# 'Fern leaf, so you are challenging me?'
## Some observations on the Lelegesan, a form of verbal combat in Totoli

Sonja RIESBERG

Universität zu Köln
Australian National University (CoEDL)

This paper presents some observations on a special form of verbal art in Totoli, the *Lelegesan*. In this kind of performance, singers sing in turns and have to make up as many rhyming two-liners as possible, each of which usually has to start with the name of a leaf. The paper discusses form and function of the *Lelegesan* and compares it to a popular modern-style 'local' song.

## 1. Introduction

Totoli is an endangered Western Malayo-Polynesian language spoken by at most 5000 speakers in the northern part of Central Sulawesi (see Map 1). While the Totoli speech community is nowadays a Muslim society that adheres to the values of the modern Indonesian mainstream and everyday communication largely takes part in the national language, Indonesian, some older speakers still master a form of verbal sparring called *Lelegesan*. This traditional verbal art genre is usually sung by two or more singers, who must spontaneously produce as many rhyming two-liners as possible. These two-liners show parallel structures, which, ever since Fox's influential edited volume *To speak in pairs – Essays on the ritual languages of eastern Indonesia* (1988), are well known to be a frequent stylistic device in oral traditions in this part (and others) of the world.
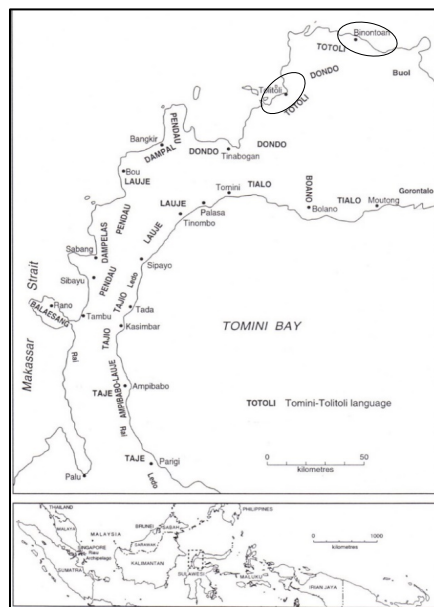


**Map 1: Tomini-Tolitoli languages and the Totoli speaking area**[1]

---

[1] Adapted from Himmelmann (2001).

An example of parallel structures is given in (1), a Rotinese mortuary chant, where semantic parallelism is reflected in grammatical form:

(1)    Rotinese mortuary chant (Fox 2005:88)
    a.  *Soku-la* (a1) *Pinga* (b1) *Pasa* (c1)          They carry *Pinga Pasa*
    b.  (*Ma*) *ifa-la* (a2) *So'e* (b2) *Leli* (c2)          (And) they lift *So'e Leli*
    c.  *De ana sao* (d1) *Kolik* (e1) *Faenama* (f1)     She marries *Kolik Faenama*
    d.  *Ma tu* (d2) *Bunak* (e2) *Tunulama* (f2)         (And) weds *Buna Tunulama*

In this short example, there are correspondences between the first, the second and the third elements of the first and second lines, and of the third and fourth lines, as indicated by the letter-number combinations. Thus, the verbs *carry* and *lift,* and *marry* and *wed,* form dyadic sets. In Fox's notation, where // denotes parallelism, this can be schematically represented as a1//a2 and d1//d2.

The Totoli *Lelegesan,* though in many ways very different from the Rotinese mortuary chant shown in (1), employs a similar parallel structure, and the main goal of this paper is to describe some of the characteristic features of this special genre of the Totoli language. After giving a short overview of the function and content of the *Lelegesan*, this paper will discuss the formal structure of the genre, including the aforementioned parallel structures, the rhyme pattern, and – its most distinctive feature – the (in principle) obligatory occurrence of a leaf name at the beginning of each line. As will be shown in section 2, singers have considerable freedom in how to make use of these characteristic features of *Lelegesan*. In section 3, these features will be compared with a more contemporary local song from the Tolitoli area. While in many aspects the modern song is fundamentally different from the traditional *Lelegesan*, it will be shown that there are nevertheless certain similarities between these two songs/song types. Section 4 briefly draws on the importance of special genres for language documentation and linguistic analysis. It demonstrates that in the two songs discussed in this paper, we find lexical elements that are not, or only sparsely, otherwise attested in the author's corpus - an above-average proportion of locative voice constructions, and a special way of realizing long vowels which allows us to draw inferences about Totoli phonology.

