Alliances Without Marriage:
Exogamy, Economic Exchange, and Symbolic Unity Among Ambonese Christian and Moslems[1]

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Introduction

In 1935, Wouden published his Sociale Structuurtypen in de Groot Oost[2] in which he takes marriage alliance as the pivot on which the activity of social groups turns, in his attempt "to demonstrate the essential unity of social organization, myth and ritual"(Wouden 1968:2). Intrigued by affinal alliance, Wouden and scholars following him in Eastern Indonesia have generally neglected a second form of alliance which has been widely reported to have existed throughout the Eastern archipelago and is still found in the Moluccan islands of Tanimbar, Kei and the Central Moluccas.[3] These alliances are structural mirror images of affinal alliances, i.e., the ties between alliance partners are based on the prohibition of marriage rather than on marriage between them as in affinal alliances. They are just as pivotal in the "vertical" integration of culture and social structure as Wouden claimed marriage is; furthermore, they are as crucial as Lévi-Strauss (1969) see marriage, i.e., the exchange of women, in the "horizontal" integration of social groups of a particular region. (The terms "vertical" and "horizontal" integration are used here as heuristic devices for clarity of argument.)

It is hoped that these claims can be substantiated in the following treatise, adding another dimension to our understanding of the relationships between symbolic classification, economic and ritual exchange and social structure. I would like to further the discussion by focusing on a society of much greater socio-cultural complexity than those treated by Wouden and other early students of Eastern Indonesia. Since the complexity of this society is the result of historical developments which still can be traced or reconstructed, it will be possible to go beyond Wouden's essentially atemporal approach and add a perspective of time and change.

The society to be dealt with is that of the Ambonese of the Central Moluccas. A population of a little more than a half a million is spread out over a number of islands. The most important of them are Ambon, the Lease group (Haruku, Saparua, and Nusalaut), and Seram. The population is about evenly divided into Moslems and Calvinist-

Protestants.[4]

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of Ambonese society is an exogamous intervillage alliance system called pela. It is the specific task of this inquiry to investigate, through an analysis of the pela alliance network, the interrelationships between the rule of exogamy, economic exchange and the achievement of symbolic unity, as well as regional integration, in a society consisting of adherents of two traditionally antagonistic religions who are dispersed over several islands.

The Pela Alliance System[5]

The Ambonese Moslems and Christians live in villages which are, with a few exceptions, mono-religious. The villages are the largest political units of Ambonese society, discounting the superimposed administrative structure of the Indonesian government. These villages, negeri, are made up of a number of mostly exogamous patri-clans which randomly intermarry with one another.[6] Although there are no overt restrictions, a majority of marriages seem still to occur between clans of the same village.[7]

In contrast, alliances which proscribe marriage create ties beyond the village level. In a few rare cases, pela alliances are pacts between two or more villages. The partner villages are usually far apart and often located on different islands. Frequently, they adhere to different religions. The number of alliances any village may engage in is unlimited, but most villages have only one or two pacts.[8] If a village has multiple alliances, each is treated as a separate unit.

Pela pacts 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 it. These objects will turn against and kill any offender. The exchange of blood seals the brotherhood.[9]

Pela, 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; (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

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4   The most comprehensive description of Ambonese Christian society and culture has been by Cooley (1962). Aspects of the Ambonese Christian world view have been treated by Jansen (1934) and Pattiasina (1954). No authoritative account about Ambonese Islam is yet available. Some insights are offered by Kraemer (1927).

5   For a detailed description of pela, see Bartels 1977a.

6   Until the end of the Dutch colonial rule, these clans were often ranked within the villages and marriage preference seems to have been along these lines. In Moslem villages, ranking still has some combined importance and the clan of the hereditary village chief, raja, still prefers to intermarry with clans of equal rank which results often in marriage across village lines.

7   The percentages of intra-village marriages have been declining since World War II. Improved means of transportation, increasing access to tertiary education in Ambon City, and a considerable lessening of parental authority since Indonesian independence have made it possible for marriageable youth from distant regions to meet in increasingly greater numbers with fewer and fewer restriction. Formerly, marriages were often arranged by the parents. Actual figures are not available.

