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Religious Conversions and Flexible Spaces in Riung (Flores, eastern Indonesia)

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INTRODUCTION

My aim is to analyze the religious conversions occurring mainly through marriage between Muslims and Catholics, in an eastern Indonesian community called Riung.

Riung area is located in the northern part of the Ngada regency (*kabupaten*) of Flores, in the East Nusa Tenggara province (NTT). The inhabitants, about 25 000, call themselves *ata riung* "Riung people", and claim membership to a common social entity.

Catholics represent more than 75% of the population, while the remaining part is Muslim. Catholics and Muslims – who share the same local beliefs – gather around common life cycle rituals. These interreligious practices take place in the ethnographical frame of an eastern Indonesian society where unilineal descent social units are related to each other by an asymmetric marriage alliance system, also called "asymmetric connubium". In this context of wide alliance and exchange network, how do the Riung people handle the community divide in two religious identities?

Answering this question, my aim is to emphasize the principle that I tentatively name "pragmatic flexibility", as underlying the social practices between Riung Catholics and Muslims. I argue that this flexibility is enrooted in a singular historical context related to the way both Islam and Catholicism were adopted and to the place religions are given in the local landscape. Contrary to the impression that would be gained the substantial literature developed these last years about conflicts in Indonesia, one would have to note that interreligious cohabitation is not necessarily difficult or violent. Riung manifests an uncommon local situation: Catholics and Muslims intermarrying and living peacefully.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND MARRIAGE

The villages and traditional domains of the Riung region constitute a heterogeneous assemblage marked by cultural, linguistic, and religious variability. This diversity takes place in a typical Austronesian ethno-historical context: a landscape crossed by structuring dynamics of mobility, dispersion, and aggregation of human groups. Scattered from a local mountain or landed on the coast, Riung communities are organized according to an essentially dualistic way founded on a principle of precedence between autochthonous and immigrants groups from South Sulawesi. These immigrants were in general small groups which flee the constant warfare that ravaged their homeland from the seventeen century to the nineteen century.

Traditionally, it exists a distinction between the "people of the mountain" (ata mapar) and the "people of the coast" (ata wirong). These two part used to exchange goods especially in periods of food shortage. However, there is no clear social boarder between the two domains. It was not uncommon that a lineage split, one segment remaining upland and the other one settling near the coast. This allowed to diversify access to natural resources and to facilitate exchanges.

Unilineal descent is the basic principle shaping social units in Riung. Membership to a lineage (wa'ung na'ang) which ascends as far as there are agnatic ancestors supporting it, determines the mawa unit formed by its living members. Each mawa or patrilineal - most often - exogamic clan, possess a name, a totem, taboos and its own narrative which tells the origin of the group and supports its identity. This set of rules and taboos is also called mawa. Several mawa joined together form a village, wongko', the main socio-political unit in Riung.

Concerning kinship and marriage, the Riung people are not an exception to the most recurrent model found among the societies of eastern Indonesia. Patrilineal groups are related to each other by virtue of women given in marriage in one direction, from "givers" to "takers". Ideally, unions take place between a ZS (sister's son) and BD (brother's daughter), or, in other words, between ego's mother's brother's daughter and her father's sister's son. They form together the category masa lawa or "preferential spouses". Beside marriage with an "outside" partner, only these real or classificatory cross-cousins are required to marry. Observance of this rule implies repetition of marriages which creates alliance "path" ideally kept up between two lineages from generation to generation.

The wife giving group is called *anak rana* ("children of a man i.e. of a brother") while the wife taking group is *anak wina* ("children of a woman i.e. of a sister"). An exchange unit is "children of a woman" because a sister given by her brother has given birth in it. As suppliers of women, thus of the mean of fertility and continuity,

wife givers (anak rana) are related to the concept pu'un, meaning "trunk, base, origin". This relation of precedence implies a contrast in status between those who give life and blood through women, "superior", and those who receive life, dependent to their givers. In this context, the mother's brother is the first representative of the source line faké pu'un ("root trunk") constituted by the women given in marriage by their brothers. Each individual recognizes its origin through this feminine line to which one is related by the "mother's blood".

