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Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies

*Introduction**

One of the merits of the Field of Anthropological Study approach in the so-called 'Leiden tradition' is that it focuses on what P.E. de Josselin de Jong has called the mutual interpretability of local transformations. Within a Field of Study, with its common historical roots, 'each culture can, in principle at least, contribute to an understanding of the others' (De Josselin de Jong 1980a:325). On the basis of the results of such comparison, recent developments in this approach with respect to Indonesia have identified more and more 'distinguishing features of an Austronesian heritage' (Fox 1993:5).

These features are not isolated traits, but they are not part of a closed system either. The Leiden tradition stressed from the outset that the ordering of local forms was governed by basic structural principles that pervade the various aspects of a culture. Initially this was explained, in accordance with the ideas developed by E. Durkheim and M. Mauss (1903), by saying that it is 'the scheme of the social categories' that provides 'the model for an all-embracing classification' (Van Wouden 1935:2). Later, this 'primacy of the social organization' (De Josselin de Jong and Vermeulen 1989:303) was rejected. The 'internal coherence of the representational system' of a society then was quite generally attributed to a 'holistic' axiom (Platenkamp 1990:18) and considered to be based on an 'innate' human propensity (see Schulte Nordholt 1971:436).

However, to quote Schulte Nordholt (1971:13) again, this order is 'never in

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a state of equilibrium'. There is no traditional system without diverging, contradictory features which call forth continual alterations. This may give rise to diachronic changes, or the problem may be temporarily addressed by applying alternative contextual solutions, notably in ritual (*Gegenbild*, or counterimage, see Schefold 1988a:33). In other cases, however, and in line with the 'holistic axioma', it may lead to adaptive adjustments and conceptual compromises that can be regarded as being the result of a basic concern of the social groups themselves.

This paper deals with an Indonesian example in which such holistic concern with consistency becomes apparent in religious ideas. I shall focus on an aspect that is at the basis of most ritual behaviour and which in another context I have called its 'telic' dimension (Schefold 1988a:22-4): the fact that people expect such behaviour to bring about a concrete result. More specifically, I shall concentrate on local concepts of the origins of beneficial influences that are appealed to in ritual performances within the Indonesian field of study. In the first part I shall identify, by way of comparison and 'mutual interpretation', three different sources of ritual blessings. In the second part, common ideas behind these three modalities and their partly fictitious relationship with notions of precedence and origin structures will be analysed and interpreted, both as partial expressions of certain basic organizational principles and as conceptual adjustments to these.

Three modalities of a Stream of Blessings

As a point of departure, I refer to certain rituals of the Sakuddei on Siberut, the largest of the Mentawai Islands, to the west of Sumatra, where I have done several periods of fieldwork.¹ In my opinion, many characteristic features of the cultural heritage of Siberut reflect the Austronesian tradition in Indonesia that was mentioned above (see Schefold 1993). For their sustenance the people traditionally depend on growing root crops and bananas and catching fish, which constitute the women's contribution to the economy, and cultivating sago palms, laying out *ladang* fields, and hunting, which are the tasks of the men. Furthermore, both sexes keep chickens and pigs. There are no specialized skills; many techniques that are widespread throughout Indonesia, such as metalwork and weaving, are unknown in Mentawai.

The population is organized into patrilineal clans. These clans constitute the largest genealogical clusters on Siberut and are distributed over the whole island. In daily life, however, the local representatives of the clans in

¹ See Schefold 1988a. The descriptions that follow refer to a period remnants of which can still be recognized in some parts of southern Siberut, predating massive modern influences.

the different valleys are most prominent. They live together in groups of about ten families, called *uma*, and occupy a large communal house, which is also called *uma*. Traditionally, various *uma*, each belonging to a different clan, are located along the rivers at irregular intervals from one another.

Inside the local community, there has always been an ideology of cooperation and mutual support. There are no political leaders. Decisions are taken communally; if agreement cannot be reached on important issues, the community may split. Fission is in contradiction with the spirit of the *uma* and entails a dreaded weakening of the group. However, ideological solidarity is in constant conflict with the tendency of individuals to put their private interests above those of the community and to try and enhance their personal prestige. This means that tensions within the *uma* are the rule rather than the exception.

Uma dwellers have an ambivalent relationship with their neighbours in the valley. Their explicit ideal is one of peaceful co-existence, but here again the ideal is continually threatened by the opposing attitude of rivalry. This gives rise to a mutual distrust that is never entirely absent and which often leads to open enmity. Even on most ritual occasions, different *uma* do not come together.

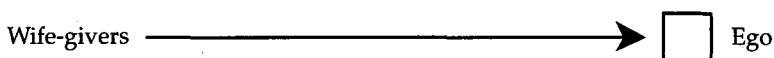
The most important means of maintaining peace are marriage alliances. Marriage within the *uma* is regarded as being incestuous. There are no prescriptive rules: marriages are generally concluded with any other *uma* in the valley on the basis of personal affection, and often also at the instigation of the parents in the service of their alliance plans. However, even at wedding ceremonies the continuous tension between local groups makes itself felt. The bridegroom's group pays a bride price agreed upon beforehand in the course of some hard bargaining. In return, the bride's group presents the meat of big sacrificial pigs. These pigs will be sacrificed at the start of the ritual in the bride's house, marking her departure from her paternal group. After that, the bridal couple, together with some friends carrying the meat, moves to the *uma* of the bridegroom, where the second marriage ceremony is to take place. There is thus no communal feast of the two groups.

The only exception to the balance in the relation between the members of the wife-giving and wife-taking groups is the husband. The position of the husband relative to the men in the *uma* from which his wife originates is one of a certain immature dependency. He has to treat them with respect and is obliged to help them when asked, for he is in fact continually in their debt. Although he has paid bridewealth for his spouse, material goods can never fully compensate for the gift of life and the prospect of progeny and continuity.

