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# The Indigenization of Catholicism on Flores

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# The Indigenization of Catholicism on Flores

by Susanne Schröter

## Introduction

From the very outset of European expansion, scholars have been preoccupied with the impact of proselytization and colonization on non-European societies. Anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski, who witnessed these processes at the beginning of the twentieth century while at the same time benefitting from the colonial structure, were convinced that the autochthonous societies could not possibly withstand the onslaught of the dominant European cultures, and thus were doomed to vanish in the near future.<sup>1</sup> The fear of losing their object of research, which had just recently been discovered, hung above the heads of the scholars like a sword of Damocles ever since the establishment of anthropology as a discipline. They felt hurried to document what seemed to be crumbling away.<sup>2</sup>

Behind these fears there was the notion that the indigenous cultures were comparatively static entities that had existed untouched by any external influences for many centuries, or even millennia, and were unable to change. This idea was shared by proponents of other disciplines; in religious studies, for example, up to the late 1980s the view prevailed that the contact between the great world religions and the belief systems of small, autochthonous societies doomed the latter to extinction.<sup>3</sup> However, more recent studies have shown that this assumption, according to which indigenous peoples have not undergone any changes in the course of history, is untenable. It became apparent that groups supposedly living in isolation have extensive contact networks, and that migration, trade, and conquest are not privileges of modern times. Myths and oral traditions bore witness of journeys to faraway regions, new settlements founded in unknown territories, or the arrival of victorious foreigners who introduced new ways and customs and laid claim to a place of their own within society.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists faced the dilemma that the subject matter of their discipline disintegrated before their very eyes at the moment when contact was established, and that they themselves were immediately involved in that process of destruction. On the nineteenth century, compare Bastian (1881); on the twentieth, Lévi-Strauss (1955, 1985:23); Malinowski (1922:XV); Mead (1972:294).

<sup>2</sup> See Kohl 1988: 252-253.

<sup>3</sup> This view was primarily due to an evolutionist theory of religion, which made a distinction between primitive and modern religions.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Graham (1996); Lewis (1988:45-69); Sahlins (1981); Traube (1986:51ff.).

## Indigenization and Resistance

Many non-European societies responded to the confrontation with colonial administrations and missions with the same flexibility they had already displayed in their reactions to pre-colonial challenges resulting from contacts between different cultures. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, indigenous cultures have by no means disappeared or faded away in a uniform global culture dominated by the West. Quite to the contrary: They creatively adopted and integrated the foreign influences, moulding them into new, indigenous forms.<sup>5</sup> Wherever proselytizing world religions established themselves during the past centuries, they adapted to the local conditions, and thus also underwent changes.<sup>6</sup> In that dynamical process, syncretistic and hybrid forms of rituals evolved, as well as creative combinations of various elements from both belief systems, reinterpretations of history, novel definitions of symbols, and new myths in which oral traditions became intertwined with the written texts recorded by the religions of the book. Frequently, parallel systems were developed that allow the local actors to make use of both the traditional and the new religion, according to the advantages each of these has to offer. Christian systems of thinking and acting became indigenized in the course of each particular proselytization process, and made compatible with local conditions and world views;<sup>7</sup> in a similar manner, this also happened with Islamic ideas.<sup>8</sup> The combination of own and foreign elements, as well as deconstructions and reconstructions of things pertaining to the 'Self' and the 'Other', finally resulted in the development of a multitude of modern indigenous cultures.<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand, this resilience on the part of the neophytes was not what the missionaries had hoped for, as they viewed proselytization as a civilatory mandate aiming at the eradication of all heathen traditions. Yet on the other hand it came as no surprise. Far-sighted missionaries had uttered some doubts regarding the

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<sup>5</sup> Social science theories reflect this phenomenon since the 1990s and focus on hybridization and 'glocalization' instead of homogenization and Westernization. See: Appadurai (1996); Robertson (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Compare Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 1993, 1997); Kohl (1986, 1988, 1995); Ranger (1994); Schoffeleers (1994).

<sup>7</sup> Compare Bediako (1996) and Byarnhanga-Akiki (1993) for African religions, Jebens (2004) for so-called cargo cults in Oceania, Houk (2004), Segato (2003) and Weingärtner (1969) for Caribbean religions. See also: Kaplan (1995); Kohl (1996, 1998:61-68).

<sup>8</sup> The example of the matrilineal Minangkabau in West Sumatra shows that even such social structures were accepted in the course of this process that are in diametrical contradiction to Arab models (compare Benda-Beckmann 1988; Kahn 1976; Sanday 2002 ).

<sup>9</sup> Towards the end of the 1980s, there was a turning point in anthropology, which became less culture-pessimistic. Instead, the focus shifted to newly emerging cultural phenomena that sometimes are also referred to as hybrid cultures (compare Comaroff and Comaroff 1993).

lastingness of their endeavours anyway, and contented themselves with counting formal adherence to Christianity as a success.<sup>10</sup>

Proselytization is an activity that is fundamentally associated with constructions of a subject reflecting itself in the 'Other'. This is a bilateral process based on ideas of the Self and the Other that mutually influence each other.<sup>11</sup> The mirroring of these images in each case determines the actors' options for action, as well as the possibilities or impossibilities of communication. In the past, this process was basically an interaction between unequal parties. The missionaries had a multitude of means at their disposal when it came to implementing their image of humanity, and enforcing compliance with that ideal among the local population. In cooperation with the colonial armies and administrations, objectionable social or religious practices could be prohibited and religious leaders be arrested. The introduction of compulsory education ensured that the missionaries had control over the socialization of the adolescent generation, and the noble intentions and commitment underlying the missionary endeavour could be demonstrated by means of special benefits, such as development aid projects or medical services. The proselytized, who were less interested in a complete absorption of the European model than in a selective integration of the Foreign into their own culture, had much fewer means at their disposal, yet these were not necessarily ineffective. This applies particularly to their skill in combining their passed-down traditions with the newly received Christian messages, and in confronting the missionaries with a convincing reinterpretation of Christianity. Within the history of appropriating and transforming the dominant Other, the balance of power was not once and for all predetermined by the social, military, and economic structures of dominance, but allowed for clever interaction on the part of those who were structurally weaker.

