

***Pela* Alliances in the Central Moluccas and in the Netherlands: A Brief Guide for Beginners¹**

**By Dr. Dieter Bartels
University of Leiden**

In conversations with Moluccans, sooner or later, someone will drop the term “*pela* alliance” often assuming, as a matter-of-course that everyone knows what he or she is talking about. Your conversation partner, quite unconsciously makes this assumption because *pela* alliances are of central importance in his society. Thus, he or she will easily forget that non-Moluccans may know very little or nothing about them. Well, if you don’t know much about *pela* and are interested in the subject, you may want to read on. In the following pages, I will make an attempt to give a brief overview of this remarkable Moluccan social institution.²

Roughly half of the population in the Central Moluccas³ is Protestant Christian, while the other half adheres to Islam. Outside Ambon city, Moluccans live in villages which are, with a few exceptions, either wholly Christian or wholly Islamic. These villages are the largest political units of Central Moluccan society, discounting the superimposed administrative structure of the Indonesian government. Each village is composed of a number of clans, called *mata rumah*, whose members are forbidden to intermarry, but who can intermarry with members of the other clans. It seems that most marriages still occur within a given village.

Economically, the Moluccan villages are also still largely self-sufficient, at least as far as the procuring of food is concerned. Agricultural cash crops (e.g. cloves and copra) are sold directly to traders from the city and modern goods are also usually obtained at the marketplace in Ambon. There is only very limited trade between villages. Relations with neighboring villages are often tense, sometimes even hostile. One of the reasons is that borders are ill defined and that an ever increasing population has to be fed, frequently leading to feuds about land between neighboring villages. The infrastructure (roads, water transportation) is also still weak, making intervillage contacts in most places still very difficult.

¹ This article is based on anthropological work the author did in 1974-75 in the Moluccas and on findings during his current research on Moluccan *adat* and life style in the Netherlands. For a more detailed analysis of the *pela*-system, see D. Bartels, *Guarding the Invisible Mountain: Intervillage Alliances, Religious Syncretism and Ethnic Identity among Ambonese Christians and Moslems in the Moluccas*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University (1977).

² Here I will only deal with *pela* in the Central Moluccas. It should be pointed out that similar alliance systems also exist in the Kei and Taminbar Islands and some smaller island groups.

³ The term ‘Central Moluccas’ as I use it here includes the islands of Ambon, Haruku, Saparua, Nusalaut and the West coast of Seram which together form one culture area.

In short, Central Moluccan villages still exist, as they did for centuries, in relative independence from each other, a fact further reinforced by a strong loyalty to one's own village (*satu kampung*), a loyalty which still remains strong among Moluccans in Holland after more than three decades of exile. This loyalty is not merely a sentimental attachment to one's place of origin but is tied to strong social obligations. Whenever the village as a whole, or individual members of it need help, one must come without hesitation to it, or their, aid. It seems surprising then that in such a situation of relative physical isolation and social divisiveness, a common Central Moluccan identity could develop and sustain. It seems even more surprising that such a common identity would not be restricted to particular islands and/or to a particular religion, but truly unite people across the islands and across religious boundaries, as it is indeed the case in the Central Moluccas.

The central role in developing, and sustaining, a common ethnic identity must be ascribed to the *pela* alliance system, the major indigenous institution to establish ties beyond the village level. *Pela* are alliances between one or more villages, often on different islands and adhering to different religions. Although each village has only one or a few *pela*, the cumulative effect of a dense network of crisscrossing alliances is such that all Central Moluccans share in the ideals of *pela* and thus share the ideal of common unity.

The *pela* system has its origins in the distant past, long before Europeans invaded the Spice Islands in search of cloves and nutmeg. It probably started as an alliance system in the context of headhunting, but during the Portuguese and Dutch conquests in the 16th and 17th centuries, the system was utilized to resist the foreign intruders, and to help each other in times of need. As a matter of fact, quite a few of the still existing *pela* pacts were founded during that period, often binding Moslem and (recently converted) Christian villages together. Many new *pela* arose during the last desperate struggle against Dutch colonialism, the so-called Pattimura war at the beginning of the 19th century. After this struggle was lost and the region experienced an economic depression, *pela* was utilized as an instrument gaining access to foodstuffs when many poor villages of Ambon-Lease established ties with the sago-rich villages of Seram. Today, *pela* is in full bloom, mainly as a vehicle of Moluccan identity in the pan-Indonesian state and also to further village development without governmental aid.

Basically, there are three kinds of *pela*, namely (1) hard *pela* (*pela keras*), (2) "pela of the uterus" (*pela gandong* or *bungso*) and (3) soft *pela* (*pela tempat sirih*). The hard *pela* originated because of the occurrence of some major event, usually war-related, such as the spilling of blood, undecided battles, or extraordinary help given by one village to the other. The second kind of *pela* is based on genealogical ties; i.e., one or several clans in the villages of these alliances claim common ancestry that, at the conclusion of the pact, was transferred to the villages as wholes. The soft *pela* are concluded after some minor event, such as to restore peace after some small incident or after one village does a favor for another. They also are established to facilitate trade relations.

