



Catherine Allerton

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CATHERINE ALLERTON

**AUTHENTIC HOUSING, AUTHENTIC CULTURE? TRANSFORMING A
VILLAGE INTO A 'TOURIST SITE' IN MANGGARAI, EASTERN INDONESIA**

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c.l.allerton@lse.ac.uk

Since the publication of MacCannell's *The tourist* (1976), the issue of 'authenticity' has been at the centre of tourism studies. Whilst early analysts broadly agreed with MacCannell's thesis that tourism, by turning culture into a commodity, replaced real with 'staged' authenticity (ibid, 91-107), more recent work has shown 'an increased awareness of the social construction and invention of both tradition and authenticity' (Wood, 1992: 57). That is, authenticity is increasingly seen as a socially constructed concept, with criteria for *judgement* of 'the authentic' varying greatly between different actors. In addition, analysts are moving away from rather naive considerations of the 'impact' of tourism on pristine, pre-tourist culture, to an appreciation that not only does tourism create a 'space for discussion' of tradition (see both Adams and Picard, this issue), but that its 'impact' is always bound up with local cultural politics (Wood, 1992: 67-8).

In this paper, I describe an Indonesian tourism project – the 'discovery' of an apparently 'untouched' village and its remodelling into a 'tourist site' – in which issues of 'authenticity' played a central part. As I shall show, both *concepts* of authenticity and perceptions of what objects, practices or other aspects of culture should be the *focus of talk about* authenticity varied between state officials, ambitious young men, ritual elders and other villagers. Not only does the project I describe have implications for pan-Indonesian discourses on 'culture' and 'ethnicity', it also raises issues concerning the ways in which local people distinguish between different kinds of visitors, and how 'tourism' can have a profound impact on local perceptions of place and identity, even in the absence of large numbers of visitors.

Waé Rebo, a village 'in need of preservation'

Manggarai is the most westerly regency (*kabupaten*) of the Indonesian island of Flores, with a linguistically and culturally diverse population of some half a million people. The predominant economic activity remains subsistence cultivation of corn, rice and various tubers, with an increasing reliance on cash crops such as coffee. However, in the western port of Labuanbajo, and to a lesser extent in inland villages and the town of Ruteng, tourism is also opening up new economic opportunities (Erb, 2000). Whilst many tourists continue to visit western Flores in order to see the famous ‘dragons’ of Komodo and Rinca islands, Manggarai is also seeing an increase in the promotion of ‘ethnic’ and ‘cultural tourism’.

The community with whom I carried out fieldwork number almost 500 people and are split between two sites in southern Manggarai: a highland, origin village called Waé Rebo and a lowland, satellite village called Kombo. Life for most households involves more or less frequent travelling between these sites, and many villagers describe themselves as ‘people who swing’ (*ata jéjong*)ⁱ. Whilst Waé Rebo is an old, ancestral site, Kombo was founded in 1967, on the orders of state officials, on donated land near to the Catholic church, school and newly-opened wet rice fields. A large number of nearby villages were forced to relocate in the lowlands at this time, following a general pattern of spatial ‘development’ in eastern Indonesia whereby village relocation went hand-in-hand with the destruction of traditional housing (Fox, 1993: 168-9). However, the impact of such development on Waé Rebo was rather unusual in two respects. Firstly, the community did not abandon its highland site, and today the mountain village sits in an isolated position, a four-hour walk through dense forest from the lowlands. Secondly, and uniquely within Manggarai, the highland village was able to retain four *mbaru niang* – traditional, ‘circular houses’. These structures are very different from the rectangular houses, with a separate kitchen at the back, that predominate in Manggarai today. *Niang* houses are round and windowless, with a central hearth and a ridge-

pole sticking out from a conical, thatched roof sloping down to the floor. Once found throughout the regency, they were pulled down in the name of ‘hygiene’ and ‘development’ by both Dutch colonial and later Indonesian government officials.

