

Stealing Women and Living in Sin

Adaptation and Conflict in Morals and Customary Law in Rembong, Northeastern Manggarai

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Abstract. – The Rembong, as well as other Manggarai peoples in western Flores, have been under the influence of the Catholic Church for several decades. Native tradition and the Church have conflicted on various issues, particularly in the realm of marriage and morality. This paper describes the traditional ideology and rituals involved in the creation of a marriage, and explores the problems that have been encountered with the meeting of two different understandings of marriage and sin. Both conceptual systems have adjusted; the Manggarai slowly accept (but with modifications) Catholic morality, while offenses to the Church are resolved by traditional means. [Indonesia, Flores, Rembong/Manggarai, marriage, change in morality, influence of Catholic Church]

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1. Introduction

Since time immemorial the Rembong people of Flores in Eastern Indonesia have upheld the morals and customary laws of their ancestors. As many other peoples in Indonesia, the Rembong call this body of laws, customs, and moral regulations *adat* (or *adak*). And as for other peoples in Indonesia, *adat* was not originally distinct from what we would call religion.¹ Two of the most important guardians of their *adat* are the ritual land leaders (in Indonesian literature *tuan tanah*, “the lord of the land,” and *dor tana* in Rembong) and the sacred objects that the ritual land leaders of each village possess (in Rembong *doke*). These objects are said to be inherited from the time of the most ancient ancestors and will guard the villagers and their fields, as long as the rules of the ancestors are followed faithfully. The villagers are counselled by the *dor tana* on these ancestral regulations three times a year at major agricultural rituals. These ancient rules contain the moral code by which the Rembong people must live in respect to other people and the spiritual world: do not spread tales,

do not poison either people or their gardens, do not bother other men's wives, do not engage in improper sexual relationships, carry out all the traditional rituals, pay homage to ritual leaders, and honor the proper relationships with all of one's relatives. One must also behave respectfully towards plants and animals.² If one follows the ways of the ancestors then it is not necessary to build fences around the fields, the *doke* will keep all garden predators out. But if one does not respect these regulations, rats, mice, wild pigs, or other garden predators, flood or drought will ruin the crops and offenders will be punished with sickness or death. In order to stay these consequences the usual punishment is a fine. When a person has been wronged compensation must be given to the affronted party. But since all transgressions are also viewed as disrupting the order of the ancestors, another type of “fine,” that is a sacrifice to the ancestors, must be given to erase the potential danger to the whole community. These fines depend upon the gravity of the crime. For small offenses, chickens or a bottle of palm wine are enough to ask forgiveness of the elders and the ancestors. In more serious cases, larger animals, like pigs and goats, would be offered, and in the most serious of crimes, a buffalo would have to be sacrificed, in an attempt to hinder almost certain death to the perpetrators.

1 It is frequently argued that religion is not a separate sphere of life among traditional non-literate peoples. Recent work on religion in Indonesia points out clearly the new problems of definition, particularly in reference to the current policy that forces a separation of *adat* and other realms of social life, from *agama* (Indonesian: “religion”) (Weinstock 1987: 71–76, Hoskins 1987: 138 f.).

2 See also Verheijen (1951: 72–92) for similar ideas of sin in other areas of Manggarai. As is common throughout Indonesia, the plants are considered very vulnerable during the harvest. Hence loud, unseemly behavior could be dangerous to the souls of the plants. There is also a prohibition on using certain words, thought to chase away the souls of the plants. As in other areas of Southeast Asia, there is a prohibition on laughing at animals (Needham 1964, Blust 1981, Forth 1989).