This idea is underlined by the significance of the meat that the wife-givers offer. The value of the pigs is set much higher than in everyday transactions,

since it is understood that the receivers of the meat are also obtaining the bride herself. However, this is not the only occasion on which the value of big sacrificial pigs is set higher than usual. This is also the case in a particular healing ceremony, a ritual which significantly is also called 'celebrating a marriage' (*pangurei*). This ceremony is aimed at calling back the soul of a sick person. The patient is adorned like a bridegroom – hence the name of the ceremony – and a big pig is ostentatiously purchased from a related *uma* for a sumptuous banquet. Yet in this case it is not payment of the price of a bond between a bride and bridegroom but payment for life itself that is at issue. The meat of the sacrificial pig has the power to bind the soul of the patient to life again and in this way to restore health. In other words, the acquisition of this meat brings blessings, just as it does at a wedding. Apparently, the conception of a lasting indebtedness of the wife-taker to his wife-givers is also religious in nature.

It is not difficult to place these ideas within the context of the Indonesian Field of Study. The people of Siberut have no special word to designate the blessings streaming from the wife-givers to the wife-taker, but terms used by the Toba Batak, such as *sahala* or *pasu pasu* (Johann Angerler, personal communication), point in the same direction, evoking the image of the 'Flow of Life' of the Ema of Timor as it has become well-known through the volume with the same title edited by J.J. Fox (1980).



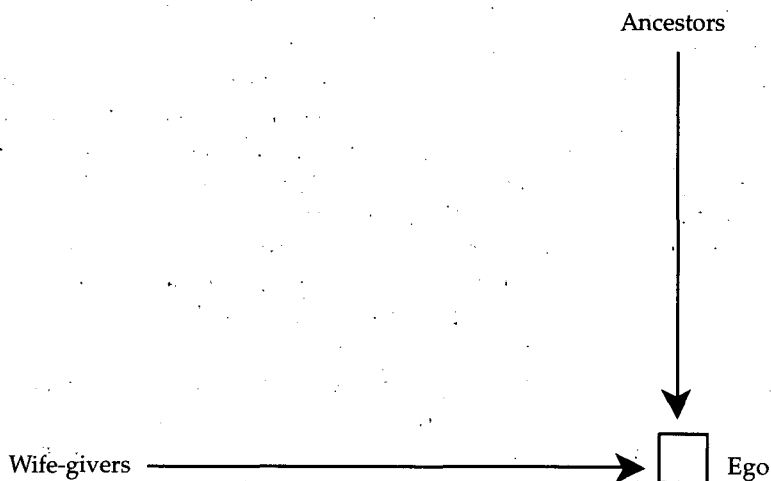
In contrast to Siberut, among the Toba Batak not the individual wife-taker but his entire patrilineal group is considered to be the receiver of the blessings.² A logical consequence of this shift are the generalized asymmetric prescriptions of the Toba Batak system.³ Among the Toba, as in many other Indonesian societies with such a system, the host's party invites representatives of both the wife-giving and wife-taking groups to celebrate together on the occasion of important rituals.

During the big periodic rituals in Siberut, referred to as *pulaiijat*, instead of the beneficial forces of the wife-givers, two other sources of ritual blessings

² A matrilineal equivalent of the individual position of the Mentawai bridegroom is provided by the Minangkabau, among whom, according to Linda Hansen (personal communication), it is only the wife who is expected on certain occasions to assist the bridegroom's family (the 'husband-givers'). There is no question of any lasting relationship between the two matrilineal descent groups involved.

³ However, the example of the people of Nias shows that a preferential asymmetric system can also combine with a subordinate position of the actual wife-taker, just as in Mentawai; see Beatty 1992:63: '[...] a whole clan theoretically gives a wife but only an individual receives'.

are appealed to. In the course of these festivals, which are the crowning event of any extraordinary occasion, the group is re-consolidated in various ways. There are two scenes of action, namely the communal house and the surrounding forest. In the house, in an initial phase, a few shamans of neighbouring groups are invited to participate⁴, but in the subsequent and most important phase, the members of the community devise a temporary social alternative, a *Gegenbild*, whereby they shut themselves off completely, prepare sumptuous banquets, ceremonially invite their ancestors as guests, and celebrate the solidarity of the *uma* with them. To honour the ancestors, huge decorated bamboo stakes, one for each sacrificial pig, are erected beside the house.⁵ The ancestors are asked to offer their protection and to help in all difficulties threatening the community. There is no specific word for this ancestral protection; the image used by the people is that of the ancestors helping in attracting and strengthening the souls of the living in order to prevent the souls from straying too far away and keep them firmly bound to life.



The ancestors appealed to on such occasions are the group's own genealogical forebears. As was said above, in contrast to other Indonesian societies, the people of Siberut do not explicitly appeal to the matrimonial

⁴ These shamans help to achieve certain ritual aims (see Schefold 1988a) and often come from groups that are related by marriage. At the end of the ritual it is first and foremost the families of the husbands of married-out daughters who receive a share of some of the reserved festive meat. In this sense the social alliance motif is not entirely absent, but there is no explicit reference to it.

⁵ The poles recall the megaliths erected during the ancestor-directed feasts of merit of more complex Indonesian societies.

source of blessings in these ceremonies. This is in line with the absence of a prescribed marriage system with lasting relations between wife-giving and wife-taking groups. For a counter-example see, for instance, the Niasans, about whom A. Beatty (1992:278) writes that the blessings of feasting are not summed up in a single concept. One source of good fortune are the blessings of the agnatic ancestors of the organizers of the feast; other beneficial influences are attributed to the affines and are purchased with tribute to the wife-givers.

However, even during the *puliaiijat* ritual there is another source of blessings, additional to the ancestral one. This comes to the fore in the second scene of action of every *puliaiijat*. Towards the end of the ritual, the entire group moves into the jungle for a few days, where they erect an improvised hunting camp. Sacrifices are offered to the spirits residing there, whose permission to stay in their domain and help with the hunt are requested. The quarry of this hunt are monkeys. The hunters leave behind a piece from the left ear of each animal as a special offering. The meat is smoked while they are still in the forest and is subsequently eaten communally in a great closing ceremony held in the *uma*.

There is something strange about this particular quarry. The people regard game as the domestic animals of the spirits residing in the forest. When referring to these spirits in ritual, they normally use a word – *ukkui* – that in its strict sense designates the genealogical ancestors. However, this verbal merging does not mean that the hunt is just a replication of the acts performed first in the house, reinforcing the ritual benefits people want to reap from the ancestors through reiteration by other means. The forest is the domain of a special category of supernatural beings, that of the forest spirits (*sai ka leleu*).

