THE PASOLA

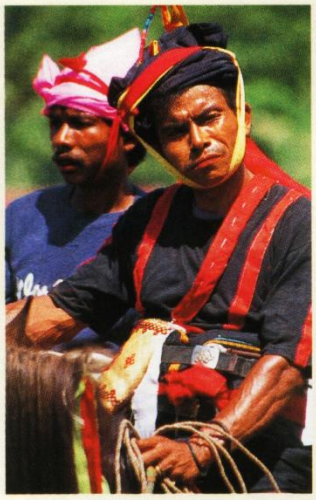
The Pasola actually takes place in four different village areas, twice in February and twice in March. In a region of fiercely divided loyalties (there are 27 distinct languages in West Sumba), the Pasola has always been a ritual battle strictly distinguished from internecine warfare.

For each of the Pasola events, the two sides represent the hillside or interior villages, and the coastal villages. Membership is not limited to the men of one area, but rather any eligible male who wants to enter from practically the entire south-west may do so, aligning along coastal/hillside allegiances.

According to the local legends, once the Pasola had been brought to Sumba by the unknown hero, who possibly came from the westerly village of Kodi, it was passed into the other Pasola villages (Wanokaka, Gaura and Lamboya) as a means of keeping some sort of peace among the different tribes, always with the strict instructions regarding the nyale.

Further back, the legend of the nyale is itself somewhat of a mystery. In Lombok (between Bali and Sumba) an annual festival is held to honour the Goddess of the Sea and the worms are believed to represent her hair.

Traced even further west along the archipelago, we see that in the southern Javanese port of Pelabuhan Ratu (Queen's Port), a yearly ceremony is held for the goddess of the sea Nya Loro Kidul, so it is feasible that the Sumbanese festival has travelled in various forms along the archipelago, where, it should be noted, little other cultural influence has. That "nyale" is a corruption of "Nya Loro" is otherwise unfounded and a conclusion of this author.



Above: ritual horseback battle is the climax to the Pasola; left: men await their chance to do battle

To this day, and despite increasing Christian influences, sea worm festivals take place among other island peoples in the South Pacific, although on a less colourful scale than the Pasola.

Elsewhere, nyale are known as palolo worms —a Samoan or Tongan word (the languages are similar) for any of various marine polychaete worms of the families *Eunicidae* and *Nereidae*. They reproduce by breaking in half at the same time each year, the tail portion rising to the surface to release eggs and sperm.

Sumbanese mythology has other interesting vestiges. According to the *rato*, through whom the legends are passed father to son in a secret language, the Sumbanese that now inhabit the island are descendants of the original inhabitants who had been displaced by flooding.

Forced to flee to the heavens, the people were forced to return to earth a long way from home, apparently to Babel. From there they migrated back to Sumba by means of a land bridge (i.e. the Indonesian archipelago) to resettle their lost homeland.—***Dan Bool***

year's Pasola, to create an air of excitement and tension in the final few days.

The men then have one more day of preparation, excused from their duties in the field. Though horses may not have been used in the first Pasolas, the proliferation of horses on the island has seen the men take to their mounts. The lucky among the warriors will have a horse reserved only for use in the Pasola, though most will use a family horse that suits their riding style.

Ridden bare-back, and at best one-handed, the horses must respond almost instinctively to their riders, ducking and weaving, twisting and turning, carrying their jockeys to safety through a hail of spears. The relationship between the horse and rider requires hours of training to attain the almost telepathic level necessary.

Under cover of the night on this occasion, the group of *rato* leaves the mother village—their spiritual centre—and proceeds to the beach, calling upon the villagers as they pass through each hamlet. As the riders put the finishing touches to their outfits and their horses' decorations, the *rato* gather in the half light and wait for the first streaks of dawn to paint the sky. A steady stream of villagers bring numerous personal offerings in the form of chickens, bananas and bound packages of cooked rice, all placed on the sacred rocks as food offerings for the *Merapu*.

At the appointed time, the two *rato* responsible for gathering the nyale leave their fellow priests and wade out into the surf, searching the exposed rock pools and shallows for the emissaries of the gods. Once they have collected enough, the villagers are themselves allowed to collect worms, to be taken home and cooked and appreciated as a delicacy.

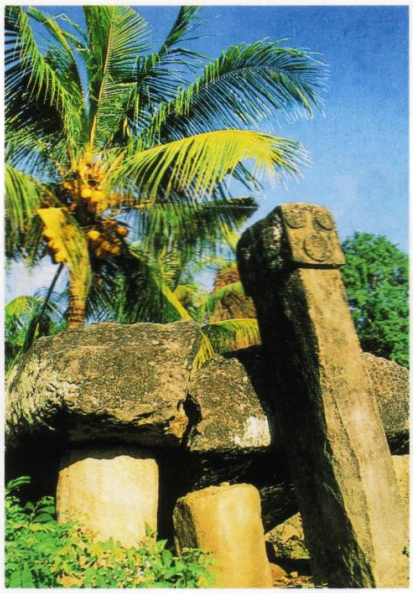
The worms are carried to the main group of *rato*, there to be examined and interpreted for the omens they carry. Only strong and healthy worms bode well for the year's crops; should the worms be fragile, thin or listless, the crops will suffer accordingly. As the findings are confirmed by divination from numerous chickens, back up the beach the teams of riders become increasingly agitated, until they can no longer contain themselves and the fighting begins.