8   A few villages, usually newer villages, have no pela relations. Butonese settlements in the region are excluded.

9   For details on the conclusion of a pela treaty, see Bartels 1977a: 230-240.

take home with them; and (4) all members of villages in a pela relationship are considered to be of one blood. Marriage between pela members is considered incestuous.[10] Any transgression against these rules is severely punished by the ancestors who founded the institution.[11] This punishment consists of sending illness and other misfortunes to the offenders.

Pela in Historical Perspective

Pela has its historical roots in head-hunting. Villages, as well as clans, concluded these pacts to attack their enemies or to defend themselves against raids of others. They were also concluded to gain peace after a period of prolonged feuding between adversaries. Early European reports suggest that these pacts were only semi-permanent until the earlier half of the 17th century, i.e. feuding could resume after a ritual uprooting of a banana tree-a symbol of permanence and continuity-which had been planted at the conclusion of a pact. (Gijzels 1871:430-1).

While pela's primary functions were those of war and peace pacts, the possibilities of using pela for economic gains were already built in due to the rule that visiting pela members had not only to be given shelter, but also food. Pela partners could even take, without any fear of supernatural sanctions, fruits or other plant products from trees or gardens owned by their partners, ignoring the otherwise feared matakau prohibitionary signs put up by their owners to protect themselves against thieves.[12] This possibility of using pela for economic exploitation is expressed in stories about the mythological past where human beings engaged the dead and spirits into pela pacts in order to obtain such highly valued goods as Chinese plates and other wares (Riedel 1886: 128).

The role of early pela in terms of social integration seems to have been rather limited. At least in parts of interior West-Seram, it seems to have been more effective than marriage, since pela eliminated head-hunting between the allies while marriage ties across village lines did not seem to prevent such attacks.[13] However, other ties, such as tribal affiliation and membership in the Kakehan, a secret men's society, and negatively, the common adherence to head-hunting, may have played more important roles in giving the region some sort of loose socio-cultural unity.[14] In the first quarter of the 16th century, the Portuguese, in search of spices, found their way to the Moluccas. It was a time of tremendous Islamic expansion in the Eastern archipelago. In the central Moluccas,

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10 There are three basic categories of pela: (1) Pela keras, or "hard" pela, based on an oath, (2) Pela gandong, or "pela of the uterus," which is based on genealogical relationships between villages, but often sealed with the oath. In these two categories marriage is strictly prohibited. The third type of pela is called pela tempat sirih, or "Betel box pela," which is based on the exchange of betel nut rather than an oath. However, there is a current trend to upgrade these "soft" pela to "hard" pela and marriage becomes increasingly rare and in some cases it has been forbidden. In theory, the obligation in pela tempat sirih are much more loose than in pela keras, but in practice, they are often taken just as seriously (see Bartels 1977a: 181-190).
11 Pela obligations are still observed among Ambonese refugees in Holland. Although pela partners were often thrown together in the same refugee camps, an overwhelming number observed the marriage prohibitions and engaged in activities of mutual help (Wittermans 1955b).
12 These matakau (literally, "red eye") signs were connected with a potent curse causing illness or even death to any trespasser. Even the owner had to undo the curse before entering his garden or taking fruit from his trees (see Jensen 1948:77).
13 In cases of pending attacks, blood relatives living in the enemy village were usually forewarned, giving them time to seek refuge in the forest.
14 It should be cautioned, however, that most of the information on early pela derives from West-Seram and does not necessarily reflect the situation on Ambon-Lease which came much earlier under foreign influence. For more details on Ambon-Lease, see Bartels 1977a: 72ff.

Moslems and non–Moslems were engaged in a deadly struggle.[15] The non–Moslems were on the verge of defeat and in quest for new powers, both material and spiritual, turned to the Portuguese for aid and soon converted to Catholicism, a religion most did not renounce even after the Portuguese instituted a reign of terror.[16]