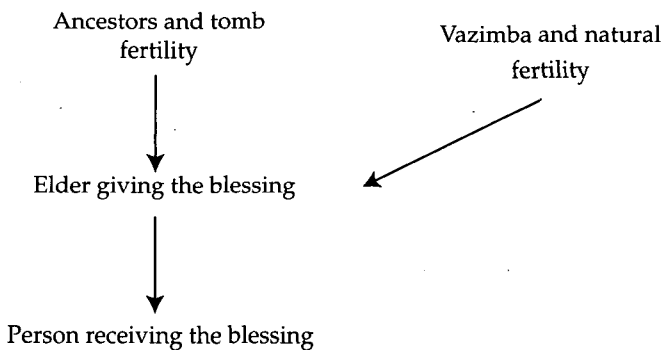
There is a peculiar relationship between the ancestors and the *sai ka leleu*. Mythical narratives relate how in primeval times, before there was any death, the present spirits of the forest and humans were one. The earth was in danger of becoming overcrowded, and so the people split up into two parties; one party became today's mortals, the other withdrew into the forest and created its own, other-worldly, 'culture of the beyond' behind the apparent wilderness. These latter spirits are feared, being more remote from people, who avoid explicitly addressing them by their proper name in ritual invocations. However, when we place the ritual hunt in a comparative Indonesian perspective, we have reason to believe that it is specifically the forest spirits who are the agents people want to reach at the end of the *puliaiijat*.

I found an indication for this in Maurice Bloch's analysis (1986) of the circumcision ritual of the – Austronesian – Merina in Madagascar. In his description, the relationship between the spirits of the wilderness and the genealogical ancestors of the community appears in a new light. It is con-

nected with an opposition that is known from many cultures in the Indonesian field of study: the distinction between a primeval autochthonous population and later immigrants.

This distinction is often combined with the idea that the immigrants captured the land from the autochthonous people but were only able to take possession of it and make use of its fertility by concluding a pact with them and marrying their daughters. Here again we find the relationship that we have come to recognize as being central to the social life of many traditional Indonesian peoples, namely that between wife-givers and wife-takers. This mythical theme lives on in a diarchic pattern in many Indonesian societies: the descendants of the autochthonous party provide the representative of spiritual authority, the Lord of the Land (*tuan tanah*), while the political leader comes from among the descendants of the immigrants.⁶

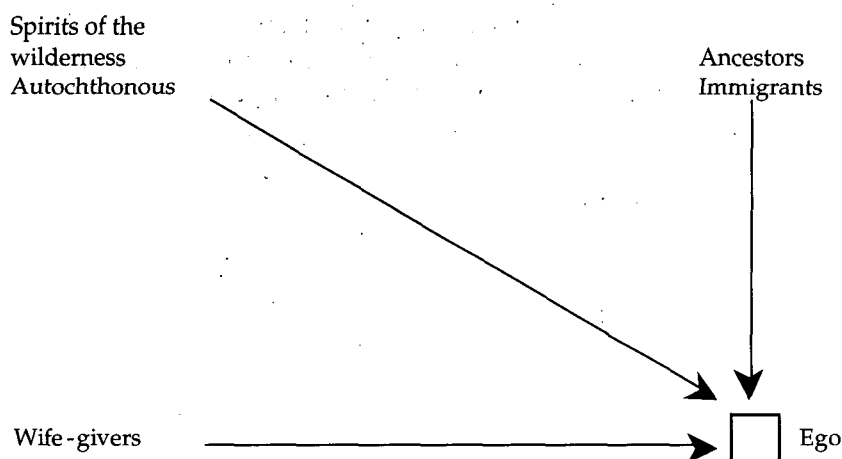
In Merina traditions these ideas are expressed very clearly. The myths (Bloch 1986:42) tell of an autochthonous population, the Vazimba, who had a matrimonial relationship with mythical immigrant-ancestors of the present rulers and who live today as spirits in the wilderness, where they are associated with ponds. During the circumcision ritual both parties are appealed to. At home, ancestral blessings are sought and transferred to the living. At a particular stage, however, these blessings have to be complemented by the beneficial forces which originate from the uncultivated domains of the Vazimba and which are brought into the community in the form of water collected from their ponds.



Merina social organization and religion (from Bloch 1986)

⁶ See Van Wouden 1935; Scholz 1962; De Josselin de Jong 1980b. Sometimes the relation is explained by actual autochthonous roots of the *tuan tanah* people. In other cases they are said to have arrived in the area first – wherever their origins may have been – and to owe their exclusive relationship to the primordial forces of the earth to their role as prime cultivators (see Schefold in press). According to T. van Dijk (2000:175, 194), on the Babar islands the versions of

The diagram provided by Bloch fits the situation in Siberut exactly, the one difference being that the blessings from the wilderness are not transferred by means of collected water but accompany the meat of the hunted animals. We can conclude, in 'mutual interpretation', that the source of these blessings is not the genealogical ancestors – as the terminology normally used in the invocations at first seems to imply⁷ – but the spirits of the wilderness, which people are afraid to call by name during a *puliaiijat* but which nevertheless possess an identity of their own. In the first stages of the ritual, the *uma* dwellers sacrificed to the ancestors of their own group and asked their protection. Now, at this later stage, the community celebrates the second source of *puliaiijat* blessings; the original wilderness, whose favours are no less essential for human physical well-being and prosperity. The meat of the monkeys is the visible symbol of these favours; it is interpreted as a sign that the forest spirits approve the offerings made to them. In the final phase of the *puliaiijat*, this meat is understood as a guarantee that the communal ritual has succeeded in its entirety. It transfers the blessings of the autochthonous forces, of which the world of men, with all its intrinsic, inevitable contradictions, is sorely in need.



primordial legitimation vary from village to village, the *tuan tanah* in one case being descended from an autochthonous people and in another from a first immigrant-ancestor who forged a special relationship with the autochthonous population, for instance by marrying one of their daughters. In both variants, the first people were sometimes joined by later immigrants, who are hierarchically subordinate.