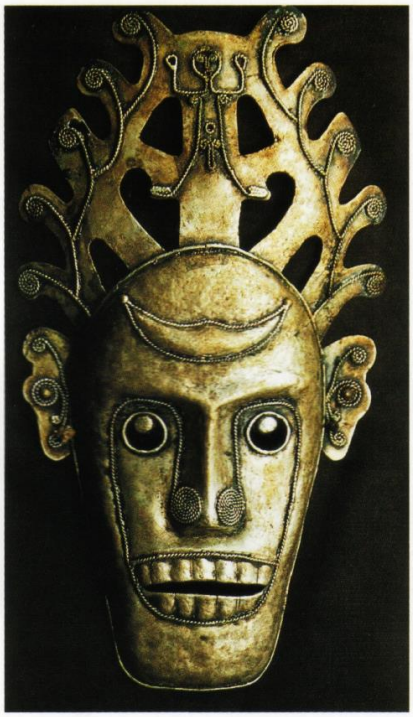
Though the early morning session on the beach is supposed to be no more than a warm-up for the main event later in the morning, with tension between the two teams running high and with both freed from the constraints that govern the main event, the practice session quickly degenerates into a chaotic free-for-all. Carrying up to four blunt wooden spears, riders from either end of the loosely defined arena gallop out into the no man's land that separates the two sides and, selecting a target from among the opposition ranks, they let fly a vigorously thrown spear just as they bring their horse round to dash back to the relative safety of their own ranks.

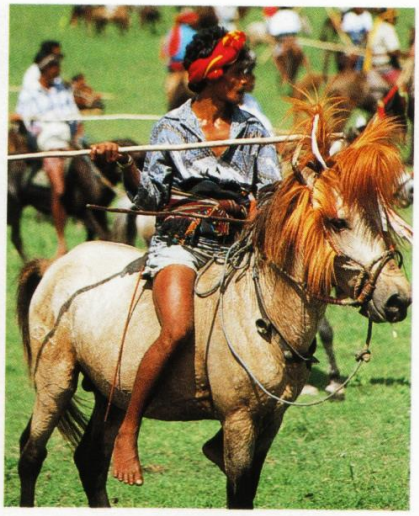
Cheered on by the gathering crowds, the riders become more and more daring, venturing ever closer to the enemy, presenting broadside targets in mockery of the skill of their opponents. Forays become more and more frequent, with several riders emerging simultaneously, only to be chased back by spear-wielding opposition. Huge cheers go up from the spectators whenever any of their team scores a body hit and soon the young men are playing up to their admirers in the crowd.

Without the *rato*, who act as referees in the later event, the fighting escalates and is quickly out of control. The momentum swings from one end of the "pitch" to the other, and from side to side, often enveloping and involving the crowd in the battle. As the weaker side is routed, frustrated riders, unable to restock their spear supply in the chaos, dismount and continue their fight hand-to-hand. As the frenzy spreads, the crowd joins in, picking up

Above: a more peaceful pursuit of the west Sumbanese people is the weaving of ikat blankets; right: Sumbanese mask; below: megalithic tombstone







With minimal protection for riders, the risk of serious injury is high at the spear-throwing climax of the Pasola when passions are inflamed

anything to hand to launch at the other side—and only timely police intervention prevents a full scale stone-throwing riot. The fighters are separated and calmed in preparation for the main event.

Within an hour or so, more than 7000 spectators have gathered around the main field and, surrounded by a ring of people, the riders at either end of the pitch, which must be 100 metres long, eagerly await the chance to rejoin the battle.

Before that may happen, the *rato*, who have finished their deliberations on the bench, must exchange ritual insults across the lines of their affiliations, throwing down the gauntlet to their respected opponents and entreating the members of their own team to fight for the honour of the village gods.

Though the spilling of blood is not essential, it is always thought to be providential as a blessing on the land, whereas death, a not uncommon occurrence, reflects more personally on the deceased, who, it is reasoned, must have sinned in some way against the *Merapu*.

Some years ago, one of the villagers was found fishing in the waters off the Nyale beach in the month running up to the Pasola. On the night before the main event, all the indications, from the chickens and other omens, were that the man would be foolish to compete. Despite the imploring of his wife and family not to take part, he ignored all the warnings and rode out the next morning. A spear penetrated his neck and, despite the ministrations of an American doctor in the crowd, he died quickly.

With the *ratos'* challenges voiced, the battle is once more joined, marginally more controlled than previously, but still spirited and chaotic. In front of a baying crowd, the younger riders have even more to prove. They become reckless in their bravado, while those more experienced are content to select specific targets and engage from opposite sides like medieval jousters denuded of their cumbersome armour, arcing towards each other across the spear-strewn field, waiting until the last possible moment in a test of nerves, skill and courage.

With minimal protection, the risk of serious injury is high, and, as one rider leaves the field with blood pouring from a wound in the back of his head, the stronger side completely routs the other, driving them off the field, across a stream and up into the hills. Once more the fighting ignites the crowd, and, to a background of pistol cracks and shouted orders, stones rain across the ladening sky.

A timely downpour dampens the fighting spirit and averts a repeat of the house-burning events of a few years ago. The villagers return to their thatched houses to boast and toast into the night over the traditional meal of roast pig and coconut milk, and dream of the revenge they will exact next year. G

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