The existence of traditional, multi-family *niang* housing, together with the community’s continual travel between highlands and lowlands, lay behind my own choice of Waé Rebo-Kombo as an interesting fieldsite for conducting research on place and landscape (Allerton, 2001). However, I was not the only outsider to have become interested in Waé Rebo at this time. In November 1997, just over a month after I began fieldwork, the village erupted in a flurry of activity when it was visited by the *Bupati* or state head of the Manggarai regency. Alerted by previous foreign visitors that Waé Rebo still contained four original *niang* houses, the *Bupati* arrived with a large group of over 40 state officials and teachers to see for himself what he and his staff immediately began to call the most ‘authentic’ (BI *asli*) of Manggarai villages. Indeed, the implicit reasoning behind this visit was that if a village had retained traditional housing it must, *de facto*, have preserved other ‘traditional’ aspects of Manggarai life. Thus, a local newspaper report on the visit commented:

‘According to Bupati Ehok, one of his reasons for visiting Wae Rebo is that it has many of the customs of Manggarai people which have already changed as a consequence of recent development. “I wish to discover again the authentic culture of Manggarai people in Wae Rebo. I don’t want Manggarai people to lose their authentic culture. It is for that that I am trying to give a warning about culture”, states Ehok.’ (*Pos Kupang*, 3.1.98)

Like the Chinese ‘ethnic tourist villages’ described by Oakes (1997), Waé Rebo was viewed by the local government as something of a cultural relic that had, through geographical isolation, escaped the ravages of recent historyⁱⁱ. However, the irony that the government,

which had once pulled down *niang* houses, was now giving a ‘warning about culture’, was not lost on villagers.

Beneath the lofty aims to rediscover ‘symbolic values which have begun to disappear in Manggarai’ (*Pos Kupang*, 3.1.98), one highly significant purpose of the Bupati’s visit was the desire to develop Waé Rebo as a *tempat pariwisata* or ‘tourism site’. The *Pos Kupang* report suggests that Waé Rebo, approached by a four-hour walk through rainforest, is just right for ‘hiking’ or ‘adventure’ (sic). Indeed, despite its official status as a formal government reception, the Bupati’s visit could itself be seen as a form of domestic tourism, particularly for those officials from other areas of Flores. However, whilst the village was officially regarded as ‘authentic’ and ‘in need of preservation’, a number of enhancements were nevertheless required before the site could be promoted as a fully pristine tourist attraction. Thus, some three weeks after the Bupati’s visit, news reached the village of his plans to sponsor the rebuilding of the community’s ‘drum house’ (*mbaru gendang*) – at that time a rectangular building raised up on stones – as a large, planted, *niang* house. A sixth *niang* was also to be built in place of a large house in the village yard, the shiny, metal roof of which was thought to produce an unattractive gleam in photographs of this cultural curio. The remodelling of Waé Rebo thus had what Urry (1990) calls the ‘tourist gaze’ – in particular as filtered through the lens of a camera – very much in mind.

The Bupati’s project to remove two ‘unsightly’ houses and replace them with *niang*, shows the significance of *architecture* as a key marker of authenticity to the state. However, as with the ‘troglodyte houses’ of the Turkish ‘tourist village’ described by Tucker (1997: 118), the meaning of *niang* houses for some villagers concerned the practicalities of life, rather than their status as ‘monuments’ of authenticity. Those living in old *niang* complained that they

were rather cramped and smoky, whilst others objected to what they saw as the wasteful dismantling of the pre-existing, rectangular drum house. In addition, although most people were pleased that the Bupati was funding the rebuilding project, and were flattered by his stress on the uniqueness of their village, the rebuilding did generate certain tensions within the community. Local officials wanted the project finished before the Bupati left office in Spring 1999, but many villagers felt that the work – including the felling and transporting of timber – was rushed through far too quickly. There were also a number of tensions between young men, particularly those with more schooling than average, and the community's elders. The frequently argumentative stance of the former exasperated the latter, who felt that harsh words at the time of building a community drum house created an atmosphere of spiritual danger. One young man, who I shall call 'Marsel', was chosen to represent the village at meetings with the Bupati's staff in Ruteng, his fluency in Indonesian considered crucial for negotiations with the government. However, his frequent use of complicated Indonesian was not seen as appropriate for village-based meetings with (non-fluent) elders, for whom the rebuilding of a drum house concerned rather more than architecture.