⁷ In earlier publications (Schefold 1988a and b) I assumed that the designation *ukkui*, used both in ceremonies at home and in the forest, referred to a single category of spirits. The interpretation presented here was confirmed by my informants during a later visit to Siberut. They explained the ritual extension of the word *ukkui* to the forest spirits as being euphemistic, yet contextually sufficiently clear to be understood by those spirits.

In Siberut, the contrast between the beneficial forces of the wilderness and those of the genealogical ancestors is not clearly linked to any opposition between an autochthonous people and an immigrant population. What is stressed in the origin myths is the primordial unity of both parties. In the genealogical narratives of the different local groups in a particular valley the theme is alluded to, however: all ancestors are said to have moved in from outside, but the *uma* whose ancestors were the first to settle in the region (*si bakkat laggai*, literally 'the trunk of the river-stones') possesses the land rights, and its ancestors are included in the invocations of every *uma* in the forest at the beginning of a ritual hunt.⁸

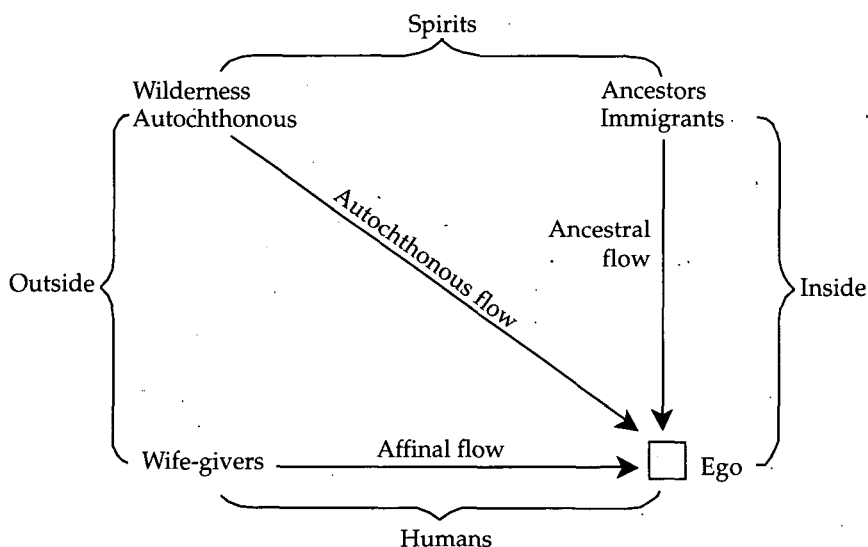
In certain other societies of Indonesia, the idea of the original unity of the spirits of the forest and those of the ancestors appears under a different guise and is projected into the future. The case of the Tana 'Ai on Flores as described by Douglas Lewis (1988) merits special attention in this connection. In a certain sense it represents a mirror image of the situation encountered on Siberut. In Tana 'Ai mythology mention is made of the first clan, Ipir, whose ancestors are said to have emerged from the earth in a neighbouring region and which today has a leading position in spiritual matters. The clan Ipir has a special relationship with the autochthonous forest spirits, the *nitu noang*, who have 'always been there'. Other clans which immigrated later are dependent upon Ipir in spiritual matters.

Of special interest in the present context are the ideas about life after death. The spirit of the decaying body of a recently deceased person is considered to be hot and dangerous – a common feature in Indonesian cultures.⁹ The corpse is quickly buried. Subsequently, in the course of a second-stage mortuary rite – again a custom found throughout the archipelago – the spirit is transmuted into a 'big old one' and invited to come into the house to unite with the other ancestral spirits. Later, however, in a third mortuary ceremony, which occurs after several years, the spirit changes into a *guna déwa* spirit, whereby it reaches a semi-divine state. This means another change of locality, as the spirit moves into the forest; where it loses its clan affiliation, becomes part of the environment, and provides, in gratitude for offerings presented to it, fertility for the gardens and success in hunting. Comparing these ideas and practices with those of the people of Siberut, a picture emerges whereby the original unity of forest spirits and ancestors among the latter appears in Flores to be projected into a remote future.¹⁰

⁸ The fact that there are very few occasions on which members of different *uma* unite for communal ritual activities may be in part responsible for the limited significance of the autochthonous/allochthonous opposition in Siberut.

⁹ Compare the *pitto* (Siberut), the *begu* (Toba Batak), the *bombo* (Sa'dan Toraja), and various manifestations of *liau* (Ngaju Dayak).

¹⁰ The offerings to the *guna déwa* for success in hunting are called 'bridewealth' – a further



So far we have recognized three sources of ritual blessings: wife-givers, genealogical ancestors, and spirits of the wilderness.¹¹ All these agents are related to each other in systematic ways: the wilderness is the domain of autochthonous spirits that sometimes act as wife-givers, and there is a mythical union between these spirits and the genealogical ancestors in the primeval past or in the remote future.

Danielle Geirnaert, in her fascinating analysis of the ritual cycle of the Laboya on Sumba (1992), has shown how all three sources can be combined. The big annual ritual starts with a pig hunt in the wilderness, a domain which is associated with the world of the primeval autochthonous population, so that autochthonous fertility of the land is released for the benefit of the living. In the ceremonies of the second part of the ritual, affinal relationships are acted out, evoking ideas of the flow of life and of human procreation. Finally ancestral blessings are sought, which are manifest in the 'immigrating' sea worms that appear at the coast seasonally and are collected and distributed by the hereditary priests (*rato*) representing the descendants of the founding genealogical forefathers, as a promise of good harvests and good health for human beings and their herds.

allusion to the association between autochthonous forces / forest spirits / wife-givers (see Lewis 1988:272). The relationship to the *nitu oang* in this connection is not entirely clear.

¹¹ Apart from the forest spirits mentioned in the examples above, this category includes various other manifestations of autochthonous forces. They play a role in specific contexts, such as the clearing and occupation of land for house building or laying out a garden. They are discussed in more detail in Schefold forthcoming b.

