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SOME IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS OF MARRIAGE ALLIANCE: TANIMBAR, INDONESIA

SPEAKING about the societies of eastern Indonesia, van Wouden writes in *Types of Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia* (1968: 2), 'The preservation and continuation of everything is ensured by the interaction of human and cosmic powers in the ritual.' In this paper I subscribe to van Wouden's idea and elaborate on this 'interaction of human and cosmic powers'. 'Interaction' is a vague term, suggesting that there is a dialectical relation between cosmic and human powers. The purpose of this contribution is to show that this interaction can only be understood within a hierarchical model, the interaction present in the rituals being ordered according to different levels. My demonstration will be made through an analysis of various rituals in a south-eastern Moluccan society of the Tanimbar Archipelago. For the purposes of this analysis I include the ancestors and the local deity, Ratu, as partners in the rituals and actors in the cosmology.

By way of an introduction, I would like to give an example of the manner in which the distinctive oppositions met with in these rituals can be hierarchically ordered. Usually, in the ritual exchanges of Tanimbar, prestations consist in particular foods and specific valuables. Both the food and the valuables are offered as prestations to Ratu and given in exchanges between affines. It is clear that in the ritual exchanges between affines, for instance at marriage ceremonies, the prestations of valuables are decisive for the success of the ritual, while the prestations of food, though present, are secondary. Conversely, in the offerings to Ratu all the prestations including the valuables are treated as though they were food. For example, when food is lacking during an epidemic, people can decide to offer valuables to Ratu to avert disaster. These valuables

are then called 'biscuits' (Drabbe 1940: 246). They are offered provisionally, pending the time when adequate food can be found for the offerings. Here there is a reversal of the relative importance of food and valuables. According to Dumont (1979a: 811), 'the reversal of an asymmetrical opposition is significant...it is evidence of a change of level'. In my example this reversal depends on the principal relation established through the ritual, which may be either the relation between affines or the relation with Ratu. I accept that these two types of relation are located on different levels and intend my analysis to situate these levels according to a hierarchical ordering.

This paper presents the results of two years' research into social organization and exchange in Tanimbar in preparation for field research, which was made possible by the rich literature available for this area. Van Wouden bases his discussion of Tanimbar on three articles by Father Drabbe (1923; 1925; 1927) published before 1935. However, in 1940 Drabbe enriched his ethnographic data with a monograph—and it is the unpublished manuscript of this book, which contains many more expressions and quotations in the language of Yamdena Island,[1] that I have used as the principal source for this paper. My research focuses on Yamdena, where Drabbe spent sixteen years.

I shall now review those aspects of Yamdena society that are relevant to the analysis of its rituals. The society is thought to consist of 'houses'. Each house identifies itself through its relation to two ancestors: one is the ancestor who founded the house, where his patrilineal descendants cluster; the other is the ancestor who gave the first wife to the house. The terms used between two houses linked by a marriage are the following: *nduan*, which I translate as 'master, the one who is responsible', designates the wife-giving house, while *uranak*, 'sister-child', designates the wife-taking house. This relational terminology is actually used for all the exchanging units, from the largest (the 'house') to the smallest (the nuclear family), as well as the members of these units. There is a third relational term designating the members of an exogamous unit: *merwan-awajar*, 'men-brothers'. The exogamous unit is called *tnjame-matan*, literally 'source of food'. It contains a variable number of 'houses', *das*, issued from the same ancestral founder and whose members are agnates related as 'elder and younger brothers'.

This society practises matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, but it also allows marriage with other women. There exist therefore two types of marriage. The first is called the marriage with a *bat nduan*, a '*nduan* woman'. In such a marriage a man marries a woman of a house with which his ascendants already have a relation of alliance. The repetition of such a marriage at each generation is not requisite, but at each generation the prestations implied by the alliance continue. The second type of marriage is called the marriage with a *bat waljéte*, a

1. This manuscript can be found at the library of the Dutch missionaries of the sacred heart at Tilburg, the Netherlands, and is actually the version Drabbe wanted to publish. Since Drabbe was in Tanimbar, Father Geurtjens edited the manuscript and on his own authority discarded some expressions and quotations in the language of Yamdena Island.

'stranger woman'. In this case a man marries a woman who is neither a *nduan* woman nor a sister, real or classificatory—that is, a woman of a house with which his ascendants have not yet established a relation of alliance. Prestations are exchanged for both types of marriage. In the second, the prestations from wife-taker to wife-giver are called *béli*, 'bridewealth'. The prestations from wife-giver to wife-taker are said to be the 'adornment'. The prestations circulate in the following ways. Passing from the *uranak* to the *nduan* are male earrings, breastplates, elephant tusks, swords, meat (pork), fish, and palm-wine. Circulating from the *nduan* to the *uranak* are female earrings, necklaces, bracelets, sarongs, loincloths, and vegetable foods (rice).