This was facilitated by the circumstance that the missionaries, while being interlinked with the colonial administration and sharing the latter's attitude of cultural superiority, could not adopt the strategies of the colonial masters. If their missionary work was to be successful, they needed to gain the trust of the indigenous population, which could only be achieved on the basis of a certain measure of acceptance towards local culture.<sup>12</sup> Yet such openness for the foreign was inevitably in conflict with the theological reasoning that served to justify Christianization itself – namely, the construction of a dualism between the dismal world of heathendom and the bright world of the neophytes.<sup>13</sup> Thus, a balance had to be found between missionary ideology and acceptance of the indigenous culture, as well as between the will to change and the desire to preserve. This ambivalence was more than a

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<sup>10</sup> See Dietrich 1989:224-225.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Friedman 1994:12.

<sup>12</sup> Compare Bade 1984:18.

<sup>13</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:7; Hoffmann 1984:34f.

strategic device; the written sources from everyday missionary life reveal that it also expressed an inner attitude that oscillated between fascination and disgust, and thus is very akin to the ambiguity we encounter in anthropological texts.<sup>14</sup>

This process of rapprochement was no less complex on the part of the indigenous populations. Arguments in favor of an adoption of Christianity were both of an instrumental-rational and affective nature. In postcolonial historical missiology, it has repeatedly been pointed out that by adopting the Christian faith the colonized developed a modern identity that offered them the option of upward mobility.<sup>15</sup> Other incentives for embracing a new, powerful religion were access to resources (schools, developmental aid, health care), which was facilitated by the missions, or the intention to integrate into the corpus of indigenous protective forces such as new spiritual powers as were considered efficient. Karl-Heinz Kohl (Kohl 1998:177) has pointed to ritual voids among the Lamaholot-speaking groups in eastern Flores, such as a lack of youth initiation rites. Among the Ngada of Central Flores the fear of witches and evil spirits believed to be omnipresent has given rise to a need for additional spiritual protection.<sup>16</sup> The equality of all believers, which is an inherent feature of Christianity, needs to be mentioned as a convincing argument because it was crucial in overcoming rigid caste boundaries and putting an end to local slavery.<sup>17</sup> The integration of Christianity may also have been furthered by the manifold convergences of interests between missionaries and certain groups of influential locals, such as village elders, who held a sceptical view of modern influences, regarding them as potential dangers for the social order and the maintenance of morals. In individual cases, anthropologists observed that each of the two parties used the other's structures to lend weight to its concerns. The inhabitants of eastern Flores, for example, reactivate their woman giver/woman taker relationships<sup>18</sup> within the context of the local Catholic First Communion. Another

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<sup>14</sup> Karl-Heinz Kohl (1987) once characterized this relationship between researchers and researched, which is an ever-recurrent theme in the texts of early ethnographers, as torn between 'defence and desire'.

<sup>15</sup> Gründer 1982, 1994; Thomas 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Schröter 1998, 2000b

<sup>17</sup> Both Christianity and the colonial apparatus of power have triggered processes of de-hierarchization in the local cultures through pacification and the prohibition of slavery (Schröter 2005). Among the Ngada, rigid hierarchies existed in the form of endogamous castes. In former times, sexual relations of women with lower-ranking men were punished with death; a symbolic execution is considered sufficient today (Schröter 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Compare Kohl (1998:177). Each defined kin group maintains clearly specified relationships with other groups, from which the men either obtain their wives (wife giver), or into which they marry off women belonging to their own group (wife taker). Such relationships are ranked hierarchically, with the wife givers enjoying higher status than the wife takers. Next to blood relationship, these marriage alliances are the most important social networks. They are always well established, and are renewed and perpetuated by a continuous exchange of goods (fabrics, animals, gold, rice, and the like). The

example are the joined ranks of village elders and missionaries against efforts of the younger people to abolish bridewealth, since the missionaries view that institution as crucial for ensuring compliance with existing sexual morals.

### **Between Fascination and the Will to Change: Catholic Missionaries of the *Societas Verbi Divini* on Flores**

The island of Flores, where I repeatedly conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 1994 and 2004, will serve as an example to illustrate the complex relationship between a Catholic missionary society and local cultures, and the course taken by processes of integration and indigenization in practice.<sup>19</sup> Flores is today the largest coherent settlement area of Christians in Indonesia, with more than ninety percent of the population avowing themselves to Catholicism. While first contacts between the indigenous peoples and Western missionaries occurred as early as in the sixteenth century in the course of Portuguese colonization, the influence of Catholicism remained limited to a few centers until the region was taken over by members of the order *Societas Verbi Divini* (SVD, 'Society of the Divine Word') in 1913. The SVD was assigned Flores as its proselytizing area by the Dutch colonial administration, and immediately began to unfold extensive activities, which included not only the missionization of the local population but also the establishment of a primary educational system, medical stations, pharmacies, and model farms.<sup>20</sup> As the Dutch colonial government had ruled that a school system should be established on the entire island, the priests were able to proselytize children even if the latter's parents refused to adopt the Catholic faith. That process is today remembered as a compulsory measure. The eldest among the people I talked to in the 1990s told me how they hid from the foreign whites, who wanted to forcefully drag them to school, in the forest or in storage huts. In the longer term, however, these actions of resistance were not crowned with success, and the children all over the island were compelled to attend schools and churches, where they were instructed in the foreign faith and eventually adopted the new religion. The employment of indigenous *guru agama* (religious teachers) in spreading the Catholic doctrine additionally contributed to the

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exchange of gifts usually took place in the context of traditional ceremonies (birth, initiation, wedding, death), and swallowed the entire economic resources of a group. A large part of the gifts is immediately consumed during sumptuous feasts. These rites are criticized by missionaries and government officials alike as destroying economical resources; yet all efforts to abolish them have hitherto failed.

