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VAIHOHO – POLYPHONIC DUETS OF THE FATALUKU OF TIMOR-LESTE

Introduction. In this talk I will describe a tradition of singing found among the Fataluku-speaking people, who live at the far eastern end of the Republic of Timor-Leste (the eastern half of the island of Timor). The singing I will discuss is called *vaihoho*. This is the term for the poetic texts, and also for the genre of vocal music that uses those poems as texts. Vaihoho are sung in polyphonic duets. Such duets are extremely rare in the Indonesian archipelago. The only other non-unison duet tradition known in Indonesia is found in eastern Flores, about 500 kilometers west of the Fataluku region.

Vaihoho: general. The typical performance format for vaihoho is two or more duos singing in alternation. Duos may consist of two women, two men, or a mixed pair – the crucial thing is for them to sing in the same register. Duos are formed by friends, relatives, a husband and wife. Nowadays more women sing than men. Duos tend to remain stable over years and decades. When one member of a duo dies or moves away, the other member often stops singing, rather than build a new partnership.

People sing vaihoho when they are walking a significant distance, such as from the village to their fields, or to town. They sing during individualized, parallel work such as weeding, weaving baskets, or preparing food in groups, and they sing vaihoho when they are just sitting around. Vaihoho are not sung on ritual occasions, only for informal ones. At a wedding, after the ceremonial part, or when people are eating at a feast, a few women may be sitting off in a corner singing vaihoho. No one pays attention to them, and there is never any applause.

Oral tradition. Vaihoho melodies are in oral tradition. There is no institutional or cultural demand to standardize melodies. This makes for great latitude in performance. Duos that sing together regularly tend to develop their own habitual versions of melodies, which may differ considerably from the versions sung by other duos in the same village, and differ even more so from versions sung in other villages. Thus there are no definitive versions of the melodies, only myriad variants. If there were someday an effort to make collections of vaihoho for teaching in schools, the choice of one version of a melody over another would inevitably involve political considerations and the disfranchisement of one tradition in favor of another.

Musical characteristics. Musically, vaihoho are duets characterized by drone polyphony. Intermittent and movable drones may occur in both voices. Drones are generally syllabic rather than continuous. There can be passages without drone, where the

two voices sing in mixed or parallel intervals. Syllables of the text are, for the most part, enunciated in both parts at the same time (that is, homorhythmically). Most vaihoho are in free meter. The upper line of the duet is the principal voice. It is typically more active rhythmically than the lower, with embellishments, neighboring tones, passing tones, and brief melismas. There is hardly any contrapuntal texture, even when the drone is suspended, and there is no crossing of parts.

A striking feature of vaihoho is the prevalence of simultaneous seconds, usually major but sometimes minor.[1] Often the second is arrived at from a unison, when the lower voice slips down from the unison to form a second. This practice resembles what English-language writers call "seeking seconds" when discussing Shop singing in Bulgaria. (The term is an English translation of a Bulgarian term proposed by Nikolaj Kaufman.)

Illustration 1 shows a transcription of a vaihoho melody, *Fata Koole,* as sung by two women.

Scales. The scales of vaihoho melodies are quite heterogeneous. In a sample of 21 melodies, none of them had identical scales. The count of pitches in a scale ranged from 5 to 13. Most of the scales, however, had a regularity, namely a core of central pitches around the finalis. If we call the finalis C, then the core pitches were Bb, C, and some form of D (usually D-natural). In addition, there was usually some form of A below the core and some form E above it. [Illustration 2.] There was also frequently a gap of a third somewhere in the set of a melody's pitches. More fieldwork is needed to determine whether some of the chromatic contrasts within and between scales are intentional, or are instead the product of latitude in intonation. However, in one melody that I will discuss presently, the half-step contrasts are definitely intentional [Illustration 3].[2]

Melodies. In the duet repertoire, there are perhaps 25 named melodies over the entire Fataluku-speaking area, but only three or four will be common in any one village.

Melodies usually end on a unison, often with a final flip up in the upper voice at the very end. In contrast, internal phrases often end on a major second. The maximum distance between the voices is rarely, if ever, more than a fourth.

Texts. All regular vaihoho poems are couplets, and each line is sung to one statement (strophe) of the melody. So a complete poem requires two substantially identical statements of the melody, differing only in incidental variants. An important point to make is that particular poems are not fixed to particular melodies: any vaihoho poem may be sung to any vaihoho melody.

