



Ambivalent Blessings

Head-Hunting on Siberut (Mentawai) in a Comparative Southeast Asian Perspective

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Abstract. – The practices of head-hunting in Southeast Asia share certain formal features but the indigenous explanations of the phenomenon are very diverse. The article explores a set of ideas behind this apparent heterogeneity. The case of Siberut in the Mentawai Archipelago is described in some detail and compared with occurrences in related cultures. The sacrificial character of head-hunting and its relationship to autochthonous powers prove to be common key concepts. [*Southeast Asia, Siberut, Mentawai, head-hunting, human sacrifice*]

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1 Introduction

There is a strange inconsistency in the practice of head-hunting in Southeast Asia. On the one hand, there are certain formal characteristics which make it possible to recognize a common pattern. In contrast to warlike conflicts with neighbours, most head-hunting raids were performed by small groups of people and in the guise of surprise attacks outside their own domain. They were aimed at obtaining one or a few heads of whatever individual was

encountered, irrespective of gender or age. Moreover, the practice had always a ritual character. It was influenced by the readings and observations of omens and oracles and ended in elaborate religious celebrations in the community.¹

On the other hand, precisely with regard to this ritual dimension, the ethnographic descriptions on head-hunting are so heterogeneous that, in her reader on the topic, Hoskins (1996: 40) commented that there is no single model of a “head-hunting complex” to be found in Southeast Asia. Indeed, there is a great variety of indigenous explanations at various levels which agree only in so far that generally speaking a beneficial influence on the community is attributed to the practice of head-hunting.² This leaves us with the question of how

1 For a general survey on Southeast Asian head-hunting practices, I refer to Schuster (1956), Stöhr (1965: 194–201), Schouten Patuleia (1992), and Hoskins (1996). The practice occurred in a vast region from northeastern India to Polynesia among peoples belonging to different language families (Austronesian, Tibeto-Burman, and Austro-Asiatic) and appears to have existed in Proto-Austronesian times some 5000 years ago (Coiffier et Guerreiro 1999: 44f.).

2 Another frequent aspect in the taking of heads has in fact little to do with ritual at all: the personal renown an individual can attain through a successful headhunt. That this should be the case is in itself a logical consequence of the extraordinary prestation and is similar to what might be expected from any spectacular undertaking. However, in nearly all Southeast Asian examples, it is the accompanying communal ritual rather than personal bravery which gives meaning to a head-hunting raid.

are we to explain certain striking commonalities in the reports of head-hunting practices in premodern times throughout the Southeast Asian region. In this article an attempt is made to explore an answer to this question. The past tense which is used throughout most of its arguments indicates that I am not aiming at an essentialist construction of a timeless phenomenon, a phenomenon that in fact was subject to local transformations everywhere it occurred. What I am in search of is an understanding of the ideological backgrounds of various recurring features reported to have been part of head-hunting practices before they were suppressed by the colonial governments.

Of course, there were also private rather than collective motives. There is a variety of statements that the soul of the person beheaded is supposed to serve the successful headhunter or some prominent member of the community here and in the Hereafter.³ Local elaborations of this idea include certain Southeast Asian construction rituals which alternatively involve the killing of a captive slave from outside the domain or the providing of a head-hunting trophy. The souls of the victims are said to become guardians; they are ritually prompted to protect the structure and its inhabitants (see Wessing and Jordaan 1997). However, such animistic elaborations are too sporadic to shed light on Southeast Asian head-hunting in general.

2 Reasons for Head-Hunting in Southeast Asia

Did there ever exist any specific aims and goals which motivated people to embark on a head-hunting raid? An ethnographical survey soon reveals that there are no general answers to this question to be found. There are nearly always concrete reasons for taking a head, but these are so diverse that it is instead this phenomenon as such which needs explanation. Fertility, for instance, is often mentioned, in a marriage or for the crops; there is the death of a chief, there is the averting of disaster, and, of course, there is retaliation. In more general terms, the idea that new life requires the taking of life recurs. However, one particular theme, to which I shall come back later, has a pervasive prominence: The motivation of a headhunt being coincident with the completion of a communal building. From every corner of the area there are reports of captured

heads being buried under the foundations of such major constructions (see Schuster 1956: 70–82).

This profusion of aims elicits a second question: What is the basis of this many-stranded ritual efficacy attributed to head-hunting? In other words, what warrants the confidence that there is hope of attaining whatever the headhunt is aimed to accomplish? Why do Southeast Asians believe that the capturing of a head from outside one's own domain induces propitious consequences of the ritual at home?

In contrast to the second question, scantiness not diversity marks the answers to this question in anthropological literature. Rodney Needham, in an often quoted article of 1976, departs from Kruyt's (1906: 18; see also Nooy-Palm 1986: 318) well-known explanation that the "soul-substance" (*zielstof*) of a slain enemy can be captured by taking his head and can be used to effectuate fertility and other beneficial influences. Against this general theory, and taking the reports about the Kenyah Dayak by Elshout (1926) as an example, Needham demonstrates that it has not proved possible to produce direct evidence of indigenous notions pointing in the direction of such a general explanation (see also Metcalf 1982: 113). Indeed, a closer reading of Elshout and other authors reveals that, according to their informants and despite their own Kruytian interpretations, in most instances it is not the trophies themselves which are said to elicit the beneficial effects.

At this point, Needham's argumentation takes a surprising turn. His failure to find an indigenous theory such as that of the soul-substance to explain "just how the cause produced the effect" (1976: 78) brings him to the conclusion that what we are struggling with is in fact not a lack of sufficient field information. It is instead an example of a situation for which we have to accept the existence of a mode of thought which is alien to European tradition. It represents an "alternative conception of causality" (1976: 71) in which something can cause an effect without any intermediary element in between. It is nothing but the tacit preconceptions of the anthropologist, triggered by a contemporaneous "scientific idiom derived from physics" (1976: 82) which inspires the researchers to assume the existence of a quasi-physical mediating agent which realizes the desired result.

Although Needham is probably right in pointing out the circumstantial tinges in Kruyt's influential theory, his alternative assumption of associating head-hunting with an alien causality seems rather odd to me. Firstly it should be said that Needham is somewhat categorical in denying any use of the

³ See Stöhr (1965: 198) and for early sources Schuster (1956: 64–69) and Downs (1977: 117).

heads in the sense Elshout generally takes as valid. There are indeed reports of magical uses of a skull or of parts of it to effectuate success in certain endeavors.⁴ Moreover, the same trophies can be used in several rituals for a few years, after which “they become malevolent” (Rousseau 1990: 276). Often we are told that head trophies were treated in a friendly fashion and fed at feasts (see McKinley 1976: 114). Such uses, however, do not require a quasi-physical energy. Rather, it appears that in certain contexts the skulls are being ritually addressed just as so many other “mediating” objects in Indonesia possessing a soul.⁵ However, Needham is certainly right that the occasional instrumental uses of skulls cannot be taken as an overall explanation for head-hunting.

