionally translate as ‘clan’, denotes a named descent group usually represented in more than one village. Affiliation to such groups, and thus to their segments, is by preference patrilineal, but incorporation into the mother’s group, or even other groups, regularly occurs as well, either when bridewealth is not paid or because of a particular form of adoption. As I discuss just below, while *pa sa'o* concerns the localized segment of a clan, that is the group associated with a single cult house (*sa'o waja*), *pa peo* — the ritual performed after a sacrificial post is erected — is sponsored either by an entire clan (*woe*) or by several groups belonging to different clans. It should also be pointed out that clan segments, or cult house groups, corporately own land independently of one another, and that erecting a cult house and subsequently performing *pa sa'o* in effect establishes a group of this kind as a distinct corporate entity within the larger clan.

The writings of Beker and Banner are relevant to the distinction of *pa sa'o* and *pa peo* only in so far as neither of the performances they describe, occurring in 1910 and apparently 1926 or 1927, is clearly connected with either of these undertakings. Nor, from what information I could gather, was a performance that was held in Bo'a Wae in 1956. The *pa* ritual observed in 1913 by Van Suchtelen, on the other hand, followed the erecting of a *peo* post in the eastern Nage village of Rendu Ola (1919-21: 193). This indicates, then, that *pa peo* and *pa sa'o* are indeed not the only instances of *pa sése*. Yet Nage regularly speak as though they were, so that one is justified in treating them as the most important contexts in which

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5 There is not sufficient space here to discuss the other varieties of *pa sése*, but this omission will not significantly affect the following discussion of the ritual in general.
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this sort of ritual is required. In this connection, it may be relevant that, as I later show, *pa peo* and *pa sa’o*, in contrast to other instances of *pa sése*, have significance for the definition and constitution of social groups.

An issue related to the different kinds of *pa sése* is the frequency of its performance. Beker (1913) describes the ceremony he witnessed in 1910 as an annual harvest festival (*oogstfeest*). But all the information I obtained in the Nage region indicated clearly that *pa sése* was not held every year. In fact the Nage of Bo’a Wae seem to have performed the ritual only four or five times since 1910. As was pointed out to me, however, in earlier times hardly a year went by without *pa sése* being performed in some village or other within the Nage region or in the neighbouring Keo area. The ritual usually takes place during the relatively dry months preceding planting, from August to October.

**Participants in Pa Sése: Pa Sa’o and Pa Peo**

When *pa sése* is held after the building of a cult house (*sa’o waja*), all men belonging to the group that owns the house are required to slaughter a buffalo. The Nage speak of participation in *pa sa’o* as an obligation and as a confirmation of one’s membership of the group concerned, rights to land owned by the group, and a voice in its affairs. If a person does not slaughter, his position within the group can then be called into question and, in principle at least, he can lose the rights attaching to membership. In this connection rights to land are especially important, being by far the most often mentioned by Nage.

All of the foregoing applies as well to *pa peo*, even though in this case the ritual is performed by a clan (*woe*) composed of two or more segments that exercise rights to land independently of one another or by groups belonging to more than one clan. When the festival is held in Bo’a Wae, for example, groups belonging to five different clans, including the leading clan Deu, collectively sponsor the rite, and all are obliged to slaughter, even though in the strictest sense the principal, and owner of the *peo* post, is Deu. At *pa peo*, it is moreover usual to invite members of other clans, and people from other villages, to attend the festival and to slaughter buffalo. Indeed, any association of clans or clan segments united around a single *peo* will have a number of other groups, some of them even from outside the Nage region (for example, from Menge, So’a and Ngadha), which it will regularly invite to *pa* and by which it will be invited in turn.

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6 Other groups may be invited to slaughter at *pa sa’o* — the festival sponsored by a single clan segment — as well, but on a smaller scale than at *pa peo*. When the leading segment of the clan Deu in Bo’a Wae restores its cult house and thus performs *pa sa’o*, members of particular local segment of the clans Tegu and Mudi are always summoned to slaughter. The invitation is then reciprocated when these groups build, or restore, their own cult houses.

7 This reciprocal relationship is one instance of *ka’e-azi*, a category that also applies to members of the same clan or clan segment and to same-sex siblings.
In contrast to members of the sponsoring groups, guests, although they contribute animals for slaughter, do not of course have a claim to lands belonging to the sponsors or a say in their internal affairs. Nor, it seems, do they have an actual right to slaughter, at least not in the same sense as do men of the groups that sponsor pa.

Where several clans or segments of a clan sponsor pa peo, as is in fact usual, the rite is not performed by a single land-owning entity. Nevertheless, in pa peo as well as in pa sa'o, the ritual can be said to articulate and reinforce a territorial unity, since the sponsoring group will be composed of segments of a single named clan, or in any event groups that occupy neighbouring lands and villages and in other ways constitute a political unity. In the case of pa peo as performed in Bo'a Wae, moreover, the five clans that sponsor the festival, although now resident in separate villages, are said formerly to have occupied a single village with a single peo.