Just as the marriage itself, exchanged goods are prescribed and asymmetric. Gifts circulating from the wife givers (anak rana) to the wife takers (anak wina) are pigs, sarongs and other textiles, rice, yam, and gold. These "feminine" goods symbolize the flow of life, the blood carried by the women passing through the exchange lines. Children's membership to the lineage of the father requires the circulation of "masculine gifts" in the other direction: buffaloes, horses, chickens, goats, coconuts, palm wine and machetes. These gifts and counter gifts symbolize and materialize the nature of the relation between alliance groups. Exchanges occur during all the important moments of the life cycle, from birth to death.

ISLAM OR CATHOLICISM? LOCAL MODEL OF CONVERSION TO WORLD RELIGIONS

In this part of Flores, the Catholic religion was introduced by the European missionaries of the Societas Verbi Divini (SVD, "Divine Word Society"), who began their evangelization work in the 1920–30's. The arrival of Islam occurred at an earlier time. Its first introduction, rather sporadic and informal, is a consequence of the influence on the western part of Flores of the Muslim sultanates of Bima, in Sumbawa and Goa, in Sulawesi, from the eighteen century. Moreover, from the same period, members of some Islamized noble families fled from Makassar (south of Sulawesi) to Flores, avoiding conflicts between local principalities and with the Dutch East India Company. However, being Muslim was something mostly nominal. It was an identity transmitted from generation to generation without having a real influence on the local social, religious and ritual life. Indeed the descendants of some immigrant groups recognize that their ancestors where Muslim upon their arrival on Flores but that they quickly loose any practices related to Islam in the process of their assimilation: they are pork and did not pray; and many of these groups converted to Christianity in the first half the 20th century.

It is only since the beginning of the twenty century that Islam began to assert itself by the way of immigrants (often from Sulawesi) spreading a formal religious teaching. They both converted some local people and strengthened the identities of those who were already Muslim.

In the 60's, religious membership became an obligation. This point stems from the Indonesian national political context. One of the 5 Principles (Pancasila) stated by the government at the time of the independence of Indonesia in 1945 is the recognition of a "unique God" which is achieved by joining one of the five world religions officially recognized by the Indonesian state: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism and Hinduism. In 1965, the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) attempted a *coup d'état*. Considered as atheists or anti-religious, communists are hunted down all through Indonesia. According to government officials, communists and small populations with local traditions and beliefs have in common the denial of the religion and a potential opposition to the government. Ideologically, both are outside the control of the centralized state (Atkinson 1987: 178). Thus, to avoid being associated to the communist cause and to be characterized as *kafir* (an Arab word meaning "pagan" or "unbeliever") it became urgent to choose a religion. In this way, conversion to Islam and Catholicism for the populations of Flores was also an answer to this social and political pressure.

For those who did not yet profess membership to one religion or another, the Riung people were confronted with a choice considering the different characteristics of Catholicism and Islam. What appears quite singular in Riung is the particular atmosphere in which this choice took place. It even happened that members of a same lineage joined deliberately in two different religions to compare them and see if one confession was more advantageous than the other. This distribution presented the advantage that a part of clan's members could still raise pigs for the needs pertaining to alliance groups exchanges. An interesting case is a village called Waté, where some members converted up to four times from one religion to another alternatively, depending on the circumstances.

Becoming Muslim enabled to continue practicing polygamy, a metaphor of social success and expression of the elevated status of some men. This right was sometimes a decisive argument for the conversion of a whole lineage. Adherence to Catholicism presented other "advantages". The missionaries were the first to offer structures related to education and health, benefit to which the Riung were not insensible. Considering the high quality education that one could obtain, it was not uncommon to convert to Catholicism for this reason. Another "advantage" in becoming catholic is that one could still eat pork, while Muslims were forbidden to. However, it seems that this prohibition did not have much influence on the choice of religion since in the first time of conversion to Islam, people didn't really applied this food observance.

In general, peer pressure and intermarriages had the most important role in converting. When one or several influential individuals converted to a religion, other members of the lineage tended to follow them.

