

IVORY, WOMEN AND RAJAS

INITIAL COMMENTS ON SOCIAL CHANGE IN AN EAST INDONESIAN
BOUNDARY COMMUNITY

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I

My research in eastern Indonesia began with a simple question: was it true that a boundary population of a culture group with documented ‘patrilineal’ descent groups did in fact, as rumours claimed, have ‘matrilineal’ descent groups.¹ In this investigation, local perceptions of kinship and descent are certainly not irrelevant, though they are not the main focus of interest. Kinship features are here closely interwoven with qualities that are central to modes of livelihood, conceptions of life and ideology.²

The rumours of a matrilineal boundary population dated back half a century already, and to cap it all their prime source (Kennedy, see below) had been shot dead on Java not long after he had made his notes. The whole thing breathed of Miss Marple and the curse of Tutankhamun, and although there was admittedly neither plot nor curse, I could not resist the temptation of picking up the trail. This article considers the social power of ivory in relation to a particular Indonesian rajadom, and the changing social position of women in relation to that of men within the context of recent historical change in social practice and ideology.

II

The east Indonesian boundary population in question belongs to a culture and language group known as Lamaholot. The Lamaholot occupy the administrative regency of East Flores, at the

¹ I thank my former supervisor, Bob Barnes, for drawing my attention to this matter.

² I must admit to being quite stunned by the stubborn ‘horror’ (for lack of a better word) of kinship studies that I see among many young scholars today. It is not as if everyone in the world suddenly stopped being related to each other as kin just because this area of study has fallen out of fashion. Perhaps now more than ever kinship has become a highly relevant area of study, given the rapid technical advances that are being made within the field of assisted reproduction and the social consequences that follow, to take just one example.

very eastern tip of the island of Flores.³ Flores is mountainous and covered in lush forests, and most inhabitants gain their subsistence from fishing and/or agriculture (typically swidden agriculture). There are five distinct culture and language groups on Flores, all the languages being Austronesian. The geographical extents of these groups correspond roughly to the official boundaries between the island's eight administrative regencies, but neither cultural nor linguistic boundaries can be that easily pinpointed.

Existing data show that the Lamaholot have patrilineal descent groups (clans and/or lineages), which, as many informants themselves claim, are based on actual or fictitious blood relations through the male line. Although there are examples that deviate from this rule, these occur under special circumstances and are fairly limited geographically.

The 'descent group' as a concept has indeed been contested in the context of eastern Indonesia, as some culture groups, such as the Ngada on central Flores, do not have unilineal descent groups (Arndt 1954); James Fox (1996) prefers not to use the concept at all. Within the context of Lamaholot, however, the data do support the conclusion that the unilineal descent group is a valid concept. But the question of whether unilineal descent groups in eastern Indonesia are matrilineal or patrilineal might be of minor importance. Schulte Nordholt (1971) has already demonstrated that the 'houses' (i.e. parts of clans) among the Atoni on Timor can be either patrilineal or matrilineal and that both forms fit in with the Atoni social system.⁴

In 1949-50, Raymond Kennedy, an American anthropologist who was touring Indonesia, was told by the Lamaholot in the westernmost part of East Flores that some local Lamaholot communities were in effect matrilineal (see Kennedy 1955, ed. H. Conklin). Regrettably, Kennedy was killed before he could pursue this lead, but more recent reports did substantiate the claim of matrilineal Lamaholot in the boundary area. The allegations did not seem at all implausible given that the exact same pattern can be found just across the administrative boundary, among the Sikka, a neighbouring culture and language group. The Sikka inhabit

³ The regencies (*kabupaten*) are the third smallest administrative units in Indonesia: the state (*negara*) and the provinces (*provinsi/provinsi*) are above them, the sub-districts (*kecamatan*) and the officially recognized villages (*desa*) below them. The creation of the administrative regencies began in the 1920s, when Indonesia was still part of the Netherlands East Indies, and was an on-going process that did not come to an end until the 1960s (just over a decade after independence). The East Flores regency includes two offshore islands, Solor and Adonara. Lamaholot is also the major culture and language group on the neighbouring island of Lembata, nowadays a separate regency.