The drum house: one body, one voice

In order to understand the wider impact of the Bupati's rebuilding project – begun in earnest in August 1998 and completed with a large communal ritual in July 1999 – it is important to describe in more detail the significance of a Manggarai 'drum house'. Despite changes in built style, drum houses (taking their name from the heirloom drums hanging in the centre of the house) continue to be the most prominent building in a Manggarai village or village-quarter – a place for holding meetings, rituals and Sunday-morning prayers. It is in part

because of the features of a drum house that Manggarai can be seen as a society where, as elsewhere in southeast Asia, 'Houses' are both prominent social institutions and 'ordered structures' expressing key cultural values (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 156; Errington, 1989: 236-241). Indeed, it is the indigenous significance of houses that makes the Bupati's choice of cultural project so intriguing.

There are five main socio-symbolic aspects of a Manggarai drum house – primarily related to kinship and ritual authority – that shall be briefly outlined here. Firstly, a drum house is a communal building for a clan or clan branch, symbolising the ideal unity of patrilineal descent. A clan dwells as one body in a drum house, the drums frequently described as its 'voice' (*réwo*). However, in reality, and like other southeast Asian 'houses', the drum house can encompass those members of a community related not through descent but by ties of marriage alliance (cf. Errington, 1989: 238). Indeed, the second main socio-symbolic aspect of a drum house also connects with certain of Lévi-Strauss's comments concerning the projection of a tension between descent and alliance in such 'Houses' (1987: 155). During the construction process, the central ridge-pole (*ngando*) of a Manggarai drum house is conceived of as a young, kidnapped bride. Thus, a drum house, the symbol of the patrilineal kinship uniting a community, actually has at its heart an outsider, a 'mountain bride' (*molas poso*).

Thirdly, the drum house's role in an ideology of clan unity is also complicated by its function in the growth of village communities. Throughout Manggarai, people make distinctions between old, origin villages and those settled by people who 'went to find corn and rice' or new land. Crucially, a new village is thought to remain ritually dependent on its origin site until it is able to 'make a village' (*pandé béo*) by building its own drum house. Drum houses

not only mark community independence, they also reflect the history of the movements of different clans from origin villages to new sites. Thus, although Waé Rebo-Kombo is a ‘one clan’ village, other multi-clan villages may have more than one drum house, or one building uniting a number of different clans.

Fourthly, and connected with such historical movements, a Manggarai drum house is implicated in and symbolises structures of traditional authority. A community centred on such a house has two traditional positions of authority: the ‘head of the hill/ village’ (*tu’a golo*), responsible for the resolution of land disputes and other ‘political’ matters, and the ‘head of the drums’ (*tu’a gendang*), responsible for ritual matters. The drums are associated, both symbolically and physically, with the ‘right to speak’, and may not be removed from a drum house. Moreover, in multi-clan villages, only a member of the clan claiming precedence (whether in time or space) can be ritual leader or ‘hold the drums’. Finally, a drum house is also a home for ancestral spirits and, as such, is a focus for community fertility and renewal. This aspect is revealed most strongly during *penti*, a series of ‘new year’ rituals – many centred on the drum house – at which requests are made for the ongoing ‘growth’ (*beka*) of the community and its fields.

What this brief description shows is that the significance of a Manggarai drum house, as both a building and a complex set of ideas, is largely unrelated to the *style* of its architecture. Moreover, since ‘the House’ is a central institution in Manggarai, the Bupati’s rebuilding project raises pertinent issues concerning the impact of social change on ‘house-based’ societies (cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1983: 187). For example, the local government’s vision of a drum house as a predominantly ‘cultural’ and ‘artistic’ artefact is at variance with its local role in

kinship and social organisation. What, then, is the political significance of the local government's interest in 'Houses', and in 'culture' more generally?

State and culture: remodelling an 'authentic' village

The remodelling of Waé Rebo's drum house was not the first project in Manggarai to rebuild traditional housing. A few years earlier, the drum house of Todo, a village whose leaders had been appointed to the position of *raja* ('king') by a succession of outside powers, was rebuilt as a large *mbaru niang* (Erb, 1998). The Todo project had been instigated and funded by westerners, notably the Polish parish priest and a Swiss development agency involved in road construction throughout Manggarai. However, by contrast with Todo, the rebuilding of the Waé Rebo drum house not only took place against the backdrop of four pre-existing *niang* houses, but was entirely funded (to the sum of 30 million Rupiah) by the Manggarai government. The fact that this occurred during a time of acute economic and political instability in Indonesia should be proof enough of how seriously the state takes its 'cultural' projects. Moreover, although the building of the Waé Rebo drum house was completed after the fall of Suharto's government it was, with its appeals to 'traditional values', a classic 'New Order' cultural project (Hitchcock, 1998: 127).

