

Animals, Witches, and Wind

Eastern Indonesian Variations on the "Thunder Complex"

Gregory Forth

Abstract. – Contrary to Needham (1967), ideas and practices included in what has latterly been called the "thunder complex" (Blust 1981) have a wide and fairly continuous distribution in Southeast Asia. Central to the complex is the notion that certain prohibited acts, more particularly ones involving improper treatment of animals, will result in a storm and hence be punished by flood or lightning strikes and, in some cases, by petrification. This paper examines instances of the complex in eastern Indonesia, focusing especially on its expression among the Nagé of central Flores. The objective is to consider what this evidence contributes to an understanding of the complex in general and, in respect of its occurrence among speakers of both Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages, what its present distribution and internal variations indicate regarding its origin and development. [*Indonesia, Flores, Nagé, thunder complex, prohibitions on mistreating animals, relations between Austronesian and non-Austronesian societies*]

Gregory L. Forth, D. phil. in Social Anthropology (Oxford, 1981); 1982 Visiting Assistant Prof., Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser Univ.; since 1986 Assistant Prof., Dept. of Anthropology, Univ. of Alberta, Canada. – Fieldwork 1975/76 and 1983 in eastern Sumba, Indonesia; 1983, 1984, and 1985 in Flores, Indonesia. – Publications include: Rindi: An Ethnographic Study of a Traditional Domain in Eastern Sumba (The Hague 1981); The Language of Number and Numerical Ability in Eastern Sumba (Hull 1985); Register of U.K. Anthropologists Specializing in South-East Asia (Bangkok 1985); Articles in *Man*; *Sociologus*; *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*; *Ethnos* and other Journals.

A long standing problem in social anthropology is the appearance of identical or very similar ideas in societies that differ markedly in terms of general culture, language, economy, and social organization. An example of this is what has lately come to be called the "thunder complex" (Blust 1981: 294), a configuration of symbols found in many parts of island Southeast Asia and in the Malay Peninsula among populations that display a high degree of socio-cultural diversity. In broad outline, the complex revolves around the idea that certain offenses – most notably behaviours considered offensive to animals, or particular kinds of animals, and especially acts that entail a mockery of animals (dressing them in clothes, for example) – will result in a storm, so that the offenders will be

punished by a flood, a lightning strike, or some similar catastrophe. Also common is the idea that offenders will be turned to stone or will suffer some other kind of punitive transformation.

Recent interest in the thunder complex stems largely from Rodney Needham's brief and rather inconclusive, though nonetheless well-known and oft-cited, article entitled "Blood, Thunder, and Mockery of Animals" (1967). In this paper, Needham drew attention to the occurrence of almost identical forms of the complex among the Semang, or Negritos, of Malaya and the Penan of Borneo. Referring to the geographical distance between the two peoples and to the fact that the Penan speak an Austronesian language while Malayan Negrito languages belong to the Aslian group of Austro-Asiatic, Needham argued that the similarity of their customs presented anthropologists with a serious difficulty, for it pointed to a natural symbolism that existed independently of any particular cultural tradition.

A crucial part of Needham's argument here was his claim that the symbolic elements encountered in Semang and Penan ritual practice and ideology – and particularly the offering of human blood as an act of expiation or propitiation – are not found among Malays or other ethnic groups in the Malay Peninsula, and that this combination of elements does not occur elsewhere either. In this connection, however, the evidence shows Needham to have been very much mistaken. Thus, as Robert Blust (1981) has recently shown, elements of the thunder complex, including the blood offering, not only occur among all indigenous groups in Peninsular Malaysia, including both the dominant Malays (see Evans 1923, 1937) and the Senoi (or "Sakai"), but they are also "ubiquitous in Borneo and have a relatively dense distribution in the Philippines," in the latter case occurring among both Negrito and non-Negrito populations (Blust 1981: 298).¹ With considerable justification, therefore,

¹ Both "Senoi" and the rather more pejorative "Sakai" have long been used as general terms for the various groups of