The former prestations are all called 'ivory-gold' or 'fish', while the latter are all 'bracelet-necklace' or 'vegetables'. This double set of names seems to permit emphasis on either the prestations of valuables or the prestations of food, referred to above; the fundamental importance of this distinction will become evident later. In the case of marriage with a *nduan* woman there are also prestations during the ceremony, but these are considered neither as bridewealth in the one direction, nor as adornment in the other. Nevertheless they *are* part of the usual circulation of prestations between the two partners of the alliance. The wife-giver is a rightful claimant; he receives here the 'ivory-gold' gifts he was expecting independently of the fact that he gave his daughter to his wife-taker. Likewise he is expected to give 'bracelet-necklace' valuables to his wife-taker. These prestations are emphasised by the gift of a woman, preferably his own daughter. In such a marriage the married couple is defined in advance by an alliance which concerns not only the individual partners, but all the members of the two houses and also their wife-takers and wife-givers. The prestations circulate on account of this alliance and not because of the contracted marriage.

There is another difference between the two types of marriage. In the case of a marriage with a *nduan* woman, the woman, if widowed, will marry her husband's brother. In marriage with a stranger woman, the widow leaves the house of her husband. If she marries again the new husband must pay bridewealth, and she breaks all genealogical ties with the first wife-takers.

A marriage with a *nduan* woman, however, ensures that through the obligatory funeral prestations of the wife-takers, the wife-givers become ancestors to their wife-takers. They are called *mangmwat'enar*, 'dead-mothers', and are represented by named statues on the altar of the dead in the house. These 'dead-mothers' are important for all that concerns fertility and growth. At paddy planting their help is requested by means of a fan on which are spread a sarong and a necklace. These objects belong to the category 'bracelet-necklace', and are worn by the wife during planting. The 'dead-mothers' come down to her, and the people in the field ask them to make the rice grow. The relation between the house and its 'dead-mothers' is essential to the existence and the permanence of the house. But another kind of ancestor, also important for the house, can be distinguished: these are the patrilineal ancestors, who are usually represented by their vertebrae. Just as the 'dead-mothers' are 'ancestors-givers-of-rice', the 'ancestors-vertebrae' are 'ancestors-givers-of-pigs'; and

hunters appeal to them to help them kill pigs. 'Dead-mothers' and 'ancestors-vertebrae' are integral to the house.

The house acquires food through the relation between the living and their ancestors. The two categories of ancestors correspond to the two ancestors of a house, namely the founder, who is an 'ancestor-vertebrae', and the ancestor who gave the first woman, associated with the 'dead-mothers'. It should be noted that the wife-takers are absent in this definition of the house.

The main activity of the house is making offerings to Ratu. In local terms offerings consist in 'nourishing' the god, who will 'eat' the offerings. The living thus preserve themselves from being 'eaten', that is, they protect themselves from disease and death. These dangers occur either occasionally, due to a transgression—when the threat proceeds from a malediction such as 'may Ratu eat you'—or they are inscribed within the life cycle (birth, construction of a house, etc.). All these critical situations are resolved by rituals in which food is given to Ratu. Now in many cases these offerings cannot be made without the participation of the affines, from whom the house organising the ritual receives prestations. These include food, of which a great deal is consumed and redistributed, while a small amount is offered to Ratu. The participation of the wife-takers *and* the wife-givers is essential in so far as their prestations are specific: wife-takers give pigs and wife-givers give rice. Now the pre-eminent offering is made up of the two kinds of food, animal and vegetable. In these rituals we discern the two levels of relations I have already mentioned. On one level there are the prestations between the partners of an alliance, which take the shape of an oriented circulation of valuables and food: what is given in one direction is redistributed in the other. On the other level a proportion of all the previous food prestations is set aside as offerings to Ratu.

Let us consider some rituals in more detail and start with the ceremony of 'coming out of the house' of a newly born child. It is a ritual which invokes the relation of a house with its 'dead-mothers' and Ratu. The ritual is called *luri*, or 'feast of the "dead-mothers"', and takes place in a house some time after the birth of a child. The rituals call upon the participation of the agnates and their affines. The men of the house collect rice, hunt pigs and cut down some sago trees. Then they summon their wife-takers, who bring pigs, fish and palm-wine, and their wife-givers, who bring rice. The feast consists of a ritual meal where all the partakers consume rice, pork and sago. One part of the rice is given to the wife-takers, and one part of the pork is given to the wife-givers. But another part of the ritual requires the levying of a portion of rice, pork and palm-wine to be used in offerings to the 'dead-mothers' and Ratu. These offerings are intended to assure that the god and the 'dead-mothers' protect a child's growth and life span,[2] which accordingly are the result of the prestations of the agnates and their affines.