By no means all local descent groups found in the Nage region at present have cult houses, nor, according to what I was told, did all such groups in the past. Thus only a limited number of these groups — localized segments of clans — are able to perform pa sa'o. This applies with even more force to pa peo — the pa performed after erecting a forked sacrificial post — since very few villages, or more exactly very few descent groups, have such a post. At the same time, I was told that it is possible to hold pa sa'o without a peo, by employing two large crossed bamboo poles (sagu doka) as a means of tying up buffalo.

The organization of a pa sése ritual, particularly a pa peo, expresses and confirms a hierarchy among the participants. Any group that possesses a forked peo post includes two named positions: saka pu'u, or 'trunk rider', and saka lobo, or 'tip rider'. These are named after the physical positions the individual holders, who may belong to the same or different clans, occupy when they sit atop a new peo post as it is carried into the village. As accords with the fact that the trunk end (pu'u) of the post is always brought into the village first, the saka pu'u is the senior member of the pair. Indeed, he is recognized as the overall leader of the group which possesses the peo, while the saka lobo can roughly be described as his deputy or surrogate. At pa peo, therefore, the buffalo of the saka pu'u is the first to be slaughtered, followed by the animal provided by the saka lobo. In Bo'a Wae, both of these positions are filled by men of the clan Deu, though from different local segments of that clan; the group of the saka lobo, which has its own cult house (sa'o waja), is resident in a different, though neighbouring village, so that only the group of the saka pu'u is resident in the village of Bo'a Wae itself.

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8 The great majority of cult houses in the Bo'a Wae region are at present in disrepair, so that nowadays other houses are usually employed for the purposes of a cult house, and are sometimes named as such. Since 'cult house' (sa'o waja) strictly speaking refers to a particular form of building, however, it is a moot point whether the groups concerned can properly be said still to possess such houses.
In addition to *saka pu’u* and *saka lobo*, there are several other named ceremonial positions linked with the *peo* which become manifest at *pa peo*; and in the case of the *peo* of Deu in Bo’a Wae these, or some of them, are occupied by men from other clans. Since there was considerable disagreement in Bo’a Wae as to who should fill which position, and because even the number and nature of the positions themselves was in some dispute, I shall not attempt even a summary of this evidence here. Suffice it to say that, in this regard, *pa sése* (and especially *pa peo*) serves to express and validate a hierarchical order of social relationships both within and between the sponsoring groups. What is more, preparations for *pa sése* may involve the negotiation of these positions, and even of the principal positions of *saka pu’u* and *saka lobo* themselves, which appear to depend as much on wealth and personal leadership qualities as upon any strict order of succession defined by descent. This applies especially when a new village is founded or a new *peo* post erected. As I was myself able to witness in Bo’a Wae, preparing for *pa* can also entail the settling of long-standing land disputes, since the questions of who has the right to slaughter, and when in a particular order of precedence, are always bound up with questions of who are the legitimate representatives of particular groups and, thus, the rightful holders of particular areas of land. In this way, then, *pa sése*, and more particularly *pa peo*, may entail a major revision of society and of relations among component groups: in other words, a sort of socio-political spring cleaning.

The Ritual

Arranging *pa sése* thus requires a series of negotiations as well as a number of minor rites that can take months, even years. The main issues to be settled include who will slaughter and in what order (and thus how many buffalo will be killed), who should be invited as guests, and in some instances at least which individuals will occupy the named positions discussed above. It is also usual for the principals, that is, those who have a right to slaughter, to invite affines — both wife-givers and wife-takers. In accordance with the obligations attaching to the alliance relationship, wife-takers will often (but not always) supply the buffalo that the host will slaughter. As elsewhere in eastern Indonesia, buffalo, a principal item of wealth, are among the goods given as bridewealth, and as prestations to wife-givers at funerals and on other occasions that require material exchange between affines. Indeed, all affines who formally attend *pa sése*...

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Most of these positions are named with terms incorporating *lado*, a word that denotes the various sorts of cock feather headdresses worn by all prominent men who have a right to slaughter in *pa sése*. One issue that remains unclear is how the named positions, of which there are at least three or four besides *saka pu’u* and *saka lobo*, articulate with the five clans (or rather segments belonging to five different clans) that together sponsor *pa peo* in Bo’a Wae.
take part in an exchange of alliance prestations sometime after the slaughter is completed and before they leave. Obviously, fairly extensive arrangements must often be made to accommodate affines and other guests, since a pa festival can take several days and invitees must often travel some distance to attend.