<sup>19</sup> Two of these research projects (1995-1998, 2001-2004) were generously funded by the German Science Foundation, to which I wish to express my most cordial thanks. Without that support, my anthropological work in East Indonesia would not have been possible.

<sup>20</sup> Compare Piskaty 1964; Steenbrink 2007:77-152; Stegmaier 1974.

implementation of Catholic faith. The efforts to change the indigenous societies according to Christian ideas were backed by measures taken by the colonial government, which made unwanted social or ritual practices punishable offenses subject to military sanctions. Yet it would be wrong to assume that proselytization was a mere act of cultural rape committed on the indigenous people. Many of the new achievements were welcomed. If the indigenous healers could not help in case of sickness, people would turn to the missionaries and sisters for treatment, making use of the foreign medicines and the care given them in the medical stations maintained by the order. They also appreciated the missionaries' commitment to agriculture, such as their attempts to work against soil erosion and to cultivate new products that brought revenues as export goods (Brinkmann 2003; Prior 1988:24). By and large, the missionaries were – and still are – admired for being individuals who selflessly commit themselves to the wellbeing of others. As far as the SVD was concerned, its combined strategy of coercion and convincing altruism turned out to be an absolute formula for success, and within just a few decades of the twentieth century Flores became a 'Catholic island'.

During the first phase of missionization, which lasted until the Second Vatican Council, Evangelization first and foremost meant a battle against the indigenous cultures, and particularly against the native religions. This endeavour was justified as serving the purposes of both 'civilization' and 'humanization'. Thus, the local societies on Flores were constructed as being deficient, inhumane, and barbaric. The propagandistic movie 'Ria Rago' by Father Simon Buis, which was completed in 1930 during the climax of the first wave of proselytization, is one of the testimonies that make us realize how the media took up the stigmatization of local culture. The unhappy heroine of the movie is a young woman who refuses to comply with a forced marriage, the groom being a rich old man. She gets support from Catholic sisters and priests, and finally dies from exhaustion and the constant physical abuse inflicted on her by her parents and the inhabitants of her village. The story gets an additional air of explosiveness by the fact that the brutish, repulsive creep whom she is to be given as a wife is a Muslim while she converts to the Catholic faith.<sup>21</sup>

'Ria Rago' portrays a prototype of Catholic world view that does not only promote conversion to the Catholic faith but also a fundamental reform of the local indigenous societies. The opponents of that radical overthrow dictated from outside were clan leaders and religious experts, that is, individuals who suffered a considerable loss of power under the new order and vied with the missionaries for the prerogative of interpretation in social and religious matters. If missionary work had not been accompanied by the colonial subjugation of the region, these

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<sup>21</sup> Such films were well suited for collecting donations for the mission in Germany and the Netherlands; however, they were also screened in the proselytizing areas.

individuals would doubtlessly have frustrated the endeavour of proselytizing the entire island, which is inhabited by linguistically and culturally heterogeneous groups. With the exception of the eastern part of the island and some coastal strips, all attempts by missionaries to gain ground failed for a long time because of the resistance offered by local warlords. This changed only when the Dutch government decided to militarily conquer and occupy the region. It thus needs to be stressed that military subjugation and proselytization went hand in hand on Flores. Yet in spite of the fundamental discreditation of indigenous societies and the unconditional will to subdue the native peoples and transform their cultures, the latter did not become extinct.

On the one hand, this was due to the undaunted resilience of the population, which even after conversion did not renounce its old beliefs, but instead cognitively added Catholicism and local religions, and integrated both into a religious parallel system; in other cases, people intertwined symbols and meanings, thus developing a Catholicism of their own that itself became an environment where indigenous knowledge and practices survived. However, the survival of local traditions was also a result of the specific attitude of the SVD towards autochthonous societies, which was characterized by a certain ambivalence facilitating liberalism and tolerance.

The order was founded in 1875 by Arnold Janssen in the Dutch village of Steyl. From the very beginning, the SVD was distinguished by a certain anthropological openness, and has brought forth a number of prominent ethnologists, an anthropological school of thought, as well as several ethnological institutions that are still influential today. Since the end of the nineteenth century, ethnology and linguistics were taught at the Austrian mission house St. Gabriel, and an international journal of ethnology and linguistics named *Anthropos* was launched in 1906. The 'Anthropos-Institut' in St. Augustin, Germany, is a recognized institution of ethnological research, and the museum associated with it, the 'Haus der Völker und Kulturen' ('House of Peoples and Cultures'), has set itself the goal to 'make foreign cultures and religions accessible to people of our own cultural sphere' (SVD 2009). The founder of *Anthropos*, Father Wilhelm Schmidt, began to teach as a lecturer in physical anthropology and ethnology in Vienna in 1921, and in 1929 planted the Wiener Institut für Völkerkunde ('Vienna Institute of Ethnology'). In cooperation with Father Wilhelm Koppers, he established the 'Wiener Schule der Kulturkreislehre' ('Vienna Culture-Circle School'). The 'Vienna School' has left its imprint on the missionaries of the SVD all over the world, and can rightfully be considered as one of the intellectual predecessor of the Second Vatican Council. In contrast to anthropological evolutionism, which in the nineteenth and early twentieth century defined the societies of the colonizers as civilized and those of the colonized as barbarian, the Viennese ethnologists rejected such a linear evolutionary model. Indeed, they turned it upside down by postulating a primordial stage of humankind