We can explore the value of the offerings to the god by returning to the distinction between animal food and vegetable food. We may then infer that this

2. The distinction here between life span and growth derives from the consideration that the gift of life does not entail that life will have duration. The span of life is a separate gift.

same value applies to the prestations coming from the ancestors and practised between the affines. Ratu gives life, Yamenda people say. 'Ratu makes the child come down in the belly of the women.' 'Ratu is making us men.' Ratu also gives death; it is he, they say, who 'eats man' when he dies. The ancestors have an intermediary role in this control over life and death. They can urge Ratu to give death, but they can also give to the living the means to obtain a life span or growth. For this purpose the 'ancestors-vertebrae' give pigs, which are used as offerings, and the 'dead-mothers' give rice for the offerings. The two kinds of ancestors intervene with different gifts. To determine the value of the pigs and the rice we shall examine a situation where they appear alone. In the case of disease, and therefore the peril of death, one promises a pig to Ratu in exchange for a life span. The value of the rice is also explicit in the following example. When about to cut down a sago tree from an unused clump, men first sow rice around the roots, so that, as they say, 'Ratu makes the clump grow and multiply.' Thus by giving pigs the 'ancestors-vertebrae' are giving the means to obtain a span of life from Ratu, and by giving rice the 'dead-mothers' ancestors are giving the means to obtain growth from Ratu. In the same way, when the wife-takers give pigs to the wife-givers they give them the means to obtain a life span from Ratu; and when the wife-givers give rice to the wife-takers they give them the means to obtain growth and life.

Ratu does not represent the differentiation we find among the ancestors: he is at the same time giver of life and of life span. He is also called *Limnditi-Fenréu*, 'Woman-Man'. This double name of Ratu reminds us of the two types of ancestors, of which one, the 'dead-mothers', has a female connotation and the other, the patrilineal 'ancestors-vertebrae', a male connotation. Elsewhere, the inhabitants of Yamdena classify their oriented prestations also as female and male: for the wife-givers, the woman, *limnditi*, is the most valued prestation; and for the wife-takers, the tusk is the most valued prestation. The tusk and the man, in the ritual language, are called *fenréu*.

Having seen that wife-givers are also rice-givers and that wife-takers are also pig-givers, we can ask whether their prestations are always necessary for the relation of the house to *Ratu*. In the example of the feast of the 'dead-mothers' on the occasion of the coming out of the new-born child, we saw that the wife-takers and the wife-givers both participate in the offerings. On the other hand, in the case of disease only the wife-takers participate by giving pigs. The rice is collected by the inhabitants of the house and is not brought by the wife-givers. This practice is in keeping with what we have said about the respective values of pigs and rice, namely, that this ritual is chiefly destined to obtain a prolongation of life from the god. Consequently the important participants of the ritual are the wife-takers and not the wife-givers, the prestation of rice being subordinated to that of pigs.

In a contrasting way, it appears that in funerary rituals the prestation of one particular wife-giver is more important than that of the wife-takers. There is also a second important fact about the funerals: there are no offerings of rice and pigs. The deceased himself, as they say, has been 'eaten' by Ratu. Therefore he becomes himself the object of the offering. From the point of view of the

prestations, the main point of the ritual consists in placing the prestations of the affines together on the corpse. The first prestations are those of the wife-givers, who give bracelets, sarongs and loincloths: the bracelets are put on the eyes and the mouth of the departed 'so that he can see and speak in the world of the dead'. Afterwards follows a period where they stay up for the dead until the day of the funeral. On that day the eldest daughter of the dead brings a pig which, they say, is the back of the dead and which revives him. The second daughter of the dead gives a sword which is used to cut up the pig and an earring which is used 'to string up' its most important part, the jaw. The other daughters of the dead and the wife-takers bring pigs, and the latter also bring earrings. The wife-givers bring bracelets, sarongs and loincloths. One part of these prestations is said to follow the departed to the world of the dead; another part is taken from the set of gifts to be redistributed between the wife-takers and the wife-givers, according to the orientation of the prestations within the alliance. These are the minimal prestations for funerals.

It behoves the principal wife-giver of the house, that is, the one who represents the original wife-giver of the house, to turn this funeral into a great ritual event by making a particular prestation. He gives a group of valuables consisting of bracelets and a necklace which is suspended above the head of the deceased. These objects constitute, they say, the 'ladder of the dead'; they prefigure his future 'coming-downs' when the living who possess them will appeal to him to request his help. Afterwards all the bracelets and the necklace are received by the two eldest daughters of the departed. The principal wife-giver receives the jaw of the pig, which he hangs up in his house and which he will point out each time he receives the children of the dead, saying, 'You will never be able to deny that you are my wife-takers because there hangs the back of your father'. The sword and the earring given by the second daughter are also for the principal wife-giver, but he will give them to his own wife-givers. We can distinguish here prestations which are registered in a general exchange circuit, such as the earrings, the bracelets and the loincloths, and one particular prestation, namely the jaw of the pig. This jaw remains as the token of a relationship and stresses certain rights of the wife-giver over his wife-takers. From the viewpoint of the exchange, the only token which is equivalent to the jaw in the house of the wife-giver is the gift of a woman to the house of the wife-taker.