But what about Needham’s own argumentation? In a prompt and, in my view, apt reaction, Michelle Rosaldo (1977: 169) has countered that “... a misplaced model of causal explanation ... demands ... a discussion, not of alternate causal logics, but rather of native views of how and why some human actions make good sense.”⁶

At this point the discussion seems to have become mired down. In a monograph on Kayan Religion by Jérôme Rousseau which was published a few years ago (1998: 86), the author follows Needham in his assumption that “there is no need to assume the existence of a soul substance in the head trophy.” The transformation of heads into trophy “produces (or unlocks?) a propitious influence ... without [people] requiring [any further] explanation.”

However, there is a strange omission in the whole argument. Two pages earlier than his statement just quoted, Rousseau remarks that “head-hunting is a form of human sacrifice.” And later in his book (207f.) he describes various categories of spirits involved in connection with the annual head-hunting ritual.⁷ This brings us back to

Elshout. According to this author, a head-hunting trophy was considered to be a proof of the favourable disposition of the community of the spirits associated with head-hunting, the “spirits of courage” (*bali akang*); the above-mentioned localization of these favours in the trophy itself appears to be Elshout’s own addition. Or, to quote an author about another Dayak group (Geddes 1957: 52): “... the heads were made into ... symbols of supernatural support by their presentation to the gods.” Again, about the Toraja in Sulawesi, we read (Adriani en Kruyt 1950–51/I: 246) that the enemy heads are food for the spirits (*anitu*); head-hunting induces fertility in people, livestock, and harvests; not going head-hunting would be punished by the spirits with misfortune. Looking at the west of the archipelago, about the Niasans, Scarduelli (1986: 140 and 1990: 461) remarks that the heads were offered first to the ancestors and later to divinities of realms outside the human domain. They guaranteed plentitude for all the members of the community.

Strangely enough, Needham (1976: 77f.) himself comes close to such reports on the grounds of his own observations in Borneo when he writes that head-hunting was required by the spirits in order to avoid misfortune. And he goes on to acknowledge with regard to various Indonesian examples that “it is certain spirits ... which actually provide the desired consequences of the practice of head-hunting” (80).

In view of all these documents, the first conclusion to be drawn seems to me, that far from being forced to accept an alternate logic we should take what is stated by the people themselves seriously. As we have seen, just as any Indonesian ritual, head-hunting is performed for explicit aims and purposes. In another context (Schefold 1988: 22–24) I have called this purposeful function of rituals their “telic” dimension. To reach the ritual goals, mediating instances can be appealed to, but other practices such as offerings to spirits can also be resorted to. Our task, therefore, would be to identify whether we can find more information about the nature of the spiritual beings whose favours were apparently to be reached by means of the head-hunting raids. It is here that we can expect to find the agent between the cause and the effects so profoundly missed by Needham.

In order to illustrate this, I shall dwell on one case in somewhat more detail. The case comes from some tribal groups on Siberut, the northernmost and, with a size about the same as Bali, the largest island of the Mentawai Archipelago west of Sumatra. Siberut is sparsely populated, with only about

4 Elshout (1926: 300, 327), Schuster (1956: 47), Adriani en Kruyt (1950–51/I: 338), and in interesting detail Rousseau (1998: 206f.).

5 Cf. Schefold (1995a, 1999). – The conversion of the enemy “into an internal social person”, as mentioned by McKinley (1976: 120), seems to me a special elaboration of the ideas about mediating agencies rather than a general explanation of the phenomenon of head-hunting.

6 Rosaldo had based her reaction on the case of the Ilongot where the beneficial consequences of head-hunting are explained in rather psychological terms. This is an exception in Southeast Asia, but it does not impair the fundamental validity of her point.

7 See also the corresponding arguments by Coiffier and Guerreiro (1999: 45) for the characterization of Southeast Asian head-hunting practice as a “dette de vie.”

20,000 inhabitants, among whom I have spent several extended periods of fieldwork (see Vermeulen 2003: 373–382).

3 Siberut

The people of Siberut were headhunters until about the time of the First World War, when the Dutch colonial government banned the practice and threatened offenders with severe sanctions. In reaction to this, head-hunting was given up at once and without much ado; in other respects people succeeded in continuing their way of life with only some minor adjustments forced upon them by the Dutch. Two more generations and massive attacks by the Soekarno government were necessary to persuade larger parts of the population to relinquish their traditional beliefs.⁸

It was shortly after that period, in 1967, that I first came to Siberut. There I met several old men who had still participated in head-hunting expeditions. Many of them were strongly opposed to official attempts to encourage them to choose a way of life which was less primitive in the eyes of the Indonesian Government. Despite this resistance, they all agreed in expressing the spontaneous relief people had felt after head-hunting had been banned. Although success in head-hunting was regarded as auspicious on certain ritual occasions, everyone was glad, they said, to be liberated from

the constant fear of becoming the victim of a head-hunting raid, and from the vicious circle of them having to take revenge. The new peaceful situation was confirmed by opulent rituals of friendship, as a part of which fines were paid in kind to make up for any imbalance in casualties. Such feasts are still being organized even today and lead to revealing discussions about genealogies and past relationships.

This ambiguous reaction – accepting enforced change in one respect while continuing to adhere to a conservative attitude in others – raises some interdependent questions: Why were the people on Siberut so amenable to accepting the governmental ban, without much further consequence? Or, the other way round: Why had they persisted in a practice which was obviously so onerous to them before that period? And as regards the time after the ban: How was it possible to continue traditional ways of ritual life shorn of the auspicious effects attributed to the head-hunting component? Was there a substitute for it? It is the answer to these questions which, I hope, will bring us closer to an understanding of the meaning of head-hunting on Siberut and perhaps also in some related societies. I shall begin by describing former head-hunting arrangements on Siberut in some detail.

4 Head-Hunting on Siberut

Most people on Siberut agree that originally they come from Simatalu, a valley in the northwestern part of the island. There, in mythical times, the forebears of the different patrilineal clans settled, living, as they do today, in independent longhouses, *uma*, of about ten families. In the course of history, members of various *uma* began to quarrel, and some of them moved to other valleys in Siberut, until the island was covered with a network of clans, descendants of different clans living in close proximity along the rivers, each in their own *uma*.

Clans are exogamous, at least in theory, but otherwise clan affiliation on Siberut is not important in everyday life. Before colonial times, there was a quite direct impediment to clan commitment: the genealogical network of clans was crosscut by regional subdivisions which narrowed down the possibilities of friendly relations with people within a person's own district. This subdivision was caused by the headhunt, the *pulakeubat*.

There are no mythical traditions that primordial conflicts within Simatalu developed into head-hunting. This concurs with the traditional situation: even in recent history, conflicts between neighbours within one region never resulted in the taking of

⁸ This in itself is a quite normal situation in Indonesian tribal traditions. My special interest in the phenomenon, however, was triggered by a remarkable peculiarity in the reaction to the ban, especially when compared with the closest neighbours of the Mentawaians, the inhabitants of Nias to the north. In size and in their location off the west coast of Sumatra, both islands are similar. In their social organization, however, there are some major differences. Whereas Nias was a quite complex society with a hereditary aristocracy and a differentiated economy, and with a political organization which resembled early states, the people of Siberut represented a largely egalitarian society with simple shifting cultivation and little political integration beyond local kin groups. These differences were matched by differences in population density: at the beginning of the 20th century there were about 135,000 people living on Nias, while Siberut was occupied by barely a tenth of that number.