that was simple in technological terms, yet characterized by a monotheistic religion, and thus morally superior to later stages of human development. Other religions were referred to by Schmidt as 'degenerate'. Empirically, the search for the 'origin of the idea of God' ('Ursprung der Gottesidee'; compare Schmidt 1926:55) turned into a search for the idealized 'monotheistic primitive people' ('monotheistische Urvölker') – an agenda that exerted great influence on German ethnology in general and the missionary activities of the order in particular. It inspired missionaries to discover evidence of the supposedly primordial monotheism among those to be proselytized; frequently, they would selectively study and interpret the local religions until the latter fit into the desired pattern. Among the Ngada, for example, missionaries exalted the male sky deity Déva to the status of a sole high God, regardless of the fact that people also venerated an earth goddess who was of equal rank with the sky god. It can be shown that there were similar attempts to discover a primeval indigenous monotheism among other peoples of Flores as well.<sup>22</sup> Whenever missionaries thought that they had discovered evidence of this primordial monotheism, they felt a profound sympathy for their potential neophytes. An elderly missionary once confessed to me that he was joyously surprised when he encountered people 'who were already Christians without being aware of it' in the proselytizing area assigned to him.

Ethnological and linguistic training in their home country had a formative influence on the missionaries, many of whom continued to work as anthropologists and linguists throughout their lives.<sup>23</sup> According to the policy of the order, the missionaries were expected to collect and record indigenous knowledge, and to become experts in the indigenous cultures. In order to gain such an expert status, they could not just go ahead and destroy these cultures root and branch, but first had to come to know and understand them. The descriptions of anthropologists such as Father Paul Arndt or Father Herrmann Bader attest that the missionaries were present at many ceremonies as participant observers, and that they listened to their local consultants. In perfect accordance with an ethical principle that was not to become popular until the late 1980s, they allowed their informants to have their say, and created ethnographies that are literally polyphonic, elucidating one and the same topic from the most diverse perspectives. Yet the policy of the order did not only stipulate an ethnological conservation of the foreign cultures, but also the preservation of traits that were viewed as positive. While the missionaries wanted to proselytize, they did not want to be destructive in that process. They appreciated the community spirit encountered in the foreign cultures, the respect accorded the elders,

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<sup>22</sup> Compare Arndt 1939; Verheijen 1951.

<sup>23</sup> In particular, the priests Paul Arndt, Herrmann Bader, Willem van Bekkum, and Jilis Verheijlen were noted scholars. Their journal articles and monographs are considered to be basic works up to this day, and are used as class readings in Florinese schools.

the honour paid to the deceased, and they were full of admiration for most of the material culture. Given this attitude, they sympathized with certain customs, an example being the ancestor cult, which they viewed as imbued with an ethical principle that they did not want to fall victim to modernity. However, there was much less tolerance towards customs and beliefs that were regarded as negative, with the result that many of the rites and practices described by Arndt, Bader, Ettel, Rozing, and others<sup>24</sup> have ceased to exist. Thus, we also need to note that unwelcome elements of culture were deliberately eradicated.

In spite of its contradictory attitudes towards the local cultures, the *Societas Verbi Divini* offered a favorable environment for a type of missionary who was very akin to an anthropologist, and often made no secret of his fascination with the local cultures. In some cases, this openness and acceptance even reached an intensity that was considered scandalous in Rome. Willem van Bekkum, for example, the former bishop of the city of Ruteng in West Flores, already questioned the appropriateness of Latin rites at the first international congress on pastoral liturgy held in 1956, and decidedly voted for an attitude of appreciation and respect towards autochthonous cultures.<sup>25</sup> Van Bekkum was notorious for his indigenizations of mass, particularly his practice of celebrating *misa kerbau* ('buffalo mass') that brought him harsh criticism from among the clergy.

At the Second Vatican Council, priests of van Beckum's stamp came out successful all along the line, and the Catholic Church underwent a programmatic change towards 'inculturation', cross-cultural dialogue, and an acceptance of the 'Other'. This inspired missionaries to introduce further integrative approaches. Indigenous languages have found their way into liturgy in many places on Flores; adaptations of local dances are performed during mass, and bold experiments are undertaken in the construction and furnishing of churches: German and Dutch missionaries began to build pulpits from sacred megaliths. They put up ancestor figures next to the altar, or modelled the place of worship after sacred clan houses. In all Florinese communities, the ordination of new priests is a ritual that has been reinvented and now combines Christian and local elements, including sacrifices of pigs and divinations from the intestines of the animals killed. One missionary who was venerated beyond measure by his parishioners used to draw crosses on the foreheads of his patients during curing ceremonies, with the blood of sacrificed animals serving as paint. Before speaking a Catholic blessing on his private native-style residence, he had it consecrated by an indigenous priest according to the traditional local ritual. This old priest often discussed his proclivity to (partial) cultural deflection with the business manager of a foundation he had established, a young

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<sup>24</sup> Compare Arndt (1929/30, 1929/31, 1932, 1933, 1936/37, 1939, 1944, 1954, 1956a, 1958, 1959/1/b, 1960a/b, 1963); Bader (1954, 1968); Ettel (1966); Rozing (1961).