## 2. The *Lelegesan* – verbal combat in Totoli

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the *Lelegesan* is a song sung by two or more singers. It is accompanied by the playing of a *gambus Melayu*,[2] and consists of two-line stanzas, each line of which is broken up into two half lines. Usually, one singer sings one stanza and then passes the turn to the next singer. *Lelegesan* are performed at festivities and public events, such as, for example, wedding celebrations, but also in larger private groups. The singers have to make up the lyrics spontaneously, and as soon

---

[2] The gambus Melayu is a wooden, pear-shaped plucked lute. Its form probably originated from the Yemeni *quabus.* It is particularly popular in the Riau islands, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Peninsular Malaysia and the coastal areas of Sabah and Sarawak. In other places, e.g. in Java, the *gambus Melayu* has been mostly replaced by the *gambus Hadhramaut* (also known as *'ud*), which has a bigger, arched-back body and probably originates from the southern Arabian peninsula (cf. Hilarian 2006, Capwell 1995). In Tolitoli, the gambus is manufactured from the wood of the jackfruit tree, and its open face is covered with a soundboard made of goatskin. The skills of gambus building and playing is usually passed from father to son (I am grateful to Christoph Bracks for providing this information).

as the first singer has finished their stanza, the second singer has to react to the lines from their predecessor. Usually the lyrics are humorous or provocative, their major function being to entertain the audience. Both men and women can participate in *Lelegesan* singing. The corpus[3] used for this study consists of 13 recordings of *Lelegesan* of varying length. The shortest recorded *Lelegesan* is 15:03 minutes long; the longest has a duration of 43:35 minutes. On average, the *Lelegesan* recordings in the corpus have a length of approximately 22 minutes.

## 2.1 Function and content of *Lelegesan*

Example (2) illustrates the first couple of lines of a *Lelegesan*, sung at the house of a groom one night before the wedding. The two singers, Salun (male) and Amasia (female), challenge each other, and thus set the stage for the *Lelegesan*. In the last two lines of this short excerpt, lines (2)-3a and (2)-3b, Salun starts teasing Amasia by saying that he will not challenge her because she is a woman. This kind of teasing between singers is a recurring characteristic of *Lelegesan*, and in the example at hand, it runs throughout the rest of the song and causes amusement in the audience.

(2)     *Lelegesan* [lelegesan_7 007-013 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C7EC-2]

Salun    1a: ***<xxxx>***   ***ku***   ***ingga***   ***mogole***   ***ampun:::***
               ***       aku     NEG       ST-gole       ampun
               ***       I       NEG       ST-ask.for    mercy
               'I don't ask for mercy (I am not afraid of a "fight")'

         1b: ***i***   ***laeng***   ***munano***   ***baga***   ***posukasukatimo:::***
             i       laeng       munano       baga       po-RDP3-sukat-i=mo
             HON     leaf        k.o.tree     only       SF-RDP3-try-APPL2=CPL
             ''munano' leaf, so let's measure/try each other.'

Amasia   2a: ***laeng***   ***paku***   ***tutu***   ***sukatimu***   ***aku***
             laeng       paku       tutuu       sukat-i=mu       aku
             leaf        fern       correct     try-APPL2=2s.GEN    1s
             'fern leaf, so you are challenging me?'

         2b: ***isukatimu***                ***aku***   ***iyo***   ***alamai***   ***sau:::***
             ni-sukat-i=mu               aku       iya       ala=mo=ai       sau
             RLS-try-APPL2=2s.GEN        1s        well      take=CPL=VEN     THING
             'you wanted to challenge me, so bring me some (show me what you've got)'

---

Salun    3a:   ***laeng    paku    ingga    monukati    kau    aku:::***

| laeng | paku | ingga | moN-sukat-i | kau | aku |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| leaf | fern | NEG | AV-try-APPL2 | 2s | 1s |

'fern leaf, I will not challenge you'

      3b:   ***bombane    karna    kau    bokon    moane:::***

| bombane | karana | kau | bokon | moane |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| k.o.tree | because | 2s | not | man |

''bombane' because you are not a man'

The fact that the content of a *Lelegesan* is indeed invented spontaneously and does not always deal with the same recurrent topics can be illustrated with the excerpt in (3). This *Lelegesan* was sung for Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, who recorded it in 1988, and it tells of Himmelmann's situation as a young man in a foreign country who is far from home and should therefore be pitied.

(3)     *Lelegesan* [lelegesan 001-004 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C7F4-4]

Idrus J.    1a:   ***laeng    dulian    sabatu    manuk    putian:::***

| laeng | dulian | sabatu | manuk | puti-an |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| leaf | durian | one | bird | white-NR |

'durian leaf, one white bird'

      1b:   ***sabatu    manuk    putian    kena    dagitna    kueang:::***

| sabatu | manuk | puti-an | kena | dagit=na | kueang |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| one | bird | white-NR | don't | attack=IMP | eagle |

'one white bird, don't attack the eagle'

      2a:   ***i    laeng    tabawang    lipuna    dentu    kobawang***

| i | laeng | tabaang | lipu=na | | dentu | ko-baang |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HON | leaf | tabaang.tree | country | =3s.GEN | like.that | ST-far |

''tabaang' leaf, his country is so far'

      2b:   ***laeng    palia    nitunggalanna    ingia:::***

| laeng | palia | ni-tungga-an=na | i-ngia |
|---|---|---|---|
| leaf | bitter.melon.vine | RLS-aim-APPL2=3s.GEN | LOC-APRX |

'bitter melon leaf, left alone here'

*Lelegesan* thus cover a range of different topics. The two examples discussed so far include instances where singers are teasing each other (as in (2)), and a report and evaluation of recent events (as in (3)). Yet, *Lelegesan* can also cover romantic or political topics. Consider the following excerpt from another *Lelegesan*, which addresses the multi-ethnic (and multi-lingual) make up of present-day Tolitoli. The metaphor used here is that of a *Balonti*, a kind of cake made of corn, parsnip and rice. It translates into Indonesian as 'kue campur', i.e. mixed cake. The metaphor of integration is thus based on the picture of the Buginese people becoming a part of 'the big, mixed cake' of ethnic groups that have settled in and around the Totoli area.