Another striking difference is visible in the reaction to the ban on head-hunting. In both islands, the ban was part of a general attempt to bring the population under control. On Nias, the consequences were dramatic; there apparently being little room for any kind of coming to terms with the new developments. Initially, there was some strong resistance. Within a few years, however, after a period of ecstatic abjuration of heathen traditions, which was soon to be named "the big contrition," most of the population accepted the Christian faith (cf. Müller 1931: 104).

heads of the eventual victims; head-hunting raids, by contrast, were always directed at faraway territories. Other mythical accounts directly referring to the origins of the practice are also absent. As far as anyone could remember, head-hunting had resulted in hostile relationships roughly between the valleys in the southern, the northeastern, and the north-western parts of the island. Independent of this, the ancient original place of settlement, Simatalu, was a region which was open to head-hunting to every *uma* in the other valleys of the island.⁹

There were various reasons for embarking on a headhunt, such as to prove an individual's bravery, and of course there was always the obligation to take revenge.¹⁰ However, there was also one ritual incentive. A head-hunting raid was required after the completion of a new *uma*, as the culminating point in the inauguration celebrations.

The initiative to undertake a headhunt (*mulakeu*) always came from a single *uma* which was called "originator of the head-hunting ritual" (*bakkat labbara*). The more followers from neighbouring *uma* (*si pamumu*) who joined the initiators the better. The participants and their families lived together in seclusion for the coming period, as was the rule during most religious rituals on Siberut. Part of the *labbara* was a common procession to the tree on a riverbank in the forest from which the trophies from previous headhunts were suspended. The souls of the victims were supposed to reside with the skulls. As a sacrifice to them as well as to the local spirits, a small decorated pole was set in the ground and the souls were exhorted to summon the souls of their companions and family members at home, the idea being that if a soul was already in the vicinity of this place, its owner back in alien territory would be easy prey.¹¹

Returned to the *uma* the participants aroused their courage by singing aggressive head-hunting songs. An example from a raid against the Tubeket region:

Soon there will be going *pai-tou-ku*, soon there will be going *pai-tou-ku*,
pai-tou-ku our younger brother,
 he carries my wrath out there to the forest hill,
 to the mist-veiled forest hill,
 on the far side of which stands the *koka*-tree
 with its wide trunk and its wide crown,
 on top of which sits the hawk with its concave face
 who knows how to seize, who knows how to circle,
 circling he seizes the children of the Tubeket Valley,
pa-to-pi-gug-gug, pa-to-pi-gug-gug!

The slit drums were also beaten (see Schefold 1973: 59f.). The *labbara*-ritual included various ceremonies aimed at ensuring the success of the headhunt by magical means and to protect the participants from their adversaries (*labbara* is the name of a special fetish put together and carried by the headhunters). Pigs were invoked and sacrificed. In their hearts divinatory information about the success of the raid could be read. So much importance was attached to a correct interpretation that head-hunting was the only occasion on which people copied on heart-shaped stones the signs they discovered in the heart in order to be able to memorize their significance in connection with the outcome of the expedition after returning.

Technical activities included the preparations of the weapons and the production of arrow poison – embarking on a raid was the only occasion when poison was made on the verandah of the *uma*, rather than in a spot in the surroundings, as was the case before an ordinary hunt.¹²

During *labbara*, the same taboos and regulations were in effect as those observed during other major community rituals. These included a ban on ordinary work, on raw food, and the demand for absolute collective solidarity, culminating in a prohibition of private sexual relations. As I have explained

explain the meaning of head-hunting itself; moreover, it has nothing to do with head-hunting specifically but is also found in connection with animals and even with objects (see Schefold 1970: 195; 1988: 272).

12 The Sakuddei group with which I have spent most of my periods of fieldwork on Siberut told me that during the Soekarno period, when people were forced to abandon their traditional – "primitive" – ways of life, a team of government officials tried to reach them in order to enforce the new regulations. When the unruly Sakuddei received news of the approaching group they prepared themselves by making arrow poison on the verandah. The officials understood the message and retired.

9 The people on the southern islands of the Mentawai Archipelago, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai derive their origins from southern Siberut. They seem to have already abandoned the custom of head-hunting in precolonial times. One of the first visitors towards the end of the 18th century, Crisp (1799: 85), reports that in his time people still remembered that they used to hunt heads in Sybee [Saibi] in northeastern Siberut and in Simatalu – an indirect confirmation of their traditions about their origins. According to Loeb (1972: 172) "some years" before his stay in Pagai (1925), the local people still went on war expeditions to the north but restricted themselves to killing one or more enemies and did not take the heads. Conversely, in 1968 old people in Sipora told me that two occasions of headhunters from Siberut attacking Siporans were still remembered.

10 Revenge was not directed at the actual killer, whose identity was not known in most cases, but at the local group to which the headhunters belonged.

11 To call the souls of the companions back home in order to ensure success in killing new victims cannot, of course,

elsewhere (1988: 302–309), in Mentawai explicit motivations of ritual taboos are always related to the incompatibility of the forbidden activity with the hunts for game animals, which complete every major religious feast: Working, consuming raw or “cold” food, antisocial behaviour – all these would have negative effects on the readiness of the hunted animals to allow themselves to be shot, or otherwise it would endanger the hunters themselves.¹³ Head-hunting increased the intensity of these prescriptions. And it was only for this occasion that the ban on the privacy of sexual contacts underwent a collective enhancement: during *labbara*, men and woman were supposed to eat in two separate groups, the men in the right, the women in the left part of the *uma*.

Before departing on the headhunt, the participants dressed up in specific attire: a yellow loin-cloth, a specially woven belt (*kabitat*) worn around the waist as a protection against arrows, and black marks on their faces. During the expedition into the enemy territory, special significance was attributed to dreams and omens, especially to the flight of birds. A sea eagle flying in the direction of the adversary was a favourable sign: other birds or bird calls, especially from the left, were considered to be warnings sent by the ancestors, and led to delays and, according to some informants, even to cancellation of the expedition.

The assault was always made by surprise. The participants came stealing up in a row, the first ones carrying daggers and machetes, the middle ones bows and poisoned arrows, and the last ones bearing spears. All except the middle group carried shields. Any victim, man, woman, or child, was welcome. Clearly, bravery was not the main issue.

The headhunters were not always successful in remaining undiscovered. There was a special slit drum signal designed to alarm the neighbours in a valley that hostile headhunters (in the example which follows from the Saibi-Simatalu region) had been spotted. The text underlying this signal was recited to me as follows:

Ku ku ku,
presently the heads of the Saibi people will be falling,
presently they will be falling with their rotten faces,
with their maggoty faces,
presently falling, *ku ku ku,*
look out, enemies have come with maggoty faces,
ku ku ku!

13 The relevant reasons and associations are described in Schefold (1988: 543f.).

This was a sign for everybody to take up arms. All inhabitants united in attempting to locate the intruders and to kill them or at least to track them and to drive them away. If people were successful in killing one of the headhunters, everyone converged on the place where the body was lying and participated in hewing the corpse to pieces until it had been ground into the dust (*pasibubu*). If, however, those under attack came too late, and the aggressors had successfully departed with the head of their dead companion, the corpse was brought back to the *uma* where it was buried in an especially miserable ritual designed to incite the anger of the victim's soul (*simagere*) and to engage it to help in later attempts to exact revenge.