During the three days preceding pa sése, various activities are carried out in a particular sequence. The main tasks are spinning the long, thick rope — about 30 metres in length, according to Beker (1913:626) — with which the buffalo will be tied to the peo post, and constructing a high fence (mada). The fence, which is erected just in front of the houses on either side of the rectangular village plaza, is to prevent maddened buffalo from charging into the crowds of spectators. In Bo’a Wae, the two shorter ends of the plaza are left unfenced, since the rope is not so long as to allow the animals to run this far, whereas in some other parts of the Nage region, where buffalo are let to run completely loose, the ends are fenced as well.

The buffalo brought for slaughter at pa sése should be bulls (mösa), and preferably castrated bulls (kodhe) since these are the largest beasts with the longest horns. In earlier times, it is important to note, these were animals that had been left to roam free, and so, as Nage point out, they were in effect wild animals. After capture, the buffalo were raised for a while in special pens called hoa, where they were well fed, to fatten them for slaughter. During this time, they would be well attended by men or boys who would sleep near the pens and would build smoky fires to keep insects from bothering the animals. Some animals were also purchased for pa sése from the more northerly regions of Mbai and Toto. Nowadays, by contrast, slaughtered buffalo are normally fully domesticated animals used in wet rice cultivation and, as Nage sometimes complain, are therefore much less fierce than the beasts of former years.10

The actual killing of the buffalo at pa sése can take one or more days. According to Beker (1913: 625), the first day begins, at sunrise, with a rite in which rice and dog flesh are offered to the spirits of the dead, and a number of ‘chiefs’ partake of the meal sitting on the circular pile of stones that surrounds the base of the peo post. ‘Lesser chiefs’, in contrast, sit on the ground, in a ring around the peo. In Bo’a Wae, this ritual meal is known simply as nalo ena pu’u peo, ‘to eat at the base of the peo’, but informants stated that it should take place at the end of the day, and that dog flesh is never served.11

10 Wet rice cultivation was introduced to the Nage region during the colonial period, previous to which buffalo were used only as bridewealth and as sacrifices.
11 Both the early sources and my own field record describe other rites, which include offerings, that are performed during the days just before and in the evening preceding the first day of pa sése. I have no doubt that Beker was right about the dog flesh, and I therefore suspect that my informants’ statement reflects no more than the current distaste for this meat that some wealthier and higher-ranking Nage have acquired in recent years.
The proceedings begin when the first buffalo is led into the arena. The horns of the animal are tied to one end of the long, thick rope, while the other end is attached to the base of the *peo*. The owner, who is of course the *saka pu'u* in the case of the first buffalo, then steps forward and, in a high, staccato voice, performs a speech (*bhea*) announcing his derivation and social standing and the extent of the territory he can lay claim to, and hence proclaiming his right to slaughter at the post in question. In its more traditional form at least, an important part of this kind of speech is the recitation of a genealogy which, as was stressed to me on several occasions, gives especial prominence to the derivation of the individual's mother, mother's mother, and other female ascendants. Since Nage prefer that children be incorporated into the father's group, what is apparently referred to here is a chain of alliance connections which place the speaker, and his group, in relation to other groups.

Generally, the speech can be understood as a performative or 'operative act' (see Skorupski 1976, following Austin 1962) that serves to express and confirm the standing of the buffalo owner, or to locate him socially within, or in relation to, the group sponsoring the festival, which is then validated by the actual killing of a buffalo. That this is not a mere formality is evidenced by the possibility that if someone makes a claim that is not accepted by the leaders of the sponsoring group, the animal will be cut loose from the *peo* and he will be asked to leave. Interestingly enough, earlier writers, especially Beker (1913:626) and Banner (1929:300), interpreted this kind of speech as an address to the ancestors, which further accords with their understanding of *pa sése* as primarily an act of 'ancestor worship'. As I discuss below, the cult of ancestors, to the extent that it is relevant to the performance of the rite, actually appears to be of minor significance, at least in the present understanding of the Nage of Bo'a Wae. Although none of these writers was an anthropologist, here we have something reminiscent of the later imposition of classic descent theory on social realities it cannot adequately accommodate.

