



The Dance of Creation

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It is important to note, from the very beginning, that all interpretations of what would constitute a Traditional practice or symbol in regard to the rituals described in this article are my own; the population described here does not make any distinction between symbol and immediate reality (which I believe is a Traditional perspective in its own right) and never attempts to interpret its own traditional practices; they are taken as immutable truths and necessary obligations of all human kind on a physical level, the same with the necessity of breathing and nourishment, for instance.

Furthermore, the documentation of traditional practices in Melanesia is not without challenges, because of the remoteness of the areas and – sometimes – the reluctance of the communities towards outsiders; living long term in the communities is a way to overcome reluctance, but that is a difficult undertaking for most people from outside of Melanesia.

The Solomon Islands are situated in the South Pacific, between Papua New Guinea to the NW and Vanuatu in the SE; it is a collection of almost 1,000 islands (under 200 inhabited), divided into 9 provinces and home to a predominantly Melanesian population and thousands of years old orally transmitted traditions. There are over 70 local languages spoken in the country, totally different from each other; the lingua franca used by the local population being Solomon Islands Pijin,¹ a mix of English and local languages, with a form of grammar that resembles the general Melanesian one.

The tradition, or *kastom*, is a central part of Melanesian life and it still regulates all its aspects: it is the main collection of legislation, social rules and traditional rites and symbols in use and its importance stands even after hundreds of years of British colonization. However, in the major urban centers, in the most developed areas and among the higher educated population the importance of *kastom* is continually decreasing, Western legislation and behavioural norms starting to increasingly gain ground. This is not the case of most isolated islands, where *kastom* is still strong and traditional ceremonies and rituals are still performed somewhat regularly.

The Temotu Province is the most isolated territory in Solomon Islands; it is situated in the far SE of the country, it is geographically much closer to Vanuatu than to Solomon Islands and it is home to a predominantly Melanesian population, even though the Polynesian and Micronesian ethnic groups are also represented. The islands comprising the province are the most scattered compared to any other

¹ All Pijin words will be written in italics and translation will be given for all of them; words in local languages will be underlined, with translation also given.

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provinces in the country; the geographical characteristics, coupled with the remoteness of the province and with the unique weather patterns, make Temotu a territory where local tradition is very much alive and Christianity coexists with *kastom majik*² and traditional practices in which only headhunting and cannibalism are no longer to be found.

I have been living and working in Temotu with my wife for a year, gradually gaining the acceptance of the local population which, even though very polite and forthcoming to foreigners, regards all as outsiders when it comes to *kastom*; but my interest in Tradition must have been apparent for the old *kastom man*³ of the various communities, as we have recently been invited to attend a very old and intimate ceremony of the people of Graciosa Bay, situated in Nende, the biggest island in the province – the Nelo Dance.

The Nelo Dance is a ritual symbolising the renewal: the population must perform it in its entirety (because shorter versions exist as well, for minor functions) every 15 years, otherwise Creation will not be maintained and the Gods will destroy and remake it. The *kastom* tells of a time in which it will be necessary to stop the practice, because Creation will have to be renewed; until that time it is, however, necessary for the Nende tribes to fulfil this Traditional obligation.

The story of the local deities is also interesting: apparently they were all human at first, but elevated to divine status because of their capacity to follow Tradition; in all cases the children are taken from their families when they are young and taught “the ways of the Gods” by other Gods; then they are tested several times in succession and, if they pass the tests, they are given a sacred function to perform. It sounds like an initiation. Also, the Gods that brought the present population to Nende were apparently white, very tall, with blond or red hair and beards and coming from far away from the North East, from a “white land”. They were part of a bigger “population of Gods”, that migrated to different places, unknown to *kastom*.

One of the stories told by Nelo is about the migration of the Gods and the establishment of their dominion over Nende; it also tells the story of Opla, the last of the “made” Gods in the local traditional Pantheon (this is also a story of initiation, but for another time).

The preparation of the dance is a specific ritual in itself: a place is chosen on flat ground, close to the reefs that surround the island, at it is cleaned of all vegetation and debris. It is then consecrated by the oldest *kastom man* in the community during a ritual that is performed by him alone, at night, in a language that is very different from the local languages – the language of the Gods; I was not, of course, allowed to hear it being spoken (or to witness the ritual, for that matter), but I suspect that it is at least of Indo-European origin, because when I spoke Romanian on a few occasions (one of the communities wanted to know how my native language sounds) it seemed very familiar to the local *kastom man*, and similar to the language of the Gods. The dimensions and entrance in the dancing circle (the place for *kastom* dances is always of a circular form and always with a single entrance towards the West) are calculated

² Traditional form of magic.

