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Static Crosses and Working Spirits: Anti-Syncretism and Agricultural Animism in Catholic West Flores

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Abstract

In southern Manggarai, in the west of the Indonesian island of Flores, Catholicism has a long history and people assert the importance of their identity as Catholics. Nevertheless, they also continue to engage, both pragmatically and in ritual contexts, with a landscape that they experience and describe as full of spirits and energies. As an example of this, I consider a ritual to renew the fertility of a river feeding into wet-rice fields. Despite attempts by the Catholic Church to ‘inculturate’ the faith in Manggarai, many people adopt an attitude best described as anti-syncretism, in which they reject the possibility of a fully Catholic landscape. I argue that the resilience of this anti-syncretic spiritual landscape can be explained both by the particular nature of the Catholic mission on Flores, and by local adherence to a strict separation of ‘religion’ (*agama*) from the ‘custom’ (*adat*) associated with the land. Drawing on recent literature reviving the concept of animism, I suggest that Manggarai people’s engagements with their spiritual landscape are a form of ‘agricultural animism’. However, like all animisms, this has a specific history, including responses to shifts in spiritual potency occasioned by state-sponsored resettlement.

Key words: Manggarai; Landscape; Catholicism; Animism; Anti-Syncretism.

The landscape of southern Manggarai, in the west of the Indonesian island of Flores, is one of both extraordinary beauty and hard-working endeavour. High mountains, frequently shrouded in cloud, encircle highland villages where houses cluster amongst steep fields and coffee trees. Painstakingly-constructed stone roads weave past lowland villages, schools and a large, concrete Catholic church. Rivers and streams descend down steep ravines to the lowlands, where water is diverted to feed wet-rice fields. This varied terrain can be read for the visible signs of history: of village expansion and relocation, of missionisation and school-building, of road-construction and wet-rice cultivation. However, for the Manggarai people who inhabit, move through and engage with this landscape, it is not a text to be read, nor a setting against which human life unfolds. Rather, the landscape is intrinsic to their being-in-the-world, it is a 'lived environment' (Ingold 2000), one constituted and animated by kinship connections, ancestral journeys and, as this paper will describe, potent spiritual energies.¹

Throughout Southeast Asian history, people have engaged with the landscape as a dense realm of spirits and forces (see Introduction to this issue). The inhabitants of the region of southern Manggarai are no exception in this regard. However, what is both relatively unusual and interesting about their situation in the contemporary Southeast Asian context is the degree to which Manggarai people have resisted either a 'purification' of spiritual forces from the land (see Howell and Amster, this issue), or a syncretic landscape that combines Catholic and ancestral/ indigenous elements (Bovensiepen, this issue). In this paper I describe attempts by the Catholic Church to 'inculturate' the faith on Flores, and the generally negative response by many Manggarai people I know to such efforts. I argue that the concept of anti-syncretism is helpful for understanding the attitude of many Manggarai villagers to inculturation, and that such anti-syncretism is in part influenced by Indonesian discourses on the separation of 'religion' (*agama*) and 'culture/ tradition' (*adat*). However, rather than focusing only on the general rejection of an incultured landscape, I go further and try to understand why local perceptions of an animated and energised landscape have been so resilient. Following recent work re-conceptualising the concept of animism (Bird-David 1999), I argue that we can best approach such perceptions as a form of 'agricultural animism' in which, by contrast with hunter-gatherer

animisms, reciprocal relationships with fertile land and water (rather than with animals) are central. However, though resilient, this animistic attitude is not unchanging, and I therefore indicate the ways in which it has been adapted in response to changes in settlement patterns and agricultural practice.