<sup>25</sup> Compare Bekkum (1957a, 1957b, 1958).

woman who coordinated his numerous social projects. She originates from one of the local ethnic groups, and was just as fascinated by the European Catholic rites as the missionary was by the local traditions. And thus the woman from Flores argued fervently in favor of Latin mass and Gregorian chants, while the German priest praised the beauty of the indigenous language and the musical performances of the Florinese.

These winsome gestures and culturally sensitive attitudes notwithstanding, there are also moments when foreign and indigenous clerics repressively encroach on local customs. Above all, they lack understanding of the local marriage practices. Marriages are often preceded by years of negotiation between the bride givers and the bride takers. Often will couples already have several children before an agreement is reached, and in many cases they separate without any agreement, despite of having mutual children. The church will then punish the young women, who cannot hide their 'sin' of non-marital motherhood, by excluding them from communion. Matrifocal structures, as found among the Ngada, are also a bone of contention time and again because they are not in accordance with the missionaries' patriarchal image of the family.

### **The Ngada of Central Flores: Traditionalists and Catholics**

How did, and do, the indigenous peoples make use of these conditions, which on the one hand imposed foreign customs and beliefs upon them, yet on the other hand offered them a multitude of opportunities to preserve their own customs, or to at least keep to them in a modified form? In the following, I will change perspectives from the proselytizers to those who were proselytized, and explain how the latter integrated the foreign faith into their systems of thinking and acting, how they took advantage of the advent of a religion that was dominant in political and military terms, and how they were forced to play 'hide-and-seek' games, to retreat, or to abandon rituals and traditions altogether. The Ngada will serve as an example; they are an ethnic group living in the mountains and on a small coastal strip of Central Flores, and I have become acquainted with them during several long-term and short-term field research trips undertaken over the course of many years.

The Ngada count among those ethnic groups in Indonesia that are most conscious of tradition. They keep to many things that have long fallen into oblivion in other places, and they have developed a number of strategies that enabled them to hold on to their customs. Since the late 1990s, they have also been manifesting a very obvious re-traditionalization. In spite of an awareness and appreciation of their own *adat*, it goes without saying that their culture is not the same that it was one hundred years ago. Many ceremonies are irretrievably lost, and novel ideas reach

even the most remote villages, carried by television and radio, returning migrants, tourists, government officials, and priests. Yet as compared to other parts of Indonesia these influences of modernity and globalization are slight, because the rainy, cool highlands of middle Flores are geographically marginal and economically unattractive. For lack of 'modern' jobs, the majority of the population subsists on what they cultivate on the steep mountain slopes and the few existing plateaus: Corn, beans, and sweet potatoes, as well as yams, vegetables, spices, and occasionally also mountain rice. Bananas and coconut palms grow in the coastal regions, while bamboo, which is needed in the building of huts and stables, thrives in the mountains. Whatever people do not consume themselves, is sold on regional markets, or bartered for other goods. The need for animal protein is satisfied by eating fish, dogs, chicken, goats, and pork; this diet is sometimes supplemented by the meat of horses and water buffaloes. Meat is too precious to be consumed daily, and thus is only served on exceptional occasions. Pigs and water buffaloes are only killed within ritual contexts.

The Ngada live in ritual villages, so-called *nua*, which are associated with the ancestors of individual clans. Each parental couple of clan ancestors is represented by two wooden shrines: The female ancestress is venerated in the form of a miniature hut, which is a diminutive copy of a descent group's ceremonial house, or rather of the sacred center (*oné sa'o*) of the latter. Vis-à-vis the uterine shrine of the woman stands the phallic personification of the male ancestor, an anthropomorphic pole that threateningly brandishes a sword and a spear.<sup>26</sup> The shrines of the clan ancestors are the centers of the *nua* and testify, in combination with the megalithic burial places, to the vibrancy of an autochthonous culture<sup>27</sup> that long was oppressed by the Indonesian central government for being barbarian and backward. Nowadays settlement groups that each consist of several *nua* have become concentrated in a new administrative unit, the *desa* (village). In these large settlements, which sometimes are inhabited by up to 1,000 people, new centers have developed, replacing the old ones in some respects. The center of the *desa* Langa where I conducted my fieldwork is marked by the Catholic Church – a magnificent white, rotund building located next to the local soccer field, the primary school, and a large kiosk that sells candies to the children and cigarettes to the men. Every Sunday people will wander to this new hub of rural life, the men dressed up in ironed shirts, the women wearing colorful barrettes made of plastic; before and after Mass they linger on the forecourt of the church, exchange the latest gossip and chit-chat, and then watch a game of football or volleyball in the afternoon.

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<sup>26</sup> On the gender symbolism in architecture, compare Schröter (1997b).

<sup>27</sup> On the social structure of the Ngada, compare Schröter (2000, 2007).

The Ngada are good Christians who fulfil their obligations as members of the Catholic Church with a great deal of enthusiasm. Yet at the same time they are good traditionalists whose greatest fear is to be punished by the ancestors – a punishment that is inevitably meted out if the ancient rules are transgressed. Just as the Church mandatorily prescribes the performance of certain ceremonies, the ancestors demand that certain specific rituals be performed. In order to satisfy both powers, the Ngada have developed a religious parallel system by means of which they try to combine the advantages of the Christian faith with those of their traditional belief system.<sup>28</sup> They have their children baptized, celebrate Catholic communion, and have accepted Christmas and Easter as new ritual complexes; they weep during the Passion Week, meet every evening during the Marian months, and speak Christian prayers at funerals. Yet they also perform their local rituals that both structure the course of the year and accompany the passages occurring within the individual's life. Weddings and funerals each consist of two separate ceremonial complexes: a Catholic and a local one. The ancient initiation rites have been completely replaced by a Catholic celebration, which, however, has been perfectly adapted to indigenous concepts.

