

a *prescriptive* system, and are not systematically integrated with the marriage prohibitions" (Needham 1973: 170; original emphasis). In any case, rules, categories, and behaviour are independently variable and "what can vary independently must be analysed independently" (1973: 174). The implications of these authoritative conclusions for the Nias case will be apparent as my argument proceeds.

3. Alliance in Central Nias

In a previous article I have described the alliance system of the Susua valley region of central Nias (Beatty 1990), and a brief recapitulation is necessary here. The system depends on two features: the recognition of a line of maternal affiliation and the prohibition of marriage to a woman whose line of maternal affiliation connects up with the groom's patrilineal descent group. In outline, the system works as follows. Every individual traces descent patrilineally and, in addition to clan and lineage identity, he or she recognizes ties to the agnates of mother, mother's mother, MMM, and so on. These complementary ties define a series of patrilineal groups linked through the transfer of women (who form the line of maternal affiliation). There is no categorical prescription to repeat a marriage; neither is there a jural obligation or preference to marry a woman from a wife-giving group. The alliance remains valid whether or not it is renewed by cross-cousin marriage. The asymmetry of the alliance structure is maintained not by renewal but by a strict prohibition on the return of a woman to a wife-giving group. The alliance units are of variable extension, which means that a *de facto* bilateral exchange between clans or lineages may be allowed to occur so long as the asymmetry of actual alliance groups is not impaired. A further complication derives from the fact that each alliance series is conceived egocentrically (brothers may marry into different alliance chains), so there is no overall pattern ordering the relation between descent groups. The system thus opposes groups of wife-givers to individual wife-takers, who pass this relation on to their sons but no further.

The ideology of asymmetric alliance in Nias is grounded in notions of personal origin and the sources of life and prosperity of an individual. Wife-givers, as the source of life of their wife-takers, are analogous to God and are in fact referred to in central Nias by a divine epithet, "they who own us." Wife-takers owe them lifelong tribute epitomized in bridewealth and the gifts given at feasts of merit. In turn, they are a source of wealth

to their wife-givers. The strict asymmetry of affinal relations is reflected in the exchange of unequal, complementary prestations: bride for bridewealth, protection for loyalty and service, blessing for tribute, health for donations of cash and pigs. Wife-givers can be ruthless in pressing for contributions, and they will threaten to impose a curse or withdraw their blessing if funds dry up. These considerations are everyday matters of concern, not merely theoretical questions of interest only to the traditional experts. A man cannot build a house without obtaining materials from his wife-takers and a blessing from his wife-givers. He cannot plant or reap his crops without similar help; and at every stage in the life cycle he depends on his affines. He fears their curse just as he believes in the efficacy of his own powers. If he falls ill, he wonders how he may have offended his wife's father or mother's brother and he begs their forgiveness with a substantial gift. If the pigs of his sister's son die suddenly, he attributes the misfortune to his illwill which the nephew has earned by neglecting him. When one of my neighbours lost all his chickens to fowlpest, his uncle said simply that the young man was behind with his bridewealth payments and that it would teach him a lesson.

The ethnography of eastern Indonesia reveals similar conceptions of alliance – though the ideological similarities mask certain differences (see Beatty 1990); and closer to Nias is the example of the Karo Batak. However, the important point for the present argument is that in central Nias asymmetric alliance subsists without a positive marriage rule. In fact, marriage to genealogical MBD is disapproved, although marriage to a classificatory MBD is acceptable and is regarded as having certain advantages over marriage to an unrelated woman.

4. Models of Alliance in the Nias Ethnography

The earliest Dutch colonial authors recognized that in some parts of Nias (notably the south) marriage with MBD was preferred or even enjoined (Schröder 1917: 261), and this has been confirmed by subsequent authors.¹ It was not until much

¹ An MBD preference is not reported in any northern districts with the exception of Huruna (north-central), where its rationale is that the families are thereby *dua kali bertali* (twice linked). In the same area marriage to FZD is rejected because it would imply a return of bridewealth (Korn dossier 476/22). It appears, however, that in much of the north marriage to MBD is at least permitted, in contrast