

# Territorial Organization by Bupolo People in Buru Island

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## Abstract

To understand Bupolo people in Buru Island, I should start from how I understand the way they divide their life space in association with the environment, namely by understanding the territorial organization of the Bupolo. This understanding will then give a good direction to the understanding of their social organization. Complex division of space in Bupolo people's lives is something interesting to study. Ethnobotany approach is one of the most suitable methods to be used to describe to complexity. This paper attempts to describe how the Bupolo people in Buru Island, Maluku Province, organize their territory and life spaces.

**Keywords:** Bupolo, Buru Island, territorial organization, ethnobotany

## Introduction

Buru Island is known for being the place of internment of communist prisoners after the establishment of the President Suharto political regime, the "New Order", following the fall of President Soekarno. Buru is the island that is known to produce the essence oil of kayu putih from the "white tree" (*Melaleuca leucadendron*, Myrtaceae).

This island is in the southwest of the Moluccas, where its coastal regions are considered unwelcoming and dry. People living in the mountains of Buru Island make the essence oil of kayu putih and go to sell it on the coast. They avoid contact with the outside world and were always on the move and rarely stay in their homes.

Between 1969 (the year of the arrival of political prisoners) and 1979 (the year of their liberation), the entrance to the island was tightly controlled by the military and no research was allowed. People from the outside only knew that the prisoners were housed in a plain, north-east part of the island, where they had to work in irrigated rice fields and gardens which they had to do to make a living. In addition, in the northern part of the region the military developed a system of forced labor to exploit the forest, where many prisoners died. In the 1980s, military elements established a plywood factory and opened private forest concessions in the southern part of the region.

After the liberation of prisoners and the opening of the island to the outsiders, the civil administration began to have interest in the island and its inhabitants. Thus, at the end of 1980s, a settlement project in order to facilitate their participation in the overall development of Indonesia was launched. The objective of this project was to bring these people to reside permanently in the villages for easy access by the officials. Thus, dozens of settlement areas consisting of wooden houses with thin iron roofs were built on the coast.

In this paper, I discuss the description of Geba Bupolo community, especially on their territorial relationships. After describing about the general lifestyle of Geba Bupolo and some information about their language as an introduction, I begin this description with the ideas about the origin of the island and its people by constructing the story of some fragments of myths that I have collected. Then, I will explain the conception of how Geba Bupolo is being in their island and how it represents it as the body of a human being that is necessary to protect its center that contains the vital parts. I will next embark on how to organize the island's territories by assigning each social group a role in protecting the central part of the island where Mount Date and Lake Rana Waekolo are located. I will elucidate how this central part is designed as 'a dwelling' place. I address the structuring of different lineage groups, *noro*, and sub-groups, *bialahin*, which development is analogous to the development of a sago (*Metroxylon sagu*) cluster, where the suckers get nourishment from the main trunk and then are released. The *bialahin* term is indeed the term appellation of sago. I will explain how each *noro* has its place in the territory; it consists of the catchment area of a river and the mountain that is its origin and corresponds to the origin of its first ancestors.

### **Buru Island in the Moluccas, Indonesia**

Indonesia is located in the tropics and is very rich in natural resources. Despite the cultures and languages of the people composing this country, the feeling of unity is generally strong despite some regional exceptions. There are about 530 languages and dialects in Indonesia. To overcome this linguistic multiplicity the government decided since independence to impose a single language: Indonesian. The language chosen by the anti-colonial opposition since 1928 is derived from the Malay lingua long used in the archipelago. Although Indonesia was a Dutch colony for centuries, the Dutch as a language is not, and has never been used in the daily lives of Indonesians. However, English is now of great importance in technical and scientific language.

The Maluku archipelago or the Mollucas is located in eastern Indonesia. According to the administrative division, it is divided into two provinces since 1999, i.e. North Maluku with Ternate as the capital city and Maluku with Ambon the capital city. The Maluku archipelago has the distinction of being made up of about a thousand islands whose layout is

reminiscent of Indonesia on a reduced scale. This is why this archipelago is also called “the thousand islands”.