It seems to me that a common concept can be recognized behind all these interrelated ideas about ritual blessings: a pervasive perception of asymmetry in relationships which makes possible an irreversible flow from one pole to the other.¹² In the second part of this paper, I shall interpret the three different ritual elaborations of this concept as three different models reflecting holistic efforts of the participants to order their view of reality. The first of these models, which refers to the influx of beneficial influences in connection with receiving a marriage partner, can be characterized as *affinal flow*. The second, which evokes the blessings of the real and mythical progenitors of the community, concerns *ancestral flow*. The third, which in our examples came to the fore in the relationship to the wilderness and which in Siberut is manifest in luck in hunting, is less easy to describe by a single term. In Mentawai, all kinds of spirits of non-human origin are associated with the wilderness and can be subsumed under this category. They reside in various locations in the 'world beyond', such as, aside from the forest proper, the upper world or the sea. In other Indonesian societies, however, some of these locations are imagined as being inhabited by spirits with other affiliations. A case in point is that of the Mamasa Toraja of South Sulawesi, who oppose the gods or spirits of the upper world to the powers of the wilderness and link the upper world rather to a certain group of their own genealogical ancestors.¹³ What the whole of the third category of beneficial powers has in common is para-human, autochthonous origins. Accordingly, I characterize these influences as *autochthonous flow*.¹⁴ First I shall concentrate on what these models have in common; then I shall focus on relevant differences.

Ritual dependency and reciprocity

A common characteristic of all three modalities is a certain ambivalence in attitude. On the one hand, the receivers of the blessings admit by this very fact their dependency upon the givers. On the other hand, they tend to

¹² The differential treatment of the root and tip ends of the timbers used in Indonesian houses objectifies this flow; see Schefold forthcoming a.

¹³ Personal communication Kees Buijs, who is preparing a PhD thesis on the Mamasa case.

¹⁴ In contrast to the origins and the general character of the blessings, their specific nature cannot be defined in a way that is representative for our field of study as a whole. One aspect, however, is mentioned in all three cases: that of fertility (see Beatty 1992:247 for the affinal flow (Nias); Vischer 1992:303 for the ancestral flow (Palu'e); and Hoskins 1988:131 for the autochthonous flow (Sumba)). An exception to this is formed by Mentawai, where, as we have seen, the association with physical health and well-being (*purimanuaijat*, literally 'life') is stressed much more than that with fertility; for a possible explanation see Schefold 1999:92.

regard these givers as partners who should be compensated for their gifts by appropriate offerings.

The ambivalence of this attitude concerns the fact that in all three cases the attempts at reciprocation are doomed to be inadequate. This asymmetry in the relationship is obvious in the case of the affinal flow. Generally, bridewealth consisting of 'male' goods possessing a certain permanent character is paid, such as in Sumba gold ornaments (see Adams 1980). This is in accordance with the lasting character of the gift of life which the wife-takers receive with the bride. But this very fact underlines the irreplaceability of what they have received. Nothing can make up for life, and so the wife-takers remain subordinate to the wife-givers.

As regards the ancestral flow, the superiority of the progenitors is an intrinsic given. Not only are they the origins of the living and their belongings, but they also provide continuity. All that humans are able to give in return are offerings of their own products. But since everything is owed to the ancestors, the living can in fact return no more than part of what they have received. The greater the need for protection, the larger the offering, giving rise to the destruction of animals or objects. Significantly, the dilemma is often disguised by verbal eulogies exaggerating the value of the offerings or by statements stressing the desire of the ancestors to receive them.

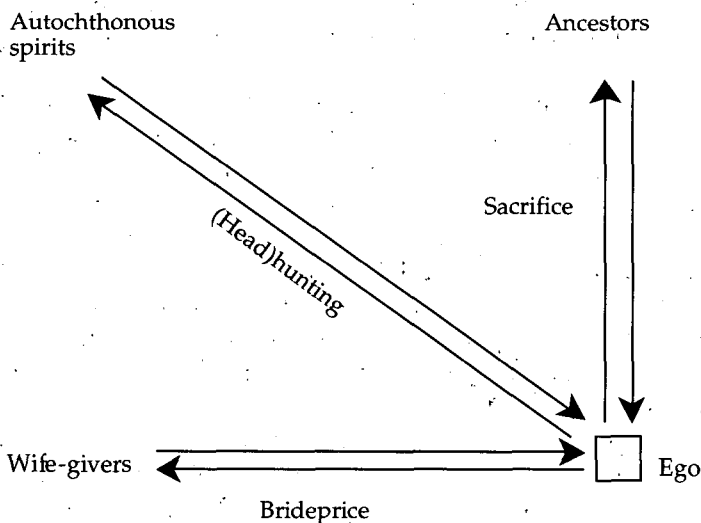
The latter aspect is also found in the ideas surrounding the autochthonous flow. Whereas one's own ancestors may in a way be regarded as constituting part of the community, so that a principle of sharing alleviates the problem of the impossibility of balanced reciprocation, a benevolent attitude of the less familiar autochthonous spirits of the wilderness can be taken much less for granted. There is an illuminating Mentawaiian myth in this connection. As we have seen, at the start of the ritual hunt offerings are made to the forest spirits in order to obtain their permission to stay in their domain. Then, when they have donated a monkey from among their animals, they are given a part of its left ear as a sacrifice. In this case, the imbalance between what is given and what is received is even more conspicuous than in the case of the ancestors: in contrast to the offerings of human products, the sacrifice here consists of parts of animals which the hunters have played no active part in raising, so that what they contribute in fact is no more than the effort of killing. Yet here, too, people behave as if they were concealing an asymmetry they do not want to admit.

The myth tells of a deer hunter who shoots all his arrows, but without success. At a wallow in the heart of the jungle, he enters the domain of the forest spirits. There he learns that what he had taken for deer were in fact the pigs of these spirits. They allow him to shoot one of the animals, and after much bargaining about what they should be given in return as their rightful share they instruct the man to sacrifice the left ear to them. This apparently

small piece, which moreover comes from the animal's left side – the side that is inauspicious for men – is, they say, the appropriate 'half' for them, for in the spirit world everything is the other way round from the human world.