³ A keeper of tradition (he might also be referred to as *bikman*); he transmits the tradition orally to the children of the community (partly to girls and fully to boys) and he is also tasked with keeping the Traditional calendar of community events and with teaching the manufacturing of ceremonial objects used in rituals.

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and traced on the ground by the *kastom man* with the same occasion; he defines, in this way, the physical space of the future creation and consecrates it in observance of Traditional norms. After the location and dimensions of the dancing circle are known, it is surrounded with coral stones extracted from the nearby reefs, to set it apart as sacred space in relation to all other spaces at the community's disposal; once it is "opened" (meaning, consecrated and with apparent boundaries) no one is allowed to step in it until the beginning of the dance and with the invitation of the dancers.

The dancers themselves are a specific part of the community, reminiscent of the cast system (even though this system, as such, is not known in Melanesian societies apart from the Nelo dance); Nelo dancers are chosen from among members of the community by other Nelo dancers and the *kastom* is transmitted to them not only orally, but by dancing as well. This is highly unusual for a Melanesian community, where *kastom* is transmitted to all children orally, while young, and then to girls and boys separately (boys are initiated and taught the *kastom* in the madai⁴).

The madai (or single house) is the place where all male initiations are performed, it serves as seat of council for the tribe and as a sacred location in which *kastom* is transmitted; it is a place where women are not allowed to enter, under any circumstance; it has three entrances, one facing N, used by

the Gods and men and two others facing E and W, to mark the passage of time and the direction of every movement in *kastom* ceremonies (all movements, either individual or group, are from W to E and right to left in *kastom* rituals, without exception).

Moreover, returning to the Nelo dancers, the *kastom man* always takes part in the entire dance.

There is a distinction to be made: the Nelo dance, as a complete ritual, lasts for about 18 hours (it starts precisely at noon and continues throughout the night – always on full moon – until daybreak); it is interrupted by three feasts in which the entire community takes part.

Three weeks before the dance the Nelo dancers start a fasting period that will end during the first feast of the dance; they spend all their time in the madai and do not normally communicate directly with the rest of the community during this period of time; this is done in order to purify them before performing a Traditional function.

The Nelo dance is also a reunification of the sacerdotal with the temporal: the dancers are representatives of the former,⁵ while their guards (warriors chosen from the male members of the tribe in order to protect the dancers while outside the circle) are representatives of the latter. At the start of the dance the Nelo dancers are in the dancing circle by themselves; after the first dance they will invite their respective warriors to join them, thus unifying the sacerdotal and the temporal aspects.

The Nelo dance starts with a ceremony that recounts Creation: a night before the dance, a target is placed on a nearby reef – a tree with banana leaves hung on it; at mid day on the day of the dance the Nelo dancers come from the madai to the dancing circle accompanied by their warriors, in a procession through the village; they enter a covered shed where no one is allowed to look at them (because, traditionally, they do

⁴ The madai has the closest equivalent in English as "single house".

⁵ The attire of the dancers is believed to be identical to the one given to the first man by the Gods and is said to comprise all the science of the Gods in its symbols; in fact, in parts of the dance some of the dancers impersonate the deities.

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not yet physically exist) and their warriors start the shooting competition. Each warrior is given three arrows and he has to hit a banana leaf placed on the tree anchored in the reef; the dance starts the moment the leaf is hit. The dancers themselves can take part in the shooting competition, but by doing that they will forfeit their sacred quality and bestow it on the community instead.

Once the target is hit, the dancing starts: all dancers enter the circle from the W and begin moving circularly towards the E, from left to right; by doing so, they restore Creation and retrace the progress of initiation from human to an elevated condition.

The story of the target, itself, is significant: I will only recount it, without attempting to interpret it, as I think the symbolism is obvious: the first deity (the only one of non-human nature and, interestingly, without a name in the Nende Pantheon) existed alone, in nothingness, before Creation; out of himself he fashioned a bow, an arrow and a target, to practice his shooting skills; the sound produced when the arrow hit the target caused air to appear and the fragments of the target became all things in existence (the manifested Creation); the fragments are in perpetual motion, because they are attempting to reunify and return to the body of the Creator; the function of the Nelo dance is, as mentioned before, to prevent that until the point when the reunification must occur.