Hundreds of islands of this archipelago remain anonymous. The population of 1,533,506 inhabitants is essentially distributed in the principal islands and archipelagos: Ambon, Ambon Lease, Seram, Banda, Wetar, Tanimbar, Kei, Aru, and Buru.

In floristic point of view, Maluku is one of the region where limited research has been done, so that accurate data is still lacking. This area has a high geographical diversity that affects the variation of the vegetation (PATTINAMA 1998).

We have little information about the colonial period of Buru Island. Clove and nutmeg were absent in this island, that the Dutch had little interests in this island. On the other hand, there is the kayu putih in the island, so inhabitants have extracted its aromatic essential oil (PATTINAMA 1998).

The surface area of the island of Buru is about 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and has 135,500 inhabitants. In the south and west, it is bordered with the Banda Sea; and the north by the Seram Sea. Administratively the island of Buru has, since 1999, two districts (*kabupaten* in Indonesian), i.e. the District of Buru with Namlea as the capital city and is divided into five regencies or *kecamatan*, and the District of South Buru Namrole as the capital city and is divided into five regencies.

### **Methods and Approaches**

This study is based on field research for two years. The initial phase of this research started to learn the local language, the language of Buru, to understand all the expressions and symbols in their lives.

My efforts to learn the local language helped me to get accepted as a researcher by local people. In fact, due to the lack of schools, many mountaineers only speak the local language. In addition, the knowledge of the language was essential to me to fully grasp their conceptions about how the world is. However, for sometimes they remained reluctant to provide me with information about everything, they seemed to keep secrets and not disclose them to a stranger, especially anything related to their relationship to the ancestors. I must add that even among themselves mountaineers often use metaphorical language to talk about what is most sacred.

My first concern was to understand the organization of space according to the topography, hydrography, and distribution of ecosystem. Then, I analyzed the relationship between the visually perceptible organization with the use and exploitation of land resources and their distribution among different social groups. For that I had to study the organization of the territory as a function of social organization. My intention was interested in it to the extent

of its relationship with the rights to use, the different forms of management and land exploitation, and vis-à-vis sacred places.

### **General Information on the Human Environment**

Among the inhabitants of the island of Buru, I must distinguish the native (*autochtone*) population lives mainly in the mountains, and a non-native (*allochtone*) population who are now most numerous, and live on the coast and coastal plains.

The *allochtone* population has several origins. Some people of foreign origin has been there for a long time. They are descendants of Arab and Chinese traders who mostly stayed in Buru for centuries and married there. The other non-native people are from more recent immigrations.

The coasts of Buru island, like those of other islands in the Indonesian archipelago, are not regularly monitored by national marine guards, because Indonesia is composed of many thousand islands spread over 5,000 km. Buru has been the subject of a spontaneous transmigration more or less regularly of mostly poor people coming from elsewhere of the country in the hope of improving their life.

Since the 1980s an official transmigration was organized by the government. Also, as was mentioned in the introduction, after 1965 and the fall of President Soekarno, the island was chosen as a place of banishment for communist prisoners, many of whom chose to stay there after liberation. It is especially in the northeastern part of the island that Javanese transmigrants were settled under the national transmigration program. In this region, new roads, as well as public transport have been developed.

In general, the development in this island is very slow because all decisions are taken without consultation by the central government. These decisions do not take sufficient account of the island's capacity to contribute to national income from its natural resources.

While the *autochtone* population, as I have just described, will call themselves Geba Bupolo, they have been named with various terms by the colonial and Indonesian administrations or administration of the Maluku Province (PATTINAMA 2005), described as follows:

- Alifuru, that is to say, the people living in the dense forest. The word Alifuru comes from the language of the northern Halmahera: *halefoeroe*, that is to say "place in the dense forest". The North Halmahera people, including Tobelo people, often speak of « *o halefoeroeka ma nyawa* » that is to say, people from the forest. The word Alifuru was also used for indigenous people living in the island of Seram.

- Orang Kafir (*orang* = people, *kafir* = infidel) that is to refer to people who do not belong to one of the great religions.
- Suku Terasing (*suku* = people, *terasing* = isolated) that is to refer to the “isolated people”, term used by the Departemen Sosial (Social Department) to refer to all isolated groups who continue to practice their local customs.
- Orang Pemas (*pemas* = lazy) that is to say “lazy people”.
- Orang Belakang (*belakang* = back) that is to say, “backward”.