The bargaining in this myth stresses the pretension that what the spirits get in the end is what they actually desire. The common Indonesian idea of everything being inverted in the spirit world is used as a way of explaining – or rather, explaining away – the imbalance. This represents a rather strained attempt to make up for a dependency which is inherent in the human condition (see Schefold 1980).

As I hope to show elsewhere (see Schefold forthcoming b), headhunting can be viewed, at least in certain respects, as an extreme way of securing the blessings of the autochthonous spirits. Various Indonesian headhunting rituals reveal that the custom is certainly more than just a means of acquiring some kind of 'life force' from a slain enemy. On the island of Nias it is explicitly stated that the domains where the heads were captured were regarded as part of the wilderness, where everything is reversed (Scarduelli 1990:459). Sometimes, in addition to the heads of slain enemies, Niasan warriors brought home people they had captured alive to use or sell as slaves. And, similarly to what we have seen happening with game on Siberut, a part of the ear of the captives was offered to the deity of the headhunters (Fries 1908:80).



In summary, we can conclude that all three modalities of the Stream of Blessings imply a lasting bond, although the receivers are able to reciprocate but inadequately. They remain in the givers' debt and are therefore their subordinates; at the same time, however, they regard them as their allies.

The Stream of Blessings, precedence and origin structures

In line with these common traits, one may ask whether there is also a common idea underlying them that validates the qualification 'providing blessings' in the three instances under discussion. In recent years a hypothesis with regard to Austronesian societies has been formulated by Fox (1994 and 1996) which gives some indications in this direction. This hypothesis refers to a central concept in Austronesian ideology on the basis of the principle of precedence. It attempts to give a general explanation for the differences in relative status in relations of affinity and ancestry. The principle applies directly to the relationships we found in the ancestral flow, but also has implications for the two other sources of ritual blessings. In the remaining part of this paper I shall examine the import of this principle for a better understanding of the Stream of Blessings.

Precedence in its literal, temporal meaning is implied in all the three modalities we encountered so far. The giving of blessings precedes the receiving of them. In this sense, wife-givers have precedence over wife-takers, ancestors over their descendants, and the autochthonous population over the immigrants. As such, this observation is perhaps not very illuminating. However, there is another aspect to it, based on a theory that in fact has motivated the choice of the word 'precedence' rather than a term like 'superordination' in the hypothesis just mentioned. This is the assumption that in relations of ancestry and affinity, precedence represents not only a fact but also a value.

According to Fox, the term 'precedence' has the advantage that it indicates the relativity of the relationships. What takes precedence over something happening later can itself be preceded by something happening even earlier. The value of 'being earlier' in the situations he discusses lies, in the Austronesian tradition, in its implication of a closer proximity to origins.¹⁵ What validates precedence are origin structures. T. Reuter (1992:493), taking up these ideas in an article on 'Precedence in Sumatra', subsumes the principles of 'asymmetry, recursiveness, transitivity' under the term precedence. It is the last two of these principles that pose problems, as we shall see below.

Knowledge of somebody's origins is indeed something of a preoccupation in many Indonesian societies. Malay *mantra* addressed to animals, for instance, frequently include the remark that the *dukun* knows where the animal comes from – knowledge of mythical origins gives power (see Skeat

¹⁵ In the line of his argument Fox (1994) sets himself against Dumontian concepts of hierarchy. One might ask whether this is really necessary. In his presentation precedence itself, despite the relativity and contestability of individual positions in any order of 'precedence, always remains focal by virtue of the encompassing value of maximal proximity to origins.

1900; Bakels 2000).

To begin with ancestral relationships, it is a common feature of these that the superior status of an 'older' segment of a descent group, over against a 'younger' segment, is legitimized by its descent from an elder sibling, who has precedence due to his closer proximity to ancestral origins. There are indications that the blessings subsumed under ancestral flow are sometimes graded according to this principle. In such cases, they represent a transitive access to the source of these beneficial influences: the closer the relevant forebears are to this source, the more powerful will be their protective gifts. In this way, the Toba Batak make a ritual distinction between the *begu* of a recently deceased member of the group, the *sumangot* of someone who died earlier and has many descendants, and the even more venerable *sombaon*, or spirit of a man who died many generations ago (see Vergouwen 1964:69-73; Sibeth 1990:67).

As regards the autochthonous flow, the principles of recursiveness and transitivity are less obvious. After all, the precedence of the original autochthonous population over later immigrants is an absolute one and cannot be graded. This fact is mirrored by the primordial pact mentioned above and by the continuing diarchy of a spiritual and a political leader.¹⁶ However, recursiveness and transitivity can occur in the sequential order of different immigrant groups. To take an example from western Indonesia, Marcel Vellinga (2000) discovered in his research on a southern Minangkabau group (Abai), which is distinguished by the fact that they build extremely extended houses – more than a hundred metres long in some cases – that there was a clear distinction between the descendants of the first settlers, who hold the land rights, have a special relationship with the spirits of the earth, and are responsible for community rituals, and the various groups that came subsequently, one of which, after a marriage with a descendant of the first settlers, established the ruling dynasty of the local *raja*. These latter groups in turn were ordered according to earlier and later times of arrival. However, whereas the first opposition was expressed in a fundamental distinction in character and quality, the subsequent gradation only came to the fore in a – frequently contested – differentiation in genealogical seniority and corresponding rights to occupy more or less prestigious parts of the long-house.

We might distinguish, then, between absolute and relative consequences of orders of precedence. The fundamental dichotomy between original autochthony and later immigration is not in fact affected by any further gra-

¹⁶ In this context Wessing (in press) mentions the existence of two shrines at opposite ends of Sundanese villages, one for the local autochthonous 'nature spirits' and one for the actual village founder.