Acciaioli has described how the value of Indonesian *adat* – 'custom' or 'tradition' – has become primarily aesthetic and is, for members of 'isolated tribes', increasingly prescribed by local Indonesian officials (1985: 152-3). During the rebuilding of the Waé Rebo drum house, Marsel, the young man with responsibility to the local government, was keen to see all male elders – who normally wear their own sweatshirts for rituals – in a kind of *adat*

‘uniform’, including pristine white shirts to set off the colours of woven sarongs and scarfs. Interestingly, this prescriptive approach to ‘tradition’ went hand-in-hand with attempts to play down local diversity. One evening during the rebuilding process, people collected together in one of the older *niang* houses to sing drumming songs. When visitors from another village suggested that their own songs were rather different to those of Waé Rebo, Marsel became agitated, insisting that people ‘must not talk about differences’, since Manggarai culture was ‘all the same’. As with the case of clothing, this shows an official view of ‘authentic’ culture as regionally *uniform*.

One key catchphrase of Suharto’s New Order was ‘the preservation of national culture’ (BI *kelestarian kebudayaan nasional*). However, what the government chose to preserve – houses, ritual costumes, handicrafts and other marketable ‘objects’ – was only a small part of what anthropologists would term ‘culture’ (Kipp, 1993: 111-113; Picard, 1997: 197). In particular, *rumah adat* or ‘customary/ traditional houses’ have enormous importance in state-sponsored representations of Indonesia, appearing in school atlases, maps in provincial offices and tourist brochures (cf. Adams, 1984: 476). Within Manggarai, pictures of traditional *niang* houses appear, in rationalized form, on the shoulder patches of local officials and teachers. Most explicitly, at Jakarta’s ‘Taman Mini’ theme-park, twenty-six *rumah adat* representing the ‘genuine customary architectural style’ of Indonesia’s twenty-six provinces present an ahistorical image of Indonesia’s ‘Unity in Diversity’ (Pemberton, 1994: 152).

The project to remodel Waé Rebo as a tourist site showed the changing significance of such *rumah adat*. Although the Indonesian word *adat* generally signifies ‘customs’, when used as an adjective it increasingly implies what is ‘traditional’ in the sense of no-longer-regularly-

used but necessary to ‘preserve’ as a mark of ‘cultural identity’. As the focus for kinship and ritual that I have outlined above, the old, rectangular drum house in Waé Rebo was a ‘customary’ *adat* centre. However, in architectural or aesthetic terms it was not ‘traditional’. The Bupati’s rebuilding project was thus an attempt to make sure that the drum house became an Indonesian *rumah adat* in the full sense of the term. In the process, though, the significance of the house as an institution was overshadowed, and emphasis was primarily given to *niang* architecture as a marker of Manggarai ethnicity. One man in Waé Rebo, who was noted for his rather grand pronouncements in Indonesian, said that it was important to build the house well because *niang* houses were the ‘heirlooms of Manggarai culture’ (*pusaka kebudayaan Manggarai*).

Hutajulu has argued that the Toba Batak tradition, reworked for tourists, serves to situate the Toba Batak ‘as a “legitimate” ethnic group within the framework of Indonesian nationalism’ (1995: 639). This is an extremely important point with regard to the political significance of house-building, and echoes Wood’s arguments that ‘touristic space can offer an opportunity for asserting local identities and rights against other groups’ (1992: 59-60). Manggarai as a region has long been lacking in the necessary cultural ‘objects’ to entice tourists off their buses as they travel from Komodo, with its famous dragons, to the regency of Ngada, the old village sites and traditional housing of which are a regular feature in guide-books on eastern Indonesia. With the rebuilding of traditional housing in Manggarai, together with staged ‘performances’ of *sasi* whip-fighting, ‘the Manggarai’ have more claim to being considered a legitimate ethnic group within the ‘diversity’ of the nation. Indeed, the perception of *niang* housing as an aesthetic marker of Manggarai ethnicity is also seen in attempts by the Catholic church to ‘inculturate’ churches as places by creating links with more traditional structures (cf. Barnes, 1992: 171). One such building is the chapel in Borik, a large village on the south

coast. This chapel, another of the projects instigated by the priest behind the rebuilding of the Todo drum house, has been built in a circular, *niang*-type style, with a large mural depicting Jesus and the disciples in Manggarai dress. However, its most striking feature clearly evokes the image of a drum house: a central post from which hang drums and a gong.