All these expressions indicate the determination of Bupolo Geba to stay in their mountains and their refusal to participate in government programs, as long the government has not talked to them about the programs.

When I asked them the reason for their reluctance, they said that they live in this island with their ancestors and that if they did not faithful, one day the ancestors will be angry and send the disease and death. “Always be faithful to them”. “We do not want to leave our villages because we have our gardens and protected places where our ancestors have lived”. But the government wanted them to move to the coasts and forced them to choose one of the major religions. Indeed in Indonesia during the General Suharto (Orde Baru, ‘the new order’), people were forced to convert to one of five religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

### **The Territorial Organization in Relation to the Social Organization**

#### **The conception of Geba Bupolo to their island**

Most of the Geba Bupolo’s conception of how the world is in their representation of Buru island, is like a bisexual human being, lying, with the central bodies - sexual organ of male, stomach and uterus of female – consisting of Mount Date as the male essence and Lake Rana Waekolo as the female essence.

All this reflects the image of the island as a living being (see Fig. 1), with the head (*olon*) representing the highest mountain in the west (*kakupaladmada*), spine (*kakunrohini*) representing the peaks covered by the sacred Garan forest, left foot (*kadanwana*) on the side of the coastal plain in the northeast (*waeyapo*) and the right foot (*kadanbali*) on the side of mount Batakbul in the southeast. The arms on each side, with the left hand (*fahanwana*) on the north coast (Waenibe river) and right hand (*fahanbali*) on the south coast (Waemala river). In the middle, the abdomen (*fukan*) with Mount Date represented by a male organ and Lake Rana Waekolo in its center represented by the belly containing both the bowels and uterus (female organ). This is the central part that the Geba Bupolo are responsible to preserve and protect from external attacks. This central area is irrigated by rivers flowing into the lake

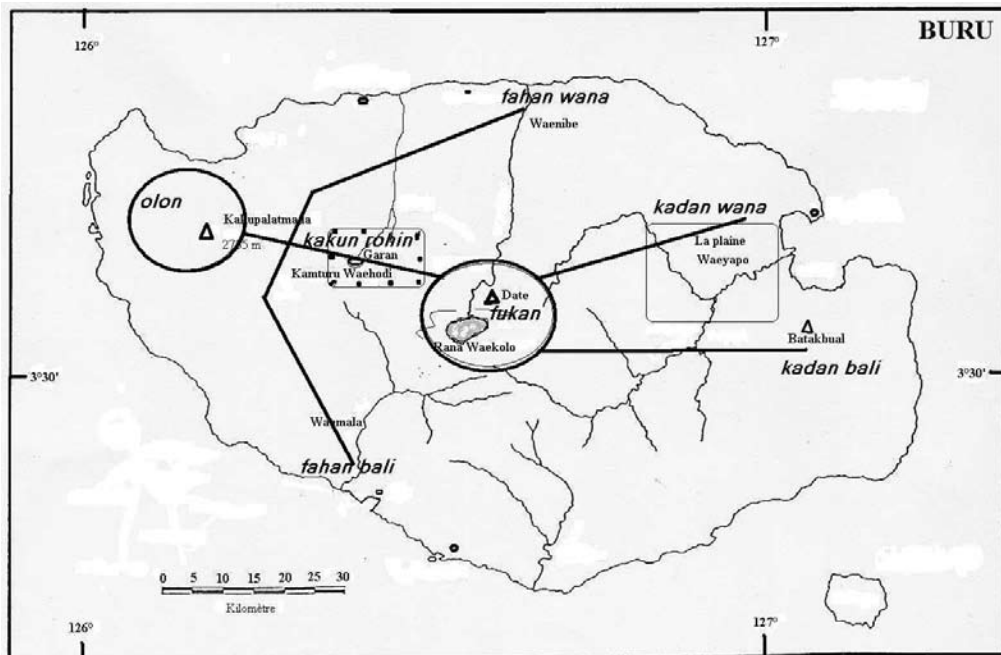


Fig. 1. The conception of the island of Buru according to Geba Bupolo.

