

CAKALELE, VOL. 7 (1996): 79–92 © Glenn Dolcemascolo

## FOREIGN ENCOUNTERS IN AN ARUESE LANDSCAPE

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*Standing at the edge of everything—you, me and the landscape*  
—Taufiq Ismael, 1992

### **Introduction**

Last year while traveling in the Eastern Indonesian island of Aru, I heard a curious story. A village elder explained that Aru's most precious resources, including pearls and sago, were produced from the body of a wandering Chinese woman. He pointed out that the Aruese were indebted to the Chinese for their generosity, a debt which is fulfilled through the ongoing trade relations with local Chinese merchants. Obviously, this trade has affected local patterns of resource exploitation and led to practices that have shaped the contemporary landscape. The perpetuation of this belief in the Chinese origins of key resources may have had more profound implications for the Aruese landscape. Certain elements of the environment have been infused with new meanings and thus have affected transformations in the world as seen by the local people. The Aruese landscape continues to change with the introduction of new beliefs and practices.

Many foreigners, not only the Chinese, have journeyed to the remote islands of Aru in Southeast Maluku throughout history. Traders and merchants came in search of exotic birds and precious pearls while Christian missionaries and state bureaucrats, in their turn, each came to Aru to pursue their own missions. Today, international fishing fleets have come to harvest Aru's abundant marine life while migrants from throughout the region continue to settle in coastal villages throughout the archipelago. Although time has erased the traces of many visitors and migrants, others have left a more enduring imprint on the land and in the minds of the people. In the following pages, I offer a general ethnographic account of a village on the island of Wokam and sketch some of the many influences that have shaped the Aruese landscape.

The archipelago is situated on the Sahul shelf, the submerged extension of the Australian continental shelf that lies beneath the Arafura Sea. Six low-lying islands—Kola, Wokam, Kobroor, Maikor, Koba, and Trangan—segmented by a series of deep channels, comprise the primary land mass. While the northern islands are cloaked in rainforest and fringed by mangroves, on the southern island of Trangan the forest cover is interrupted by savanna. Aru's population of about 54,000 is spread out among the 122 villages that line Aru's coasts and waterways (Kilmanun 1993).

### Notes on the journey

The difficulty of traveling in the region delayed my arrival in Aru's administrative center, Dobo. I knew I would only have a few weeks to conduct preliminary surveys on the use of palm sago (*Metroxolyn sago*) as part of the Sago Project, a joint venture between the University of Hawai'i and Universitas Pattimura in Ambon. As I disembarked from the ferry, the chaos of urban life tumbled before me. Speeding cars, sidewalk vendors, and school children collided in a traffic accident as onlookers complained that the streets were no longer safe. Leaving the scene, I was accosted with offers to have pearls implanted in my body and invitations to the *lokalisasi*, or red-light district.

On the ferry ride from Kei, I had been warned of the prevalence of AIDS in Dobo. Nevertheless, several locals tried to convince me that the *lokalisasi* were disease-free. Local wisdom attributes the spread of AIDS to foreign fishermen and so, with the assistance of the police, most foreigners are barred from the brothels. The creation of a space reserved for locals suggested one way in which the arrival of foreigners can influence the Aruese landscape. Unwilling to investigate the phenomenon, I continued on to my hotel.

The next morning I set off in search of sago. Although rice consumption has increased in recent years (Kilmanun 1993), most Aruese continue to rely on this prolific palm for subsistence and almost any village might have stories to tell about the sago palm. A local forestry official said that *adat* (customary law) was still strong on the nearby island of Wokam. I could see the dense forest on the low-lying island across the channel and it seemed to be a fine destination.

I secured passage with a local fisherman and motored off. Also on board were the tails and fins of some 50 small sharks; the remainder of each carcass had been cast out to sea, apparently too costly to bring to market.

Another passenger lamented that shark fishing had become more difficult in recent years; competition with larger commercial fishing operations had led to lower yields and smaller sharks. I later learned that similar conditions have affected local populations of dugong (sea cow), trepang (sea cucumber), grouper, and green turtles (Persoon & De Groot 1995). The man pointed out that the forests were also under pressure from commercial interests. Evidently, P. T. Budi Daya had recently claimed Aru's first logging concession in the interior forests of Wokam. When we reached the shore a half-hour later, I was invited to my new acquaintance's village and offered a large bowl of *papeda*, or sago porridge.