For all intents and purposes, the hard *pela* and the genealogical *pela* function in an identical way. Both are concluded through a powerful oath, which is backed up with a terrible curse upon any potential transgressor of the treaty. A concoction of palm wine and blood taken from the leaders of

the two parties is drunk after the immersion of weapons and other sharp objects in it. These objects will turn against and kill any offender. The exchange of blood seals the brotherhood.

Pela, therefore, is conceived as an enduring and inviolable brotherhood between all peoples of the partner villages. There are four main ideas underlying *pela*: namely, (1) villages in a *pela* relationship assist each other in times of crisis (natural disaster, war, etc.); (2) if required, one partner village has to assist the other in the undertaking of large community projects, such as building of churches, mosques and schools; (3) when individuals visit one's *pela* village, food cannot be denied them, nor do they have to ask permission to help themselves to agricultural products which they can take home with them; and (4) all members of villages in a *pela* relationship are considered to be of one blood; thus marriage between *pela* members is considered incestuous. Any transgression against these rules is severely punished by the ancestors who founded the institution. This punishment consists of sending illness, death and other misfortunes to the offenders, or even their children. Those who break the marriage taboo are, if caught, also paraded around their respective villages, clad only in coconut leaves, with the villagers heaping abuse upon them.

In contrast, the soft *pela* are concluded without the oath by merely exchanging and chewing *betel* together, a traditional custom of establishing friendship between strangers (*tempat sirih* = betel box). The soft *pela* are ten exactly that, friendship pacts. Inter-marriage is allowed and any future help given is voluntary, and not backed up by ancestral sanctions.

In order to keep the *pela* alive, and to make the youth aware of their obligations, many *pela* alliances conduct, periodically, a ceremony for "heating up the *pela*" (*bikin panas pela*). At these occasions, the population of all partners meets in one of the villages for as long as a week to celebrate their unity, accompanied by a renewal of the oath, feasting, singing, and dancing.

The system as described above works still very well in the Central Moluccas. Because of the heightened awareness of unity and common identity mentioned earlier, *pela* renewal ceremonies occur frequently. Also a number of new *pela* (mostly soft *pela*) have been established since World War II, frequently between Moslems and Christians, in, more or less, conscious attempts to strengthen the ties between these two groups. It can be said that because the existing system of *pela*, the antagonism between Moslems and Christians has been held to a minimum, quite contrary to elsewhere in the world. On the practical level, many churches, mosques and schools have been built with the generous help of *pela* partners who supplied labor, work material, money and/or foodstuffs to make those undertakings possible without governmental aid.

Pela ties among the Moluccans living in Holland have remained equally strong. The situation among the latter has of course been much more complex because *pela* partners often live in the same community and contact with one's *pela* partners is often daily, or at least very frequent, while in the Central Moluccas *pela* partners live far apart and meet very infrequently. Thus special precautions have to be taken to prevent that young people within an alliance don't fall in love. *Pela* partners are pointed out and introduced during family celebrations (baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals), and young people are admonished to treat them in the same way as their real brothers and sisters. Another complication is the different way Moluccans in Holland count their *pela*. In the

Moluccas, people recognize only the *pela* on their father's side, i.e., the *pela* of his village of origin. This is based on the social rule that when a woman marries she leaves her own clan and enters the clan of the husband, after the latter has paid the bride wealth (*harta kawin*) and the woman is officially introduced into his family during a celebration (*kawin adat*) in the original house of his clan (*rumah tua*). All children she bears afterwards are then exclusively members of her husband's clan and, by extension, have to honor only the *pela* of his village of which there is usually only one or two, up to about seven in a few cases.

In the Netherlands, Moluccans not only reckon the *pela* of their father, but also of their mother, of both sets of grandparents, and in some instances, even include a generation or more before. One person can easily end up with a high number of *pela*, severely restricting his or her marriage choices and perhaps already a factor in the development of an ever increasing number of Moluccans marrying outside their own ethnic community.

Another major difference is that in the Moluccas *pela* partners interact mostly on the village level, between the respective village governments, while in Holland, dealings between individual *pela* partners rank first. However, whenever help is requested from a *pela* village in the Moluccas, the village organization (*kumpulan*) in Holland will collect and sent money.

Finally, in the Netherlands, *pela* is an important symbol of Moluccan identity and unity and therefore has great emotional value to most Moluccans. This is, at least partially so, because the *pela* system is uniquely Moluccan, having no equivalent in Dutch society. It gives people a feeling of distinctiveness and pride, important for their survival as a distinct group in a multi-ethnic society.