In this singular context, conversion to Islam was accompanied by a local protocol called *inung waé tana* "drinking the earth water". Some water was mixed to some earth and the neophyte had to drink it while an elder pronounced these words:

Aku téing ghau I give you

waé tana ong this earth water

omé ghau murtatif you leave the religionghan lé tanabe eaten by the earthrenok lé waébe drowned by the water

toé bosé, toé naék it won't take long

In Indonesia, along with the reciting of the *shahada* (the Islamic creed), circumcision is the essential rite which marks the conversion of a novice. However, since adults are reluctant to circumcision in Riung, "drinking the earth water" has become a convenient ritual which suits with the local beliefs. The ritual is a pact made with the water and the earth considered in Riung as animated elements which can punish in case of betrayal.

In nowadays, "drinking the earth water" is still practiced especially in the context of conversion through marriage of both women and men.

RELIGIONS IN THE LANDSCAPE AND DESIGNATIONS

In this part, I will show how religions are inscribed in Riung's landscape and how it is conceived locally.

In Flores and in the other islands of the province, the coastal culture budaya pesisir related to the Muslims throughout Indonesian history (Geertz 1963: 58, Pigeaud 1967: 6-7) often corresponds to a notable bipolarity between, on the one hand, the Muslims/immigrants settling on the coast, and on the other hand, the non–Muslim/indigenous of the inner part of the land. Although Riung exhibits this feature as well, there is no categorical distinction presenting the coastal population (ata wirong) as Muslim and the mountainous one as Catholic. Indeed, Riung manifests a rather rare local situation with Muslims being part of the same population as Catholics, not being necessarily immigrants and inhabiting some inland villages as well.

Here I argue that the landscape is not divided into categorical spaces related to one or the other religion. And the main reason explaining this feature is that it occurred several shifts in time and space in the religious membership of the diverse Riung groups.

Observing the distribution of the clans' religious affiliation, it is notable that most of the groups are constituted of both Catholics and Muslims. For instance, one of the biggest Riung clan called Niki, although its members derive from the mountainous part they are almost all Muslim on the coast, while there are still bireligious families in the upper part.

Traditionally, the clans' segmentation was conceived as a distribution of roles between an elder branch located upland with the function to keep and watch over the the territory and its resources, while the younger branch had to guard the coast, downstream. In the same way, the members of clans consider that a distribution occurred between the elder lines uphill that have become Catholics and the younger lines on the coast that have become Muslim.

Thus, a metaphor used to refer to the Christians is ata éta raga "people of the dry land upstream", or ata mbola "people of the mountain", or ata lé tana "upland people", opposed to the Muslims called ata ili waé" "people of the water downstream", or merely ata waé' "people of the water", or ata ili "downstream people". Roughly, these distinctions correspond to the division of the ata mapar ("people of the upland") / ata wirong ("people of the coast") I already mentioned. However, the association of the Muslims to the water and the Christians to the "dry land" doesn't only reflect a geographic distribution but further refers to distinctive practices. The Riung explain that the Muslims, may they reside on the coast or in the mountain are expected to "wash their bottom" (BI "cebo") with water (after relieving their selves), as prescribed by their religion in the sunnah (sunnah is the way of life prescribed as normative for Muslims on the basis of the teachings and practices of Muhammad and interpretations of the Quran). Water is also a compulsory component for the Muslims to perform their ritual ablutions (wuduh) before praying. However, the use of water to clean up one self after defecating was not the usual practice of the remaining population already converted or not to Christianity. It was something new brought by Islam. Until recent times, they only used tree leaves or stones in order to wipe their bottom. We will see later that this distinction related to hygienic issues becomes a critical difference marker between the two religions.

One has to note that the metaphors of the "dry land" and "the water" are in fact more emblematic of this difference in habits between Muslims and Christians than marking a geographic distinction between them. Indeed, Muslims residing upland can be referred to as "people of the water downstream", as well as coastal Christians can be referred to as "people of the dry land". This observation helps underline the fact that Riung doesn't really fits the general rule concerning the bipolarity usually

found in this region between inland Christians and coastal Muslims. In Riung, things are somehow muddled. This blurred situation is well represented by the presence of mosques in the mountainous part of Riung, which appears as very singular in the landscape of Flores where mosques are usually found only on the coast. Kedu village (cf. Fig.) is representative of these inland Muslim villages and is said to be the first place being Islamized (probably during the 18th century) long before the coastal villages.