After the speech, the buffalo owner, who is dressed in his finest costume, and a number of companions who are similarly decorated and who carry parangs and spears, perform a dance to the accompaniment of gongs and drums, moving (as is normal among the Nage) anti-clockwise around the *peo*. This done, the owner raises his parang as a sign that the slaughter should commence. An assistant, a kinsman of the owner, then casts a chicken's egg and, according to some accounts, also a handful of uncooked rice, at the buffalo, and makes the first thrust at the animal's hindquarters with a spear. The owner of the buffalo then plays no further part in the proceedings.12

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12 This is necessarily a rather condensed account of this part of the performance. There are also some minor differences between my data and those included in the older, published descriptions, but space is not sufficient to explore these here.
This initial wounding is intended to enrage the animal and set it on the run. According to Beker’s account of the ritual held in Bo’a Wae in 1910 ‘attempts are made to infuriate the buffalo by firing shots and by throwing bamboo spears into its hide’ (1913: 626-27). The buffalo is then pursued by a number of young men armed with spears, parangs and swords who, advancing from the two ends of the rectangular field, alternatively endeavour to wound it further and to dodge the great beast’s horns. This procedure, which requires much daring and skill, is subject to definite rules. For example, spears must be held in the hand and may not be thrown; and it is prohibited to immobilize the buffalo in any way, for instance by injuring its legs. When necessary in order to flee a charging buffalo, young men may use the high fence as a means of escape, sometimes springing to the rooftops situated not much higher than the top of the fence.

In this way, the buffalo is slowly brought to the point of collapse both from loss of blood from the numerous wounds and from exhaustion. When this occurs, the animal’s hind legs are chopped at the knee joint in order to incapacitate it completely, and it is dragged to the side of the field, where it is finally killed by spearing or stabbing in the heart. There the great cadavers lie until all the buffalo to be slaughtered have met their end, for it is forbidden to butcher the beasts and distribute their flesh until the entire slaughter is complete. The procedure described above is then repeated until every buffalo is killed.

Descriptions of pa contained in the older published sources, as well as ones I obtained from Nage, emphasize the dangerous nature of this activity — which can easily result in human injury, even death — and the great excitement and frenzy generated by the event. It is also important to note its competitive nature. Indeed, one of the first accounts I was given of pa sêse described it as a competition between man and buffalo, while Van Suchtelen (1919-21:193-94), generally an astute observer, calls it ‘fighting’ with buffalo (buffelgevechten) and compares it to Spanish bull-fighting.13 On the whole, the attitude of both the human combatants and the spectators towards the buffalo would appear to be one of aggression, even hatred, at least in earlier times. Thus, Nage in Bo’a Wae regularly described the method of killing used in pa as cruel and ‘sadistic’. In a similar vein, Beker (1913:627) reports that the buffalo is teased and provoked by

13 Pa is also competitive in regard to the size of the buffaloes — and especially the length of their horns — that participants are able to contribute to the slaughter, and as a contest of skill and daring between the young men themselves who, as was pointed out to me, are hereby able to enlarge their reputations. Other Nage performances also display a pronounced competitive, or even combative aspect, either in their practice or supporting ideology. The most notable examples are the annual hunt (to’a lakó), conceived as a war on deer and wild swine, and the yearly etu competitions, which involve hand-to-hand combat between youths of different villages. Daeng (1988: 261) makes much the same point in his discussion of buffalo slaughter among the Wogo people, to the west of the Nage.
singing and dancing men and women, while Banner speaks of the young men who engage the beast 'plaguing and paining the poor animal in every diabolical way that suggests itself' (1929:303) and of the spectators behind the fence joining in the 'preliminary plaguing' of the buffalo (1929:304).  

Indications are, then, that the buffalo is treated not just as an animal to be slaughtered but as an enemy. In this regard, it also seems relevant that the buffalo are rubbed with pig grease to make them shine and are provided with headdresses and necklaces (in this case made from aubergines, dhoso), after the manner of warriors going into battle. Indeed, in this respect they are decorated in basically the same way as their owners, the 'sacrificers' in the terminology of Hubert and Mauss (1964:10).

An Analysis of the Rite

The method of killing buffalo characteristic of pa sése reveals two main elements: the aggressive and combative attitude displayed towards the beasts, and the inflicting of numerous wounds. Nage explain the latter practice as a means of drenching the earth with blood. This objective also accounts for the practice of letting the animals run free on the end of a long rope while they are subject to wounding, since this results in the shedding of blood far and wide over the village plaza. The relative freedom permitted the buffalo of course also facilitates combat between men and beasts, a competition in which (though the odds are somewhat stacked in favour of humans) both sides, albeit to differing degrees, are exposed to the danger of injury and death.