Successful headhunters severed the trophies – the head, and often the arms and legs as well – and returned triumphantly to their own territory. When resting on their way home, they used the trophies (*manai*; literally: flowers) as pillows; were they not to do so, the trophies might begin to cry (*musou*) or to gnash their teeth.¹⁴ On arriving home the heroes were enthusiastically welcomed by friends and family members and were asked to give an arrow or any other personal attribute as a token of memory (*salepe*) which transferred some of their courage. The actual killer was the subject of the most veneration, followed by the men who had been second, third, and fourth in striking the victim. These were called “the strong ones” (*simagege*).

Again the slit drums were beaten, rumour spread, and in the course of time it could become known that the victim in the foreign territory had been a member of the clan of one of the headhunters. This was, of course, regrettable but in fact it was no more than the consequence of a risk which had to be taken. Territorial community feeling was stronger than old genealogical ties.

During the head-hunting expedition strong taboos had continued to be observed by the family members in the *uma* back home, in order to protect the warriors. Now, upon their return, they were received by the wife of the Master of Ceremonies, the *rimata*, who carried out magical “cooling” acts, designed to protect the headhunters from the wrath of their enemies.¹⁵ In the evening, a great festival commenced. The trophies, the “flowers,” were hung in the *uma* on a rattan liana, fixed between the

14 Cf. Hose (1926: 197) for similar reports from the Dayak.

15 The ritual reception of the life-taking headhunters by the life-giving women who remained home is a common element in the Southeast Asian context (cf. Schuster 1956: 83–90; Schouten Patuleia 1992; King 1993: 239; de Jonge en van Dijk 1995).

posts of the communal hearth where this bordered the dance floor; otherwise, the heads were sometimes hung on a pair of interconnected, specially decorated poles (*sirigugu*) in front of these posts, which rose from the ground through the floor to about one and a half metres above it (see Scheffold 1980: 137, no. 210). For a couple of nights, in the presence of many guests and spectators, there was dancing and singing. When the reason for the headhunt had been the building of a new *uma*, the roof in the front and at the rear was crowned crosswise with pairs of decorated rattan leaves (*buluk bebeget*), at least five metres long, which waved in the wind and were called *leilei*, a word originally designating the tail feathers of a cock.

Then, the ritual took another turn. The continuous presence of the deceased with his soul was felt to become threatening. Fearful of his wrath the trophies were removed from the *uma* and taken to the tree on the riverbank in the forest where earlier trophies were hanging, visible to all passersby. After ritually appeasing the victim, the headhunters returned home and started the closing ritual. This ritual, the *mulepa*, lasted several weeks and was designed to cleanse the participants of all the dangerous influences of their victims and to reintegrate the members of the *uma* into the protective sphere of the group's own ancestors. Among many other protective magical means to be made was a windmill-like structure (*totopoi*) with painted propellers and a shaft intentionally made to squeal while turning. The *totopoi* was fastened high up in a tree by the successful headhunter. He sat there, starting to rotate the propeller with his hands and accompanying the ensuing squealing with a song designed to call the wind and to praise his reputation:

Here is my *totopoi* made from *gite* wood,
with its concave propellers.
Come and try yourself on its stem made from *manggea'*
bamboo,
manggea' from the Rourogat River,
come, come you motherly west wind,
and you come, motherly wind from northeast,
here is something for you to blow at,
something to try yourself on,
here is my *totopoi*, under the shoulders of heaven,
which suits me,
me, the daring one, me, the head of the settlements.

Thereupon the *totopoi* was enjoined to perform the magical function for which it had been made: to frighten any souls of adversaries which might approach and to induce them to "turn away" by the noise produced by its squealing propeller.

Another part of the *mulepa* was tattooing. In Mentawai, tattooing in itself is not connected with any particular ritual or specialist activity. It can be regarded as a cultural contribution to the natural process of growing up of an adolescent male or female body. There were, however, specific patterns which had a relationship to head-hunting. The successful headhunter was entitled to have a frog-like figure tattooed on his belly as a symbol for his victim, and, according to some informants, certain spiral patterns on the forehead and on the shoulders as well. Moreover, all members of the headhunters' group were given a tattoo of cuff-like rings around forearms (*pumumurat*) and calves (*biti*) – perhaps related to the fact that the trophies brought home often included the extremities.¹⁶ A short ceremony concluded this episode: the newly tattooed were magically treated with a black chicken as a means of ensuring that the dark blue design would always remain clearly visible.

The *mulepa* was also a time of artistic creation. Simultaneously with the tattooing, the rear wall of the verandah was painted with illustrations depicting episodes from the headhunt, such as the killing of the victim by the successful warriors,¹⁷ and with ornamental designs recalling tattoo patterns and female breasts. At the same time, effigies were made of the slain enemies. In the first instance it was the actual killer who was entitled to make them, but other men of his own or a friendly *uma* could help as well. Different sections of the island had different designs for these figures. In the eastern parts I was told that they used to be simply painted on the rear wall of the verandah, alongside the scenic drawings just mentioned. In the central regions (Sarereiket), three-dimensional sculptures are reported to have been made. These figures were mounted on the tie-beam in the front part of the interior, next to the hunting trophies with their wooden decorations of birds, which also had their place on that beam.¹⁸ During my first visit to Siberut in 1967, the only places where I still found a few genuine specimens of head-hunting figures were some old and decaying *uma* in Taileleu in the southern part of the island. There, for every slain victim a figure (*simoinang*) was cut out on

16 Tattooing of all members of a community after a successful head-hunting raid is also reported from Borneo (cf. Rousseau 1990: 276).

17 See the example in Wirz (1929: 340).

18 See the illustration in Scheffold (1988: 114). During my first stay in 1967, I could no longer find examples of such figures, in contrast to shields which had been carefully preserved because of the hands of dead family members engraved on them as a memorial.

a thick wooden plank in relief. The plank was inserted in the rear wall of the first interior room of the *uma* with the face of the figure directed towards the entrance.¹⁹ The painted decorations and tattoos were those of the place of origin of the victim,²⁰ and sometimes the spot where he or she had been wounded by a spear or an arrow was marked. In a few instances, the feet and/or hands were lacking, as a sign that they had been cut off after the killing and brought home as trophies.

These figures were memorials and had no religious function. They did not receive sacrifices; on the contrary, the various *mulepa* ceremonies were designed to drive the souls of the slain enemies away from the house. Such an averting ceremony was repeated after the figures had been installed; people feared that otherwise the similarity of a figure to the victim might induce its soul to settle in the effigy, instead of following the head to the skull-tree in the forest. Nevertheless, from now on every visitor to the *uma* was confronted with this impressive proof of its inhabitants' courage and vigour.