(4)     *Lelegesan* [lelegesan 023-024 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C7F4-4]

Idrus J.    1a:   ***sakurati    Bugis    mopogubalonti***

| sakurati | Bugis | mo-pogu-balonti |
|---|---|---|
| chocolate.fruit | Buginese | AV-AS.IF-k.o.cake |

'chocolate fruit, the Buginese integrate themselves'

1b: ***lamali        Bugis        nopogutotoli:::***
    lamali        Bugis        no-pogu-totoli
    k.o.tree     Buginese   AV.RLS-AS.IF-Totoli
    ''lamali' tree, the Buginese became Totoli'

Irrespective of the topic, the aim of the singers is to be as smart and funny as possible, in order to entertain the audience and to trump their fellow singers. And while no official 'winner' is determined in the end, the best singer is considered to be the one who came up with the smartest rhymes. The audience laughs, cheers and applauds at the end of each line or stanza if they think that it was good and funny. The singer thus gets immediate feedback from the audience, and their successor will try to outdo them and gain more positive and even louder responses. In former times, when villages and houses were not yet on the electrical grid, performing *Lelegesan* was a popular and frequent pastime of everyday village life.

## 2.2 The form of *Lelegesan*

The most distinctive feature, and one of the defining properties of a *Lelegesan,* is the fact that, in principle, every line has to start with the name of a leaf. Compare, for example, lines (5)-3a and (5)-3b below, taken from the same *Lelegesan* as the one  in (2). Both start  by mentioning a leaf in the first half line – here *laeng bona* 'bona leaf' and *laeng tabako* 'tobacco leaf', which is then followed by the actual content of the respective stanza. It is quite obvious that the Totoli *Lelegesan* thus displays a similar parallel structure to the Rotinese mortuary chant in (1), represented here by '//' (following Fox 2005). Taking again (5)-3a and (5)-3b as an example, parallelisms are comprised of the lexical elements *laeng bona*//*laeng tabako* 'bona leaf//tobacco leaf', and the phrases *kenamo leseina*//*alamo balemuko* 'don't avoid him//take him to your house'. In a prototypical stanza we will thus always find a parallelism between the leaf element (or its substitute, see below) on the one hand, and between the actual content of the stanza, on the other hand.

(5)    *Lelegesan* [lelegesan_7 033-046 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C7EC-2]

Amasia   1a: ***laeng     paku     geipo     mosolu        aku:::***
               laeng    paku    geipo    mo-solu      aku
               leaf     fern     INCPL   ST-satisfied  1s
               'fern leaf, I am not yet satisfied'

          1b: ***tibangna     i     laeng teeng mapasandaapo          sadedeng:::***
               tibang=na   i    laeng teeng mo-po-sanda'=po       sadedeng
               pair=3s.GEN HON leaf    tea     ST-SF-lean.toward=INCPL a.little
               'pair of tea leaves, lean a little forward please'

Salun:    2a: ***laeng     paku     molinggolinggomogawaku:::***
               laeng    paku    mo-RDP5-lingo=mo=ga aku
               leaf     fern    ST-RDP5-afraid=CPL=??  1s
               'fern leaf, I am scared'

          2b: ***<xxxxxxx>     aku     ia     nilesemu:::***
               *xxxxxxx      aku     ia      ni-lese=mu
               ***         1s      PRX   RLS-avoid=2s.GEN
               'you better avoid me (leave me alone)'

Rahmat   3a: ***laeng       bona        kenamo      leseina:::***
             laeng       bona        kena=mo     lese-i=na
             leaf        k.o.tree    don't=CPL   avoid-APPL2=IMP
             ''bona' leaf, don't avoid him'

         3b: ***laeng       tabako      alamo       balemuko:::***
             laeng       tabako      ala=mo      bale=mu=ko
             leaf        tobacco     take=CPL    house=2s.GEN=AND
             'tobacco leaf, take him to your house'

Amasia   4a: ***tabako      kau         melese      inako:::***
             tabako      kau         mo-lese     inako
             tobacco     2s          ST-avoid    where?
             'tobacco, (what do you mean) you want to be avoided?'