In the rituals we have already considered, we find the two levels of relation visible in the prestations: on the one hand the oriented prestations between affines, and on the other hand the offerings from men to Ratu. In the funerals, only the relation between affines is present. Ratu has, they say, 'eaten the man'. But a prestation from the wife-takers to the wife-givers seems to indicate that during the funeral the wife-givers substitute themselves for the god and 'eat' the departed. In fact the pigs of the wife-takers, including the 'pig of the back', are cut up and their skins are dried on bamboo frames. These skins are given to the wife-givers who 'eat' them. We can see in these gifts of skins, representing some aspect of the dead, a kind of return of the gifts of women. So the prestations of the affines at the funeral allow the deceased to become an ancestor and become integrated in the world of the dead together with the valuables. Furthermore,

they permit some reciprocation of the gifts of women and the reaffirmation of the alliance, which is visible in the circulation of the valuables between the living. The creation of an ancestor with the help of one's wife-takers and wife-givers goes beyond the ritual outline of the funeral: it connects the ritual framework to the existence of the ancestors who are providers of pigs and rice, permitting prestations between affines and also permitting them 'to nourish' Ratu.

The marriage ceremonies and funerary rituals have in common the stress placed on the participation of the affines and on the circulation of the valuables. The creation or the perpetuation of the alliance is at each time the centre of the ritual. If we consider all of the rituals, we see some in which the relation to Ratu is central and some in which the relation to the affines is central. As Dumont says (1979b: 402), the hierarchical relation 'cannot be true from one end of experience to the other...for this would be to deny the hierarchical dimension itself, which requires situations to be distinguished by value'.

In this paper I have insisted on the opposition between food and valuables, and I have shown that, while in the relation between the affines, typically in the marriage, the valuables subordinate the food, the opposite is the case in the relation of the living to Ratu. Here we have seen the reversal. I have also laid stress on the distinction between wife-giver and wife-taker, associated with the distinctions between rice and pork, female and male, and multiplication or physical growth and life span. I showed further that, if in the relations between the living we find stress on one pole or the other, in the relation of the living to Ratu, there is a conjunction of the two poles. Within the entire configuration, we observe the two central relationships of hierarchy: inversion and totalization. I demonstrated too that the two levels do not refer to two different contexts, but on the contrary, that they form a unity, since the offerings are levied from the prestations between the living.

I will conclude with a consideration of mythical material emphasising the superior character of the relation with the god and his totalization. The god is the giver and the taker of life. He is called 'Woman-Man'. This name implies that he is wife-taker and wife-giver, at least when we consider him in the sphere of social relations. Mythology effectively represents Ratu as a marriage partner, either as a wife-taker or as a wife-giver. When myth represents him as a wife-taker, he pays bridewealth, but in the relevant myth the separation of the married couple takes place before the payment of the adornment. When he is wife-giver, he adorns his daughter, but the separation from his wife-taker takes place before the payment of the bridewealth. In both cases the living remain in a position of debt toward Ratu. This debt could find its expression in the fact that Ratu 'eats' the living, or gives death. But the marriages with Ratu as partner have another consequence. Each time he marries, the child of the couple has no wife-giver following their rupture with Ratu. The child whose father is heavenly has no maternal uncle in so far as he becomes his son. The child whose mother is celestial has his maternal uncle in heaven and relations are broken. This absence of wife-giver has given rise to the creation of a closed alliance circle between all the houses which had the god as a marriage partner. That is, there is in Tanimbar a 'circulating connubium' of thirteen houses which explain their

presence in the circle by a myth similar to those I have mentioned. All these houses claim a status of equal nobility on the basis of a marriage with Ratu. This equality subordinates the hierarchical relation between wife-givers and wife-takers within the circle. On the social plane, this circle neutralizes the asymmetry between affines; simultaneously, on the mythological plane the nobility is associated with a symmetric relation to Ratu, that is, a relationship of both wife-giver and wife-taker. The problem of status in this society is not linked to the asymmetrical wife-giver/wife-taker relationship, but is linked to a particular relation to the god. The enclosure of the alliance circle between nobles can be seen as a manifestation of the completion of exchange. It is here that the alliance comes closest to the relation with Ratu, in that it synthesizes two operations of exchange which are usually separate in ordinary alliance practice: the giving of a woman and the receiving of another. Ratu, 'Woman-Man', acts in the same way, giving and taking life.

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