Another striking feature that I partly mentioned earlier is the shift that occurred through history in the religious membership of the communities. Many immigrant clans who have settled in the uplands recognize that their ancestors where first Muslim upon their arrival on Flores. An instance is the clan Poso which ancestors are said originating from Goa (South Sulawesi). Today, all its members are Christians but they tell in their clan historical account that an ancestor called Zuma (a name considered as having an Islamic origin) settled in Poso (located upland) and dig two deep holes in the rock in order to make wells and get water for the Islamic ritual and hygienic purposes (cf. Fig.).

Despite the general assertion which associates the Christians to the uplands and the Muslims to the coast, it is important to note that the Riung don't consider a categorical division in terms of space and the reference of water related to Muslims and the dry upland related to Catholics has rather a symbolic use more than a literal one, since it does not necessarily correspond to a geographical reality. This absence of religious territoriality goes with a general mobility of religious membership through the local landscape.

RELIGIONS ET MARRIAGE: TRANSFORMATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

Each religion transforms different aspects of the local marriage system. I will mention here two practices representative of the adaptations resulting from the sometimes conflicting encounter between local *adat* and world religions (*adat* comes from an Arab word and refers in Indonesia to the set of socio-ritual rules pertaining to a local tradition).

The Christian dogma forbids the marriage between the first and second degree cousins considered as too close and which union can cause mental or physical handicap in the children. This ban is the main factor of transformation of traditional marriage in Riung, as well as in the other Christianized societies of eastern Indonesia. But this change does not radically upset the process of human reproduction and exchanges accompanying it. As it is not possible to unite the real *masa lawa* preferential spouses (or real cross cousins) anymore, the problem is bypassed by

shifting the union of the preferential spouses by two or three generations. Henceforth, instead of his mother's brother's daughter, a man can look for his mother's brother son's daughter or his mother's mother's brother's son's daughter, or one of the women deriving from the "source line" (faké pu'un) constituted by the women given in marriage by their brothers.

Islam does not forbid marriage between first cousins so that the union of the real sister's son and brother's daughter remains possible. The main problem raised by Islam with regard to *adat* is the prohibition on the consumption of pork, as well as the fact that any contact with pigs have to be avoided. Usually, during the ceremonies pertaining to the different crucial moments of the life cycle, the wife givers eat part of the chickens and goats— which meat constitutes a "masculine" and "superior" meal-given by their wife takers. The wife takers eat part of the pigs—embodying feminine value—received as the essential part of the counter gift. Symbolism attached to exchange goods and food manifests the contrasted status of the two alliance units.

One strategy to get around this ban is to make the Catholics members of the clan raise the pigs for the Muslims. This answer allows the maintenance of the normal exchange order. Another rather generalized practice is the replacement of the prohibited animal by the goat. However, this solution creates a great contradiction because the goat is normally part of the goods given by the anak wina (wike takers) to the anak rana (wife givers). Therefore, it happens that alliance units exchange the same things. Moreover, during ceremonies, anak rana and anak wina eat goat meat together. For the Catholics, the arrangement found by the Muslims is a real violation of adat. This infraction is called "fallow garden", an expression referencing disorder. With respect to the symbolic representations ascribed to the goods, the idea that a same food is ingested in the stomach of both givers and takers appears to be inconceivable. Symbolically, wife givers and wife takers embodying respectively the masculine and the feminine principle tend to get merged.

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE AND INTERMARRIAGES

In the part of Riung where Islam and Catholicism coexist, almost the entire population recognizes having kinship ties with members of the other religion, through descent and/or marriage alliance. By this way, alliance groups are often composed of members of both religions.

In general, one belongs to the religion of his/her father through patrilineal descent. This principle shapes mono-religious lineages. Yet, it happens as well that a man (or more) from a Muslim lineage converts to Catholicism or vice-versa. Therefore, one would find the two religious memberships in the same lineage. From

generation to generation, the descendants of each branch will maintain its own religious affiliation according to the patrilineal descent principle, thus creating bireligious lineages and clans.