While not always being without conflicts, the process of integration is successful; it is affected by means of de- and reconstructions of cultural elements, reinvention of rituals and symbols, as well as camouflage and additions. In the following, this process will be illustrated using the example of the annual ritual cycle.

### **The Ngada Ritual Cycle**

Both the annual ritual cycle and its climax, the so-called *reba* ceremonies,<sup>29</sup> are associated with the myth relating to the cultural hero Sili Ana Wunga, who is considered to be the 'inventor' of the ritual and whose story is told in songs and recitations during the festivities. Other texts focus on other heroes and heroines, some of whom are venerated as the progenitors and progenitresses of all Ngada, while others are merely revered as local ancestors. The clan membership of certain heroes is used by local groups to justify not only ritual claims, but also such regarding land rights and status. All things that are still of importance today came into being with the settlement of the land by the ancestors, whose names and deeds are recalled during the *reba*. The myths tell that the ancestors once came from across the sea in large canoes; upon having arrived at the coast, they gradually took possession of the land. The *reba* cycle reconstructs their migrations and mimetically re-enacts the events

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<sup>28</sup> On this subject, compare also Schröter (1998a, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> A more detailed analysis of the *reba* complex is found in Schröter (2002a).

that took place in those ancient times. The villages located south of Langa begin to perform the *reba* ceremonies as early as in November. Langa opens its cycle season at the end of December, and it is not until February that *reba* reaches the last villages in the highlands.<sup>30</sup> *Reba* is a ceremonial complex of the rainy season and besides many other functions originally was also a ritual that served to manipulate the weathers. Nowadays, scientific findings on rain and storm clash with the views held by the elders, yet people believe that by faithfully keeping to the rites they are 'on the safe side'. The *reba* does not only illustrate how people deal with Catholicism, but also how they cope with the challenges posed by the modern Indonesian state.

While the first part of the *reba* is opened by Catholic prayers, it subsequently conforms to an indigenous procedure: It consists of two opening ceremonies that each last one day, and are held outside the villages at a site associated with the ancestors of the ruling clan of the region. The members of that clan celebrate the rites on behalf of all others, and thus reaffirm their ritual leadership position. In return for these services, the community has to supply them with chickens that are then sacrificed and consumed during the festivities. The poultry is not just handed over, but hunted down by the young men who are dressed as traditional warriors; armed with sticks, they prowl through the villages and finish off any chicken they catch sight of. Once they have bagged enough chickens, they move on into the forest. The rituals practiced there include offerings to the ancestors, blessings, dances, and songs invoking the growth of yams, which formerly was the most important crop. There is also a common meal that the spirits of the ancestors are invited to join. The first ritual is concluded by the proclamation of a taboo that will be in force during the entire rainy season: the prohibition on consuming fish, coconuts, and all other fresh produce coming from the coast. 'Coast' in this context refers exclusively to the southern coast of Flores, the direction whence come the monsoon storms that may carry fructifying rain, but also devastating tempests. Whenever wind and water are raging excessively, trees will fall over and crush people, earth slopes will slide, and corn, the most important crop of the Ngada and already grown to half its final height by that time, will be destroyed completely. By going without all produce coming from that direction, people hope to pacify the forces of nature.

These rites, and others that are performed in the forest, are followed by ceremonies that center on the *nua*, or clan house. Each kin group has fattened pigs, bought rice, and purchased sufficient quantities of palm liquor for these events that last three days. All members assemble at the ancestral house of the group, which simultaneously functions as a place of emotional reference, materialized genealogy, and temple. The Ngada are a so-called house society as defined by Claude Lévi-

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<sup>30</sup> In addition to the *reba*, which is characterized by a great uniformity of its ritual corpus, the communities also have specific, individual local rites, such as a ceremony aimed at the destruction of yams pests that is held during the dry season.

Strauss (1975); such societies are common in the Austronesian culture area<sup>31</sup>, and the *sa'o méze*, the ancestral house, embodies a multitude of social, political, psychological, and cosmological attributions and meanings. *Reba* is a festivity of the house. It ensures cohesion among those group members who have temporarily or permanently migrated to other islands or foreign countries. Whoever can arrange it will come from Java, Bali, or Timor, where there are migrant communities, to the ancestral house of his or her kin group. Those who cannot attend are integrated into the community by the recitation of their names and a 'spit' blessing. Besides the living, the dead are remembered. People present offerings to the megaliths of the fields, the wooden shrines in the center of each village, and certain places inside the houses where spirits like to alight. Candles are lighted on the tombs of those deceased who have received a Christian burial. As in all rituals of the Ngada, the inclusion of the ancestors goes beyond a formalized remembrance: The doors are opened, and the ancestors are invited to join the festivities of their descendants. They are viewed as being definitely present, and only on the last day will they bid farewell to the living again.

Yet the *reba* does not only facilitate the cohesion of the house community; its communitarian aspect extends to the clan, the village, and the entire system of villages. During the *reba* members of the individual houses visit each other and consume communal meals. Affinal relatives are visited as well. Because of the numerous family relationships that thus need to be reaffirmed and strengthened in the course of three days, the ritual actions largely consist of constant eating, a veritable gluttony. On a broader level, cohesion is affected by communal dances that once again evoke the growth of yams and recount the story of the culture hero.

