

Autobiography in Question

On Self Presentation and Life Description in an Indonesian Society

Birgitt Röttger-Rössler

Abstract. – This article addresses the problem of collecting autobiographies in non-Western cultures and questions some general assumptions held by anthropologists about this genre and the biographical method in general. The author reflects the causes behind her failed attempts to collect autobiographies in a rural Indonesian community. Through the analysis of the process of detecting the range of her own cultural-bound presumptions which initially presented a hindrance for understanding the local modes of self presentation and life description the indigenous conceptions of Self and Person are approached. [Sulawesi/Indonesia, life histories, Self and Person, cultural bias]

Birgitt Röttger-Rössler, Dr. phil., DFG-fellow and lecturer at the Department of Cultural Anthropology, University of Göttingen; fieldwork: 1984/85 (social stratification) and 1990/91 (gender-relations) in South-Sulawesi, Indonesia; current fields of interest: social organisation, gender and sexuality, study of emotions, cognitive anthropology, biographical method, Indonesia, and Southeast Asia in general. – Publications include: *Rang und Ansehen bei den Makassar von Gowa (Süd-Sulawesi/Indonesia)* (Berlin 1989); (with M. Rössler) *Sprache und soziale Wertschätzung: Soziolinguistische Aspekte des Makassarischen* (in: K. H. Pampus und B. Nothofer [Hrsg.], *Die deutsche Malaologie*. Heidelberg 1988).

Introduction

This paper primarily deals with some problems I encountered when attempting to collect autobiographies in an Indonesian village community; problems which later caused me to reflect on the local conceptions of Self and Person.¹ Two different, though interrelated aspects will be discussed: some general features of the autobiographical method commonly used in anthropological fieldwork and the analysis of conceptions of Self and Person in non-Western cultures.

The Makassar are a population of about 1.8 million, who live in the southern corner of the southwestern peninsula of Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Makassar living along the coasts are renowned for their skills as seafaring traders and fishermen, while those inhabiting the interior mountainous regions are peasants. Depending on climatic and

topographic factors, the local staple foods are rice (both wet and dry), maize, and cassava. The inhabitants of one village or of a cluster of neighbouring villages, each comprising from 10 to 150 or more houses, consider themselves as belonging to a bilateral kin group. In practice, however, widespread kin networks are a characteristic feature of local social organization.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the sociopolitical structure is a subtle differentiation of social rank, though the former strata of nobles, commoners, and slaves have officially been abolished. The local conceptions of Person and Self are closely connected to social stratification: Each individual is ranged continuously on a scale of social rank and esteem which, in many instances, focus on the phenomenon of *siri'* (self-respect, shame, honour). Since this feature is of paramount importance for social life in general, and for the evaluation of personal qualities in particular, it plays a major role within the context of biographical data as well. I will first briefly describe how I began to collect data on life histories in a Makassar highland village community.

¹ I use the terms "Self" and "Person" as defined by Harris (1989) who pointed out that these two terms refer to different theoretical concepts: While "Self" conceptualizes the "human being" in a psychologistic fashion as a "locus of experience," the term "Person" constitutes a sociologistic concept referring to the human being as "agent-in-society" (1989: 599). Consequently, to focus on "selves" means "... to formulate questions and to direct observation with reference to posited intrapsychic structures and processes. Social structure is, as it were, taken 'inside' the experiencing selves. Cultural formulations are treated as a source of goals, ideals, problems, ideas, concepts, and beliefs incorporated by selves, and as defining the contexts for the self's growth, development, expression, and reading by others. To focus on *persons* as agents-in-society brings properties of the social order and its cultural forms to the center of attention, for these are seen as constitutive of human agency as a public fact" (1989: 608 f.). It should be noted that the major concern of this paper is not a theoretical debate on concepts of Self and Person.