The village of Wokam, on the island of the same name, is quite large by Aruese standards. About 420 residents were distributed among three hamlets, 107 households in all, about half of which were located in the main hamlet. Houses built entirely of sago palm lined the well-swept village lanes, and colorful ornamentals filled the front yards. A few homes were built of wood and capped with tin roofs. Chickens roamed freely and occasionally I found a domestic pig tied to a post and feeding on a sago log. The village was fringed by coconut groves laced with trails that led to swidden patches, sago groves, and the dense forest beyond. Long dugout canoes equipped with outboard motors rested on the beach, while fishing boats of odd shapes could be seen plying the waters beyond the shallow reef.

Despite the natural wealth of the region, Wokam is among the poorest villages in Indonesia. Access to fresh water is limited, particularly during the dry season from May through December. Malaria is a common cause of death and the local population is plagued by hookworms and tuberculosis. The local economy is primarily subsistence-based and villagers are frequently in debt to Chinese merchants. The community was recently included in a national poverty alleviation program, *Desa Tertinggal* (Villages Left Behind). Wokam used the money granted through this program to buy a small generator, which has unfortunately been out of service for over a year. I was told that, had it been working, I would be able to sing karaoke in the home of the *kepala desa*. Despite the inconvenient lack of electricity, I felt relieved.

The morning after I arrived, my friend invited me to hunt pigs in the forests surrounding a nearby Muslim village, but it was a Sunday and I thought it best to attend church and meet the locals. The islands of Aru are predominately Christian—about 90% Protestant, 6% Catholic, and 4%

Muslim (Kilmanaun 1993)—and the village of Wokam appeared particularly proud of its Christian heritage. Villagers explained piously that their community was the first in Aru to accept Protestant missionaries in the 1920s, and they quizzed me on my knowledge of the Apostle's Creed. The tiny church was quite obviously the central focus of village life. After the sermon, the village secretary announced the opening and closing of *sasi* restrictions and other news of relevance to the community. Furthermore, as locals were quick to point out, relatives in the Netherlands send remittances to the church. The money is used for various public works, such as the community's only latrine, located in the churchyard. Commenting on the many contributions of the church to their community, one man pointed out that the missionaries had wisely prohibited the extravagant traditional funerary rites because these were seen as a waste of money and valuable resources. Apparently the congregation complied. A few days later I was to witness a funeral in the village of Durijela that resembled any service I might find in my own hometown, with the exception that here rites were administered by a young woman. However, despite the injunctions of church authorities, remnants of traditional beliefs would soon surface in other ways.

#### **A syncretic view of the Aruese landscape**

After church that first Sunday, as I walked—again accompanied by my host—through an orchard just beyond the last house in the village, I encountered a curious bottle filled with a murky liquid hanging from a *jambu* tree (*Syzigium sp.*). My companion explained that the bottle was the sign of *sasi adat* (traditional prohibition).

The *sasi*, a system of ritual prohibitions common throughout Maluku, functions to regulate the timing of access to local resources. On the island of Wokam, these resources included sago fronds, fruit trees, and certain marine resources such as trepang (sea cucumber) and *lola* (*Trochus sp.*). In addition to restricting access to common pool resources, any member of the community can for a token fee request that a *sasi* be placed on his or her own crops. Traditionally, the prohibitions were administered by a ritual leader, the *tuan tanah* (lord of the land), who was assisted by the *kewang* (corps of monitors) (Rahail 1993). Local resources were linked to various legends that explained their origins. Resource use patterns reflected the fulfillment of the obligations of humans to the spirits who offered these gifts (Kissya 1995).

