



SPEAR WARS

Keeping their heads down, **Annemarie and Holli Hollitzer** brought back this report of Sumba's colourful annual *pasola* festival

A bloodcurdling yell pierces the morning quiet at Wanokaka. In a flurry of thundering hooves and flying headbands, the warrior charges. Taking careful aim, he hurls the first of his wooden spears, but his skilful opponent ducks.

Relentlessly, the bareback rider pursues his enemy, and his next spear finds its target. Blood trickles down

the cheek of the unfortunate horseman as he slides to the ground. With shrill screams the spectators surge on to the battlefield. At last, blood has been spilled to appease the gods and ensure a good rice harvest. The triumphant warrior returns to the safety of his own ranks.

This ritual battle between teams of young village men is the culmination



of the annual *pasola* festival held on the Indonesian island of Sumba.

Lying to the south of Komodo and Flores in East Nusa Tenggara, Sumba is off the beaten tourist track. Its fame comes from its magnificent hand woven ikat cloths and from its horses.

Around seven days after the February and March full moon, four villages in West Sumba stage their annual *pasola*: Lamboya and Kodi in February and Gaura and Wanokaka in March.

This ancient horseback combat is fought between hundreds of young warriors divided into two teams. The men from the coastal villages align themselves with the Lower World and Nyale, the goddess of the sea, while the ones from the hills represent the spirits of the Upper World.

The word for spear, *sola*, is thought to have given the *pasola* its name. Its origins go back 33 generations. During a famine on Sumba, a villager travelled to neighbouring Sumbawa to



Riders (above) at Wanokaka oval wait for the *pasola* to start; early morning at a hilltop village (left) in West Sumba

seek the help of the Sultan of Bima. After successfully meeting three challenges set by the Sultan, he was rewarded not only with rice seeds and a bowl of seaworms, but also with one of the Sultan's daughters. The *pasola* festival honours this bond between the two islands.

The time set for the *pasola* ritual is when the seasons change from wet to dry, and the events are initiated by the ceremonial ploughing of a sacred rice paddy field. During the month leading up to the climax of the *pasola* a host of fertility rituals are presided over by the *rato*, the powerful high priests of the indigenous *Merapu* religion.

Before a successful *pasola* can be held, the high priests must also perform ritual cleansings. Then, as the big day draws near, the *rato* retire into isolation. During this month many taboos apply, one being that no-one is allowed to wear red.

It was still pitch-black when, on the morning of the *pasola*, we left our hotel in Waikabubak, the district capital of West Sumba. Despite the early hour, the road leading south to Wanokaka was filled with excited crowds making their way on foot and on horseback to the *pasola* beach. There the *rato* had spent the night awaiting the arrival of the sacred seaworms.

These multi-hued worms, which share their name with the Nyale sea goddess, only surface once a year. In fact, these "worms" are not all they seem but only the sperm- and egg-filled tail ends of a segmented marine worm (*Eunice viridis*), shed in an annual reproductive process.

When we finally arrive at Wanokaka, the still-hidden sun has set the sky on fire and turned the ocean waves to crimson. In the morning twilight we look for the hoofmarks of the riders and follow them to a rocky outcrop at the far end of the beach.

There, concealed behind a grove of gnarled old trees, the *rato* are making last-minute preparations. On the beach, excited crowds of villagers wait for the two chosen priests to emerge and collect this year's first nyale.

From the appearance of these seaworms the *rato* will predict the success



The exodus (top) from Wanokaka Beach as villagers head for the main event; clutching a handful of spears, a combatant (centre) rides out to attack; divided into two teams, the riders (right) assemble at opposite ends of the field

or otherwise of next year's harvest. If the worms are plump and healthy, there'll be a good rice harvest. But if they are thin and brittle, heavy rains may rot the rice. If they are skinny and pitted, it may presage a rat or locust plague that will destroy the crops.

A hush falls over the crowd when the two *rato* appear. Wearing traditional *hinggi* ikat cloths slung across their shoulders, and adorned by powerful amulets, they wade into the shallow water. Their eyes are fixed on the mass of worms swirling around their feet. Tension mounts as they bend and scoop up a handful of worms and seawater. Then they slowly return to shore.

The gods have smiled and the worms wriggling in their cupped hands are fat and healthy. It looks like a bumper harvest. Now the villagers hoist up their sarongs and rush into the sea to collect their share of the *nyale*. As the morning sky turns from peach to turquoise, the *rato* face each other in a mystical chant to the goddess of the sea.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the beach, the bareback riders have divided into two teams at opposite ends of a wide sandy hollow. Hundreds of restless horses fidget under their riders. In raucous voices, the warriors heap insults on their opponents until, in a shower of flying sand, the first horsemen gallop out to attack. Their blunted wooden spears land with a



A priest searches for nyale seaworms; sunrise (below) at Wanokaka Beach

thud on enemy bodies. Abruptly, with only the pressure of their bare knees, they then guide their ponies back to their own lines.

In an attempt to limit the bloodshed, the government has, in recent years, insisted that all spears must be blunt. Despite this, a successful *pasola* requires the spilling of blood. While anyone wounded in the *pasola* is thought to have offended the ancestral spirits, a rider with a pure heart is believed immune to injury.

This early morning skirmish is only a preparation for the main event that takes place on a large field sur-

rounded by thousands of spectators. Without the *rato*, who act as referees in the principal event, this beach battle quickly turns to chaos with excited on-lookers joining in. Before anyone is seriously hurt, the police call off the combat.

The colourful horsemen, followed by eager fans on foot, set off for the main event at Wanokaka oval.

Making up the rear of the procession, we arrive more than an hour later at a large field set against palm-fringed hills. Excited spectators line the green expanse and hawkers selling *ketupat* (cooked rice in fist-sized palm-leaf packages) are doing a roaring trade. Riders wearing brightly-coloured turbans have formed a line near the group of *rato*, who open the event by exchanging ritual insults.

Hour after hour, we watched the spears flying as courageous horsemen charged their enemies until, by early afternoon, both horses and horsemen were faltering. The *pasola* was declared over. Blood had been spilled and debts to the ancestors wiped out. For one more year, the spirits of the *Merapu* had been satisfied and West Sumba's villagers could look forward to a bountiful harvest. ©

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