These state and church views of *niang* architecture and drum houses as cultural artefacts may be having a gradual impact on local perceptions of a drum house as a rather complex social institution. During the rebuilding process in Waé Rebo, I was aware of some concern amongst villagers that their drum house might be ‘taken over’ as a place for simply receiving visitors. One young man involved in liaising with state officials had been heard to say that it might be better for no-one to live in the drum house, so that the interior would not become soot-blackened. Over the next few days, villagers told me that this was ridiculous, since the smoke from the hearth was needed to preserve both stored foodstuffs and the roof thatch. Nevertheless, the seeds of a suspicion had been sown, and towards the end of the rebuilding, I heard a number of older villagers referring to the house not as the *mbaru gendang*, but the *mbaru de Bupati* or ‘Bupati’s house’. Indeed, a perception of the new drum house as in some way the *property* of the Bupati also received support from people’s awareness of the sums of money arriving from Ruteng, as well as the system for the organisation of timber-felling, which fined men who missed a scheduled day of communal work. Not only did the introduction of these fines, and of work payments, grate with individual men, but the system was contrary to the traditional notion of a communal drum house being built with (voluntary) communal labour (*dodo*). When I returned to Waé Rebo in April 2001, I saw an even starker reminder of the Bupati’s ‘ownership’ of the drum house – a small plaque erected above the door of the new *niang*, and bearing the inscription ‘made official by the Bupati of Manggarai, Dr G.P. Ehok, Ruteng, 13 July 1999’.

Expanding authenticity: Waé Rebo as a tourist site

How has the rebuilding project and the transformation of Waé Rebo into a ‘tourist site’ affected the local community? In the first place, it is worth noting how, throughout the local area, the Bupati’s visit has become emblematically linked with what some now call ‘the cultural village of Waé Rebo’ (*kampung budaya Waé Rebo*). I became particularly aware of this during recent fieldwork with children, when I used photographs as prompts for discussion. When initially shown photographs of various different events and rituals in Waé Rebo, almost all the children in a range of age-groups declared them to be pictures of ‘the time of the Bupati’s visit’ (*laing said Bupati*). Moreover, although there have been no visits to the village by government officials since the ritual held to ‘open’ the drum house, and although Bupati Ehok has since been replaced, villagers nevertheless believe that the Bupati’s office is committed to the long-term development of Waé Rebo. Many think the Bupati will sponsor the rebuilding of one of the old *niang* houses, which collapsed during storms in January 2001. Some retain the hope that a road can be built to the village, to ease the transportation of the annual coffee crop, although others appreciate that this may reduce the opportunities offered to tourists for ‘hiking’.

Robert Wood has argued that the very presence of tourists may be interpreted by local people as a sign of cultural authenticity (1997: 2). The interest of both tourists and government officials in Waé Rebo has strengthened villagers’ sense of themselves as possessors of authentic Manggarai *adat*, and has even led to a re-valuing of woven baskets and sarongs as ‘culture’. At the local level, villagers have also seized on the language of ‘authenticity’ and

‘preservation’ as a way of stressing their historical and political importance (cf. Wood, 1992: 67-8). Earlier, I noted that a project to rebuild a *niang* house had been organised by various outsiders in the ‘royal’ village of Todo. Significantly, Waé Rebo people consider themselves to be in the position of ‘elder sibling’ (*ka'é*) to Todo, their foundation myth asserting Waé Rebo’s original right, over those in Todo, to be ‘kings’ of Manggarai. Villagers therefore interpret the involvement of the Bupati in their own rebuilding project, as well as their preservation of ‘authentic’ *niang* architecture, as evidence of their own cultural and political superiority to Todo. This politically-motivated discourse on ‘authenticity’ has also been extended to new areas, the most notable being language. Within the regency, a number of different dialects of Bahasa Manggarai are spoken, and language differences are a subject of great fascination to most people. Whilst Ruteng, Todo and villages to the east of Waé Rebo follow the central Manggarai dialect, Waé Rebo and villages in the mountains to the west follow the dialect identified as the ‘s/h shift’. What is significant in the context of the promotion of Waé Rebo as *the* authentic Manggarai village is that both villagers and government officials have (quite erroneously) begun to speak of the Waé Rebo dialect as the most ‘authentic’ (*asli*) Manggarai language, and one which other areas have ‘forgotten’. Thus, villagers would stress that I had chosen to live in the village because I needed to learn ‘the authentic Waé Rebo Manggarai language’ (*bahasa Manggarai asli Waé Rebo*), rather than the corrupted dialect of the town.