Blood provides a major key to the religious significance of pa. All rites called pa — and not just pa sése — have as their objective covering something with blood. For example, in pa gale kaju, a rite performed during the construction of a cult house, a single buffalo is stabbed several times as it is led across various wooden parts of the house, so that each will be splashed with blood. Indeed, a common component of Nage rites in general is 'washing with blood' (basa wai 'a), most often the blood of a fowl. Christian Nage sometimes explain this sort of practice as a 'purifi-
cation’ or ‘blessing’, comparing their use of blood to the Catholic Church’s use of holy water. Closer attention to particular usages, however, reveals that the blood is very often employed to render something efficacious or to bestow or restore vitality. Drenching the ground with blood in pa sése is apparently an instance of this theme, for the practice was explained by Nage as a means of returning fertility to the earth, or of replacing what humans have taken from it, so that crops will continue to prosper in the future.\(^\text{16}\)

This interpretation tends to agree, then, with Beker’s characterization of the pa ceremony he witnessed in October 1910, as both a ‘thanksgiving’ (dankdag) for the earlier harvest and a ‘day of prayer’ (biddag) for the coming harvest (1913: 623). This author, however, depicts pa simply as a rite in which buffalo are killed so that their flesh can be offered to the ancestors, upon whom the fertility of the land, and human well being in general, is dependent. The later descriptions by Van Suchtelen and Banner, both of whom draw upon Beker’s article,\(^\text{17}\) also present pa sése in this way, with Van Suchtelen describing the erecting of a new peo and the accompanying buffalo slaughter that he witnessed in Rendu Ola, as ‘the high point of Nage ancestor worship’ (1919-21:193). This description is correct insofar as cooked buffalo flesh is indeed offered to the spirits of the ancestors (and they, like everyone else, must surely be well served from the great pile of carcasses). Yet this aspect of the undertaking cannot fully illuminate the method of slaughter and the particular significance of blood in the rite. More importantly, making an offering to the ancestors was anything but a prominent theme in accounts of pa given to me by Nage. In fact, one of my principal informants was altogether skeptical of this understanding of the ritual.

To grasp the full meaning of pa sése for the Nage would require a comprehensive investigation of their cosmology which is not possible here. The main point to be appreciated, however, is that Nage regard the buffalo slaughtered in the ritual not just as buffalo, but as an embodiment of spiritual beings, free spirits distinct from the ancestors, which inhabit another world parallel to that experienced by ordinary men and women. These spirits — mountain spirits, as I shall call them — are thought to have their abode on the higher slopes of the Ebu Lobo volcano, above the area

\(^{16}\) Daeng (1988: 261) attributes the same significance to the blood of slaughtered buffalo in the eastern Ngadha region of Wogo. Much further afield, but in a similar vein, Suzuki (1959:103) notes that in sacrificial feasts on Nias, the express purpose of slaughtering many fat pigs is to make the ground ‘slimey’ (sic). In fact, ideas regarding the ritual killing of pigs on Nias would appear in a number of respects to parallel those entailed in Nage buffalo slaughter. Also, in *etu*, the annual pugilistic competitions of the Nage, the shedding of blood was similarly claimed to bode well for the prosperity of crops.

\(^{17}\) Though he cites neither author, Banner appears to draw heavily on both Van Suchtelen and Beker, to the extent that it is often difficult to tell what the author himself witnessed of the activities he describes.
where the Nage themselves reside. How they should be classified is a rather complex issue that cannot be settled here, but they are sometimes identified as nitu, a reflex of a widespread Austronesian term which in Nage and elsewhere in central Flores more generally refers to spirits associated with the earth and with uninhabited places, which can appear as snakes, fish, and other creatures, and can also assume human form. Particularly the practitioners called toa mali, as people with 'clear eyes, vision' (ana mata da), are able to see these spirits as human beings, so that this is arguably their true form. This idea moreover explains the Nage claim that if one looks over the shoulder of a toa mali during pa sése, the buffalo will appear as human beings, as well as other ideas according to which, for example, bull buffalo are sometimes able to turn into specific human males and have intercourse with human females. Indeed, the Nage equation of buffalo and anthropomorphous spirits should be understood as a variant of the widespread Indonesian identification of water buffalo and human beings, a theme that frequently makes buffalo slaughter a substitute human sacrifice.

But there is another side to the story. The world of the mountain spirits and that of ordinary Nage so parallel one another that, when the spirits hold their pa festivals, the buffalo they slaughter are actually human beings. Thus, as Nage with specialist knowledge told me, it is especially to prevent this from happening — in effect to preserve human lives — that Nage periodically perform pa sése. In other words, humans must destroy the spirits before the spirits destroy them, both being vulnerable in the form of buffalo. Nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in a myth concern-

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18 Other terms applied to the beings which, as buffalo, are killed in pa sése include: bapu, ga'e bapu, niitu bapu, polo bapu, ga'e lobo, and ata zèle lobo ('people up on the mountain'). I intend to make a comprehensive analysis of the Nage classification of spirits in a future study.