Shortly after 1600, the Dutch, with indigenous help, wrested power away from the Portuguese, and soon turned the Catholic segment of the population wholesale into Protestants. The Dutch, in their determination to institute a spice monopoly, were even more ruthless in their oppression. Ambonese history of the 16th and 17th centuries is marked by countless, if futile, uprisings against both colonial powers.[17] It was in these rebellions that pela was utilized to create alliances between Moslems and Christians against their common European enemies. These alliances, many of which have lasted over centuries until the present, led to the ethnogenesis of Ambonese society as we know it today. Through these links, social interaction between Moslems and Christians was kept alive throughout the Dutch colonial period. This remained the case even after the Dutch gave preferential treatment to the Christians in the last 100-odd years of their reign, during which the Ambonese Christians became the mainstay of the Dutch colonial army and administration in their conquest of the rest of Indonesia.[18]

In the 19th century, pela was adapted by the then economically depressed people of villages on Ambon-Lease as an instrument to gain free access to vital food products, particularly sago, from Seramese villages which had surplus foodstuffs at their disposal. Many of these pela conclusions were based on false historical claims of brotherhood made by the Dutch-educated villages of Ambon-Lease, who considered their brethren on Seram as "backward".

In the short run, the people from Ambon-Lease clearly profited from this exploitive scheme, but over time the ruse backfired because of the pela rule of reciprocity. Alliances are considered valid regardless of which circumstances they have been concluded under, and supernatural punishment will strike those who refuse to reciprocate. In recent years, many such requests for aid have been forthcoming from Seramese villages, now seeking improvement of their own socioeconomic situation. Only a few pela villages on Ambon-Lease have dared to ignore these requests, and the Seramese are greatly benefitting from these pela. Thus, what the Ambonese contemptuously call "pela perut", or "stomach pela", have turned into viable alliances, making the pela network ever denser.

Ambonese Ethnic Religion

In this century, pela has retained its economic aspects. The economic transactions between pela partners are important on their own terms but they are also, as we shall see later, a crucial aspect in the maintenance of a common Ambonese ethnic religion which I have called elsewhere Agama Nunusaku (Bartels 1977a: 3313-316). This ethnic religion transcends Islam and Christianity and forms the basis of a common identity and unity of Moslems and Christians.

The three core tenets of Nunusaku religion are: (1) Islam and Christianity are

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15 The non-Moslem population consisted of the indigenous, unconverted population (Alifuru) and small Hinduized principalities, often founded by Javanese princelings, but with mixed populations.
16 On Ambonese conversion, see Bartels 1978.
17 The history of Moluccan resistance against the Portuguese and Dutch is described by Rumphius (1910) and Bokemeyer (1888).
18 For details on Moslem-Christian relations, see Bartels 1979. Some insights, especially in context of pela, can also be found in Kraemer 1958: 13-25.

equally valid and truthful; they are merely two alternative paths which lead to God who is one and the same.[19]

(2) Adat (customary law), which has been created and is still guarded by the ancestors, is identical for Christians and Moslems and is the common code for social interaction among them. (3) All Ambonese originated at a sacred mountain, Mt. Nunusaku, located in the western part of Seram, the mother island of the Ambonese. At Nunusaku all Ambonese were peacefully united in primordial times. Through the slaying of a culture heroine who had endowed them with edible plants, this unity was destroyed, and the Ambonese were dispersed all over the islands they now occupy.

Agama Nunusaku then deals with the peculiarities of Ambonese society; it is concerned with its perpetuation and continued well-being and the harmony between Christians and Moslems by supplying a foundation of common origin while at the same time incorporating Islam and Christianity into a common framework. Yet Nunusaku religion has no structure or organization, no religious officials, and no temples of worship. How is it possible for Ambonese Christians and Moslems to guard their symbolic universe, their valued unity and common identity, especially in the face of an ever-increasing onslaught from religious purists?

The vehicle of Agama Nunusaku is pela. Ostensibly an economic alliance, pela is the cultic center of Ambonese ethnic religion. Pela symbolizes for the Ambonese the unity at Nunusaku. The ancestors instituted pela to negate the original wrong-doing that occurred at Nunusaku and to restore brotherhood among all Ambonese (cf. Sahalessy 1971:12). Pela stands for everything sacred for Ambonese society. An Ambonese may dismiss the Nunusaku story as a myth, either on religious grounds or based on Western notions of history, yet he will still accept the idea of pela and thus share the values of Nunusaku religion. The denial of pela is tantamount to a denial of the existence of a separate and unique Ambonese culture and identity.

