

Keo Kin Terms

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Abstract. – Ethnographically speaking, the region of south central Flores named Keo is among the least known parts of eastern Indonesia. This paper describes and analyses kinship terminologies from western and eastern Keo and compares these with the classification encountered in the linguistically and culturally closely related Nage region to the north, which the author has recently treated in another article. Focussing especially on particular lexical items, a broader comparative framework is adopted in order to consider questions of terminological change, the development of alliance systems, and the mix of symmetric and asymmetric features of social classification in this area of eastern Indonesia. [*Eastern Indonesia, Keo, kinship terminology, asymmetric alliance, classificatory change*]

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To my knowledge, this is the first published report on any single aspect of the indigenous culture or society of the region of south central Flores that has come to be known as Keo. The objective is straightforward: to describe and analyse the relationship terminology employed in the western and eastern parts of the region. This is done with a comparative purpose, more particularly to complement a discussion of kin terms employed by the closely related Nage (see Forth 1993), whose territory adjoins the northern boundary of Keo (see map). A more general aim is to expand our knowledge of patterns of variation in kinship terminology found in southeastern Indonesia in order to delve further into questions of classificatory variety and possible courses of change. In the latter part of this paper, I therefore consider how the terminologies of western and eastern Keo might represent different developments from a common original pattern.

1. General Remarks

The question of how far “Keo” denotes a distinct ethnic or cultural unit in the context of central Flores ethnography has been discussed in another paper (see Forth n.d.). As noted there, the name still retains currency on Flores largely by virtue of recognition given to the territory as a separate political unit within the system of colonial administration established by the Dutch, even though it was eventually merged with the Nage district. In regard to many details of culture, society, and language Nage and Keo are identical or similar. Yet the two regions do display a number of general differences, so that, for purposes of ethnographic description and the analysis of cultural variation, it is convenient to retain “Keo” as a separate ethnonym.

Very much like their Nage neighbours, the Keo people are subsistence cultivators, stock raisers, and occasional hunters.¹ Probably connected with the greater fertility and higher population density, especially of western Keo, differences between Keo and Nage are discernible with regard to descent group organization and land tenure. Other differences concern residential house form and ceremonial objects and practices. Named clans are more localized in Keo than in Nage and exhibit a greater degree of corporate unity in regard to land tenure and ritual undertakings. Among Nage, by contrast, the “house” group, and especially the group associated with a single “cult house” (*sa'o waja*; *sa'o* “house,” *waja* “old, ancient, ancestral”),

¹ The population of the Keo region numbers about 37,000 to 39,000 people. (The estimate is based on 1991 figures for the modern administrative districts Mau Ponggo and Nangaroro. The second of these includes Nage villages which I have excluded from the estimate.) With an average density of over 125 per square kilometre, this is without question one of the most densely populated parts of eastern Indonesia. Western Keo is notably more densely populated than eastern Keo. In 1991, the district of Mau Ponggo had 26,169 inhabitants, giving a density of 184 per square kilometre.