Ingold, in his work on dwelling and livelihood, has stressed how human environments are not neutral backdrops to activity, an external world of ‘nature’ which people need to ‘grasp’ conceptually (2000, 42). Against what he calls ‘the logic of construction’, Ingold instead emphasises the fundamental historicity of our environments, ‘forged through the activities of living beings’ and continually emerging ‘in the process of our lives’ (2000, 20). As mentioned in the Introduction to this issue, this perspective is a striking contrast to theoretical approaches to landscapes as ‘cultural constructs’ or ‘ways of seeing’. In this paper, I broadly follow such a phenomenological approach (which has also been central to the new work on animism), and try to show how Manggarai people do not project ideas or concepts of spirits and energies *onto* a ‘physical landscape’, but engage practically with an energised landscape in the course of their daily lives and work. The Manggarai landscape is experienced by its human inhabitants as having agency, the most obvious example of which being when people call out ‘there are people here!’ as the ground shakes beneath them during an earthquake. Nevertheless, despite their practical engagements with a landscape of spirits and energies, at times people are also able to step back and offer commentary on its significance. Indeed, such critical commentary on whether, for example, the land can talk, is one of the major consequences of people’s involvement with a world religion.

Catholicism, Diversity and Spirits

Although there has been a Catholic presence in east Flores since the sixteenth century, Catholicism was not introduced to Manggarai, in the west of the island, until the late 1920s. With the exception of Muslim fishing villages dotted along the coast and on off-shore islands, the majority of Manggarai people today strongly identify as Catholic. Children are baptised as babies and receive first communion during their primary

schooling. Couples marry in church in addition to village-based rituals, most people try to observe Sunday as a day of rest, and many people are interested in discussing the life of Jesus. However, beyond this fundamental, and strongly felt, identity, there is considerable diversity of practice and discourse. In villages in southern Manggarai, people vary widely in the regularity of their attendance at church and prayer meetings, and in their attitudes towards older ritual practices usually categorised under the heading of ‘custom/ tradition’ (*adat*) or ‘chicken speech’ (*tura manuk*).

As Cannell has stressed, an understanding of specific Catholicisms necessitates an integrated account of both the impact of changes in Vatican policy and ‘the distinct histories of the different religious orders and their varied relationships to forms of religious practice’ (2006, 22). The missionaries who first converted the population of Manggarai were members of the SVD (Society of the Divine Word), a missionary society noted for its study of local languages and cultures, and its links with the journal *Anthropos*. Steenbrink’s history of Catholics in Indonesia describes the SVD as ‘pragmatic organizers’, who put less emphasis than other missions on a ‘specific style of spirituality’ (2007, 558). In Flores, the SVD fathers considered what they called the ‘traditional religion’ to be ‘a deficient religion, but not... a completely negative factor’ (Steenbrink 2007, 143), since its study would lead to traces of belief in the ‘Supreme Being’ (see Verheijen 1951). Foreshadowing later church interests in local culture, the first Bishop of Manggarai, Mgr Wilhelmus van Bekkum, instituted the notorious ‘Buffalo Mass’, fusing Catholicism with traditional sacrifice. He was, though, part of a ‘radical minority’, and other priests were more forthright in viewing Manggarai sacrificial practices as ‘un-Catholic’ (Erb 2006, 212-3). Nevertheless, and in part because of the distinctly ‘anthropological’ interests of the SVD, the church in Manggarai has clearly lacked the kind of explicit, integrated project of ‘purification’ described by Keane (2007) for Dutch Calvinists on Sumba.

Since respect for customary law and rituals (*adat*) ‘has varied very much from priest to priest’ (Erb 2006, 210), there is wide variation throughout the Manggarai region in the frequency and manner of sacrificial rituals. In the area of southern Manggarai with which

I am familiar, even regular attendees at the Dengé church still speak of the fertile power of spirits and ancestors. In parishes to the west of Dengé, where many lay catechists (*guru agama* or ‘religious teachers’) practise a form of Catholicism known as *karismatik*, many people do not hold agricultural rituals. Though such *karismatik* Catholics might kill a chicken for a life-cycle ritual in a house, they will not inspect its stomach or throw food for ancestral spirits.² However, in the Dengé parish in which I have worked, only a few people are rumoured to be *karismatik*. Most others still hold rituals for a range of events, inspect auguries, and offer up food and betel to spirits. This is partly because the previous priest of the parish appears to have had few problems with *adat* ritual procedures, so long as people also attended church and had their children baptised. The current priest, though he does not attend the sacrificial element of communal rituals, also seems to have a rather tolerant attitude.