The values and beliefs of Nunusaku religion are reenacted and affirmed during the rituals at the conclusion of a pela, and during the pela renewal ceremonies which are performed periodically to strengthen the pacts. It is on these occasions that the partners drink one another's blood, swear the oath of eternal loyalty, and furthermore recite their common history, verifying the past and making it part of the present. They enter together either the mosque or the church and during the common service the unity of Islam and Christianity within One True God is reactivated. The presence of all villagers, of former villagers from as far away as Holland, and of the ancestors who have been called for the festivities, symbolizes the totality of Ambonese society. Although these rituals are infrequent and often years apart in any single alliance, they reverberate across the islands. Moslems and Christians everywhere see them as acts of reconfirmation of their common bonds.

Economic Exchange

As pela is the basis of Moslem-Christian symbolic unity, economic exchange is the basis of pela, and as such it has replaced aid-in-war as the motor force of regulated Moslem-Christian interaction. The main beneficiaries of economic exchange are the villages as wholes. Individuals too may gain some advantages. They are given shelter and food while stopping over at their partner villages and they are allowed to take a reasonable amount of agricultural produce and other small items which strike their fancy even

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19 Both the Christian and the Moslem term for God is "Tuhan Allah". God is also equated with the traditional sky god, Upu Lanite, who created the world in unison with Earth (Bartels 1977: 12-13).

without prior permission of the owner.

Pela becomes crucial when one of the allied villages embarks on a large community project such as building a new school, church or mosque. It is then that a village is obliged to help according to the best of its ability by supplying cash, building materials, foodstuffs, labor, or a combination of these forms of aid. The same is expected in time of war, earthquakes, flood or other disaster. The rule which governs pela economics is one of delayed reciprocity. After a village has aided its allies in some enterprise, it may take years, and sometimes decades, before it will ask for a return favor.

Pela, then, is a system of mutual insurance which can be tapped when one of the partner villages needs a relatively large capital investment. Because of pela, Ambonese villages have been able to engage in relatively large-scale improvements without government help, and to complete these projects in time spans which are much shorter than they would be if a village had to raise the money independently. Given the limited money resources of an Ambonese village, many undertakings would never have gone beyond the planning stage were it not for pela.

The economic advantages of the pela network are obvious. There is always the potential danger of exploitation through persuading a partner to give aid, yet not living up to one's obligations when it is time to repay. The requests for aid are crucial for testing the strength of a particular alliance in terms of an economic commitment. In interfaith alliances the strength of Moslem-Christian relations is also indirectly tested. While there has been some trouble, and a number of alliances broken, over economic squabbles, the overwhelming majority of alliances passes the test easily. The allies are on excellent terms, help is given freely and generously, and often partners go beyond the expected to help their allies.[20]

The Rule of Exogamy

In general, it can be stated that pela partners cooperate much more closely and interact much more smoothly than clans related through intermarriage. Pela alliances even approximate the closeness of clans whose structural principle of exogamy has been borrowed. This adoption of the exogamy rule makes it possible to transfer the idiom of kinship to the alliance system and use the strongest possible ties between human beings as the basis of the pela system. The rule of exogamy makes the oath of brotherhood and the exchange of blood between the allies socially meaningful. It serves as a permanent reminder of the brotherhood and its laws and obligations.

It should be stressed that the pela exogamy cannot be explained on religious grounds. Moslems and Christians are indeed endogamous; that is, they prescribe and prefer to marry within their own faith. Insofar, the rule of exogamy reinforces religious separation. However, the pela ban on intermarriage is also applied to alliances which involve villages of the same faith. The taboo is just as strictly reinforced in alliances of two Christian villages as in those where several Moslem villages are engaged as partners.[21]

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20 In one of the more notable cases, Christian guerrillas, fighting for South Moluccan independence, successfully protected the mosque of their Moslem partner village against their fellow Christian troops who wanted to burn the structure in retaliation for alleged aiding of troops of the Republic of Indonesia by that village.

21 While pela between two or more Christian villages are common, there are no pela between Moslem villages unless one or more Christian villages are also part of that pela. The absence of pela among Moslems is related to conceptions of Islam's community (ummat). See Bartels 1977a:305-310.