In order to guarantee success in future head-hunting raids, the souls of prospective victims were summoned from the enemy region. This happened simultaneously with the making of the figures. Again, however, the souls were not invited to enter the *uma*, but were summoned to the landing place of the canoes on the riverbank. There, a hole was dug in the ground, and the souls of the enemies were invited to gather in it by offering them pieces of meat, ornaments, and certain magical plants. Thereupon a decorated pole several metres long, fashioned from the hard wood of the *lakopa* tree, was thrust into the pit, accompanied by triumphant yodeling and yelling, designed to nail down the souls, as it were. The pole remained upright on the riverbank for the time being as a memorial, and to guarantee future success in head-hunting. I shall come back to this ceremony later on.

19 There is a remarkable parallel here with the treatment of crocodiles. Crocodiles are associated with water spirits; they are only hunted when a member of the group has been eaten by them. And it is only then that the successful hunter is allowed to carve an effigy of the crocodile, which will be inserted in a wall of the *uma* (see also Bakels 2000: 310–314). I shall come back later to the association of the crocodile with the external domain in which the headhunters find their targets.

20 Consequently I had to be very careful in showing the figures. I was able to acquire to visitors from northern Siberut. Some of them, recognizing a tattoo pattern peculiar to their place of origin, even after more than two generations, still worked themselves up into a fury.

5 The Setting of Head-Hunting in Siberut Society

The ritual activities and the accompanying artistic productions reveal the major importance of head-hunting as an incentive to creative production on Siberut. The head-hunting equipment itself was made with special care and bore witness to the pride of its owners. The shields were beautifully shaped and carefully painted, the daggers with their hafts carved in spirals or bird heads feature among the most precious specimens of Mentawai art. The war canoes, of which not one has survived, are reported to have been beautifully decorated. What is more, people recount that the prospect of a triumphant headhunt was the incentive for effecting various beautiful details at the *uma* itself, including decorative woodcarvings which embellished such architectural components as posts and beams and a curved elaboration of the ridge of the roof which ended in long protruding decorations of the ridge-pole, called *pailok*.

In strange contrast to these manifestations of pride²¹ stands the fear of the products of the head-hunt itself, the trophies. As I mentioned, after the ecstatic first ritual days back home, these were removed to the forest. Unlike so many other well-known Southeast Asian examples, the physical remnants were not treated as symbols of power to be conserved, respectfully treated, and carefully stored or buried in one of the houses of a community. Rather, they were regarded as an embodiment of danger and had to be avoided on all occasions, except before embarking on a new head-hunting expedition when they were asked to summon the souls of their former companions back home in order to guarantee new victims. Tying in with this fear, old people claim that head-hunting had in fact always been a rather rare phenomenon which took place no more than four or five times during a person's lifetime. Of course, such estimates are difficult to check, but they correspond appositely with the easiness with which head-hunting was abandoned after the colonial occupation, as I already mentioned in Section 3.

In the first years after this abandonment, an interesting transitional substitute for head-hunting emerged. This was implemented after each occurrence of what we have already met as the main incentive for going head-hunting in Mentawai: the completion of a new *uma*. The men of the group, instead of arming themselves as in earlier times,

21 For the religious dimension of these manifestations see Schefold (2002: 321–327).

went out to the territory of their former enemies in festive attire and asked for ritual hospitality. Since the memory of old tensions was, of course, still fresh, such an undertaking was not without risk, but, in general, as old informants remembered, they were treated well and could enjoy the new companionship. Eventually plans were even made for a peace festival (*abad*) which would create a fraternal bond between the groups involved. After several days of such socializing, the guests would take their leave and return. Back home, a festival similar to the concluding *mulepa* ceremonies after a headhunt described in Section 4 followed, but of course shorn of its aggressive components. And again, the members of the community received the special tattoos on their arms and legs.²²

These ritual sorties after the building of a community house have since long been abandoned and replaced by a ceremonial conclusion which in fact did not differ from the way all major religious festivals on Siberut are terminated. These festivals, called *pulaijat*, are generally the concern of individual *uma* and are meant to strengthen the group after any major occurrence or undertaking. It is the concluding phase of the ritual which is important in relation to head-hunting, as we shall see. Then, the whole group moves out of the *uma* into the forest for a few days where they improvise a hunting camp. The game animals killed, mostly monkeys, are offered to the spirits in the forest, but they are not consumed there. Instead, they are brought home where they are eaten communally. These concluding ritual meals are necessary if the *pulaijat* is to be successful. They benefit the *uma* community as a whole (for a detailed analysis see Schefold 1988).

Is there a symbolic relationship between these three ways of ritual conclusion: the head-hunting raids; the friendly journeys to other groups on the island; and the hunting of game animals? After all, these enterprises share one basic aspect: they are all directed towards regions beyond the own

cultivated domain of the participants. I argue that this fact will bring us closer to an understanding of the phenomenon of head-hunting itself. It is closely connected with the beliefs in the sources of beneficial blessings people on Siberut appeal to in their ritual activities in general.

I have argued elsewhere that three such sources of ritual blessings can be discerned (see Figure; from Schefold 2001: 371). The first one is composed of a group's own genealogical ancestors. During the major religious festivals in the *uma*, as mentioned above, the forebears are constantly invoked and offered sacrifices. On the principal day, they are solemnly invited into the house where they are asked to protect their descendants. A second source of blessings is represented by the autochthonous powers of the wilderness surrounding the human domain. Among these powers, the spirits of the forest (*saikaleleu*) have a special link with the mythical spirits of the first settlers in a region who hold the land rights. It is to the whole autochthonous category of spirits that the offerings in the hunting camp are addressed as a tribute for their favours. These favours, tangibly seen in the bagged game, are a necessary complement to the genealogical ancestor's protection. A third kind of blessings, finally, is provided by the wife-givers who, together with the bride, bestow spiritual well-being and life on their wife-takers.

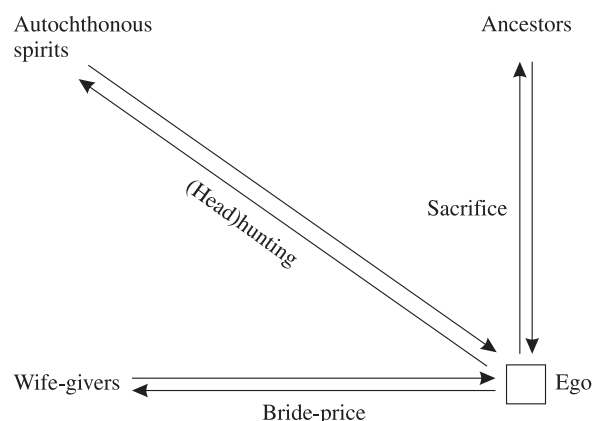


Fig.: Sources of ritual blessings.

The first two sources clearly mark the two component parts of the *pulaijat* rituals: the first part based in the *uma* and the second part with the monkey hunt focusing on the surrounding wilderness. The third source, that of the allied social world, appears less prominent in a *pulaijat* although it is alluded to as well; it plays a central role during rituals dealing with social alliances. I argue that

22 Today these tattoos are still occasionally created but without the earlier association with the consecration of an *uma*. The entire transformation reveals a shift in emphasis from the religious motivations of head-hunting towards an aspect that has been prominent in interpretations of the practice within the Leiden structural anthropological tradition, and which stressed the element of social competition between two parties; see also note 27. – On the southern islands of the Mentawai Archipelago, Sipora and Pagai, as mentioned in note 9, head-hunting had been abandoned as long as could be remembered. However, on Sipora people told me that in former times they went, in especially large boats (*kalabba*), to northern Siberut after completing a new *uma*, fraternized with the people there and, after returning home, tattooed themselves on arms and legs during a ritual.

the three sources of ritual blessings are a common feature in the cultural heritage of many traditional Indonesian societies.