19 To cite just a few comparative cases: in Savunese mythology, buffalo derive from human slaves, and replaced slaves as sacrifices after their appearance on Savu (Van de Wetering 1926: 567). On Sumba as well, people (apparently slaves) who were not properly provided for by their lord turned into buffalo (Kruyt 1922: 579). Tetum religion similarly makes the symbolic equation, human being=buffalo' (Hicks 1984:73). The Ngaju of Borneo believe that buffaloes and humans have the same ancestor, and for this reason buffalo take the place of human slaves as sacrifices (Stöhr 1976:101; Schärer 1963:116). Closer to the Nage, the Ngadha people immediately to the west compare human beings to buffalo; thus the buffalo is the main sacrificial animal there as well (Stöhr 1976: 111, following Van Baal 1947: 184, 212; 1971: 252; see also Arndt 1930: 818, 823). Furthermore, on Nias, where the pig is the principal sacrifice, it is similarly these animals that are 'considered to be substitutes for human offerings' (Suzuki 1959:102), while at the other end of insular Southeast Asia, among the Buid of Mindoro in the Philippines (Gibson 1986:154, 156-157), men are equated with pigs in a way that particularly recalls Nage ideas I discuss just below. Finally, Bloch's (1985) analysis of cattle slaughter among the Austronesian-speaking Merina of Madagascar suggests a symbolic equation of cattle, water spirits and an autochthonous population replaced by the Merina, thus indicating an intriguing parallel with the symbolism of Nage pa sése.
ing the first pa festival performed in the ancient Nage village of Nata Nage. Briefly, an ancestor of the clan Tegu, called Kodhi Téki, was out one day gathering materials for the festival, when he encountered a man named Wonga Wea, who was actually a mountain spirit. During their conversation, it turned out that Wonga Wea too was preparing to pa, and that the buffalo he would slaughter was named Kodhi Téki. Armed with this knowledge, and without revealing that his buffalo was called Wonga Wea, Kodhi Téki rushed home and slaughtered his animal at once. Thus Wonga Wea — the spirit — died. As Nage pointed out to me, had Kodhi not acted as he did, it may well have been the other way around.

In view of these ideas it becomes clear why, at pa sése, Nage in effect do battle with buffalo, and why they slowly dispatch the beasts in a way that modern Nage, at least, describe as cruel. In a sense, the Nage are fighting for their lives. The spirits whose deaths the slaughter of buffalo bring about are said to kill and eat humans. By performing pa, therefore, Nage not only prevent this from happening, by as it were launching a preemptive attack; they also eat the spirits in the form of buffalo, so that the potentially eaten becomes the eater. From another perspective, pa sése can be understood as a dramatization of a struggle that goes on daily between men and spiritual forces that can cause illness, death and other hardships. This competition for life (or the means to life) which opposes Nage to spirits, and which has its clearest ritual expression in pa sése, appears to be structural, that is, inherent in the Nage conception of their relationship with the mountain spirits. It should however also be referred to the representation of nitu spirits generally, as beings closely linked with the earth, especially uninhabited places, and natural phenomena such as springs, large rocks and trees. Indeed, nitu spirits are spoken of as the 'possessors of the land' (moi tana), which specifies them as original owners and prior occupants of areas now inhabited by Nage. Especially as cultivators, Nage regularly displace these spirits. Thus, when a large tree is felled or an area of forest is cleared to make a new settlement, these spirits must, by way of a rite called wika nitu, first be 'driven out'. Significantly, wika is the term also applied to expelling human enemies from a territory. Here, then, competition between man and spirits is represented as more contingent, in particular on Nage claiming, or reclaiming, uncultivated or uninhabited areas of land. The identification of these so to speak 'spirits of the wild', and particularly the mountain spirits, with buffalo is also significant.

\[\text{The name Wonga Wea (wonga, 'flower, blossom'; wea, 'gold, golden') is curious because, while the character in the myth is clearly male, the name itself, as the Nage well recognize, is that of a woman. It is also interesting that the same name denotes a female character in a Lionese myth recorded by Heerkens (1943).}\]

\[\text{Nage express this idea with the paired phrases ga'e pa, bapu pesa, 'ga'e slaughter (buffalo), bapu eat (meat'). Ga'e bapu and bapu are two other terms used to refer to these spirits (see note 18).}\]
in this context, for as noted earlier, buffalo slaughtered at *pa sése* in former times were in effect wild animals, and ferocious ones at that.\(^{22}\)

The link between the spirits killed in *pa sése* and the earth bears upon the other major element in the ritual: the drenching of the earth with buffalo blood. As noted, this blood represents a return of what humans have taken from the earth, particularly by way of food crops. In this regard, I suggest, the buffalo, and the anthropomorphous spirits they embody, may be seen as substitute human sacrifices. Indeed, 'substitute' does not properly express the ritual equivalence involved here, for the distinction between 'spirits' and humans appears to be a relative one. That is, there is evidence (which I cannot go into here) to suggest that, for the Nage, humans are spirits to the spirits. I would further argue that these spirits are equivalent to captive enemies or slaves, who in former times were themselves used as sacrifices in various parts of eastern Indonesia, including Flores.\(^{23}\) Stated yet more generally, the spirits as a category can, I suggest, be seen as representations of enemies, actual or potential, some of whom are captured, in the form of buffalo, on the occasion of *pa* rituals. In this light, then, the blood shed in *pa sése* is human blood, or the equivalent of human blood, so that the return that is thereby made to the earth can be seen to express or effect a rather direct and reciprocal form of exchange for the life that humans have derived from it.