⁴ The Lio on central Flores actually have double unilineal descent (Sugishima 1994).

the Sikka regency and, like the Lamaholot, are known to have patrilineal descent groups. A striking exception are the Sikka in the region of Tana 'Ai, bordering directly on East Flores. Here, the descent groups are matrilineal.⁵

E.D. Lewis, who has written extensively on all groups of Sikka, describes the society in Tana 'Ai as being structured around a number of ceremonial domains (Sikkanese *tana*) (Lewis 1988). All the domains are located within the Sikka regency, except for Tana Boruk, which happens to be included in the East Flores regency. The population in Tana Boruk is exclusively Lamaholot (with the exception of one, maybe two, villages which are largely inhabited by Sikkanese speakers). One domain within the Sikka regency proper, Tana Muhang, also consists mostly of Lamaholot.⁶

These data alone suggest that the Lamaholot in Tana Boruk and Tana Muhang are in some respects more closely affiliated with the Sikka of Tana 'Ai than with the Lamaholot further east. I also discovered that the Lamaholot in Tana Boruk had shared a pattern of dispersed settlement in scattered fields, or gardens, with the Sikka of Tana 'Ai until the late twentieth century, whereas the vast majority of records on the Lamaholot and patrilineal Sikka indicate a tradition of village-based settlement with peripheral gardens.⁷ The data also indicate that residence was initially matrilocal (uxorilocal) both among the Lamaholot and the Sikka within the domain of Tana 'Ai, rather than patrilocal (virilocal). Today most Lamaholot and Sikka are neolocal, but for the populations in Tana 'Ai this shift has occurred more or less concomitantly with the shift to permanent village settlement.

My field study was based in the Lamaholot border village of Palue (officially Nilek Noheng), situated in the inland mountains of East Flores. Palue appears to be part of Tana

⁵ Sikka descent groups in Tana 'Ai are defined on the basis of actual or fictitious blood relations through the female line.

⁶ The boundary between what was to become the East Flores regency and the Sikka regency had already been settled by the Dutch in 1904. Apparently, the Dutch only moved an existing boundary slightly east, so as to be able to include Tana 'Ai in the Sikkanese rajadom. Owing to tribute paid to a Lamaholot raja in 1902, Tana 'Ai had come to be nominally included within the Lamaholot sphere of influence for a brief period of time, but the area was claimed both by the Sikkanese raja and the Lamaholot raja on Flores.

⁷ The pattern of dispersed settlement was maintained among the Sikka and the Lamaholot of Tana 'Ai well into the late twentieth century and only abandoned due to a governmental decree explicitly prohibiting garden habitation and forcibly shifting the locus of habitation to permanent villages. In Tana Boruk some of these villages had formerly served as ritual centres where the population would gather together from time to time to perform communal rituals. Cohabitation of two or more nuclear families within the same house was also banned at this time.

Boruk and is one of ten villages Kennedy claimed were matrilineal. Somewhat to my disappointment, though, I soon discovered that today's Lamaholot in Palue only have patrilineal descent groups.

Yet, this was not the end of the story. Further research indicated that patrilineal descent groups in Palue had in effect been taken (consciously, I was told) from the Lamaholot further east, and that this only occurred within the last couple of centuries. Just how recent these events are can be seen among the older population in Palue. Here, a striking pattern reveals that these Lamaholot have recently abandoned a practice of dividing children between the two parental descent groups.

This division was not made according to the children's gender and usually not according to their birth order either. The only rule seems to have been that both parents had to receive children from a marriage, no matter how many or how few (although sometimes the rule expressly emphasized that the mother must receive at least one child). The adding of new members (or 'strength', Indonesian *kuasa*) to both of the parental groups is said to have been the very *raison d'être* for dividing children in Palue, and similar traditions can still be seen among some Lamaholot in Tana Muhang and among some Sikka in the adjacent ceremonial domain of Tana Kringa, both bordering directly on Tana Boruk.⁸

Unlike the isolated cases of dividing children that have been reported from other culture groups on Flores (Ngada, Arndt 1954; Sikka, Arndt 1933) and elsewhere in Indonesia (Timor, Clamagirand 1980; Sumatra, Moyer 1984; Sumbawa and Sulawesi [formerly the Celebes], Wilken 1912), the division of children in Palue appears to have been the usual practice in the recent past.

At least within the last century the maternal and paternal groups in question appear to have corresponded to descent groups, but whether this was always so is hard to say based on the current data. This adds an unexpected level of complexity to the question of whether these Lamaholot were originally matrilineal. Given the loosely used Indonesian term *matriarkat*,

⁸ The practice did, however, see a great deal of variation over time. Some accounts hold that the first-born child, whether a boy or a girl, was to become a member of its maternal group, whereas other accounts claim that the first-born child would enter its paternal group. It is not inconceivable that both accounts are true, but that one practice predates the other. Membership in a group might also not have been assigned immediately after birth, as recent accounts state that the last child to be born assumed a position 'in between' the parental groups until such time that a grandchild could fill the 'missing' place and allow for an even distribution of children between the parents, indicating that this had eventually become the favoured custom.

which I have myself frequently encountered in the field in the double meaning of ‘matrilineal’ or ‘matriarchal’, it is not inconceivable that the Lamaholot whom Kennedy met in the boundary area were actually referring to matriarchal communities rather than to matrilineal communities, in which case the whole question of descent groups loses some of its significance.