What is important here, however, is what the hunting territory in the forest means to the people. There is little direct information to be had on this, since people on Siberut regard spirits other than their own ancestors as too dangerous to speak about freely. More revealing in this connection are ritual and mythical texts. One myth is especially telling. It relates the story 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 to be deer were in fact their pigs and that the monkeys were their chickens. They allow him to shoot one of the stags and after protracted negotiations about what they should be given as their rightful share, they instruct the man from now on to sacrifice the left ear of each animal killed to them. This apparently small piece, and one that comes from the left, that is the inferior, side, is, they say, the proper “half” for them. For in the world of the spirits, everything is inverted.

This tale is illuminating in several respects. In the first instance it explains that what in the eyes of men is wilderness, is actually the cultural world of spirits, an autochthonous “culture of the beyond.” It shows that the spirits accept humans in their domain and grant them their favours, provided that they make them the appropriate offerings. These offerings, moreover, should consist of elements of the spirits’ own property – the left ear – which man, however, has made available.²³ There are some obvious parallels between these ideas and the components of head-hunting, but they also beg as many questions. In order to answer them, we shall have to place our material in a more comparative perspective.

23 The accent on the act of killing to obtain the supernatural blessings, which emerges from these examples, is even more prominent in Eastern Indonesia, as de Jonge and van Dijk (1995: 41, 66f., and 108–123) have convincingly demonstrated: The creation of new life is dependent upon the killing of existing life; heads as well as hunting trophies – again the parallelism (R. S.), – brought into the village community, are regarded as sources of new life. The association of gold as part of the bride-price that has to be “killed” by being transformed into ornaments, with “hot” hunting and head-hunting trophies underlines the analogous position of the third, matrimonial source of blessings as illustrated in our diagram.

6 Siberut Head-Hunting in Comparative Perspective

Both in head-hunting and in hunting, the participants in a ritual move out to another territory, a hostile one in the first case and the surrounding forest in the second. There are indications that these two domains are linked. On Siberut, as we have seen, the first settlers in a region are considered to have a special relationship with the autochthonous spirits, and it is indeed in the hunting camp both these categories are appealed to. One of the terms of address for them is cogent in this respect: *Tasirimone*, perhaps best translated as “primordial planters.” This characterization of the wilderness as an autochthonous domain relates it to the special position of the region which according to tradition has been the target area for head-hunting raids for the whole remaining population of Siberut; this is the valley of Simatalu in the northwestern part of the island where according to mythological tradition the first human being lived.

This association of a target area for head-hunting with wilderness is indeed a pervasive idea in western Indonesia.²⁴ To take just a few examples: Among the Sa’dan Toraja, the group of headhunters was called “those who first enter the woods” (Nooy-Palm 1986: 313). On Nias the potential victims of head-hunting were considered to be part of a faraway world which was conceptualized in symbolically inverted terms in comparison with the domain of human relations. The victims were depicted as deficient in true human nature, and were even associated with such appropriate reversals as walking upside down (Scarduelli 1990: 458f.). Similarly, among certain Dayak groups, the people in the regions in which heads were hunted were characterized as being descendants of animals (Schärer 1946: 72). The inhabitants of these places are similar to the spirits residing in other strange and wild places.²⁵ The other way round, “many small-scale ... societies ... have images of headhunters as forms of spirit beings” (Hoskins 1996: 7); they are in reality “demons in a new guise” (Geddes 1957: 17).²⁶

24 The association also implies that the reduction of the opposition between the two hostile poles to a ritual combat between two phratries in a reciprocal relationship, as advocated by Downs (1977), is not convincing as a general explanation; rather, this assumption seems to me to reflect preconceived ideas that have their origin in the early theories of the structuralist Leiden “Field of Study” school in anthropology.

25 Cf. McKinley (1976: 108) who also stresses that “... the head of ... an internal enemy should never be taken after the killing.”

What about the second assumption implied in the parallelism between head-hunting and the ritual hunting and offering of game in the forest? Can head-hunting indeed be regarded as a variant of an offering? Offering would mean that it is not a magical property of the trophy itself, but a certain spiritual agent which is responsible for the beneficial consequences expected from the act of head-hunting. Siberut seems to confirm this at least in so far as there is no indication of any beneficial influences to be expected directly from the trophy. On the contrary, what is dominant is the fear of its revenge. However, people on Siberut have no direct oral tradition concerning this matter.

Some neighbouring groups are more illuminating in this respect. One indirect support for interpreting head-hunting as a sacrificial act is the well-known fact that in many western Indonesian societies the offering of a slave could serve as an alternative to a head-hunting expedition.²⁷ In Nias the same word, *binu*, is used for a victim of head-hunting or a human sacrifice (see Beatty 1992: 286). Just as head-hunting, a human sacrifice was deemed to have beneficial consequences for the whole community, the reason why sometimes the whole population in turn participated in slowly killing the victim by a series of stabs (see Stöhr 1965: 200). Significant in our context is the fact that such slaves always had to be of foreign origin and were associated with the outside.²⁸

What seems more problematic than the sacrificial character of head-hunting, however, is the na-

ture of the supernatural powers which are appealed to by means of the capturing of heads. What is known in most cases is only that upon returning, the genealogical ancestors of the community were appealed to. This is not very revealing, however, as it is what occurs after every major undertaking. In the Siberut *uma*, for instance, after returning from a ritual hunt, the ancestors are offered pieces of the meat from the forest, although the myth we quoted reveals that it is the forest spirits who are central to the hunting process, and although to this day the offering of the left ear of the animals killed marks the end of the hunting camp. As to head-hunting, more specifically, on the neighbouring island of Nias the heads destined for the chief's house were first presented to the ancestors, before they were offered to divinities of the extrahuman domains (Scarduelli 1986: 64, 140). In another report on Nias (Fries 1908: 80), an offering in connection with head-hunting is mentioned – it is not said to which agency the offering is dedicated – which recalls the Mentawai pattern of the ear sacrifice to the forest spirits: In addition to the heads of slain enemies, the Nias warriors sometimes brought people they had captured home alive to use or sell as slaves. A part of the ear of these captives was cut and offered to the spirits.²⁹

Such cases seem to indicate that the ritual motive for head-hunting is indeed to obtain the favours of some outward autochthonous forces. An account from Borneo points in the same direction. According to Rousseau (1998: 207f.), the annual head-hunting ritual of the Kayan was intended to obtain the blessings of the spirits of jungle and river, and even more specifically, the spirits of faraway places where people had been killed. Buijs (2004) presents a similar explanation for the Mamasa Toraja.