However, this system has changed substantially from its earlier forms. In more recent years, *sasi* has come under the jurisdiction of the church and village bureaucrats (Zerner 1996, Benda-Beckmann et al. 1995). Traditional beliefs in the sacred world of spirits were unacceptable to Protestant missionaries. The Aruese were instructed in Christian perspectives on man's rightful place in and relationship to nature. Missionaries inculcated a proper sense of responsibility in the congregation. The state, on the other hand, offered differing views on the proper relations between villagers and the lands that surrounded them (see Dove 1987 and Peluso 1992).

I should point out that it is easy to oversimplify these perspectives and difficult to correlate the introduction of new ideas to specific changes in local practices, particularly in the absence of substantial field data. My point here is simply that these new ideas were somehow incorporated into the Aruese world view and thus affected the way in which the Aruese viewed the landscape. New ideas augmented the cultural meanings associated with elements of the world around them.

Despite the introduction of these new forms of resource management, remnants of earlier forms persist today. Those who violate *sasi geredja* (church prohibitions) incur monetary fines, but those who violate *sasi adat* invite supernatural sanctions, which reportedly range from severe stomachaches to having the penis relocated to the forehead. The local population must negotiate among these conflicting views of the world. In her examination of traditional and state rituals, Patricia Spyer (1996) points out that disjunctive meanings may exist concurrently and that local people must come up with innovative ways of harmonizing competing perspectives in practice.

After my companion explained the *sasi* taboo, we continued to walk until we reached a small *walang* in a coconut grove. There we joined his son beneath the shade of a covered drying platform and helped to prepare the copra for market. As we worked, the old man told me this story:

Once upon a time, after all the people had been eaten by a terrific crocodile, a Chinese brother and sister came to live on the island of Lelar. They lived by the shore, gathering *lola* and trepang from the *meti*; there was no other food to be had. One day a mysterious man arrived, no one knows from where. They became quick friends and when they had gathered enough *lola* and trepang, they returned to China, where these things were needed. Eventually they came back to Lelar. One day the men went to gather *lola* and trepang, but the woman stayed at home. When the men returned, the sister had

already prepared a large feast. This shocked the men, who knew that the only place to find food was at the *meti*. The next day the men told the sister that they were going to the *meti* and left the house. The two men hid themselves and watched the woman. Soon, they discovered that she could produce food from her vagina. The men were frightened and decided to kill her. Before she was killed, the sister told them that they should cut out her vagina and throw it into the ocean and that they should leave her body on land. The men obeyed. Immediately, pearls formed beneath the water. The *lola* were transformed into women and the *trepang* into men. From her body, two forms of sago sprang up: the *kor-kor* was spiny as a man; the *molad* was smooth as a woman.

As he finished his story, he pointed out that the Aruese continue to be indebted to the Chinese for these gifts.

We finished filling the huge burlap sacks with the dried copra, hefted them to our shoulders, returned to the village, and loaded the copra aboard a canoe for transport to the Chinese merchant in Dobo.

Considering the trade relations between local villagers and Chinese merchants, this debt has a double meaning. From the Aruese perspective, the Chinese, by virtue of their association with the legendary brother and sister, are entitled to some claim to Aruese resources. Although these rights are not clearly defined, it is the Chinese rather than the Aruese who often set the prices for the local harvest. From the Chinese perspective, the Aruese are indeed indebted; local people are in debt for the many consumer goods, equipment, and money loaned to them by their Chinese brothers (Spyer 1997).

Trade relations with the Chinese and the concomitant economic practices have helped to shape the contemporary landscape. While the flow of people from foreign lands has shaped the Aruese environment and influenced the way that the Aruese view the world around them, the flow of people from within the Maluku region has been influential in this regard as well.

### **Regional linkages**

Over the course of the next week I interviewed about two dozen households and was immediately impressed by the ethnic complexity of the village. I had heard somewhere that Aru's indigenous people called themselves the Jarjui, and I, eager to set my observations about sago within proper ethnographic context, inquired as to the Jarjui's whereabouts. The responses surprised me somewhat. One man replied that some time ago they had fled

inland, where they continue to follow the ways of the ancestors. The *kepala desa*, on the other hand, explained that he himself was Jarjui. He further pointed out that only five Jarjui clans remain in Wokam, but that only one clan had not intermarried with other ethnic groups. During my stay, I heard only one unsolicited reference to the Jarjui. An old man sang the following song in the language of Wokam and translated it into Indonesian for me.