What we *can* say is that the division of children in Palue was not physical. Parents and children still lived and worked together in the same household. Rather, the separation concerned group-specific prescriptions, prohibitions, ritual knowledge, rituals, and so forth. Such features are called *wun* (or a related term) by some Lamaholot. A few local communities east of Tana Boruk also use *wun* in the meaning of ‘clan’ or ‘lineage’. Perhaps future research in this area could benefit from moving beyond considerations of groups defined only through blood lines to look more at the practical actions related to the *wun* that reinforce a visibly expressed unity of people belonging to the same group.⁹

Since the mid- to late twentieth century, nonetheless, all Lamaholot in Palue do have membership in patrilineal descent groups, just like the Lamaholot further east. This tradition is said to have travelled hand in hand with a shift to (a brief period of) patrilocal (virilocal) residence and an introduction of the practice of paying bridewealth.

Lamaholot bridewealth generally consists of ivory (one or more elephant’s tusks), although in recent years tusks have increasingly been replaced with money or livestock. According to the Lamaholot in Palue, the ‘purpose’ of bridewealth is for a man to acquire the rights to the children of a certain woman. Among other groups of Lamaholot the payment of bridewealth can also require that the wife joins her husband’s descent group.

Until a few decades ago it was possible for a man other than the genitor to acquire the rights to the children of a certain woman by marrying her and paying bridewealth himself, provided that no bridewealth had been paid by the genitor. Today the rights to the children are automatically granted into the genitor’s group at birth. This means that in Palue, at least, the bridewealth is very often is not paid at all, merely negotiated. Bridewealth has thus almost become only a symbol of marriage here.

But when the practice of paying bridewealth was first introduced in Palue, it briefly co-existed with another practice of paying tusks that was totally unrelated to marriage. In this

⁹ Other approaches, such as the study of the so-called ‘botanic idiom’, which expresses kin relations in terms of a correspondence between humans and plants, or between the human life-cycle and the natural/agricultural cycle, have already proved to be useful in studying kinship in eastern Indonesia (see, for instance, Fox 1971).

other practice a man other than the genitor could acquire the rights to a certain woman's children without having to marry her, simply by paying one tusk to her family for this purpose, provided that no bridewealth had already been paid. The payment of this tusk did not imply any kind of relationship between the man and woman in question. What is perhaps more interesting is that, if no payment was made, all the children born to this woman automatically had membership in her descent group.

If we move even further back in time, we find two other payments of tusks that predate the practice of paying bridewealth in Palue. One of these payments, again unrelated to marriage, made it possible for a woman to acquire the rights to one of another woman's children (usually a boy or an adult man) by paying a tusk to that woman's family for this purpose. The second payment was, however, tied to marriage, and in effect lay at the basis of the practice of dividing children. A man was always required to pay a tusk to his wife's family in order to acquire the rights to at least one of the couple's children.¹⁰ This tusk was seen a 'boundary divider' between what rightfully 'belonged' to the maternal group and what rightfully 'belonged' to the paternal group. If no payment was made, all the children born to this woman automatically became members of their maternal group. Note that this is the exact opposite of what we see in Palue today.

Overall there seems to have been a significant and very recent change in the way tusks are perceived and actually used in Palue. The introduction of bridewealth payments seems to be directly linked to a decline in the traditional social and material authority of women and the maternal groups, accompanied by an increase in the social and material authority of men and the paternal groups, as only men retained the possibility to acquire the rights to new

¹⁰ He could never acquire all of the children for his group despite the payment, as at least one child was always guaranteed to enter the maternal group.

group members through the payment of tusks.¹¹ This effectively brought the traditions of the Lamaholot in Palue closer to the traditions of the Lamaholot further east.¹²

There is doubt that the twentieth century in particular was a time of considerable social change throughout central-east Flores, not least in the highlands. Catholicism, for instance, was only just establishing itself as a permanent influence in the mountains at this time, and alongside the spread of formal education this contributed to a greater focus on ritual centres than on gardens, as churches and schools were constructed at these sites. Such factors would certainly have had concrete repercussions on the life of the Lamaholot in Tana Boruk.

