

Notes on the Biak WOR song form (from *Of Birds and Gifts: Reviving Tradition on an Indonesian Frontier* by Danilyn Rutherford, Cornell University, 1996)



Grup Afyas from Rarwaéna, the cover photo of the CD or Wor songs produced and released by the Smithsonian Institute in 1996.

WOR is a vocal poetics of shock, of haunting melodies and structured spontaneity, where composer-singers who dance transform surprising encounters into sung texts.

"The first time I encountered *wor* was in North Biak in October 1992. The night before I had walked for four hours in the dark to reach the coastal village where I would stay while exploring possible field sites. After a meeting with the women's union at a nearby congregation, the chair and a deacon led me and the members from the church down the beach to visit the ruins of an Allied encampment. Rounding a corner, we came upon an old man in a loincloth who started singing a song that was slow and, to me, unintelligible. He stared into my eyes, repeating the verses to the beat of a drum and the wavering accompaniment of two companions. When he finished, he led me to the water, dampened my face, and presented me with a shell necklace to protect me from local spirits. I was told only that the song recounted local history and "welcomed me back to the place".

"I was delighted and amazed to find *wor* waiting for me in Biak. I had read about it in Freerk Kamma's account of Koreri, the messianic movement that repeatedly erupted in the region throughout the colonial era, most dramatically in 1939. The 1939 uprising saw thousands of people gather to greet Manarmakeri (the "Itchy Old Man"), the Biak hero believed to have created foreign wealth and power. Witnesses described how the rhythm of the drumming swept followers into a state of ecstasy as they sang and danced to speed the coming of the millennium. The "disturbance" finally ended in 1943, after Japanese troops opened fire on the believers, costing hundreds of Biaks their lives (Kamma 1972:201).

"I had also read reports dating from shortly after World War I. Their Dutch scribes recounted the arrest and detention of natives found with Koreri paraphernalia, which nervous officials took as a sign of subversion (Galis 1946). In 1992, the association of *wor* with Koreri-and Koreri with politics remained strong among older Biaks, who still recalled a time when they could be expelled from a congregation or even jailed for illicit singing. While I found no indication that the Indonesian government had ever banned *wor*, many people associated the genre with Papuan nationalism. They tended to speak of *wor* as a forbidden weapon, something dangerous, powerful, and rare."

"In the distant past everyone could sing, and the word *wor* denoted three inseparable activities: to sing, to dance, and to celebrate, all of which came together in Biak feasts. *Wor* was sung by the hostess's natal kin, who spent the night circling the dancing ground in a clump. At the front of the line were two young men, who leaped and swooped, thrusting and parrying with their drums as they pounded a powerful beat. Behind them came other drummers, then a knot of male singers, which gradually narrowed to a feminine tail. The men in front danced the *mas*, the women in back danced the *fier*, kicking up their heels to their buttocks. A clown occasionally took up the rear."

"What mattered in *wor* was not the more or less uniform style of dancing but the songs. Expert singers knew dozens of types, distinguished by melody, rhythm, and/or social function. People sang certain types of *wor* at sea, others for special offerings, and still others when they were alone."

"In collective *wor* singing, individual voices playfully compete. Every *wor* is divided into a *kadwor* or "tip" and a *fuar* or "root." A single voice introduces a new song, then a second voice answers the first. Other singers quickly follow, forming opposing sides, with one group singing the *kadwor*, and the other the *fuar*. The drummers take up the rhythm, and the volume swells as more singers learn the lyrics. Within each group, individuals choose their own pitch, joining the chorus when they please, and modifying the melody dramatically before ending each line in unison. The song has no leader, and each singer varies the melody in an attempt to stand out above the others. Likewise, each chorus attempts to seize the focus of attention, with the *fuar* singers beginning their verse before the *kadwor* singers are finished, then the *kadwor* retaliating to steal back the song. The effect is "heterophony": a rich mixture of pitches, phrasings, and volumes coexisting in the structure of a single song.

Wor poetry employs an idiom both elaborate and allusive, veiled in a tapestry of archaic and altered terms. Biaks insist that every wor must begin with a surprise, and a wor expert can transpose a new sight, sound, or sensation immediately and automatically into a song. Beginning with the jolt of something unexpected wor ends in a fantasy or memory. Wor poetry absorbs and refigures other alien discourses. A telephone wire becomes the love between siblings in a song peppered with foreign words. Good wor songs travel far from their makers, bringing wor experts great prestige.

The poetic structure of wor

Kadwor: Myundiso rwamandiyasa yakofen bayir ro mob byarek roro.

Fuar: Awino inonaye myundiso rwamandiyasa yakofen bayir ro Amerika mob byarek roro.

Tip: It is a good thing that you have come so I can tell you about the place he stayed.

Root: *Mother, young woman*, it is a good thing that you have come so I can tell you about the place America stayed.

To explain this song, the singer told me the story of the United State's unpaid debt in his community. During the bombing raids that followed the Allied invasion of the east end of Biak, the villagers hid in the hills. They had fled much earlier to elude the patrols from a Japanese post up the coast. They knew the Japanese were very "hard," and they feared being killed or forced to join labor camps. With the Americans coming, people felt safe. Built in 1946 at a place named Opspani (which the soldiers called Obobari), the post in Komboi remained in operation for only three months. The Allies provided no food for local people and no compensation for the destruction of their property. But what could we expect the wor singer sighed. This was war, and Biak was just one of the "stepping stones" on General MacArthur's path. The U.S. forces had gone from Numfor to Biak to Halmahera to Yokohama, said the man, who could list each place on the route (1996, p607).

<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/can.1996.11.4.02a00060>

The wor songs recorded by the Smithsonian Institute in 1994 under Danilyn Rutherford's supervision can be listened to at

<https://folkways.si.edu/music-of-indonesia-vol-10-music-of-biak-irian-jaya/world/album/smithsonian>