         4b: ***tibangna    i     laeng kopi  saiti     kau   kukokopi:::***
             tibang=na    i     laeng kopi  sait-i    kau   ku-kokop-i
             pair=3s.GEN  HON   leaf  coffee wait-UV2  2s    1s.ACT-embrace-UV2
             'pair of coffee leaves, wait, I will embrace you'

Salun    5a: ***laeng       paku        kenamo      pogutuna       dengawaku:::***
             laeng       paku        kena=mo     po-gutu=na     deng      aku
             leaf        fern        don't=CPL   CAU-make=IMP   LOC       1s
             'fern leaf, don't play with me/fool me'

         5b: <xxxxxxxxxxx>

Amasia   6a: ***laeng       paku        deinako     sukatimu       aku:::***
             laeng       paku        deinako     sukat-i=mu     aku
             leaf        fern        how?        try-APPL2=2s.GEN   1s
             'fern leaf, how are you going to challenge me?'

         6b: ***tibangna    laeng kanau   bali    kukokopi          kau:::***
             tibang=na    laeng kanau   bali    ku-kokop-i        kau
             pair=3s.GEN  leaf  aren.tree become  1s.ACT-embrace-UV2  2s
             'a pair of sugar palm leaves, I will embrace you'

Which leaves are chosen seems to be arbitrary and there is no special meaning assigned to individual leaves. Ideally, however, the singer takes up one of the leaf names that has been used by the previous singer. This can be observed in the previous example, where the first singer starts with *laeng paku* 'fern leaf' in (5)-1a, which is taken up again by the second singer in (5)-2a. Yet, example (5) also shows that singers can deviate from this ideal, using leaf elements that have not been used in the stanza that directly precedes it (see, e.g. (5)-5 which does not involve any of the leaf names used in (5)-4).

In addition to the leaves that constitute the characterizing image of *Lelegesan*, there are sometimes also other 'non-meaningful' elements that show up in addition to the leaf components, and that do not contribute to the topic of the respective *Lelegesan*. Consider, for example the first stanza in example (3) above. As mentioned before, this *Lelegesan* tells the story of the linguist Nikolaus P. Himmelmann coming to Tolitoli in order to conduct linguistic research. Yet, these two lines both contain *sabatu manuk putian* 'one white bird' and a phrase that is somewhat difficult to interpret *kena dagitna kueang* 'don't attack the eagle'. These 'dummy' elements seem to function like building blocks that can be inserted any time a singer is playing for time. They can be considered as placeholders that a singer can use if they cannot think of anything funny and

appropriate at the vital moment. Other 'dummy' elements besides animal expressions are, for example, landmarks, such as the soil and the river of Kalangkangan (a small village outside of the city of Tolitoli), as in (6).

(6)     *Lelegesan* [lelegesan 053-054 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C7EE-3]

Idrus J.   1a: **pakajangan        suburna           buta        kalanggangan:::**
                  pakajangan        subur=na          buta        Kalangkangan
                  k.o.tree          fertile=3s.GEN    earth       Kalangkangan
                  ''pakajangan' tree, the fertile soil of Kalangkangan'

           1b: **solog   botak   kalanggangan   \<xxx\>   malai   masanang:::**
                  solog   botak   Kalangkangan   xxx      malai   mo-sanang
                  arus    river   Kalangkangan   xxx      flee    ST-happy
                  'the streaming river of Kalangkangan xxx, leave happy'

The rhyme pattern of a *Lelegesan* exhibits assonance between the last two vowels of the first half of each line, and the last two vowels of the second half of each line, as, for example, in *bombane* and *moane* ((2)-3b), *tabawang* and *kobawang* ((3)-2a), *paku* and *aku* ((5)-6a), etc. This kind of rhyme pattern has been reported for other kinds of verbal art found in Sulawesi. The Wana people of Central Sulawesi, for example, use a special poetic form, the *Kiyori*, to express their relations to external political orders (Atkinson 1984:33). The *Kiyori* consists of two lines, just like one stanza of a Totoli *Lelegesan*. These lines are broken up into half lines and exhibit the same rhyme pattern as just discussed for the *Lelegesan* (cf. Atkinson 1984: 38). However, the *Kiyori* shows a strict syllable structure, in that every half line consists of eight syllables, cf. example (7).

(7) Wana *Kiyori* (Atkinson 1984:48)
a. *masiasimo waotua*         poor is the slave
   *yore la'u ara njuya*      sleeping down beneath the floor
b. *kale ngkaju rapa ntu'a*   the root of a tree, the top of a stump
   *etu semo rapoyuna*        exactly that serves as his pillow

The *Lelegesan*, in contrast, does not exhibit a fixed syllable pattern. In general, the first line of a *Lelegesan* stanza has more syllables than the second line, but there is quite some variation as to the exact length of each line. In those *Lelegesan* available to the author, the number of syllables in the first line ranges from 9 to 16, and the number of syllables in the second line from 11 and 21. Thus, on the one hand singers have a certain amount of freedom concerning syllables. On the other hand, they have to fit their contribution into the predetermined melody and rhythm of the song[4], i.e. even if there are no strict metric rules, the melody constitutes the frame the singer has to adhere to.