Rana Waekolo and the water flows into Waenibe river which further flows to the north coast, as represented by the side of the left arm (PATTINAMA 2005).

In this expression are synthetically gathered several concepts and essential elements in the lives of Geba Bupolo. Some of which are presented here: the daily staple food that is made from sago starch and also cassava, ritual staple food, rice and millet, the elements of the reproduction of human beings, attention to wear in the sense of fluid flow.

### The division of Buru island between two *fena*

According to the Geba Bupolo and as indicated by their myth, their dispersion started from *fenafafan*, the main village on Lake Rana Waekolo. *Fena* refers to both the group of inhabitants and the territory they occupy. It corresponds to different levels of territorial organization. *Fafan* means “superior”, “first” or “flank”. A first partition is made between two *fenas* who do not have the same importance geographically and each corresponds to a part of the body, according to the representation that the Geba Bupolo perceives about their island. The two *fenas* are *fena* Lisaboli Lisela and *fena* Masa Meserete.

The *fena* Lisaboli Lisela in the north is dominated by Mount Kakupalatmada (head), and in the center are Mount Date (males) and Lake Rana Waekolo (females). The Waenibe River (left arm), the sacred Garan forest (spine) and Waeyapo plain (left foot). The Geba Bupolo of

*fena* Lisaboli Lisela whose role is very important to protect the center from the external influence is considered as cadets.

The *fena* Masa Meserete, in the south, includes Mount Batakbul (right foot) and Waemala river (right arm). The Geba Bupolo of this *fena* is considered to be an elder brother.

Each *fena* possesses two *Matguguls* initially installed in the center. The term *Matgugul* is a contraction of *matlea* “head” and *gugul* “sit”. This term, as we have seen, was used at the time of the Sultanate of Ternate. Indonesian calls the *Matgugul* of the Geba Bupolo as the “king of the land”.

Two *Matguguls* of *fena* Masa Meserete left the center to go to the south coast and embrace the Protestant religion. The Dutch designated them as Raja Masarete.

The word Lisaboli consists of two words: *lisa* which is the name of *Terminalia* sp. tree, and *boli* “surround”. Therefore, ‘Lisaboli’ literally means “surrounded by *Terminalia* sp. trees”. The word Lisela, in my opinion, is an abbreviation of two words *lisa* and *ela*. *Lisa* “*Terminalia* sp.” and *ela* means “try”. It is difficult to know exactly why the *fena* facing the north use that name. It can be seen that *Terminalia* sp. trees are numerous on the hills around the lake. In addition, the different stages of the cycle of traditional agricultural practices are fixed according to the observation of the phenological stages of this tree, i.e. the fall and regrowth of the leaves, and the appearance and color of the latter stage.

The Geba Bupolo considers *fena* as a shared house with three parts: the room (*humalalen*), the entrance hall (*humanelan*), and the door (*sufen*).

For *fena* Masa Meserete in the south, the terms that designates this *fena* consists of *masa* “mature”, the abbreviation of *mese* “*Artocarpus indicus*” tree and *farete* “superior”. For the Geba Bupolo, *Artocarpus indicus* is a tree linked to the mythical story of the spillway of Lake Rana Waekolo to the Waenibe river which flows to the north. The water could get in that direction because a woman ancestor, who lived in Fenafafan, cut a trunk of *Artocarpus indicus* in the spillway area. The Geba Bupolo says when looking at the topography, the north shore of the lake is surrounded by high mountains, especially Mount Date, but not on the south shore, and therefore the water should flow to the south. The lake water in fact flew to the north and south is that the members of the Geba Bupolo went to *fena* Masa Meserete.

From their perspective, the relationship with the living world corresponds the horizontal links, meanwhile the relationship with the ancestors corresponds the vertical link (BARRAUD and FRIEDBERG 1996). For Geba Bupolo, in the center for horizontal links are marriages, in which negotiations and ceremonies are conducted during agricultural activities that may involve lineage subgroups (*bialahin*) spouses.