So far, the *reba* rites are in accordance with *adat*, that is, the local tradition. Unlike in other rituals, particularly curing ceremonies, no one speaks Christian prayers or crosses himself. Yet it would be surprising if a ritual like the *reba*, with its pronounced focus on the establishment of community, did completely negate the Catholic priests and the mythical ancestors of Christianity. In order to integrate these important new ancestors and to pay tribute to the ties with the church representatives, people have devised a new rite: *reba umum* ('public *reba*'), which meanwhile has become an institution within the indigenous ceremonial complex. *Reba umum* is celebrated each year in a different *nua*'s village square, which as a visible expression of modernity is decorated in the style of Indonesian mega events. A bamboo platform is built on the front end of the square, adorned with colorful paper banderols and banners, and roofed with plastic tarps as a protection against the frequent rains. The long sides are covered as well, and in addition – if possible – furnished with chairs. Illustrious guests are invited to the festivities: uniformed

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<sup>31</sup> Compare Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995), Fox (1993), Waterson (1989).

officials and stylishly dressed inhabitants of the district capital form an odd contrast to the villagers who are wearing well-worn wrap skirts. This event, which attracts a large crowd, is a mixture of Catholic mass, traditional ritual, governmental event, and folkloristic performance. Lay priests will speak Christian prayers in Indonesian, recite verses from Ngada rituals in the Ngada language, and a chorus assembled in front of the platform sings Christian hymns in Ngada. It is interesting to note here that the Christian-Indonesian lyrics are composed in a parallel-verse technique (compare Fox 1988) commonly used for ritual verses in all of eastern Indonesia and thus exhibit a traditional syntax, whereas the traditional Ngada lyrics borrow from Christian ritual and refer to Christ as a yams hero, that is, a modern twin of the culture hero Sili Ana Wunga.

The remembrance of the time when yams was consumed is a reconstruction of people's own history. When the female dancers sing 'yams of Sili Ana Wunga', they evoke both remembrance and a presence of the past. People strive to transpose the time of the ancestors performatively into the present. They wear the clothes of the ancestors, put aside chairs and modern furniture, sit on woven mats, and eat with their fingers from basketry bowls. By means of these enactments a ritual space is created where the boundaries between the living and the dead, between the present and the past, are lifted. The Ngada know different types of times and different ways to create these. Cyclical time is in accordance with the seasons, biographical time corresponds to the life of the individuals, intergenerational time mirrors genealogy, linear time reflects the modern calendar, and last but not least there is the cosmic time of the myths. Each of these times only exists through and within social practices that establish them. Cosmic time, which alone can answer questions relating to origins and basic collective identity, is created through ritual and the recitation of conceptualizations that in turn evoke myths and stories. One of these conceptualizations is the yams of the *reba*, the yams of Sili Ana Wunga. It is detached from the present in a very immediate manner, and functions as an intermediary connecting people with a mythical past. Yet this past is not constructed as contradicting the Catholic present. In the *reba umum*, the most progressive part of the *reba*, yams is not only associated with Sili Ana Wunga, but also with Jesus Christ. Here a second, modern genealogy has emerged, which consigns Christ to the ranks of the mythical ancestors of the Ngada, and links their story with that of the Bible in a very basic manner.

The chorus, consisting of women and men in complete ritual attire, underscores its hymns with meticulously orchestrated dance movements that have been rehearsed for weeks prior to the event. This rather rigid choreography differs strikingly from the improvised dances performed by the Ngada during other *reba* rituals, and the lyrics lack the ribald improvisations of the women, their sung provocations and innuendoes. The *reba umum* is very perfect, very decent, and – as



is impressively evidenced by the large audiences it attracts – obviously very entertaining. The climax of the whole event is communion; this is the only time when the local missionary, who has hitherto kept in the background, becomes active. After some concluding prayers the crowd scatters again, and everyone retires to his ancestral house to have a meal there in the midst of his family.

The conclusion of the *reba* cycle is marked by collecting the bones of the animals that have been killed, and taking them to the forest. They are an offering to ill-humoured spirits, souls of the dead that buzz in the air, and other creatures of the spiritual world that lie in wait in lonesome places and skulk around the houses of the people, eager to bring sickness and death.

Christian/modern and local ritual traditions are associated with different concepts of time: while the Christian rituals conform to the Gregorian calendar, the rituals of the Ngada go by the lunar year and the appearance of certain celestial bodies. It is not always possible to add the different manners of counting cumulatively, particularly when the local calendar is variable. The *reba* ceremonies usually begin in December, and the exact date for this was traditionally determined by the positions of Sirius and Antares. Both heavenly bodies were regarded as mythical ancestors of the Ngada, and their appearance is connected with a remembrance of people's own roots and the passing down of history. In the past, astrologists every year anew determined the date when the ceremony was to begin, because the position of the celestial bodies varied from one year to the next. In the course of Christianization, the temporal proximity between these rites and Christmas became a problem; it was feared that the *reba* might interfere with the Christian holiday. The search for a solution of this problem ended in a fixation of the hitherto variable calendar regulating the traditional ritual complex. Thus, it is nowadays possible to name a definite date for the beginning of the rites, irrespective of the journeys of Sirius and Antares, which consequently fall more and more into oblivion. Only the old people still have knowledge of the story relating to the two heavenly bodies that are imagined as incestuous siblings; as it seems to make no sense to hand it down any longer, this story is gradually getting lost.