And the singer's freedom is not confined to the syllable structure. It pertains to basically all the characteristic features discussed so far. Thus, there is quite some variation concerning the beginning of the lines. As mentioned above, the prototypical scenario is to start both lines with the name of a leaf. Yet, it is also possible to sing of a *pair* of leaves, as for example in (5)-6b *tibangna laeng kanau* 'a pair of sugar palm leaves' (cf.

---

[4] Melodies may vary slightly from *Lelegesan* to *Lelegesan*, but it does not change *within* one song. Thus, once the first singer and the gambus player have determined the melody, it is continued. This often also holds if more than one *Lelegesan* is performed, i.e. all *Lelegesan* performed at one event usually make use of the same melody.

also (5)-1b and (5)-4b), to use a leaf in combination with the honorific marker *i* (cf. (3)-2a), to only mention the tree or plant but not the leaf, (cf. (2)-3b and (5)-4a), or, as in the example (4)-1a, to sing about another part of the plant instead of the leaf (though this is far less common). Occasionally, animals or parts of animals may also take the slot that is otherwise occupied by the leaf element, as in the following example, where the second line starts with *idudupa* 'pig snout':

(8)    *Lelegesan* [lelegesan_1 013-014 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C7F3-4]

T. L.    1a:  ***laeng       malisa   kupogole        dei     kita:::***
              laeng       malisa   ku-po-gole      dei     kita
              leaf        chili    1s.ACT-SF-ask.for  LOC    2p
              'chili leaf, I am asking you'

         1b:  ***ee      sedaang    idudupa         kupogole kena  janji    palsu:::***
              ee      sadang     i dudupa        ku-po-gole kena  janji    plasu
              EMPH    now        HON pig.snout    1s-SF-ask.for don't  promise forged
              'snout of a pig, I am asking you not to make false promises'

While in most instances a leaf (or its substitute) occurs in both of the two lines, it is not obligatory in the second line (cf. (2)-2b), and there are also a few instances in the corpus where no leaves (or (other parts of) plants) are mentioned at all, cf. (9) below.

(9)    *Lelegesan* [lelegesan_5 021-022 https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C7EE-3]

Amasia    1a:  ***ai     engan     makapales      momunian:::***
               ai     engan     moko-pales     moN-buni-an
               hey    buddy     ST.AV-tired     AV-hide-APPL1
               'hey, your friend is trying to hide'

          1b:  ***makapales     momunian     kobongimo       sia   ia:::***
               moko-pales     moN-buni-an     ko-bongi=mo     sia   ia
               ST.AV-tired     AV-hide-APPL1   EXIST-night=CPL   3s    PRX
               'he was trying to hide last night'

Further variation can be observed regarding the turn-taking between singers. As can be seen in most of the examples discussed above, one singer passes the turn to the next as soon as they have finished one stanza (i.e. two lines). Yet, this is not obligatory – if the singer wants to go on, they can do so, and in principle for as long as they want. For example, the *Lelegesan* illustrated in (3) and (4) consists of 57 stanzas in total. Fifty-two of these stanzas are sung by the same singer (Idrus J., see above), and the first switch takes place only after 21 stanzas. Furthermore, singers do not have to be involved in the singing of the song to the same degree. In the *Lelegesan* shown in examples (2) and (5), the major battle takes place between two singers, Salun and Amasia, who sing one stanza each, before a switch takes place. A third singer, Rahmat, only drops in occasionally.

## 3. Comparing the *Lelegesan* with the local popular song *Buta Totoli*

This section will briefly compare the *Lelegesan* with a modern local song called *Buta Totoli*, which, though fundamentally different in many aspects, shares some of the traditional features of the *Lelegesan* that have been discussed in the previous section.

*Buta Totoli* 'Totoli soil' (cf. (10)) is a very popular song in the Tolitoli region, probably known by the vast majority of the Totoli people. Children are taught this song at

school,[5] and it is often performed in private, as well as at weddings and other celebrations.

The differences between a *Lelegesan* and the song *Buta Totoli* are not difficult to identify. First and foremost, unlike the *Lelegesan*, the lyrics of the song *Buta Totoli* are not made up spontaneously, but are fixed and can thus be learned by everybody who wants to – special skills like the spontaneity, creativity, and ingenuity that are needed to perform a *Lelegesan* are not required. Also, the rhyme pattern differs, and obviously, the expression of leaf elements that are obligatory in the *Lelegesan* are missing in *Buta Totoli.*

(10)  *Buta Totoli* [buta_totoli https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C7D8-4]

1a
***iamo     kasi     buta     Totoli***
ia=mo     kaasi     buta     Totoli
PRX=CPL     pity     soil     Totoli
'this is my dear Totoli country'

1b
***buta     nipemeaan     tau     dakoku***
buta     ni-po-mea-an     tau     dako=ku
soil     RLS-SF-live-LV     person     big=1s.GEN
'the place where my parents live'