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[1] I rely on the conventional terms major and minor for the seconds. More precise measurements would be useful, but I cannot provide them. Tamaz Gabisonia writes of neutral seconds (IRCTP VI), and Gerald Messner (1981) maintains that the "seconds" in Manus are actually intervals ranging from 80 to 165 cents. Some vaihoho seconds in my recordings sound clearly major/minor, but possibly others are neutral or of the type Messner identifies.

[2] Readers may hear a recording of this melody in the audio examples (ex. 9) for Yampolsky 2022, at https://www.academia.edu/86751847/. The transcription there shows the pitches a half-step lower than in Illustration 3 (and the discussion) here.

Performance. As I said before, ideally there are two or more duos. They sing in *serial alternation.* One duo begins by singing the first line of a vaihoho poem in a melody of that duo's choosing. Then the second duo sings that same line, in the same melody the first duo chose, or in a different melody of its own choosing. If there are more than two duos, each one repeats in turn that first line of the poem, in whatever melody it chooses. Then, when all the duos present have sung the first line, the duo that initiated the sequence sings the second line of the poem, and the other duos then echo that second line one by one, in turn. Each duo sings the second line in the same melody it used for the first line—you can't change melodies in the middle of the poem.

After every duo has sung the second line, the entire sequence begins again. Each duo is free to choose its melody, though usually one duo will stay with a favorite melody for a singing session of twenty or thirty minutes. Some sessions go longer.

At the symposium, I demonstrated serial alternation with a recording of four duos singing the first line of a vaihoho poem in the melody named *Tinolo Olo.* Each duo had a somewhat different version of the melody and the scale, illustrating what I was saying about the latitude that oral tradition allows. If I had had time to play the continuation to the second line of the poem, the audience would have heard that each duo was substantially consistent in its own version. The significant contrasts were between the versions sung by different duos, not between a single duo's iterations.

The score here (Illustration 2) shows only the first duo's version. The first duo sings the version I mentioned earlier, in which there is a clearly intentional melodic play contrasting G#, A-natural, and A#. The other duos make much less of this figure.

Horu koole. Serial alternation is the formal way to perform vaihoho. There is, however, another way. This is called ***horu koole***, and it involves many duos singing together in deliberate discoordination. It resembles the Seto wedding songs from Estonia that Žanna Pärtlas described in the 2020 symposium, for which she used the term ***polymusic***. In horu koole, one duo will initiate a vaihoho poem by singing the first line. But then, instead of each duo present echoing that line in turn, one by one, all the duos (except the one that initiated) reply by singing the line simultaneously, in different melodies or in the same melody, but all duos strive to remain unsynchronized with the others. The sound is chaotic, but all the singers are singing the same text. The pattern is the same for the second line of the poem.

At the symposium, I then played a recording, made during a rice harvest. After the rice has been threshed to separate the grains from the stalks, women sit in a line on mats on the ground, holding shallow woven trays with rice grains in them. The women jerk the trays sharply upward so the rice flies up in the air. The wind blows away the chaff, and the rice falls back into the tray. And as they work, they sing, in horu koole. Five duos were

heard in the recording.[3]

Conclusion. Polyphonic duet-singing is extremely limited in the Indonesian Archipelago, found only among Fataluku-speakers in Timor-Leste and Lamoholot-speakers in eastern Flores. Everywhere else in the archipelago, the dominant modes of singing are either solo (with or without instruments) or in choruses, and sometimes with a soloist overlapping the chorus. Aside from those traditions influenced by Christian hymnody, the texture of most of the choruses is heterophonic unison. Much less frequently, choruses may be characterized by homophonic, non-triadic harmony, sometimes with a drone.

Surrounded, then, by a sea of choral and solo traditions, the Timor and Flores duet traditions are similar in their isolation to the Georgian choral traditions, which, as Marine Kavtaradze noted in a presentation at the 2002 symposium, are mostly surrounded by monodic music cultures.

There is one other vocal duet tradition in the broader region, but it lies on the other side of the giant island of New Guinea. This is the tradition of Manus in the Admiralty Islands, which Gerald Messner described at the IRCTP symposium in 2006. It is quite different from Timorese vaihoho, though it is full of simultaneous seconds, even more so than vaihoho.