There is yet another significance Nage attach to the blood shed at *pa sése*. As an elderly ritual expert put the matter, people must perform *pa* not only to incapacitate malevolent spirits and prevent them from killing and eating humans, but also to appease another kind of spirit, called *noa* (or *nitu noa*). In this connection it was further explained that the man-killing spirits summon the *noa*, which are especially identified with disease among livestock and which commonly take the form of crows, to enter human settlements and cause harm. Therefore, by slaughtering buffalo at *pa sése*, one gains protection from the *noa* by providing them with a meal in the form of congealed buffalo blood and other waste.\(^{24}\) In this view as well, then, the blood is conceived of as an offering of sorts, though one that is of a negative, concessionary kind, in contrast to the alternative represen-

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\(^{22}\) As part of the ecological change resulting from the introduction of irrigated rice cultivation in the colonial period, buffalo have now for the most part become 'fellow workers', as Nage expressed it. This new relationship has very likely effected a change in the Nage understanding of, and attitudes towards *pa sése*, although it is difficult to say whether or to what extent this particular factor may have reduced the frequency of its performance in recent times.

\(^{23}\) Slaves were formerly killed at the funerals of high-ranking Nage. Also, Arndt (1944:156-157) describes a former practice of human sacrifice, in another ritual context, among the Lionese, to the east of the Nage.

\(^{24}\) The feast of the *noa* is manifested in the arrival of large flocks of crows that swarm over the buffalo carcasses when these have accumulated in sufficient numbers at the edge of the arena. Referring to the ritual he attended in Rendu Ola, Van Suchtelen mentions the stench caused by the accumulating cadavers (1919-21:198).
tation of the blood as a positive return that is supposed to ensure a positive result, in particular good future harvests. Paralleling this difference is the circumstance that the blood of the buffalo can be viewed both as human blood, effecting a positive and direct return of life, and as animal blood. In this latter regard, it is thus appropriate that, as an appeasement, the blood is given to spirits, the noa, which kill animals rather than humans.

The ethnographic evidence, and especially what Nage themselves have to say on the matter, therefore indicates that Nage understanding of the act of killing buffalo in pa sése combines at least three standard views of ‘sacrifice’: as the offering of flesh, or blood, to spirits (including both the ancestors, at least according to the older accounts, and the noa); as the killing of spiritual beings or deities (see Frazer, Robertson Smith; also Jensen 1963); and as the sacrifice of a (substitute) human being, an idea which in the present context particularly recalls Hubert and Mauss’s interpretation of slaughter as involving the death of the sacrificer, as an act of expiation. Nage buffalo slaughter thus seems to combine certain elements of all three models, which have of course sometimes been treated as competing interpretations. The evidence I obtained in Bo’a Wae, however, indicates that, as regards its cosmological aspect, it is the view of pa sése as a battle with, and a killing of life-threatening spirits that is the most salient. In accordance with this is the fact that it was the particular method of killing the buffalo, the skill and daring required of the participants, and the danger of the activity that formed by far the bulk of Nage descriptions of the ritual.

It should by now be evident that the several local interpretations of aspects of the pa sése ritual do not in fact compose a single, homogeneous representation. More particularly, the buffalo appears to provide a variety of meanings and thus to serve Nage as a ‘multivocal’ ritual symbol (see Turner 1967). In the context of the ritual itself — and arguably only in this context — the animal is a malevolent spirit whose destruction provides a victory, albeit a temporary one, over life-threatening forces. On the other hand, its blood represents a reciprocation; indeed, it supplies ‘offerings’ of two kinds: a positive return to the earth (and, as may be inferred, to the original spiritual owners of the earth), and an appeasement for the noa spirits. Also, of course, the flesh of the buffalo is offered — as is the flesh of all ritually killed animals — to the spirits of the ancestors. For the Nage therefore, the buffalo appears to combine and condense both positive and negative values. In addition, though there is not space to do so here, I think it could be shown that these values relate respectively to life-giving and life-threatening aspects of the earth. Indeed, this applies within a wider frame as well. Thus, while in pa sése buffalo are, in Nage eyes, malevolent mountain spirits, as items of bridewealth they are a principal means by which life is secured. Accordingly, whereas in the first instance their negative significance requires killing them, in the second their positive value is realized by transferring them, alive, to other groups. Similarly,
within the context of pa sése itself, the more positive meanings of buffalo slaughter, as facilitating reciprocity and appeasement, are realized in the representation of buffalo blood and flesh as things offered to particular categories of spirits.