1c
***uliai     pomoo     nikotoanmo***
uli=ai     pomoo     ni-koto-an=mo
from=VEN     first     RLS-know-UV2=CPL
'from the beginning it has been known'

1d
***buta     Totoli     lipu     kami***
buta     Totoli     lipu     kami
soil     Totoli     country     1pe
'Totoli soil is our home'

2a
***mosilaa     bulan     dei     bibi     pantad***
mo-silaa     bulan     dei     bibi     pantad
ST-bright     month     LOC     edge     shore
'the moon is shining bright at the sea shore'

2b
***nipemeaan     umbasan     dolago***
ni-po-mea-an     umbasan     dolago
RLS-SF-play-LV     young.man     girl
'where young boys and girls play'

2c
***mapasanang     hati     nosusamo***
mo-po-sanang     hati     no-susa=mo
ST-CAU-happy     heart     ST.RLS troubled=CPL
'pleasing the aching heart'

2d
***buta     Totoli     lipu     kami***
buta     Totoli     lipu     kami
soil     Totoli     country     1pe
'Totoli soil our home'

3a
***buta     Totoli     nipemeaanku***
buta     Totoli     ni-po-mea-an=ku
soil     Totoli     RLS-SF-live-LV=1s.GEN
'Totoli soil is where I live'

3b
***buta     nibangun     tau     pomoo***
buta     ni-bangun     tau     pomoo
soil     RLS-erect     person     first
'soil cultivated by the ancestors'

---

[5] Totoli is partly taught in Totoli schools as part of the *muatan lokal* (Local Content Curriculum). The *muatan lokal* was introduced by the Education and Culture Ministry in 1994. It regulates that a certain amount of primary school and junior high school teaching (20% of all school hours) takes place in a local language (cf. Arka 2007; Nakaya 1995). In Tolitoli, *muatan lokal* is part of the curriculum, though it is not implemented in all schools.

| 3c | | | | 3d | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *ingga* | *mataan* | *hatiku* | *kasi* | *malai* | *buta* | *Totoli* |
| ingga | mo-taan | hati=ku | kaasi | malai | buta | Totoli |
| NEG | ST-endure | heart=1s.GEN | pity | flee | earth | Totoli |
| 'my poor heart won't bear' | | | | 'to leave Totoli' | | |

Yet, there are also similarities between the two song types, as *Buta Totoli* also shows quite some variation. This pertains to lexical elements, to the melody – the second stanza has a different melody than stanzas one and three – and also to the order and number of stanzas. Comparing different recordings of this song sung at different occasions, we find, for example, that the phrase *tau dakoku* 'my parents', in line (10)-1b is often replaced by *tau pomoo* 'the ancestors'. Similarly, instead of line (10)-2d *buta Totoli lipu kami* 'Totoli soil, our home', the very first line *iamo kasi buta Totoli* 'this is my dear Totoli country' can be repeated. In one of our recordings, the song consists of only two stanzas; in another, the order of stanza 2 and stanza 3 is reversed, which results in the fact that in this version, the last (i.e. the third) stanza exhibits a different melody from the other two. Stanzas and lines, and to a certain extent also lexical elements, thus seem to be building blocks, similar to the 'dummy elements' found in the *Lelegesan*, that can be combined in different ways. Note also that, similar to the leaf elements that prototypically occur in each line of a *Lelegesan*, the phrase *buta Totoli* has to occur in the first and last line of each stanza. However, again, there are exceptions to the 'rule': just like there are lines in a *Lelegesan* that do not contain a leaf or a (part of a) plant, the first line of the second stanza does not contain the phrase *buta Totoli* (cf. (10)-2a).

## 4. The relevance of special genres in language documentation and linguistic analysis

In the literature on language documentation and the study of endangered languages (of often non-literate societies) the importance of a broad coverage of different speech styles and genres has often been emphasised (Himmelmann 1998, 2006; Woodbury 2003). Especially in the research on oral literature, it has been pointed out that there is a co-variation between discourse structure and genre and that the 'analysis of this covariation is a powerful tool for investigating and ultimately characterizing the range of ways of speaking found in a community' (Sherzer & Woodbury 1987:2f.). In this section, I want to briefly illustrate how the data presented above (i.e. the various *Lelegesan* and the different recordings of the song *Buta Totoli*) have complemented the Totoli corpus, and thus the documentation of the Totoli language, in a unique way. As we shall see, this complementation pertains to the lexical level, as well as to morpho-syntax and phonology.

Especially in non-literate societies, it is often the case that specific cultural knowledge is preserved and handed down to younger generations by means of special speech styles such as ritual speech, songs, etc. In the case of the *Lelegesan*, this pertains first and foremost to the lexical field of plants and trees (and their leaves). In present-day Totoli society, where most people work either as rice farmers or as civil servants in the growing bureaucracy of what has become the regency's (*Kabupaten*) capital city, gardening no longer plays a prominent role in everyday life. It is thus not surprising that ethno-botanic terminology is rarely used in everyday conversation, if at all. For a documentation team consisting of linguists and anthropologists with little or no knowledge of botany, and who have therefore not undertaken any systematic elicitation of the flora and fauna in the Totoli area, the *Lelegesan* is thus a stroke of luck: Nine of

the fourteen trees and plants whose leaves are sung about in the *Lelegesan* presented above are only documented in this special genre and do not occur elsewhere in the corpus.