Adherence to world religion implies a new criterion in choosing a marriage partner. Ideally, the spouses may belong to the same religion. This preference for religious endogamy has a notable influence on local marriage pattern since unions between individual of different religions are clearly in the minority. However, according to the Indonesian law forbidding mixed marriages, if a Muslim and a Catholic may want to marry, one of the partners has to convert. According to quantitative data of 2004, 2005 and 2008, religious conversions through marriage represent about 15% of all marriages in Riung.

In the Islamic law (*shari'a*), a Muslim can marry a non-Muslim woman, while it is categorically forbidden for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim, unless the man converts to Islam. Moreover, the abandonment of Islam for another faith (apostasy) is in principle not allowed. In the Catholic religion, on the other hand, there is no explicit statement concerning this matter. In Riung practice, apostasy law is very often denied by the local Muslims. Still, its coercive nature has an influence since religious conversions are more numerous from Catholicism to Islam than the contrary.

As a rule, religious membership through marriage conforms to the patrilineal norm structuring the social groups in Riung. When a woman gets married and leaves her natal family, she must adopt the *mawa* ("rules and taboos") of her husband lineage or clan. In the same way, it is the wife who is required to convert to her husband's religion.

The numerous religious conversions through marriage were integrated and institutionalized in the local adat (customary law) through a new requirement, a fine that has to be paid by the groom to the wife's family. The conversion of the wife has to be materialized by the payment of a buffalo or a horse, and this gift doesn't imply a counter gift. This fine appears as a transitional point marking the passing of a woman from one realm to another. When a Muslim woman converts to the catholic religion the fine is called: podo piso guru, kelak senggok "bringing (back) the imam's knife, split the bamboo container". "The imam's knife" (piso guru) refers to excision done on young girls. This rite, which is a requirement from the sunnah, as the circumcision for the boys, marks "the entering in the Islamic way" and the passage into the adult age for children between 7 and 12 years old. "The bamboo container" refers to the bamboo segment which contains water used to wash the intimate body parts. "Split the bamboo container" means that the woman is not required anymore to wash herself with water after relieving herself. These metaphors mean that the woman

leaves behind her the *sunnah* – including the rite which has consecrated her as a Muslim person – and the religious prescription related to her intimate hygiene.

In the opposite direction, when a catholic woman converts to Islam, the fine is called *watu pisu*, *buku bari*. "*Watu pisu*" ("the stone to wipe the bottom") refers to the practice of non-Muslim who, until several years ago, had the habit of using a stone to to wipe the bottom after defecating, while "*buku bari*", is the bamboo container (*buku*) which is used to conserve pork fat (*bari*). This expresses the change in habits accompanying religious conversion. From now on, the freshly converted wife will have to wash herself with water and will not be able anymore to eat pork.

This rule related to patrilinearity where it is the woman who is required to convert to her husband's religion is applied in almost all cases in the still "traditional" mountainous part of Riung. However it is not always true in the coastal region where different new factors have to be taken into account.

Reasons explaining the conversion of the man to his spouse's religion are often economic and concern the asymmetric relationship between the exchange units. For instance, a man of a different religion who has a lower social status or cannot afford paying the bridewealth required by his wife givers must accept abandoning his faith if he wants to get married. Whatever the situation, the wife givers stand on a superior position. It is they first, as "life givers", who put on the conditions of a union: the marriage will occur only if the husband converts.

Another consequence of the meeting of asymmetric alliance marriage with interreligious coexistence is the difference in religion between the preferential spouses. When a sister gets married and adopts her husband's religion, the offspring resulting from this union is of different religion with the children of the brother. Thus, one of the preferential classificatory spouse is Muslim, and the other one is Catholic. If a marriage occurs in this context, what is put at the forefront is the opportunity to reinforce the ties between the wife givers and wife takers. Religious difference appears as a detail compared to the high signification embodied by the repetition of a union between two lines.

BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: ADAT AND RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES

Talking about interreligious relationship, the Riung people rationalize the positive Catholic-Muslim cohabitation as based on the strength of the ties created by the local kinship system. "Everything goes well because we descend from the same ancestors". Statement of this kind refers more to an ideology of a global unity of Riung's population rather than to the acknowledgement of a real genealogy or even a

common mythical descent. However, this idea somewhat sums up the evidence of a wide ancestral alliance and exchange network still recognized and maintained through generations between villages. Here, the link often underlined in anthropology between kinship relationship and ethnicity appears relevant (Friedman 1992, Eriksen 1993). The kinship organization to which one belong by birth creates an heredity as a social construction nourishing the feeling of belonging to the same entity (Elwert 1989: 33).

The nature of interreligious relations in Riung is particularly visible during the crucial moments of the life cycle. Adat ceremonies pertaining to marriage, death, or to important agricultural feast, take place in the "big house" mbaru mêzê of the clan, gathering relatives and clan members of different religion. Beyond the religious divide, the local adat ritual governs these moments and the participants exchange goods according to their matrimonial status. Commensality, communication in formal ritual language, livestock sacrifice and prayers to the ancestors constitute the essential elements of these ceremonies.

A significant stage of life is the first communion (sambut baru) among the Catholics and the circumcision/excision (sunat/khitan) among the Muslims. These large scale feasts take place from June to October, period corresponding to the traditional calendar during which part of the food stock of the last harvest is used to carry out various ceremonies. Beyond the religious meaning, sunat and sambut baru signify the entrance in adulthood. The great importance given to this stage of life reflects that it appears as a substitution of the traditional circumcision and teeth filing (for the women). These initiation rites, designed as getas weki ("adult body"), were applied until the 50s in Riung. It required livestock sacrifices and the scale of the feast was also a way for prominent lineages to assert their high social status. As for other life cycle ceremonies, the relatives of the same or different religion are invited as much as possible to attend the sunat and sambut baru and bring exchange goods according to the adat requirement.

The positive values conveyed by Riung Catholic-Muslim relationship stands out explicitly during the two main religious holidays, Christmas for the Catholics and Idul Fitri (or Lebaran, holiday marking the end of Ramadan) for the Muslims. During Lebaran, Muslims visits each other from house to house and extend their wishes. Catholics as well take part in these interactions. In the same way, at Christmas, Muslims visit their Christian relatives or friends and can join the party.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the history of the Riung's conversion to world religions, it appears clearly that the motivations relating to their choice were not spiritual. On the contrary, adherence to either Islam or Catholicism was merely pragmatic. It even happened in certain circumstances that some individuals passed from one "religious option" to another with respect to the "advantages" and "disadvantages" manifested by each confession. This historical context can probably explain partly how the current social practices between Christians and Muslims in Riung may be considered. The numerous religious conversions through marriage first manifest the religious identity suppleness of the Riungese. Both identities, Muslim and Catholic, are often recent and potentially negotiable. Religious conversions through marriage are, again, entirely pragmatic.

The general historical mobility of the groups through the local landscape when immigrating, gathering or splitting was accompanied by shifting affiliation to world religions. Through this processes, Riung people have elaborated a singular relation to the world religions that I would tentatively define as "flexible spaces" with porous boundaries.

Adat rituals gather in a common space (big house) Christians and Muslims which relationship is based on descent and marriage alliance. Religious difference is not an obstacle to the proceeding of these moments. On the contrary, religious ceremonies (mainly circumcision, first communion, Christmas and Lebaran) become opportunities for alliance units to reaffirm the nature of their ties and maintain the orientation of the flow of life from the wife givers to the wife takers. Religious differences don't obstruct the blood tie (conveyed by the women) which links the descent groups. Kinship as a central feature which governs the social interactions stands at the basis of the harmonious cohabitation between Riung Christians and Muslims.

While Islam and Catholicism tend to be considered in the national or even international context as antagonistic, Riung people avoid treating them as opposite categories. This disposition may correspond to what Aoki has identified regarding the mountainous populations of Flores: a principle of "social adaptability and a constant dynamical negotiation of identities" (Aoki 2004 : 82-83). Among the Riung community, the ability to resolve religious differences corresponds to a pragmatic suppleness allowing a social cohesion beyond categorical borders.

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