<b>Pagi pai suara cendrawasih</b> (Indonesian)	<b>Fanam dagoa loloarti</b> (Wokam)	<b>Morning voice of the cendrawasih</b> (English)
ambil parang	molkanan beda	grab your knives
jalan	pel-pel iaro	let's go
dari sana datang	nai bana jomkai	they are coming
tempat kayu cendrawasih	kai matu pon	from the cendrawasih wood
orang	<b>Irian Jarjui</b>	people from Irian
dayung ke Aru	datu be dayung	paddling to Aru
minum darah	dar num gundai	drink blood
tempuran	tak u rei	battle

In a 1993 survey conducted by researchers from Ambon, Jarjui explained that their ancestors had come from the islands of Gesar/Gorom (off the eastern coast of Seram). Others claimed the ancestors came from the Kei archipelago to the north of Aru. Still others said they had come from Babar, far to the west, beyond the Tanimbar archipelago (Ukru et al. 1993). During my own interviews, one man claimed that the Jarjui were descended from the island's true first people—the Melanesians.

I suggest that asking who the Jarjui are is akin to asking who the people of Aru are. It is possible that the response might be that the people of Aru are the people who have come to Aru. Considering the flow of people through Maluku, it is possible that all these people established early settlements throughout the archipelago. The flood of migrants continues today. In Wokam, both men and women commonly take Tewa spouses from Babar or Evav spouses from Kei. Perhaps the test of Jarjui identity will be whether these migrants ever come to identify themselves as Jarjui and whether they come to be identified as such by other Jarjui. If this question is perceived as important to the people of Aru, further analysis of oral histories as well as archaeological and linguistic evidence may be of use. In any event, this issue highlights the problems inherent in the analysis of

ethnic identity and attribution of indigenous status by outside interlocutors and, more relevant here, it simply points to the historical complexity of the movement of peoples through the region.

As it stands today, ethnic distinctions *are* recognized in the village of Wokam and several villagers commented that their current *kepala desa* was particularly popular for his ability to negotiate among the diverse peoples in his village. However, they would not comment any further on the nature of these tensions. The hamlet of Lemarang, a few kilometers south of the center of Wokam, is populated almost entirely by Tapa migrants.

Before I left to conduct further surveys in Lemarang, I was told that the path between the hamlets was fraught with danger. I was warned that I might encounter the menacing crocodile spirit that lived beneath the bridge or fall prey to Tapa sorcerers. Nevertheless, relations between the communities appeared amicable and traffic between the hamlets continued daily. Even more so, perhaps, because the Tapa are reputed to produce the finest palm liquor (*sopi*) in all of Maluku.

The production and consumption of *sopi* is common on many islands throughout the region and, in general, the economies of both Lemarang and Wokam bear many similarities to those of coastal villages throughout Maluku. Subsistence is derived from a combination of swidden cultivation, sago production, fishing and harvesting the reef. Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), coconut, banana, and a variety of vegetables are frequently cultivated in the swidden fields, which (I was told) are typically abandoned after about three years when grasses take over. Many villagers market the produce from their swiddens. For instance, the first crop of taro is sold, while the later harvests are consumed. Coconuts are harvested at least four times annually and copra production continues throughout the year. Aruese cuisine also reflects the linkages between the islands: *papeda* (a sago porridge consumed throughout Maluku) and *embal* (a dry cassava cake commonly associated with the Kei islands) are both frequently found at mealtime in Wokam.

Food is abundant in these forests. Men often hunt cuscus (*Phalanger orientalis*), wild pig (*Sus* sp.), and various species of birds. Birds of paradise, or *cendrawasih* (*Paradisea* spp.), are hunted with blunted arrows so as not to damage the valuable feathers.

In addition to regular fishing ventures, villagers commonly harvest the *meti*, or reef flats for various shellfish and seaweed (*agar-agar*). Other marine resources, such as grouper, shark, trochus, trepang, and sea turtles



offer the opportunity for some small income. All of these latter resources have shown signs of declining populations in recent years. In addition, local men are renowned for their skill at pearl diving. However, the pearl industry has declined sharply since disease struck in 1990 (Hitipeuw et al. 1994).