After the first dance, which is made exclusively by the dancers, their warriors are invited into the sacred circle; after them, all the public is invited; it is believed that dancing with the Nelo dancers in full ceremony is a blessing and no member of the community will let the opportunity pass. I was invited twice to enter the circle by one of the *kastom man*; I had to politely waive the first invitation because I am a foreigner and, as such, not acquainted to the benefits of the dance; the second invitation was accepted because the first deity (of a total divine nature) is always attempting to reunify everything in existence and, by accelerating the motion of all things, make them return to become an integral part of its body. The deity accepted the invitation for me. This is the explanation I was given when taught how to conduct myself at the dance, as an accepted outsider.

During the dance there are always three young boys in the middle of the dancers, one holding a paddle and the others a bow and three arrows respectively; they symbolize the divine potential existent in all mankind (Nende Gods are all chosen from men).

Apart from the clothing of the dancers, their adornments and body painting are worthy of taking note: their hair is painted white,⁶ to imitate the light color of the hair of their gods; they wear complicated feather arrangements and hats on their heads, to symbolize their sacerdotal function; as a note, their warriors only wear crowns made out of vegetation, to symbolize their temporal function. On the chest the dancers wear the traditional tema shield – a round piece of clam shell, decorated with symbols representing the multiplicity returning to its source (or, in *kastom*, the bonito fish eaten by the egret bird – a symbol and messenger of the first deity). Tema decorations are fashioned out of turtle shell. The body paintings worn by the dancers represent the symbols taught to them by the Gods which, correctly interpreted, will reveal their science: of note there are arrows pointing simultaneously up and down and swastikas (in different forms). The *kastom man* also wear complicated nose piercing sticks decorated with feathers; in Nelo dance these symbolize the boar (which was the animal regarded as the personification of wisdom by the Gods). Almost all Nelo

⁶ With lime powder, obtained by burning slabs of dead coral and grinding them into a fine powder.

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dancers wear also a mouth guard, made out of turtle shell, that also pierces the nose; it is also called “nelo” and it symbolizes Tradition,⁷ which is orally transmitted to men by the Gods. It must be mentioned that all adornments and painted symbols are fascinating to watch but almost impossible to describe, because the shapes are complicated and the *kastom* significance (with the respective Traditional implications) could form the subject of an entire series of articles.

During the Nelo, after the first few dances, the trunk of a palm tree is fixed in the middle of the sacred circle and a basket filled with betel nut,⁸ a local leaf and lime powder is hung on it; all dancers, their warriors and the community members participating (in this order) will chew betel nut for the duration of the first period of the dance. After that, the palm tree will be taken out of the circle. The tree symbolizes the Axis of the World, with its two Poles; the fact that it is introduced in the circles symbolizes the direction of the first Hyperborean migration, along the Axis, and the fact that it is taken out could symbolize the end of the first migration and the horizontal (Eastern and Western) directions took by some of the groups in the migration. On another level, the absence of the palm tree from the circle at the beginning could be interpreted as the “original polar indistinctness”,⁹ its introduction could mean the end of this phase and the subsequent removal of the Axis could mean the return to the state of indistinctness that will happen at the end of Kali Yuga, the present cycle.

Moreover, the consumption of betel nut by everyone present and the fact that it comes from the Axis represents, in my opinion, the dissemination of unity in multiplicity, again in relation to Tradition as return of humankind to a state beyond the present human condition.

The information contained in the present article consists of what I was orally taught by various people on Nende and able to observe during *kastom* ceremonies, especially the Nelo; there is probably no written account of the entire Nelo dance (even though it will probably be documented in 2013 in the thesis of a PhD student present at the dance; his work, however, will have an exclusive anthropological orientation, it is not a Traditional study), or at least not to my knowledge. The interpretations given are my own, unfortunately limited by my personal studies and opinions.

⁷ *Oloketa save blo' debil an man* – The entire knowledge of Gods and men; this is, in a short phrase in Pijin, the first explanation I've received on the nelo and the reason I equate it with transmitted Tradition.

⁸ The betel nut is an energizing fruit consumed throughout the South Pacific, especially in Melanesian communities; the nut itself is chewed with a combination of leaves (or korokua, a plant originally from Papua New Guinea) dipped in lime powder; when chewed in quantity, it will give an energizing effect and will stain the teeth, lips, tongue and palate a bright red.

⁹ Idem.