In regard to the foregoing, some attention should be given to another question, namely, what distinction if any is to be drawn between mountain spirits and spirits of the earth, the original possessors of the land whom Nage regularly displace. So far I have treated these as one and the same, and indeed this is justified by the fact that Nage commonly designate both simply as nitu. All the same, in the pa sése ritual an implicit distinction between the two is discernible in the local representation, on the one hand, of the rampaging buffalo as the embodiment of a mountain spirit, and, on the other, of the animal's blood as something given to the earth, and thus to the earth spirits more generally conceived. It cannot therefore be concluded that Nage kill spirits and then, as it were, offer these spirits' own blood to them in a more positive act of reciprocity — just as it would be mistaken to conclude that Nage give murderous spirits as bridewealth! Such an interpretation is possible only if one fails to appreciate the polysemy and multivocality of the buffalo as expressed in varying local interpretations of the ritual.

While Nage thus attach various meanings to the slaughter of buffalo in pa sése, as I noted earlier, when discussing the value of the ritual, Nage commentators nevertheless focussed more often on social factors (rights to land, membership of corporate groups) than on cosmological or religious ones. Hence the question arises: what connection might there be between the two sorts of values? Insofar as membership of corporate groups requires contributing to all collective ritual endeavours, regardless of their precise cosmological or symbolic import, any rite might be seen as an expression of the value attaching to membership and of group solidarity. But it is pa sése in particular that, for the Nage of Bo'a Wae, provides a test of group affiliation; and as indicated earlier, this can be understood in relation to the territorial nature of the groups which sponsor pa sése, especially the fact that they collectively exercise rights to land, which for these cultivators is obviously essential to life.

In this regard, then, we might entertain the following interpretation. In traditional Nage-society one claims land, holds it, and affirms rights to it by defending it against outsiders, actual or potential enemies. The ultimate defense against an enemy is of course killing him. For the Nage, the buffalo one fights and kills in pa sése are enemies par excellence, since they embody spiritual beings that are structurally, and symmetrically, opposed to humans. Thus, by contributing a buffalo for slaughter at pa sése, one is ensuring the death of a spirit who has the means, in the same way, to deny

25 At the same time, it is possibly of some relevance in this latter regard that in parts of eastern Indonesia, slaves — that is, captured human enemies — were once used as bridewealth, as indeed they were once ritually killed in some places.
life; one is joining indeed in the common, and crucial, fight. Also pertinent here is the fact that, while the animals are contributed by individuals, they are fought and killed collectively, by all men who are able and willing to enter the arena. On the other hand, if one does not provide a buffalo, one in principle abrogates one's rights to membership of groups that provide access to land, a primary means to life.26

Implicit in this is a view of the spirits embodied in the buffalo as generalized others, that is, as a symbol or representation of competing forces that can deny life, including actual or potential human enemies with whom one is in competition, especially over land and all benefits that are derived from the earth.27 Also entailed in this analysis is a depiction of Nage society as essentially a 'performative structure' (see Sahlins 1985: 26-28), in the sense that membership, particularly of descent groups, must ultimately be supported by action — or as the Nage of Bo'a Wae themselves regularly state, that 'rights' (Indonesian hak) require '(the fulfillment of) obligations' (kewajiban). Among the Nage such action is primarily ritual action. And pa sèse, for reasons I have tried to indicate, is its major instance.

REFERENCES


26 This brief summary does not exhaust the possible social, or structural, significance of the Nage ritual. As indicated earlier, *pa sèse*, and especially *pa peo*, can be seen to provide an occasion for the negotiation or renegotiation of hierarchical relationships and positions of leadership. In this connection, it should also be mentioned that poorer men are often obliged to obtain buffalo for slaughter from wealthier men, including the leaders of the group that sponsors *pa*, thus creating or reaffirming relationships of debt and dependence. In this regard especially, Nage buffalo sacrifice fits quite well into the interpretive framework suggested by Kirsch (1973) regarding Southeast Asian 'feasts of merit' in general.

27 Without going into details, it is relevant to note in this connection that, by representing themselves as subject to attack from spirits resident further up the volcano, where they themselves used to reside, the Nage are in effect putting themselves in the place of groups that, according to their own traditions, they displaced in the Bo'a Wae region sometime during the last century or before. Somewhat contrary to the spirit of Leach's famous statement concerning Kachin *nats* (1954: 182), these mountain spirits are indeed 'something more' than symbols of human adversaries. But since it is the linkage of cosmological ideas with principles of social structure that concerns us here, we can for the time being safely ignore these other possible meanings of the Nage representation.
The Pa Sése Festival of the Nage of Bo’a Wae (Central Flores)