Each nuclear family has its own home. The houses are grouped into three to five, in hamlets, *humalolin*, which are formed by the members of a lineage subgroup (*bialahin*). It is noted that this notion of *bialahin* is used to designate that the lineage subgroups correspond to the way the suckers of sago occur in nature, where a main (the biggest) tree forms several

suckers around it. The hamlet, *humalolin*, consists of three to five equivalent *bialahin* houses, which is, to the eyes of Geba Bupolo, analogous to how a sago cluster develops (PATTINAMA 2005). This tree species grows as a group or cluster or *boliboli*, in Buru language. That is why the Geba Bupolo often use an expression *bialahinmsiandefobabo-liboliotohumalolinmsian* that is to say “a lineage subgroup (*bialahin*) establishes a group in a hamlet (*humalolin*)”.

The interesting point is that the characteristics of the sago tree represent Geba Bupolo's life. An informant told me that a traditional chief among the Geba Bupolo takes power after his predecessor disappears but not before. It is like the growth of a sago sucker around the main tree. Fig. 2 illustrates the role of lineage subgroup (*bialahin*) in the Geba Bupolo in a hamlet (*humalolin*) or in a village (*fenalaten*), where *Gebakuan* or the main tree is labeled “1” and the members, *bialahin*, or the other trees around it are labeled “2”, “3”, “4”, and “5”. The *Gebakuan* considers himself as the main tree “1” and around him there are members of equivalent *bialahin*, as trees “2”, “3”, “4”, and “5” that do not exceed the main tree “1”. The tree “2” will be considered as a successor, but it must wait for permission from the tree “1”. Based on LOUHENAPESY (1992), sago like other species of the same family *Arecaceae* will die, started from the youngest leaves, the petioles become dry and gradually the trunk and the roots will die. In the process of replacing the principal body, it is considered that there is energy transfer from one to the other, like what happen inside the *bialahin* formed by the people.

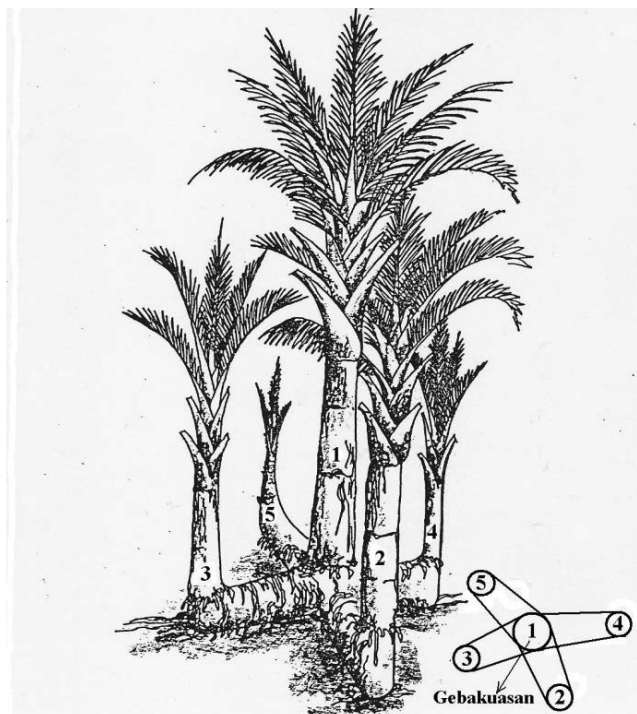


Fig. 2. The bouquet of sago, *bialahin* (*Metroxylon sagu*, *Arecaceae*)



## Conclusion

This research on an Indonesian society describes the Geba Bupolo who live in the island of Buru in the Moluccas. Although the data are limited, however, it can provide an idea of our approach to that society, its place in the world, the relationship between the living and the dead and with the environment in general.

To think about their relationship to the territory, the Geba Bupolo appeals simultaneously to several models. Buru Island is considered to be represented by the body of a human being, with the center of the island, for the Geba Bupolo, represented by both the locations of the organs in the abdomen and the sexual organs. The center of the island is also thought as a dwelling place, in which the most private part where the hosts dwell and produce their children, is the most hidden and therefore the most sacred. In the mind of the Geba Bupolo, being sacred and being secret are associated.

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