Thus, as in other contexts where Christianity has not been adopted ‘under exclusivist constraints’, but has become ‘a matter of enculturation and education’ (Anderson 2003, 128), people remain open to and interested in a variety of understandings and practices. Although occasionally, during discussions about spirits, someone might look embarrassed and tell me such things were *kafir* (‘pagan’), this is a minority view. Most Manggarai people I know take seriously the existence of a range of spirits and invisible energies. Non-human persons are often referred to as ‘people on the other side’ (*ata palé-sina*) and, as such, are thought to occupy a different dimension, the counterpart to human life on *this* side. People say of such spirits that ‘they can see us, but we can’t see them’, a form of definition common throughout Southeast Asia (see Rafael 1993, 111-115). This invisibility is the case even though, as one middle-aged woman put it, spirits ‘live as close together with us as a maize leaf and a maize cob’.

Although people often use the generic term *poti* to refer to spirits, including ancestral spirits, at other times they are more interested in speaking of specific types of beings, such as *darat* (beautiful, amoral forest spirits), *jing* (dwarves associated with rocks) and *empo-déhong* (spirits who travel at night looking to take heads). Whilst it might be tempting to focus on spirit classification as part of an over-arching cosmology, I find the

notion of a spiritual landscape closer to local understandings and practices. Although spirits are conceptualised as unseen interlocutors, for Manggarai people such spirits animate and merge with a material landscape of energies, effects and practical consequences. The boundary between spirits and spirit-places is not clear-cut. Certain, named fields, particularly those through which streams flow, are rather generally associated with harmful spirits (*poti*) and, as amongst the Nage of Central Flores, can be said to have ‘acquired a reputation’ (Forth 1998, 66). Fear of offending these spirits or spirit-places often necessitates avoidance behaviour, such as not exclaiming or shouting loudly, not drinking water from the stream, and not letting children play. However, what is significant is that, having described the kinds of precautions that should be taken against such spirits, many people went on to stress to me that they were ‘really/ actually the land’ (*tana muing*). In 2001, two schoolgirls drowned in a relatively shallow lowland stream, and their deaths were universally interpreted as the result of the actions of the stream’s *poti*. The teacher who discovered the children, who is a devout Catholic and often leads the hymns in church, told me that this *poti* was ‘really the land’ (*tana muing*), implying that the land and its places have a force of their own. Therefore, to understand Manggarai engagements with spirits, it is important not to separate out ‘spirit-beings’ from the wider landscape of places and pathways.

This spiritual landscape of seen and unseen realms has everyday consequences for humans who engage with it as a lived world. As Harvey has stressed for the Peruvian Andes, the relationship with an animate landscape is not one of thoughtful reflection or contemplation, but is instead pragmatic and practical (2001, 199). A Manggarai person who accidentally injures a wild animal—particularly an eel—is always encouraged to confess this to a healer, who will then make protective medicine. Though I never received an explicit explanation of this, people seemed to be suggesting that an eel might be the temporary material form taken by a particular place-spirit, and therefore harming it would put a person at risk of spiritual attack.³ Similarly, a person who becomes tired or ill after visiting certain fields, or going to the spring at dusk, is often said to have had a ‘meeting’ (*sumang*) with an unseen forest- or other place-spirit. Such spirits may have their own paths through fields that require ritual ‘blocking’ at harvest-time. Resting during one

exhausting walk to the highlands with my friend Nina, she told me not to actually sit on the path, but to sit to one side so that *poti* (spirits) could still walk along it without disturbing us.

Connections between variously defined or acknowledged ‘spirits’ (who might sometimes be said to ‘really’ be the land) and the landscape are also seen with regard to different kinds of ancestral spirit. Human ancestors (*empo*) in southern Manggarai tend not be named individually or in genealogies but are a generalised category connected with the mountains, the protection afforded by certain places, and the fertility of the land. As such, they frequently become blurred with spirits known as the ‘ancestors of the land’ (*empo de tana*). These spirits are imagined as the original owners or inhabitants of the land, and are addressed in rituals held in fields, forests or near water sources. One young woman, Regi, told me that the ‘ancestors of the land’ (*empo de tana*) were different from ‘ancestors who are dead people’ (*empo ata mata*) but that she didn’t exactly know how. Her brother remarked on another occasion that the ancestors of the land were rather like ‘officials’ (*pegawai*) who ‘guard’ (*jaga*) key sites in the landscape. This use of the language of the state to describe guardian spirits is intriguing, particularly since there is almost no use of the language of the church in such contexts. My informants are aware that more critical Catholics disparage sacrificial rituals for being held *pina naéng*, ‘anywhere and everywhere’. However, this perceived criticism is answered by stressing the precise, named aspects of the spiritual landscape addressed in ritual: ‘we don’t hold them at just any tree or stone,’ said one woman, ‘the *empo* tell us where’.