Perhaps the most obvious indication of Aru's association with other parts of Maluku is the prominence of the sago complex in local subsistence strategies. During my week on Aru I visited many sago groves, where I learned to convert the palm pith into a comestible starch using tools constructed mostly from the sago palm itself. The finished product is stored in a leaf container (*tumang*). (My companions laughed uproariously as I attempted to carry two *tumang* balanced on a long pole. As I stumbled down the path to the village, they cried out the sago hawkers song, "*Tumang! Tumang! Tiga Ribu!*")

Each family has its own sago grove to which all descendants, both male and female, maintain rights. As a result, some locals claim access to sago groves in villages throughout the region where various family members have resided. In practice, however, the privilege of access is conferred to those descendants living nearest to the grove. It was noted that if rights are contested, the male children have priority. However, access to sago did not appear to be problematic for anyone. Even the many recent migrants from Kei or Babar can easily establish a grove of their own.

While waiting for the trees to mature, many Evav (from Kei Islands to the north) and Tapa (from Babar to the west, beyond Tanimbar) harvest sago from a neighbor's grove. The typical arrangement is a 50/50 split of the harvest. One man reported that a single palm yields about 20 *tumang*, each of which can reportedly feed a household for two weeks. In 1995, one *tumang* earned about 3000 Rp. (US\$1.50) in the markets of Dobo, as compared to one kilo of rice at about 1500 Rp. (US\$ .75). In this arrangement, ten *tumang* are given to the owner of the grove, eight are sold, and two are consumed. Thus migrants may support themselves while they wait for their own first crop.

The sago palm is monocarpic, therefore it has only one inflorescence in its lifecycle. In order to maximize the starch yield, the palm is best harvested just before it begins to flower, usually about seven or eight years after planting. Considering the logistics of timing, this cooperative arrangement seems to benefit both the owner of the crop, who may not have the labor resources at the time of harvest, as well as the harvester, whose own grove may not be ready yet (Benda-Beckmann 1990).

Local wisdom recognizes the diversity of palm sago, which can vary in size, rate of growth, nutritional content, and quality of the fronds for building material. Most respondents, even the migrant Kei islanders recognized five varieties, although the names were sometimes different. A few mentioned only two forms, one spiny and the other smooth. Some of the most common responses are listed below.

<i>molat</i>	spiny	high yield
<i>molat</i>	smooth	low yield
<i>kor-kor</i>	spiny	high yield
<i>ekatrangan</i>	spiny	high yield, long fronds, tall trunk
<i>ereri</i>	spiny	lowest yield, good for gaba-gaba

Many stories seemed to confirm Aru's link with the rest of Maluku. With great enthusiasm and animation, village leaders recounted the village history to me in song. The founder of the village came to Wokam from the southern island of Trangan sometime at the end of the last century. Soon after, several other *marga* (clans) from diverse regions settled along the coast as well. From the songs, I got the impression that this area was part of a larger political entity, although I was unable to determine its dimensions. References were made to a *raja* seated in Durijela during the Dutch colonial era. He was assisted by the *pati* (official) of Wokam, who outranked all other *pati* in the region. I later learned that the *pati* of Wokam, the *pati* of Saman, and the *pati* of Ujir followed the rules of *Urusia*, while the *pati* of Maekor and the *pati* of Wangel followed *Urulima*. *Urusia* and *Urulima* correspond with the *Pata Siwa* and *Pata Lima* distinctions recognized throughout the region.

Another local legend explained a *pela* alliance between Wokam and Koba. One man told the following story:

Long ago, some men were enticed by a sweet aroma as they paddled past a Bugis camp. They approached the camp secretly and spied the men eating rice. That night the Jarjui set out to steal the fragrant food, but twice they were thwarted in their attempts. Only after hiding several grains in the folds of their foreskins did the Jarjui finally succeed. They returned to their village and tried to plant the rice but failed. Finally, visitors from the distant village of Koba offered to teach them to cultivate *padi*.