7 The House and Its Stand

However, such reports are scarce. If we are to obtain more concrete information, we must turn to the one dominant motive for embarking on a headhunt, which Siberut shares with most other regions of Southeast Asia: The construction of a new community house. A Siberut myth recounts how this construction came about. It is attributed to the teachings of an ill-treated orphan boy who had obtained his knowledge from a crocodile spirit who took pity

26 The equation of head-hunting with “journeys to and from other worlds”, or “theoretically non-human spheres” has been stressed by McKinley (1976: 99, 102, 108) who is certainly right in pointing out the parallelism to a shaman’s journey “into the beyond”; see also Schefold (1992: 111).

27 Since the quality of serving as a slave is frequently supposed to continue after death, the occasional explanation that it is this quality which one hopes to reach by the killing does not make much sense. – Another argument supporting a sacrificial interpretation has been put forward by Wirz (1950) and Schuster (1956: 52). Both show that among many Southeast Asian peoples there is only a gradual and not an essential difference between the treatment of human trophies and the treatment of the trophies of certain wild animals. It goes without saying that the latter are hardly suited to being spirit servants. In a recent catalogue of the collection François Coppens there is a decorated example of such a trophy stemming from an orang utan (*Anonymous* 1999: 70); according to Antonio Guerreiro (pers. comm.) these trophies could replace human trophies and were ritually treated in similar ways. – Stöhr (1965: 194) stresses that a human sacrifice presupposes slavery and, therefore, represents a later development in human history than head-hunting. Heine-Geldern (1917) argues for an analogous development on the South-east Asian mainland.

28 See, for instance, Kruyt (1906: 298), Elshout (1926: 232), Rousseau (1998: 84f.).

29 The mutilation of the ears of slaves among the Niasans is already mentioned in Radermacher (1781: 46). Schröder (1917/I: 298) specifies that this sacrifice concerns the left ear.

on him. The crocodile helped him to collect the necessary material and instructed him in the ceremonies which were to strengthen both the building in progress and the people, including the culminating ritual headhunt. The boy started to build the first *uma* with his envious relatives. When he was about to dig out the pit for the main post, they threw the pile down on him with all their strength and killed him. He now lives on as a spirit under the earth where he causes earthquakes and, joining the other spirits residing there (*tai si ka бага*), takes care of the tree fruit season. To this day sacrifices are made to him during every major ritual of an *uma*.

The image of this earthquake spirit draws together several elements we have encountered so far. The orphan boy belongs to the primordial autochthonous population whose association with the wilderness is underlined by the boy's connection with the crocodile. In another myth, this association is made even more explicit.³⁰ This tale transfers elements of the story of the deer hunter among the forest spirits mentioned in Section 5 into the realm of the earthquake spirit and his companions. It tells about two brothers who go out to sea to shoot fish with arrows but lose all their precious harpoon heads. They dive into the water to look for them and discover them in the house of the spirits of "the interior" (*ka бага*). They learn that the fish are the "chickens" of these spirits. Analogous to the deer provided by the forest spirits, the divers are given seeds of a durian fruit which the inhabitants of the underworld are eating, and they receive instructions on the taboos to be observed during durian planting and on the sacrifices to be offered to the spirits during the harvest. These instructions are followed to this day; moreover, on the occasion of the sacrifices made to the earthquake spirit during community rituals he is explicitly asked to provide a good tree fruit season.

One more indication of the close association of the earthquake spirit with the autochthonous spirits of the forest appears in the thanksgiving songs raised when carrying a killed deer home (*muai*le). Among the spirits invoked, the name Korojiji is mentioned which is one of the mythical designations for the earthquake spirit.

One specific trait distinguishing the earthquake spirit from the general category of autochthonous spirits is his mythical assassination. In a more fundamental sense, however, this motif recalls a theme which is once again a variation of a more common pattern in Mentawai mythology. The motif entails

the separation of the earthquake spirit and his companions from the forebears of today's human population. This is reminiscent of another story which tells of a primordial unity of forest spirits and humans before a "historical" ritual event led to their definitive separation (see Schefold 2001: 364). The assassination with the house pole itself, on the other hand, recalls the sacrifice of a human head at the base of a communal building, so well-known from all over Southeast Asia.

On the grounds of this last motif, the hero of the story, the orphan boy, could be regarded as impersonating both the sacrifice and the supernatural recipient of it. Complicating this conclusion is the fact that all my informants denied that there has ever been a tradition of burying a head-hunting trophy under an *uma* – something which seems to be implied so obviously by the myth.³¹ And it was never explicitly said that the head-hunting trophy had to do with the earthquake spirit in particular. I shall return to a possible reason for this discrepancy later. The sacrificial tradition is reported, however, from the direct northern neighbours of the Mentawaians, the Niasans, and, significantly, it is again dedicated to the divinity of the underworld domains (cf. Scarduelli 1986: 64).³² In Mentawai, the episode with the planting of the *lakopa*-pole and the triumphant "nailing down" of the souls of future victims in the pit on the riverbank during the *mulepa* ritual after returning from a headhunt clearly show how close the relevant ideas are even here. We can find still an echo of this today. At the inauguration of a new *uma*, a hole is dug in the ground on the right side of the building in which various offerings are put, accompanied by the seedlings of certain plants with beneficial magical properties. These seedlings will later grow and develop into shrubs, evoking a blooming life for the

31 The statement by Loeb (1972: 172) that on the occasion of the building of a new *uma* a head was formally placed under the centre post is contrary to all information I could gather on the subject and seems to me to refer instead to the personal ideas of Loeb's foremost informant, the missionary F. Börger. The only explicit contact of the trophy with the earth is an indirect one and results from the strict requirement that the *sirigugu* poles, mentioned in Section 4, had to be set firmly into the earth.

32 In an even more direct analogy to the earthquake myth, in Borneo a live war captive or a slave bought from another group is reported to have sometimes been thrown into a pit and crushed by the main post of the house (Rousseau 1990: 275 quoting Burns; see also the Introduction above). Again, the crushing of a human slave at the base of the main pole of a Naga men's house in Assam described by von Fürer-Haimendorf (1939: 160) reads like a *mise en scène* of the Mentawai myth and underlines the vast Southeast Asian distribution of the pertinent ideas referred to in note 1.

30 A comparative interpretation of this myth is given in Schefold (1995b).

new *uma*. A decorated pole (*kinumbu*) is set in the hole and the autochthonous spirits, the true owners of the spot, receive sacrifices and are invoked to give their permission and their blessing to settle on their land. Explicitly named in this “appeasing”³³ context is again the earthquake spirit.

There is yet another report from Mentawai, this time not from Siberut but from Pagai in the south of the Archipelago, suggesting a link between *uma* construction, head-hunting sacrifice, and the earthquake spirit. It is presented by Loeb (1929: 210; 1972: 168, 192) and refers to tattooing. Loeb starts by mentioning special tattoo designs, corresponding to those applied on Siberut upon returning from a headhunt, after blood has been spilled in the village or someone has been eaten by a crocodile. The purpose of blood flowing from the tattooing was to cover the blood of the dead man. Another occasion for spilling blood on the ground on Pagai was during the ceremony with the *kinumbu* pole when the pertinent sacrifices were explicitly designated as an offering to the earthquake spirit. Some men danced next to the *kinumbu* and the spirit was said to ascend to the surface via the pole to witness the dancing.