The marriage ban in pela exists not to preserve religious boundaries but to buttress the alliance system. This can be seen by looking at the different ways of treatment of transgressing couples in interfaith marriages and marriages involving pela. In the first case, the problem is solved by either the bride's or the bridegroom's converting to the religion of the other spouse. The couple takes up residence in the village which adheres to the faith to which they now both belong. There is no punishment, human or supernatural. In the second case, emotions run much higher and the couple is usually ostracized from both pela villages. Punishment will be meted out to them by God, the ancestors, and their fellow men. God or the ancestors will send barrenness, illness or even death to either the guilty couple or their descendants. If they ever dare to set foot into the home village of either partner, they will be paraded around the village clad only in coconut leaves and made to confess their sin publicly while being mocked and ridiculed by the whole village.

It is precisely the absence of marriage which makes the strong cohesiveness and smooth interaction of pela possible. If marriage were allowed within the alliance, they system would not be strengthened but weakened in terms of social integration. Marriage would lead to a series of mini-alliances of the intermarrying clans which would undermine the overall bond between the villages, since clan interests and loyalties are usually put above village interests.

The marriage prohibition not only prevents the rise of kin-alliances with the pela alliance; it also effectively eliminates the threats which the inclusion of women-or perhaps more fairly, sex-could pose to the alliance. Regardless of how carefully regulated, sex always introduces personal, often "irrational" elements into politics; rivalry, jealousy, adultery, squabbles over bride wealth, etc., are all potential disruptive factors which could impede the economic objectives of any single alliance. This would seriously shake the whole pela system and thus threaten overall integration of Ambonese society.

Interplay Between Exogamy, Economic Exchange, and Ambonese Unity

Exogamy, then, is the most basic principle of pela alliance, both socially and culturally. In terms of social structure, it separates the allied villages into distinct units, while as a symbol of brotherhood it unites them into a tightly knit whole. The first eliminates sexual conflicts between the partners and assures religious endogamy, while the latter enables them to deal with one another in the economic field in similarly close and trusting ways as if they were members of the same clan.

Mutual economic benefits are the major motivational force in keeping the interest in pela alive. Since these economic transactions are not short-term, singular deals, but long-term commitments based on delayed reciprocity, they tie the partners not only across space but through time, reinforcing the idea of the "eternity" of pela alliances.

This ongoing economic exchange necessitates, and facilitates, continuous social interaction across islands and across religious boundaries. Not only goods and services pass back and forth through the cris-crossing threads of the pela web, but also ideas. This communication helps to maintain a common Ambonese culture despite geographical fragmentation and religious division. Particularly in its ritual aspects, pela helps to perpetuate a strong ideological and emotional commitment to Ambonese ethnic unity and identity as expressed in Agama Nunusaku.

In recent years, the Ambonese have become quite conscious about the role of pela in the maintenance of Christian-Moslem unity. Increasingly threatened by ongoing processes of religious polarization and attempts at political centralization within the national context, a number of new pela were concluded between Moslem and Christian villages for no other reason than to tighten the strings between the two religious groups.[22]

Without pela, with its principle of exogamy and economic and ritual exchange, Ambonese ethnic religion would lose its foundation and the collapse of Agama Nunusaku would be a serious threat to Ambonese unity. Islam and Christianity are now subordinated to the goals of ethnic religion, but if the latter crumbles, the buffer between the two will be removed, leading to a direct confrontation, since these systems would move into the center of beliefs in both groups. Ambonese Moslems and Ambonese Christians would then deal with one another not primarily as Ambonese, but as Moslems and Christians first and as Ambonese second. This is in effect already occurring outside the traditional sphere in the arena of provincial and national politics. Yet, so far, the overwhelming commitment to pela has prevented a collapse of Ambonese unity.

Conclusion

It has been shown that alliances based on the idiom of consanguinity are just as effective as mechanisms for the "vertical" integration of alliances. They are furthermore important alternatives to alliances based on the exchange of women in the "horizontal" integration of social groups. The use of a historical approach made it possible to go beyond the mere mechanics of integration to include an understanding of changing scope and intensity as well as form and meaning. It is hoped that, in the future, more attention will be paid to non–affinal alliances within a general framework of alliance theory-especially in the Moluccas, where they have been undervalued despite having existed historically side by side with marriage alliances.

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