The *reba* briefly sketched above is merely one element of a fulminate ritual system used by the Ngada to integrate the 'Foreign' into the 'Own'. As is well known, community is established and renewed by means of rituals (Turner 1989). In that process, the dramatical performances help to act out smouldering conflicts, or even to settle them. This aspect plays an important role in the *reba* as well. All members of a kin group are ideally expected to assemble in the ancestral house during the festivities, and to jointly celebrate the rituals. All disputes should be resolved, and harmony restored. Those who cannot participate in person due to temporary migration are remembered by calling out their names. The deceased are invited to join the feast, and the neighbours are visited. People sacrifice pigs and chickens and

indulge in gluttonous banquets that last for days, where plenty of meat and palm liquor are served. Those who are more affluent contribute more, and those who are poor get what they lack. People celebrate *communitas*, the common bond shared within the community. At the same time they reassure themselves of their own culture, renew ritual and mythological knowledge, and offer the younger generation the opportunity to learn the complicated verses and to become acquainted with the old stories. According to the Ngada, the *reba* is an essential element of their culture, and it is the ritual they miss most when they are living abroad. In order to also integrate their new culture, Catholicism, they have developed the *reba umum* and thus demonstrated their efforts towards such an act of integration, as well as their willingness to compromise. Yet all these well-meant endeavors might have come to naught if the missionaries had not met the Ngada half way. The *reba* unquestionably is a ritual pertaining to the ancestor cult. The deceased and the spirits are presented with offerings, they are invited to join the festivities, and people firmly believe in their presence. This may be condemned as being unchristian, and indeed Islamic and Protestant missionary societies have crusaded against such alleged 'superstitions' with ardent zeal in other parts of Indonesia. The priests of the Societas Verbi Divini were more circumspect. They grasped the importance of the ancestor cult as a factor that strengthened family and relational bonds, and they realized that to preserve that cult also meant to maintain a moral authority that watches over people's compliance with useful rules. They deliberately ignored the magical practices employed during the *reba* to propitiate the weather, to stimulate the growth of the plants, and the like, and let the magician priests have their way. This, too, was a wise decision that did not dampen the deep Catholic religiosity of the people, because the magicians and masters of rituals are often the most fervent catechists who delight in telling biblical stories and the ancient myths alike.

## Conclusions

On the island of Flores, and particularly among the Ngada, the priests of the SVD allowed a religious parallel system to develop, which they even supported by arguing in its favor. Missionaries repeatedly explained to me that at the core of the ancestor cult there is nothing other but the Catholic veneration of saints, and thus this cult is of high moral value. Yet not all religious practices are compatible with Catholicism, and thus some evade a rhetorical reinterpretation. These are not performed right in front of the missionaries; the latter regard as non-existent what they do not see, and manifest little interest in disclosing the last hidden secrets of the local cultures. In our conversations, many priests purported that they did not know anything about those rituals that are being performed outside a churchly context. A

third group of rituals and doctrines is characterized by amalgamations and syncretisms, combinations of indigenous and Christian symbols, decontextualizations of matters of faith, and reinterpretations of stories, myths, and historical genealogies.<sup>32</sup>

This model includes a partial separation of worlds that is facilitated by the Indonesian language, which can terminologically distinguish between *agama* and *adat*.<sup>33</sup> In the context under discussion here, *agama*, 'religion', means Catholicism, and upon being asked about his religious affiliation every Ngada will fervently avow himself to be a Catholic. This affiliation does by no means conflict with his tradition, with the rural practices, the belief in spirits, particular concepts relating to the ancestors, and with the obligation to perform an infinite multitude of rituals and sacrifices in order to maintain balance within the world. All that is *adat*, and thus the indigenous population holds the view that it has absolutely nothing to do with *agama*. As long as the priests and sisters accept this differentiation, the system continues to exist – and the members of the order are well advised not to undermine it, as the Catholic identity is important on Flores. This identity helps people to stand out against both the Muslim majority of the population and Protestant groups. Catholicism is the bond that unites members of the diverse language groups living on the island, who up to this day distrust each other because of their differing cultural practices. Those who do not belong to one's own group are still considered to be witches and to practice black magic, and bizarre rumors still circulate about their secret rituals. While the ethnic groups on Flores are divided by their respective local customs and traditions – that is, by *adat* –, they are united by *agama*. Catholicism has meanwhile become a regional identity that interconnects the inhabitants of the island; it has established a common ground that helps to overcome differences.

All local Florinese societies have tried to incorporate Christianity into their cultures in a comparable manner, and to combine it with their autochthonous religion. They try to benefit from both belief systems, and strive to avert damages that might result from any potential neglect of ritual duties towards the ancestors and spirit beings.<sup>34</sup> They are performing a balancing act that requires considerable creative potential. Florinese religion is a living religion with a multitude of local variations, and

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<sup>32</sup> One example of such reinterpetative attempts is the establishment of links between of biblical and local genealogies in order to substantiate the descent of one's own mythical heroes from Abraham.

<sup>33</sup> In line with the indigenous parallelism of *agama* and *adat*, there existed (and still exists) a division of labor between priests and anthropologists. Some of the latter focussed exclusively on non-Christian aspects, and thus some monographs (compare, for example, Barnes 1974; Lewis 1988) conjure up the image of a supposedly pre-Christian timelessness that has little to do with reality.

<sup>34</sup> Compare, for example, Erb (1987, 1991, 1993, 1996); Forth (1989, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998); Graham (1994); Kohl (1986, 1988, 1990, 1995, 1998); Tule (2001); Wackers (1997). On the complex involving black magic and the ritual manner of coping with spiritual threats among the Ngada, compare Schröter (1998a, 2000b).

it undergoes a constant process of development. New dances, songs, and stories are emerging all the time. In contrast to the assertions of Frits Staal (1979, 1989), Caroline Humphrey, and James Laidlaw (1994) with regard to India, neither the Ngada nor any other ethnic groups on Flores are practising meaningless archaic rituals that long have ceased to make any sense, as the challenge posed by Catholicism does not allow them to be that rigid. They modernize rituals, recontextualize ritual symbols, and create new meanings whenever changed social structures require it.

At least in this respect they are not passive victims of world history but actors who manage to participate in modernity without losing their roots.