On the morpho-syntactic level, the song *Buta Totoli* contains a comparatively high number of locative voice constructions. In Totoli, being a symmetrical voice language, any (dynamic) eventuality can be expressed either in an actor voice construction, or in an undergoer voice construction (cf. Riesberg 2014). The locative voice constitutes a third voice in the Totoli system (cf. Himmelmann & Riesberg 2013), in which a locative argument is the pivot of the construction. Even though, in principle, the locative voice is quite productive (it can be derived from both dynamic and stative verbal bases, regardless of their valency), in natural spoken speech it is actually rather rare. There are approximately 120 locative voice formations identified in spontaneous speech in the corpus[6] (additional occurrences are elicited). The relatively low frequency of locative voice constructions might be due to the fact that there are other ways to express the location where an event takes place. Compare examples (11)a and (11)b with the example in (11)c, the only one of the three to illustrate an actual locative voice construction. (11)a is a nominalization of the verb *mea* 'to live', the whole construction being a possessive construction that literally translates as 'those chickens' living place'. (11)b is a relative clause. In both cases, locative voice does not need to be used.

(11)  a.  *pemmeaan*           *manukna*           *ana*
          po-RDP1-mea-an       manuk=na            ana
          GER-RDP1-live-NR     chicken=3s.GEN      MED
          'the place where those chickens live'                    [Abdullah's_dream 062]

      b.  *tampat*    *sia*    *nollumpak*      *ana*
          tampat      sia      no-RDP1-lumpak   ana
          place       3s       POT.RLS-RDP1-hit MED
          'the place where he hit (that stone)'                    [pearstory_2 144]

      c.  *bale*    *ia*    *nipobolianna*           *bogas*
          bale      ia      ni-po-boli-an=na          bogas
          house     PRX     RLS-SF-buy-LV=3s.GEN      rice
          'the house where he bought rice'                         [locative voice 003]

In *Buta Totoli*, a song which puts the location – the Totoli homeland – at its heart, there are three instances of locative voice constructions (derived from the two homophonous verbal bases *mea* 'to live' and *mea* 'to play'), cf. lines (10)-1b, (10)-2b, and (10)-3a.

Finally, special genres can sometimes be helpful in analysing the phonology of a language. In the case of Totoli, the realization of certain vowels in the *Lelegesan* can be taken  as a form of supporting evidence in favour of our analysis of these vowels as long

---

[6] It might well be the case that the locative voice is actually more frequent than this, but that actual locative voice forms have been misanalysed as undergoer voice forms or as applicatives. In Totoli morphology, most formatives do not have an unequivocal function, and the suffix -*an* does not only mark locative voice. Rather, it is homophonous 1) with the suffix that marks applicatives in the actor voice, in non-realis undergoer voice constructions (applying a theme argument) and in realis undergoer voice constructions (applying a goal argument), and 2) with the suffix that marks one of the two basic undergoer voices (i.e. undergoer voice 1) (cf. Himmelmann & Riesberg 2013 for a detailed analysis of voice marking and applicatives in Totoli).

vowels. Note that, for example, in words like *tabawang* 'tabaang tree' and *bawang* 'far' in (3)-2a, epenthetic glides are inserted by the singers. In ordinary speech, these words are produced without the glide, but with a perceivable longer vowel, which suggests that Totoli distinguishes short and long vowels.

(12)  *ingga    molibaangan*
      ingga    moli-baang-an
      NEG      RCP-far-RCP
      'they are not far from each other'                                    [conv_cl.031]

In the *Lelegesan* the insertion of a glide in these contexts serves to make two syllables out of what would otherwise be just one. This can be necessary in order to make a word, which otherwise would be too short, fit the rhyme pattern and the rhythm of the *Lelegesan*. So, instead of singing just *ka.baang,* or *ta.baang,* the singer produces *ka.ba.wang* and *ta.ba.wang*, adding an additional syllable so that the word fits the rhythm. The unusual realization in the *Lelegesan* can thus be taken as supportive evidence[7] that the vowel in *baang* in (12) is indeed longer than, for example, in *banga* 'straight', and that postulating vowel length as a distinctive phonemic feature of Totoli phonology is justified.

## 5. Summary

This paper introduced the *Lelegesan*, a special form of verbal art from Totoli. As illustrated in the previous sections, a prototypical *Lelegesan* shows the following defining features:

- the lyrics are produced spontaneously
- each line starts with the name of a leaf or a tree
- each stanza exhibits a parallel structure
- there is assonance between the last two vowels of the first half line
  and the last two vowels of the second half line
- there is a change of singer after every stanza.