Finally, there are ***flute*** duet traditions in the same regions of Flores and Timor where duet singing is found, and also, intriguingly, in the Sepik region of New Guinea. The pairs of flutes are tuned a second apart, in all three of these traditions. Vaihoho melodies are sometimes approximated on the Fataluku paired flutes. So we might, very tentatively, imagine that the duet tradition originated in mainland New Guinea, whether as instrumental or vocal duets, and then spread out in both directions, east to the Admiralty Islands, and west to Timor and on to Flores.

Postscript. There is one important and highly unusual feature of vaihoho singing that I have had to omit here, for lack of time. This is the matter of text-setting: the way vaihoho poems are set into vaihoho melodies. I have written an appendix that outlines this issue. One of my hopes for this conference is that I will learn about text-setting procedures in the traditions that the participants here are expert in.

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[0] A different horu koole recording can be heard (as ex. 10) in the audio examples for the 2022 article (see note 2).

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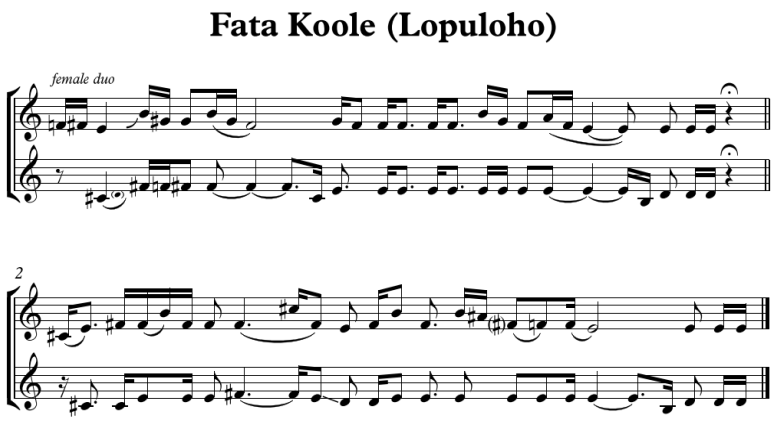
Illustration 1.



19Y12M28 T05. Actual pitch. Rhythmic values approximate. This notation shows the first melodic strophe (=first line of poem). Second strophe slightly different.

Illustration 2.

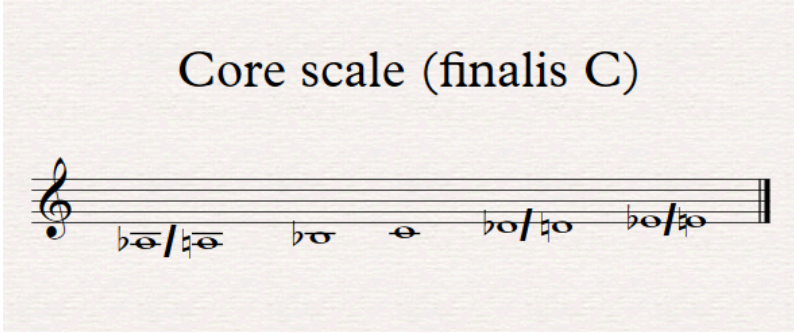
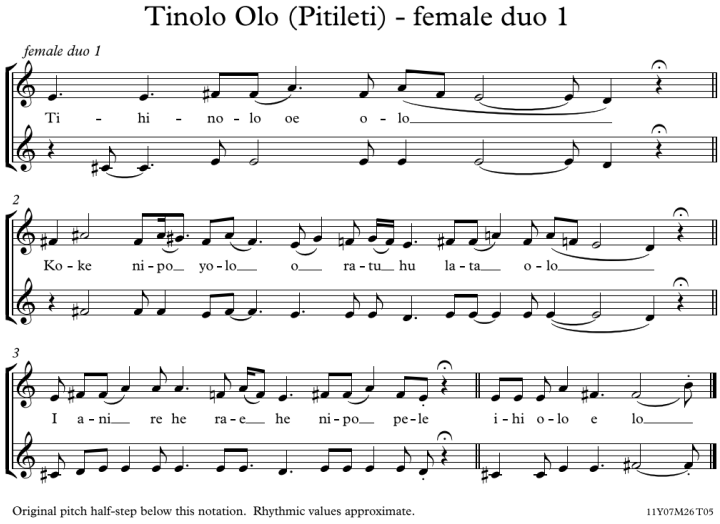


Illustration 3.



Appendix: Text-setting in Vaihoho

Text-setting in vaihoho—the way texts are fitted into melodies—is one of the most unusual features of this music.

