

From Symmetry to Asymmetry

An Evolutionary Interpretation of Eastern Sumbanese Relationship Terminology

Gregory Forth

Abstract. – This paper concerns a hypothetical change from symmetric to asymmetric principles of classification in systems of prescriptive alliance in the Austronesian-speaking world. As a test of this hypothesis, features of the terminology of eastern Sumba, and especially usages found in the first ascending level, are analysed, and component terms are compared with cognates in related eastern Indonesian languages. As well, attention is given to the question of how changes in the meanings of particular terms may have come about. A focal issue is the equating of spouses and of opposite-sex siblings in the first ascending and other levels of the terminology, and in this as in other regards it is argued that the present pattern of relationship terms in Sumba, as compared to what is found in closely related languages, is best explained by the hypothesis of a former classification of symmetric prescriptive alliance as a general property of alliance systems in this part of eastern Indonesia. The paper also bears upon the issue of terms that may have equated affines and cognatic relatives in various proto-terminologies, particularly in view of the fact that at present spouse's parents are mostly designated with distinctly affinal terms throughout Sumba. [*Indonesia, eastern Sumba, relationship terminology, symmetric and asymmetric principles of classification, prescriptive alliance systems, Austronesian languages*]

Gregory L. Forth, D.Phil. in Social Anthropology (Oxford 1980); since 1986 Dept. of Anthropology, Univ. of Alberta, Canada; since 1989 Associate Prof.; fieldwork in Indonesia (1975-76 and 1983 in eastern Sumba; 1983, 1984, 1985, 1988 in Flores). – 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); articles in *Anthropos*, *Ethnos*, *Man*, *Sociologus*, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, and other journals and collections (e.g., in A.R. Walker [ed.]: Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography, vol. 7, 1988; and in J. J. Fox [ed.]: To Speak in Pairs, 1988).

Over twenty years ago, Rodney Needham proposed a "typological scale of social evolution" which had as its initial stage a system of exogamous moieties with symmetric alliance. The succeeding stages were, consecutively, "a simple two-section system (without the exogamous moieties); symmetric prescriptive terminology plus asymmetric alliance; prescriptive asymmetric alliance; and finally the divergent possibilities of double descent (without prescriptive alliance) or cognation" (1967: 45 f.). Since then, Needham has developed aspects of this hypothesis in a series of papers

(see, e.g., 1973, 1980, 1984, 1986) that have dealt mostly with the simultaneous appearance of symmetric and asymmetric features in eastern Indonesian systems of social classification, systems which, moreover, in most cases combine symmetric features of terminology with the practice of asymmetric alliance. With specific regard to classification, therefore, Needham's scheme implies a regular development in prescriptive terminologies from symmetry to asymmetry, and, indeed, he has on more than one occasion argued against the possibility of a symmetric terminology developing from an asymmetric one (see, e.g., 1980: 70).

Despite recent interest in the evolution of Austronesian kinship systems (see Blust 1980), however, thus far little attention has been given to specific processes of classificatory change that may be involved in the kinds of transformation to which Needham's hypothesis refers. More particularly, his evolutionary interpretation has yet to be reviewed in the light of lexical data from any single group of related languages and dialects displaying terminological variation of the sort relevant to the hypothesis, in order to assess how far it can illuminate this variation. In other words, the hypothesis, as it concerns relationship terminology, has yet to be tested against the evidence of language in any particular instance.

This essay is written with the conviction that such a test is possible. The general question I pose is whether the hypothetical assumption that a development from symmetric to asymmetric terminology has taken place in a given language, or language region, can account for similarities and differences among cognate relationship terms as between this language and closely related languages. In other words, I ask whether the semantic variations accord with such a change, as well as how changes in the application of particular terms might have come about. The language I take as my focus is that of eastern Sumba, in eastern Indonesia, and comparative data are derived from languages spoken in western Sumba and on neigh-