Yet, it was also shown that singers are free to diverge from this 'ideal'. This freedom and variation is probably particularly great within *Lelegesan* as this is a genre that by definition must be spontaneous and ad-hoc. It is, however, also a characteristic of oral genres in general, as illustrated by the comparison between the *Lelegesan* and the modern-style song *Buta Totoli*. The use of lexical building blocks, for example, which are combined individually by each (group of) singer(s), could be observed in both *Lelegesan* and *Buta Totoli*.

The last section contained a brief discussion of how the study of special genres can be fruitful for language documentation and linguistic analysis. In the case of the two types of songs presented in this paper, this was illustrated with the help of three phenomena: the lexical field of leaves/trees, the locative voice, and long vowels.

---

[7] It must be clearly stated, however, that in this case the evidence is indeed *supportive* only. The attentive reader will have noticed that there are instances of long vowels (represented in the transcript by two adjacent vowels) where no glide is inserted (cf., for example, *teeng* 'tea' and *sandaa* 'to lean toward' in (5)-1b.). The epenthesis of a glide is thus not a reliable diagnostic of vowel length, as instances without an inserted glide might still be long. Yet, the reverse holds: IF an epenthetic glide is inserted, we are clearly dealing with a long vowel.

## Abbreviations

1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; ACT = actor (prefix); AND = andative; APPL = applicative; AS.IF = as if; AV = actor voice; CAU = causative; CPL = completive; EMPH = emphasis; EXIST = existential; GEN = genitive; HON = honorific article; IMP = imperative; INCPL = incompletive; LOC = locative; LV = locative voice; MED = medial (deictic); NEG = negation; NR = nominalizer; p = plural; pe = plural exclusive; PRX = proximative (deictic); RCP = reciprocal; RDP = reduplication; RLS = realis; s = singular; SF = stem former; ST = stative; UV = undergoer voice; VEN = venitive

## Acknowledgements

## References

Arka, Wayan I. 2007. Local autonomy, local capacity building and support for minor languages: Field experience from Indonesia. In D. Victoria Rau and Margeret Florey (eds), *Documenting and revitalizing Austronesian languages*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 66–92.

Atkinson, Jane M. 1984. 'Wrapped Words': Poetry and Politics among the Wana of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. In Don L. Brenneis & Fred R. Myers (eds.), *Dangerous Words. Language and Politics in the Pacific*. New York: New York University Press. 33–68.

Capwell, Charles. 1995. Contemporary manifestations of Yemeni-derived song and dance in Indonesia. In Dieter Christensen (ed.), *Yearbook for Traditional Music, Vol. 27.* New York: Columbia University. 76–89.

Fox, James J. (ed.). 1988. *To Speak in Pairs: Essays on the Ritual Languages of Eastern Indonesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fox, James J. 2005. Ritual languages, special registers and speech decorum in Austronesian languages. In Alexander Adelaar & Nikolaus P. Himmelmann (eds.), *The Austronesian languages of Asia and Madagascar*. London: Routledge. 87–109.

Himmelmann, Nikolaus P. 1998. Documentary and descriptive linguistics. *Linguistics* 36. 161–195.

Hilarian, Larry Francis. 2006. The folk lute (*gambus*) and its symbolic expression in Malay muslim culture. *Studia Instrumentorum Musicae Popularis* (Proceedings from the 16th International Meeting) XVI. 50–65.

Himmelmann, Nikolaus P. 2001. *Sourcebook on Tomini-Tolitoli Languages. General Information and Word Lists*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.

Himmelmann, Nikolaus P. 2006. Language documentation: What is it and what is it good for? In J. Gippert, N. P. Himmelmann & U. Mosel (eds.), *Essentials of language docmentation.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 1–30.

Himmelmann, Nikolaus P. & Sonja Riesberg. 2013. Symmetrical voice and applicative alternations: evidence from Totoli. *Oceanic Linguistics* 52. 396–422.

Leto, Cluadia, Winarno S. Alamudi, Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, Janni Kuhnt-Saptodewo, Hasan Basri & Sonja Riesberg. 2005-2011. *DoBeS Totoli Documentation*. The Language Archive MPI Nijmegen. http://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0005-24BE-F@view.

Nakaya, Ayami. 1995. A study of 'muatan lokal' in Indonesian Education. Regulation between national culture and ethnic culture. In *Comparative Education* 21. 213–215.

Riesberg, Sonja. 2014. *Symmetrical voice and linking in Western Austronesian languages*. Boston & Berlin: De Gruyter.

Sherzer, Joel & Anthony C.Woodbury. 1987. Introduction. In Joel Sherzer and Anthony C. Woodbury (eds.), *Native American Discourse. Poetics and rhetoric.* Cambridge, Cambridge Univertity Press. 1–16.

Woodbury, Anthony C. 2003. Defining documentary linguistics. In Peter Austin (ed.), *Language Documentation and Description 1*. London: Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project. 35–51.