Although rice is no longer grown around Wokam, a *pela* relationship was begun and continues to this day. Every few years, villagers from Wokam

travel to Koba to help with large community projects and Koba reciprocates when Wokam is in need. Alliances such as these are a common social feature in Maluku.

From these stories it is clear that Aru is connected to the greater Maluku region. Some of these similarities, particularly those regarding economic strategies, suggest that beliefs and practices common throughout the region have contributed to the current state of the Aruese landscape.

### **Changes in the landscape**

A landscape is commonly thought of as a panorama viewed by an outside observer, but the landscape is also an inhabited locality. From the perspective of those who occupy the space, the landscape is a perceptual surround (Hirsch 1995) in which local people pursue their daily lives. For the people of Aru, the physical and spatial elements of their environment are imbued with meaning; the contours of the land bear remembrances of past events and cultural significance (Ingold 1993).

As the Aruese gaze ahead, the landscape unfolds before them. But, Aru is changing continually with the comings and goings of diverse peoples, such as migrants, missionaries, and merchants, who not only mark the physical landscape but affect the ways that local people view the world around them. In the most material sense, these newcomers have marked the landscape with new features. For instance, soon after the Bugis arrived and introduced rice to the islands, *padi* (irrigated rice) fields became a familiar feature in the landscape. Similarly, the advent of trade transformed the tiny village of Dobo into a thriving metropolis. Shops, banks, hotels, and countless new constructions now sprawl beyond the town limits. An active harbor and, most recently, an airport and telecommunications services connect Aru to the world beyond. Ongoing migrations from Babar and Kei continue to fill the space into which the Aruese gaze. New faces, new swidden sites, and new sago groves saturate the village environs as the local congregation grows.

Places are infused with the memory of past events, but as the influx of immigrants continues, old places take on new meanings. For instance, Tajung Lelar, is now remembered as the site where the legendary Chinese brother and sister first arrived and generated the island's wealth. Similarly, the path between the hamlets of Wokam and Lemarang is now fraught with the threat of Tapa sorcery, and the local brothel has come to represent a space that is free from certain dangerous foreign influences.

This stream of people is linked with the flow of ideas, ideas that potentially alter the ways that local people view the world and their relationship to its elements. Protestant missionaries, for example, introduced another way of viewing man's place in nature. As Christian beliefs are incorporated into the native world view, new geographical imaginations are rendered and the physical environs become infused with new meanings. However, the transformation does not represent a wholesale conversion to an alien view of the world. Rather, the syncretism of indigenous and introduced beliefs results in a uniquely Aruese view of the landscape .

In similar fashion, the arrival of Chinese traders and the generation of this origin myth heralded a transformation in the Aruese perceptions of their own relationship to key resources, such as trepang, pearls, and sago. Where previously the landscape may have represented the latent means of obtaining the patriclans' subsistence, or perhaps the opportunity to fulfill obligations to the ancestors, today the landscape also contains the potential to fulfill social obligations to the local Chinese. These beliefs affect trade relations and local patterns of resource use—practices that also alter the physical landscape. Thus the production of the landscape relies on a dialectical relationship between symbolic and material transformations.

The right to define the landscape, to give meaning to its elements, is highly contested. Nowhere is this conflict so apparent as in the differences between state and local views of the land. Whereas the state sees large tracts of land as resources to be harnessed in service to the national economy, local actors see their own hunting grounds and swidden fallows—their homes. These conflicting views of the Aruese landscape, perhaps more than any other, demonstrate that a particular view of the land, a landscape inscribed with specific meanings can result in practices that dramatically affect the shape of the landscape and the species contained therein.

Chinese merchants, Christian missionaries, and state administrators have all contributed new meanings and remembrances to the Aruese view of the world. The arrival of these people brought changes to the physical landscape by introducing new elements such as shops, churches, and government offices. Furthermore, by virtue of the political economy that grants each group the power to impose meaning on the landscape, they have affected local economic practices as well. The migration of people from other islands in Maluku has likely affected the landscape in similar manner. However, as the subtleties of local history remain obscure, the specific influences of these migrants remains obscure as well.

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