E.D. Lewis has also presented an intriguing proposition based on a comparative analysis of the social systems of Tana 'Ai and the patrilineal Sikka, as well as on statements by Sikkaneese themselves (e.g. Lewis 2010). According to Lewis, there is a substantial probability that the entire Sikka population originally had matrilineal descent groups, just as the Sikka of Tana 'Ai have today, and that, like the latter, they lacked a tradition of paying bridewealth.¹³

Lewis links the adoption of patrilineal descent groups among most Sikka to the introduction of ivory into Sikka society from Malacca, the concomitant installation of the first Sikkaneese rajadom and the advent of bridewealth payments. According to legend, a prominent Sikkaneese man travelled to Malacca sometime in the sixteenth or seventeenth century and returned with a gift of ivory and some Malaccan princes. The princes stayed on in Flores and married Sikkaneese women, the descendants of whom became the first Sikkaneese rajas (in fact, a form of 'stranger-king'). The tusks that had been brought to Sikka

¹¹ Until around the 1970s tusks also featured in life-cycle rituals and in rituals concerned with the human being in Palue. One such ritual was the compulsory rite of a girl's coming of age, during which a tusk was presented to her maternal uncle performing the ritual. For boys, the equivalent rite was an optional ritual of circumcision, during which the maternal uncle performing the ritual also received a tusk. (The specific mentioning of the maternal uncle in these examples might be a later addition, linked with the tradition of Lamaholot further east.) We should point out that neither Lamaholot nor Sikka have ever had any rituals of a girl's or a boy's coming of age, nor practised any kind of circumcision. Only among the Sikka in Tana 'Ai was male circumcision a compulsory and communal ritual until the late twentieth century (although without the prestation of ivory); girls never had an equivalent ritual.

¹² The relative position of women, however, has admittedly largely improved due to novel social conditions such as opportunities for education, for independent work outside the home, to earn a private income, and so forth.

¹³ One piece of evidence in support of this hypothesis is the existence today of a (less preferred) option among the patrilineal Sikka of marrying without paying bridewealth, thereby placing all of the couple's children in their mother's group (and, in fact, even placing the husband in his wife's descent group).

along with their fathers and forefathers became the symbol of the rajas' sovereignty, and it was through this new medium (ivory) that the institution of bridewealth is said to have emerged, actually attributed to a woman raja.

Ivory represents value in the transactions of both sovereignty and marriage. In marriage that value is life itself: a woman's power of social reproduction symbolized by the ivory given in exchange, as her replacement. In political alliance, the ivory represents sovereignty; indeed, it is close to being sovereignty itself. The giver, the gift, and that represented by the gift are one. What is returned is allegiance, respect, prestige, the recognition of those at the periphery of the power of the center. Less tangible than children to replenish one's group, these values are no less important than they for the maintenance of polity. (Lewis 2010:153)

In Lewis's view, these events, that is, the introduction of ivory, the installation of the rajadom and the advent of bridewealth payments (notably featuring the introduced tusks), was what spurred a shift from matrilineal to patrilineal descent groups among a large proportion of the Sikka population. The Sikka in Tana 'Ai, however, retained a certain social and cultural distance from the Sikkanese rajadom, partly due to its geographical location at the periphery of the rajadom. Eventually Tana 'Ai also became protected from direct rule by the Sikkanese raja by being one of a set of subaltern rajadoms recognized by the Dutch in an attempt to dilute the growing power of the Sikkanese raja. Tana 'Ai never had an indigenous raja.

Is it possible that the events in the Sikkanese rajadom could have affected the Lamaholot in Tana Boruk? There are certainly indications of a strong historical association between Tana Boruk and the populations of central-east Flores, in addition to the domain's inclusion in Tana 'Ai. The name Palue, for instance, is supposedly derived from the island of Palue in the westernmost Sikka regency, from where the village's origin clan is said to have originated. The concomitant beginnings of patrilineal descent and bridewealth payments is, likewise, strikingly similar in both instances. While this is not the local view in Palue, and while the Sikka in Tana 'Ai evidently did not adopt either patrilineal descent groups or bridewealth payments, it would be imprudent not to take this possibility seriously until further data can be obtained.

In any case, while ivory does seem to be central to the social change that has taken place in central-east Flores in the last couple of centuries, it cannot have been ivory *per se* that favoured patrilineal descent in Palue. After all, tusks already existed there before the

patrilineal descent groups are said to have been introduced, and both men/paternal groups and women/maternal groups once had the ability to wield the power of ivory in the acquisition of new group members. Rather, the combined data from Sikka and Palue would suggest that it was the particular role of ivory as *bridewealth* that made possible the putative shift from matrilineal descent groups to patrilineal descent groups among most Sikka, as well as the adoption of patrilineal descent groups among the Lamaholot in Palue. Whether or not these two events were linked still remains to be seen.

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