The most important implication of all these, partly comparative, findings seems to me that as regards the one pervasive motive for head-hunting, the building of a new community house, both the sacrificial character of the killing and the association of the supernatural receivers with autochthony is confirmed in various ways. The beneficial results which are expected from the consecration ceremonies clearly have the wilderness as one of their sources, and at the inauguration, the blessings from the autochthonous spirits are even pertinently specified, including their permission to build on their ground. In this context it is interesting to note that, before the commencement of the clearing for a new *uma*, at the spot where the house is to be built, the autochthonous forest spirits residing there are summoned, informed about the project and, by means of an offering called a “payment” (*saki*), are requested to retreat a little. It is the same procedure which people also follow when cutting a piece of woodland for a new garden.

In all these practices it is possible to see a certain shift in focus on which category of the autochthonous powers is at stake at a certain moment. At the beginning of the building activities, the accent is laid on the forest spirits; after com-

pletion, the accent lies on the earthquake spirit and his companions. The head-hunting trophy unites the two poles: it stems from the domains of the wilderness but ends up within the reach of the nearest representative of the autochthonous forces, the earthquake spirit. The Siberut people were not explicit about these relationships. But perhaps we now understand more clearly why the heads had to be brought to the *uma* after the sacrificial homicide. They were a heavy burden during the flight back home, and in contrast to game animals, they could not be consumed. What they had in common with the hunted game was their quality as tangible proof of the favours of the autochthonous spirits, a proof which in some other Southeast Asian societies is put to concrete uses as well, albeit not culinary, but the instrumental magical applications mentioned in Section 2.

8 Conclusion

Our interpretation of the meaning of head-hunting in Mentawai has shown that there is no need to accept Needham’s alternate causal logics. An assumption of a magical use of the skulls, albeit by means of a “soul-stuff”-like agent, or, in my opinion more to the point, in its being regarded as one of the “mediators” so common in traditional Indonesian ritual, seems indeed to be of no general explanatory value. However, the “telic,” aim-oriented aspects of traditional Indonesian ritual also include other practices such as purposeful offerings. And this is exactly where Needham’s missing “agents between cause and effect” are to be found. It is indeed the favourable disposition of the autochthonous spirits which is at the origin of the blessings of a head-hunting raid.

Some analogies I mentioned in passing indicate that it could be worthwhile to consider a related set of ideas for other parts of Indonesia. Perhaps this would bring us closer to the outlines of the model of a “head-hunting complex” which were missed by Janet Hoskins. Looking at the neighbouring island of Nias, the similarities are quite evident. Here, too, we find an association of the head-hunting regions with wilderness and a dedication of the trophies to agencies separate from the ancestral domain – in the most typical case to a divinity of the underworld in direct analogy to the Mentawai earthquake spirit. And I would like to quote one last example from the Bare’e Toraja in central Sulawesi which also draws together the different elements. In reading Adriani and Kruiy (1950–51/I–III), our characterization of the autochthonous spirits applies best to their

33 Cf. Wessing and Jordaen (1997: 105) who arrive at a similar conclusion to the one presented here in applying this terminology of appeasement regarding Southeast Asia.

description of the “spirits of the earth” (*toempu ntana*). To these spirits offerings were given in the forest after a successful hunt, including that of an ear – Kruyt does not mention which one (III: 363). The same spirits had to be asked for their permission when making a new clearing (II: 62) or when starting to build a new house (I: 168). Moreover, the construction required a sacrifice to them in the hole for the first post to be erected (I: 172). For community houses, in former times a human skull was buried under the pole, and some time after a new head-hunting raid was arranged (I: 189f.).

Does this mean that the interconnection of head-hunting and ideas about community house building on autochthonous grounds represents more than just an incidental local elaboration? This would mean that instances, where other agents, notably the genealogical ancestors, are appealed to in head-hunting, are more of a supplementary character.³⁴ More comparative Southeast Asian material would be needed to approach this question. So far, however, the pervasive distribution of the motifs referring to autochthony down to many details seems indeed to support such a conclusion. It is this option which secures head-hunting a specific position in the streams of blessings tapped by Indonesian rituals. And it might be assumed that the autochthonous favours were also appealed to when going on a head-hunting expedition for reasons other than the consecration of a house.

Why did people on Siberut yield so easily to the pressure of the colonial government to abandon head-hunting? Head-hunting meant access to the blessings of the autochthonous spirits which, compared to normal hunting, represented an expansion in space and a dramatic intensification. It offered a possibility for accruing personal honour and provided an incentive for extraordinary artistic prestations. It was not, however, unique in a sense that religious life would have lost its meaning were it to be abandoned. And there is another side to it. I already mentioned the low population density on the island: Siberut has a very unhealthy climate and a high mortality rate. The soil in the valleys is fertile; the continued existence of the producers rather than production is the main problem on Siberut. In order to reduce dangerous tensions, harmonious relation-

ships are stressed everywhere at all times. This is true not only in social life but also in the relationship with the environment, in which violent human disturbances are regarded as sources of diseases. It is not surprising that the idea so often encountered in Southeast Asia that head-hunting would help to increase the fertility of the crops was met with utter amazement by my Mentawai informants.

In this sense, institutional aggression such as is implied in head-hunting contradicts the general local tendency. The traditional religious embeddings of the practice and the obligation to retaliate prevented people from dropping head-hunting altogether.³⁵ But, in contrast to most other traditional Southeast Asian societies the trophies were not stored at home, let alone buried in the foundations of a building, but disposed of far away in the jungle. And once external governmental pressure was imposed on the Mentawaians, they welcomed the occasion to concentrate on the ritual alternatives available.

This article was initiated by the participation in a workshop on head-hunting by Antonio Guerreiro and Christian Coiffier at the EHESS in Paris in 1998. I continued to work on the topic during my stay as a visiting fellow at the RSPAS of ANU in 1999. I wish to thank the organizers of the workshop and Jim Fox, then Director of the RSPAS, as well as several staff members for their support and much helpful advice. Thanks are also due to Director Wim Stokhof of the IIAS in Leiden for financial support for the stay at ANU. I am grateful to Jet Bakels, Douglas Lewis, Michael Vischer, and Robert Wessing for their thoughtful comments on various drafts of the paper.

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³⁴ As regards our last case, for instance, Adriani and Kruyt (1950–51/II: 73; I: 246) stress that ancestral spirits are the explicit agents in demanding and receiving human heads. Even this statement remains ambivalent, however, since these spirits, the *anitu*, are specifically the spirits of the first occupants of the region, the village founders.

³⁵ The southern islands of the Mentawai Archipelago, Sipora and North and South Pagai, went one step further in this direction. Their population immigrated from southern Siberut several centuries ago (Schefold 1988: 96f.). People there told me that after the building of an *uma* in the first generations they still went to the ancient enemy territory in northern Siberut to take a head but afterwards were contented with merely killing. (This indirectly confirms again that it was the killing as a sacrificial act as such and not the head as carrier of life force or soul which mattered.) The last fact is confirmed by Crisp (1799: 85), Loeb (1929: 233), and Kruyt (1923: 118); the latter adds that because of the long distance to be bridged, the custom was slowly dying out even before the arrival of Dutch administration.

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