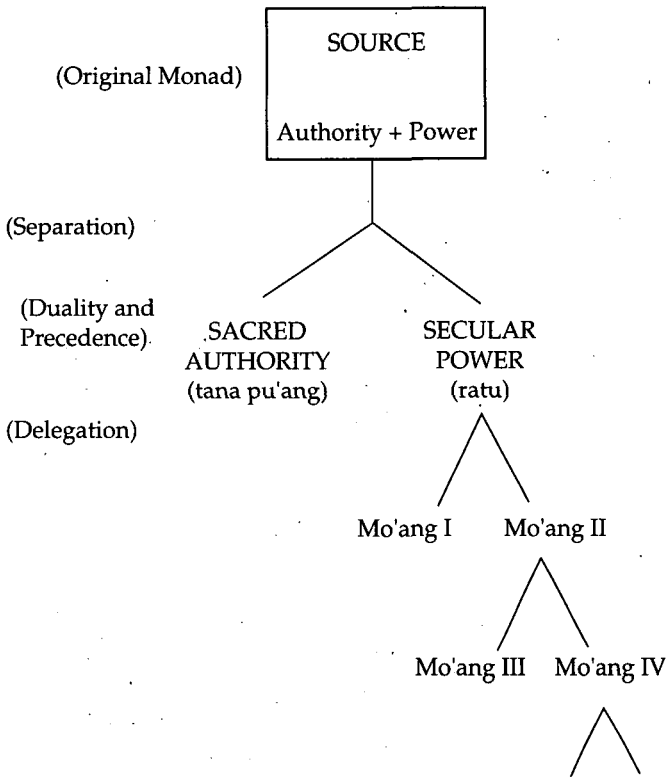
dation on the part of the immigrants. However, there are also examples revealing local attempts at a conceptual unification of the two different modalities. This may be illustrated by a case reported by Lewis (1996:171) from Sikka on Flores. There, the secular political power is seen as being a kind of derivative. The bearer of the sacred autochthonous authority, the 'Source of the Earth' (*tana puang*), is said to have delegated the secular power to the immigrant raja (*ratu*), whose descendants in turn gradually delegated some of this power to lords (*mo'ang*) of successive levels of later immigrant groups (see the diagram from Lewis 1988 below). In this way the two manifestations of precedence seem to have become adjusted so as to fit into a single overarching principle, whereby the basic division between 'sacred' and 'secular' has become transformed into stages in a process. Perhaps such local ways of integrating what is essentially different could be regarded as a first example of the holistic adjustments I mentioned in the introduction above.¹⁷

What remains is the question whether even the wife-giver/wife-taker relationship as such can be connected with origin structures. That this could be the case has been suggested by Reuter (1992:494) in his above-mentioned article. Reuter writes (1992:494): 'In the context of marriage [... r]elative superiority is associated with that group which is closer to the source of life, that is, to the first remembered wife-giving group in [...] a sequence.'

In many Austronesian cultures there is indeed a clear association of one's wife-giving group with one's base. In cases of asymmetric alliance, the mother's brother is frequently called 'trunk' or 'root' and is opposed to the 'branches' or 'twigs' that stand for the children of the wife-takers (Fox 1980:14; Sugishima 1994:156). On Nias, the wife-givers are 'in a position analogous to god and the ancestors' (Beatty 1992:73); a Toba Batak refers to his wife-giving group as a 'representative of the gods' (Niessen 1985:110); in Kédang, 'a child's well-being rests in the hands of its father's wife-givers' (Barnes 1980:79); on the Kei Islands, a man's mother's brother, together with his ancestors, represents the religious authority that is believed to help in all important matters (Barraud 1990:203-6).

Does this mean that the superordinate status of the wife-givers can be related to a closer position to origins? Some reports on the Karo Batak indeed point in that direction. According to Juara Ginting (1994 and personal com-

¹⁷ Another possibility is described by Fox (1994:100) in a case from Timor. There, each successive immigrant group acts as wife-giver for the group immediately following it, a fact which, because of its association with our affinal source of blessings, confirms the relative hierarchical superiority of each earlier immigrant. It is only a logical consequence of this that the descendants of the original founding clan must take wives from outside the settlement if they are to retain their unequivocal position. Attempts by later groups to manipulate their position by reversing their matrimonial relationships and acting as wife-givers to an earlier group constitute a counter-tendency.



(From Lewis 1988:171)

munication), there is a sequence from wife-givers (*kalimbubu*) by birth to the wife-givers of the wife-givers (*puang kalimbubu*), which represents a maternal linkage in this patrilineal society.¹⁸ Representatives of both groups are invited to take part in religious festivities, whereby it is explicitly stated that the *puang kalimbubu* take precedence in spiritual prestige. Even more specifically, Fox (1993:20) writes that 'the Rotinese identify lines of former wife-givers as *to'o-hok*, "mother's brother of origin"', and that these have certain special ritual rights and prerogatives. These Rotinese traits point to the prescriptive nature of the Rotinese marriage system, since it is only after successive marriages with mother's brother's daughters that the wife-givers of earlier generations indeed become related in matrilineal succession.

However, the significance of such examples indicating recursiveness and transitivity requires further comment. Among the Karo, the wife-givers of earlier generations (*puang ni puang kalimbubu*, 'wife-givers of the wife-givers

¹⁸ A. Wessels (1997:76) reports a similar linkage for the village of Lisabata on Seram.

of the wife-givers') are of no special importance. Among the Karo's Sumatran neighbours, the Toba, there is an order of precedence among the different grades of wife-givers, but this does not occur in the chain wife-giver to wife-giver of wife-giver but in the patriliney of the wife-taker – the more generations back a marriage was concluded, the more venerable the givers of the bride (Niessen 1985:87). The *tulang namamupus*, or wife-giver of a man's father's father, for instance, is more deeply revered than the wife-giver of his father. By the same token, members of wife-taker groups of earlier generations are entrusted with the most important tasks in rituals.¹⁹ In other words, closer proximity to origins is not interpreted here in terms of the affinal flow but rather of the ancestral one. From Nias, Beatty (1992:220) explicitly reports that the mystical powers of affines are derived not from their own wife-givers but 'from their agnatic ancestors'.