Fataluku have a large body of poems in oral tradition. These verses have stable texts (though it is possible to alter details of the wording, and also to improvise new verses). The most important genre of Fataluku poetry, spoken and sung, is *vaihoho*. Nearly all *vaihoho* poems are free-standing couplets, complete in two lines. (The exceptions are a few narratives of linked verses and the anomalous three-line verses favored by one composer.) All *vaihoho* lines have the same basic metrical pattern: three units of ♪♪♪♪, one unit of ♩ ♩, and another optional unit of ♪♪♪♪ if the length of the line requires it.

The Fataluku language has a phonemic contrast between long and short vowels. Syllables with short vowels take one metrical position (♪) in *vaihoho* meter, while those with long vowels (shown here with a colon) take two positions (♩). The standard pattern of eighth-notes and quarter-notes shown in Figure 1 can be modified to suit the presence of long vowels in the poetic text. Syllables with long vowels may fall only on the first and third metrical positions of a four-position grouping. Thus the permitted variations of the ♪♪♪♪ unit are ♩ ♪♪, ♪♪♩, and ♩ ♩ . (The word ***losire*** at the end of the second line of the sample text in Figure 1 has a long vowel on the final syllable, so the meter of that unit is ♪♪♩ .)

On the other hand, no variation is permitted in the fourth unit of the *vaihoho* line. It must always consist of two syllables, both with long vowels (♩ ♩). If in a particular poetic line the syllables that fall in that fourth unit do not have long vowels in ordinary speech,

the vowels will be lengthened to fit the metrical requirement of that unit.

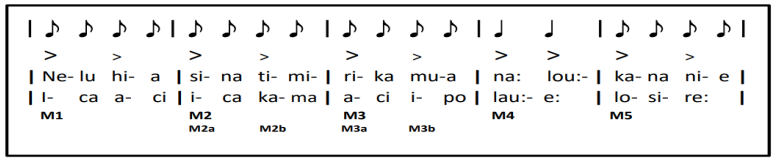


Figure 6. The normative meter of *vaihoho*, with a sample five-metron *vaihoho* text. The upper line of text is maximal, with 18 syllables; the lower line is sub-maximal, with 17 syllables. Hyphens separate syllables within a word; colons indicate syllables held for two pulses. Bar-lines mark the start of each metron. Metron labels (**M1, M2,** etc.) are shown here, but they are not discussed in the text until later. **AUDIO EX 2.**

Figure 1. Standard metrical pattern of all *vaihoho* lines.
One line = one melodic strophe.

Since ***every*** line of *vaihoho* poetry has the basic structure shown in Figure 1, we may represent that structure abstractly, without reference to the specific words of a poem. Using the abbreviation **M** (for *metron*), we may represent the structure of any *vaihoho* line as **M1 M2 M3 M4 (M5),** where **M1, M2, M3,** and the facultative **M5** have the meter ♪♪♪♪ (with permissible variations as shown above), and **M4** is always ♩ ♩ .

One line of poetry takes one statement of the sung melody. There are 25-30 melodies that can be used for singing *vaihoho*. The verses are not tied to the melodies: any verse may be sung to any melody. But the melodies are of varying lengths, and the lengths do not match the length of the poetic lines (which, as we have seen, is the same for all lines of all *vaihoho*). Therefore, the poetic lines must be ***adjusted*** to the melody. This is done by means of:

(1) textual additions:

a. an introductory text-phrase belonging to the melody, usually sung every time the melody is sung. This phrase is called the *catan*. (Some melodies have no *catan*, and in others the *catan* may be omitted under certain circumstances);

b. the insertion of filler syllables;

(2) and (unspoken) performance instructions:

c. in some melodies, obligatory repetitions of segments of the poetic text;

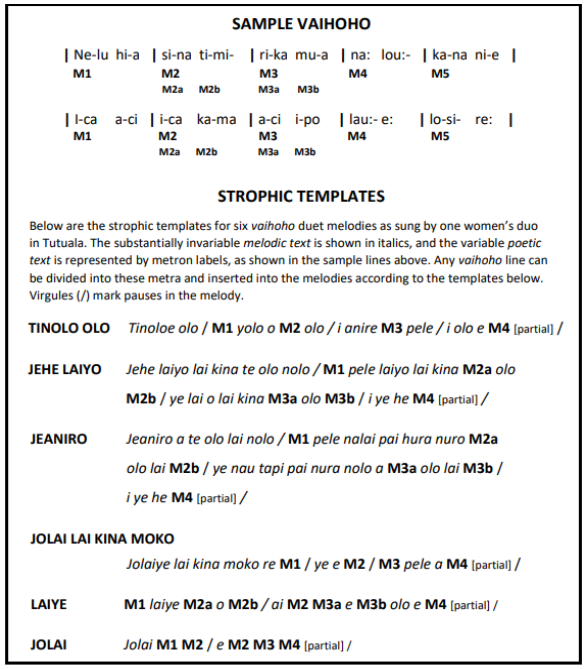
d. and, often, truncation of the last part of the line (**M5** and sometimes **M4**).