The impact of Waé Rebo’s transformation is particularly interesting given the extremely small numbers of tourists who have actually visited the village. After the Bupati’s visit, interest was generated mainly at the local level, with a party of Ruteng tourism students arriving on an excursion (*piknik*) to visit the village. Later, between March 1999 and my return trip in April 2001, Waé Rebo was visited by a number of Indonesians and by nine

foreign tourists, who all dutifully wrote their names and addresses in the village's new 'guest book'. These very small numbers of actual visitors mean that 'tourism' is not yet viewed by villagers as a source of economic opportunity. Rather, and in addition to the various discourses on authenticity and culture that I have outlined, these visits have generated a number of different types of stories in the village. The first of these, primarily directed at foreign tourists, focuses on moral evaluations of the tourist's behaviour, demeanour and dress. A crucial concern for villagers is whether or not the visitor could speak any Indonesian. Indeed, the ability to converse with villagers often leads people to distinguish the visitor as a 'school person' (*ata sekolah*), who has come to 'study' the village, as opposed to those identified as, in an interesting turn of phrase, 'authentic tourists' (*turis asli*).

The second genre of tourist stories focuses on what the tourists had taken photographs of – whether the exterior or interior of houses, whether women weaving or people working in their fields. Indeed, many villagers, who have themselves never held a camera, are now able to advise on the best places to photograph the village centre or particular houses. However, as Tucker has argued, focusing too much on the tourist 'gaze' can gloss over what actually takes place in touristic processes (1997: 107). Although this 'gaze' was crucial to the remodelling of Waé Rebo, photographs sent after a visit are also one of the key elements in the individual exchange relationships established with some visitors. Indeed, the third kind of 'tourist stories' focus on these individual relationships, and on the gifts and hospitality offered to tourists, who are viewed as a rather special category of guest (cf. Erb, 2000). Talk about food and eating is something of a Manggarai obsession, and to feed someone is to gradually incorporate them into one's house and family (cf. Wolff, this issue). Thus, people take great pride in recalling the types of food they offered to visitors, and were extremely offended when some visitors from Ruteng turned up in the village with food of their own. Indeed,

whilst the local government might see architecture as the most significant aspect of culture, villagers are likely to see traditions of hospitality to visitors as crucial evidence of their uncorrupted authenticity.

Whilst early tourism studies focused on tourists' search for an authenticity that they found wanting in their own lives and cultures, this article has considered a 'tourist site' which has yet to receive many visitors, but which is nevertheless fully engaged with discourses on authenticity and tradition. After rejoicing in its 'discovery' of such an 'untouched' village as Waé Rebo, the Manggarai government soon set about remodelling the village into a paradigm of New Order 'culture'. In the process, the significance of a drum house as a social institution and ancestral home was downplayed in favour of its role as a cultural object and marker of ethnicity. However, despite the cultural politics involved in this process, this article has also shown how Waé Rebo-Kombo people responded creatively to the stress on the unique nature of their village. In their ongoing negotiation with various outsiders, they have thereby signified as 'authentic' a number of phenomena – from language to hospitality, and even to tourists themselves – that state discourse ignores.

Notes

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ⁱ The main language of the village, and the language in which fieldwork was conducted, is the 's-h dialect' of Bahasa Manggarai (BM). Only a minority of villagers are fluent in the national language, Bahasa Indonesia (BI), which is learnt at primary school and used in all 'official' dealings. Unless otherwise indicated, words and phrases used in this article are in BM.

ⁱⁱ Of course, this is far from the case, and it is worth emphasising that Waé Rebo has been as much affected by 'history' and by spatial transformations as the villages laid out neatly along roads in the lowlands (see Allerton, 2001).

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