Such cases can help us to put in perspective the actual meaning of 'origin' for the valorization of precedence in systems of asymmetric alliance. It is not without significance that Reuter, in his analysis of the Sumatran cases already mentioned, questions the very existence of a local prescriptive ideology – ignoring, in my opinion, pervasive indications to the contrary. I would mention only the fact that among the Toba Batak a man is supposed to present a conciliatory gift to his mother's brother if he does not intend to marry his daughter (Niessen 1985:90f.). The underlying motives for all these counter-examples are not surprising. After all, in contrast to the relationships in the ancestral and autochthonous flows; in a system of asymmetric alliance any association of precedence with origin structures cannot but be fictitious.²⁰

This is most strikingly evident in examples of a 'minimal' number of three alliance partners, such as those reported by K.-H. Kohl (1989:163) for eastern Flores, where the circular implications of the system are immediately obvious. Even in the case of the usual, more open manifestations of the system, however, these implications are often quite consciously acknowledged. R.H. Barnes (1974:246) reports this for Kédang, while B. Lüem (1988:113), in describing marriages of the Tenggerese around the Bromo crater, presents an uxori-local counter-example. The symbolic uses of textiles with an uncut circular warp among the Toba Batak (Niessen 1985:154) point in the same direction. B. Clamagirand (1980:145), who introduced the term 'flow of life' in her description of the affinal relationships of the Ema of Timor, arrives at a simi-

¹⁹ Information supplied by Johann Angerler. Reuter's statement to the contrary (1992:498) is based on a misinterpretation of Niessen 1985:87. For a similar pattern in Eastern Indonesia see Clamagirand 1980:141.

²⁰ The above-mentioned strategy of Timorese origin clans to take their wives from outside the settlement underlines the problematic nature of such a fictitious association; see Beatty 1992:62 for similar cases among nobles on Nias.

lar characterization: 'The regular flow of exchanges evokes an image of the flow of life which circulates by means of women'. The somewhat uneasy fact that as a consequence 'givers become takers' (Clamagirand 1980:143) just has to be accepted, although the Ema try to mitigate potential confusion by extending the system to a four-partner cycle.

A more radical solution in this context is provided by the Mamboru of Sumba, who, according to R. Needham (1987:167), avoid extending the characterization 'wife-givers' to the wife-givers of their wife-givers, thereby excluding any embarrassment when marrying out a sister to such a group. This implies the absence of exactly that feature of 'transitivity' which Reuter, as we have seen, indicated as being a characteristic trait of the cases in point. Interesting in this regard are the remarks by V. Valeri (1980:186) about the Nuaulu of Ceram, who, in cases of longer marriage circles, decide explicitly from case to case where in a particular transaction transitivity ends and a wife-giver of a remote order ceases to play a role as such and aligns himself with the wife-takers' side.

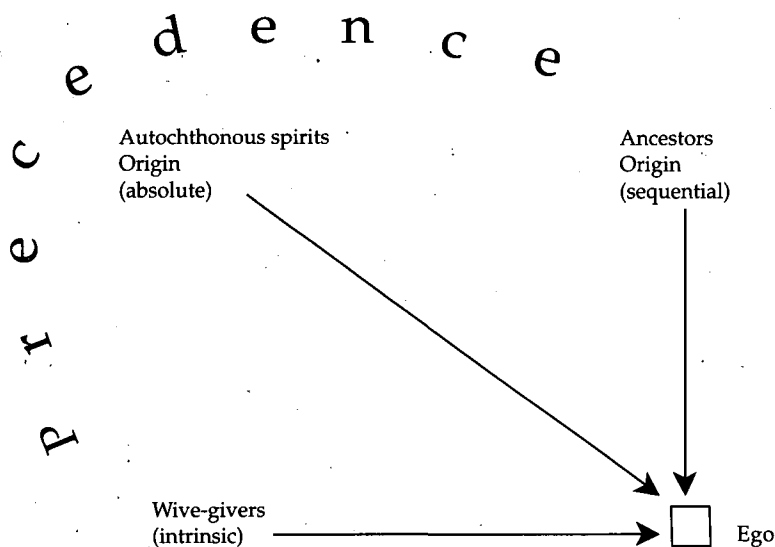
All this points to the fact that in such instances the blessing capacities of wife-givers, rather than being due to their being 'closer to the source of life', are an intrinsic quality of their relative position, which eventually they owe, as Beatty remarked, to their own agnatic ancestors. It also explains why a Toba Batak group invites key members of various wife-giving *marga* (lineages) to their rituals: the criterion is their quality as such and not any progressive proximity to origins (Niessen 1985:93). If origin structures play a role here at all, they follow the lines of the ancestral flow.

This brings me back to the non-prescriptive system of the Mentawaians which I mentioned at the outset. Even in this instance there is an asymmetric relationship between a wife-taker and his wife-givers, as we have seen, an asymmetry that clearly can be connected to ideas of receiving blessings in the affinal flow. In the one-way traffic discernible in this process, the term precedence is certainly adequate. However, since partner relationships are constituted anew at every marriage, an attempt to explain the blessing quality of the wife-givers by reference to a matrilineal link to origins makes no sense.

How, then, are we to interpret examples like the ones from the Karo Batak or the Rotinese, where in fact there *are* indications of a linking of the value of precedence in marriage alliance with a matrilineal chain of wife-givers to origins? In view of the scattered evidence, it seems plausible that we have here a typical case of convergence in a Field-of-Study situation: common points of departure leading independently to similar results.

In such cases it is essential, in my opinion, to differentiate between the symbolic images constructed by people to express their views of the existing order, such as we have encountered in the three manifestations of the Stream of Blessings, and the more abstract concepts behind these images, which in

our cases we described as a pervasive notion of asymmetry in relations, combined with the idea of an irreversible flow from a preceding pole to the succeeding one. In the ancestral and autochthonous flows, the value of precedence is substantiated by an additional concept: origin structures, which become manifest in a sequential order in the first case, and in an absolute dichotomy in the second. In the affinal flow as well, precedence is an intrinsic characteristic of the relationship, but not in combination with origins. There are sporadic cases in which particular origin structures are referred to even here, but this is not in accordance with the nature of the social relations associated with the affinal flow. However, in this way a further systematic correspondence with the other two manifestations of the Stream of Blessings is achieved. Such cognitive manipulation is reminiscent of the well-known phenomenon of folk-etymology. I would argue that it again represents an example of what can best be understood in light of the holistic adjustments that I mentioned at the outset, as a consequence of the tendency of the people themselves to try and achieve formal coherence.



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