The filler syllables are vocables and lexical words that are unrelated to the poem. (I will call them all vocables, for convenience.) ***The vocables have fixed positions for each melody, and they must be sung in those positions every time the melody is sung***. The vocables, together with the introductory *catan* and the "performance instructions" listed as (c) and (d) above, constitute what I call a ***melodic text***, belonging to the melody and wholly independent of the ***poetic text***. The words of the particular poetic line being sung have to be slotted into the gaps between the fixed positions where the vocables must fall. Or, to turn this around: the vocables of the melodic text have to be inserted into the poetic

text in all the necessary places.

The figure on the next page shows the strophic templates of six *vaihoho* melodies. The strophic text of a melody is the sung combination of variable poetic text, represented here by **M1, M2,** etc., and the substantially invariable melodic text. Sometimes syllables of the melodic text fall at the midway point in a metron. In that case, I label the half-metra with **a** and **b.** For example, in the melody ***Jeaniro*** (the third one down in Figure 2), **M2** in the first line of the sample *vaihoho* text, ***sina timi***, is interrupted by ***olo lai***, thus: ***sina olo lai timi.*** I show this as **M2a *olo lai* M2b.**

It is this requisite intermixing of elements of poetic text and melodic text, each with its fixed position in the resultant sung line (the strophic text)—together with the flexibility to sing any poetic text in different melodies with different complements of melodic text—that seems highly unusual in the world's music. I have been looking all over for counterparts. Do any of the specialists at this conference recognize a practice like this from the musics they study?



SAMPLE VAIHOHO

| Ne-lu hi-a | si-na ti-mi- | ri-ka mu-a | na: lou:- | ka-na ni-e |
M1 M2 M2a M2b M3 M3a M3b M4 M5

| I-ca a-ci | i-ca ka-ma | a-ci i-po | lau:- e: | lo-si- re: |
M1 M2 M2a M2b M3 M3a M3b M4 M5

STROPHIC TEMPLATES

Below are the strophic templates for six *vaihoho* duet melodies as sung by one women's duo in Tutuala. The substantially invariable *melodic text* is shown in italics, and the variable *poetic text* is represented by metron labels, as shown in the sample lines above. Any *vaihoho* line can be divided into these metra and inserted into the melodies according to the templates below. Virgules (/) mark pauses in the melody.

TINOLO OLO *Tinoloe olo* / **M1** *yolo o* **M2** *olo / i anire* **M3** *pele / i olo e* **M4** [partial] /

JEHE LAIYO *Jehe laiyo lai kina te olo nolo* / **M1** *pele laiyo lai kina* **M2a** *olo* **M2b** / *ye lai o lai kina* **M3a** *olo* **M3b** / *i ye he* **M4** [partial] /

JEANIRO *Jeaniro a te olo lai nolo* / **M1** *pele nalai pai hura nuro* **M2a** *olo lai* **M2b** / *ye nau tapi pai nura nolo a* **M3a** *olo lai* **M3b** / *i ye he* **M4** [partial] /

JOLAI LAI KINA MOKO *Jolaiye lai kina moko re* **M1** / *ye e* **M2** / **M3** *pele a* **M4** [partial] /

LAIYE **M1** *laiye* **M2a** *o* **M2b** / *ai* **M2** **M3a** *e* **M3b** *olo e* **M4** [partial] /

JOLAI *Jolai* **M1** **M2** / *e* **M2** **M3** **M4** [partial] /

Figure 10. Strophic templates for six *vaihoho* melodies as sung in Tutuala. Source: Pitileti 12Y10M07b.
AUDIO EXX. 3–8.

Figure 2. Strophic templates for six *vaihoho* melodies as sung in Tutuala.

Note: Readers may hear recordings of the spoken vaihoho (fig. 1) and the six strophic templates (fig. 2) as audio examples 2 and 3–8, respectively, at https://www.academia.edu/86751847/.