‘What the Land Wants’: A Water Ritual

Water is an intrinsic part of the Manggarai landscape, since the word *tana* refers not simply to the earth, but also to rivers and streams. Similarly, James Fox argues that Austronesian societies regard water as ‘fundamental to, and in many instances coterminous with, any specification of a landscape’ (1997, 7). Streams and rivers draw our attention to the flows and movement of the landscape, as does the sea, the source of many powerful beings in other, more seaward-oriented eastern Indonesian contexts (Pannell 2007).

Water in Manggarai is described as a source of fertility and of a kind of life-giving ‘oil’ (*mina*). Like the fertility of land, in Manggarai the fertility of water needs to be ensured through blood sacrifices.

In the lowland administrative area (*desa*) of Satar Lenda, at the side of the river of Wae Awéng, and some 300 metres inland from the sea, a large cross marks the site of a small dam and concrete channels. Here, water flowing down from the highland village of Wae Rebo is diverted towards the wet-rice fields constructed in a 1970s state development project, and today shared between various lowland villages. In April 2001, these villages gathered livestock, rice, saucepans and personnel for a large communal ritual to renew the fertility of this water source, following years of declining productivity in the rice fields. Upstream from the cross and dam, a group of male elders, joined by the *Camat* (head of the subdistrict, *kecamatan*) and other state officials, listened to a ritual speech and witnessed the sacrifice of a buffalo, several pigs, and a number of chickens. They were watched by a large crowd of villagers, standing on the banks of the river.

Like other sacrificial rituals in fields or the forest, this Wae Awéng ritual was described as being ‘what the land wants’ (*ngoéng de tana*). According to my informants, when work was first begun on the Wae Awéng dam in the 1970s, a large boulder obstructed the proposed path of a water channel. This unwieldy object could only be moved after the original (human) owner of the land promised to sacrifice a buffalo in the future. In 2001, it was felt that this debt was finally being called in by the land. This was shown by a number of ‘signs’ (*tanda*), such as the descendants of the original owner being repeatedly bitten by ticks, and the ritual leaders of the land becoming ill. These ‘signs’ convinced various ritual leaders of the need to honour the earlier promise of a buffalo sacrifice. The declining productivity of the rice fields was directly linked with the failure in the past to hold this ritual. ‘We’ve been eating food from this land for a long time,’ one man told me, ‘now we need to give respect, or we are scared the land will be dry (*maha*) and hot (*kolap*)’.⁴

Procedures for the Wae Awéng ritual engaged with a spiritual landscape of multiple agents and energies. Chickens were sacrificed in the rice fields to invite the ‘spirits’ (*poti-poti*) from the individual plots to the ritual at the river. Elders and ritual speakers who attended from Wae Rebo described themselves as bringing down with them ‘the souls of the old ancestors in the past’ (*wakar data tu’a empo danong*), and stressed that although these ancestors are buried in the mountains, they will travel to the lowlands for significant events. The night before the buffalo sacrifice, small rituals were also held outside family rooms in each house in the villages involved. These were to ‘collect together souls’ (*hilir wakar*), to ensure that no human souls followed the spirits or the buffalo to ‘the other side’. People were also warned not to kill any eels in rivers or streams at this time, since these might be ‘ancestors’ (*empu*) on the move to the ritual. In addition, for the three days following the ritual, people were forbidden to enter their rice-fields, since during this time ancestral and other spirits would be ‘going to do farming work’ (*ngo duat*). In the final section of this paper, I will suggest that such a ritual demonstrates the specifically *agricultural* nature of Manggarai ‘animism’. However, before drawing out the kind of environmental conversations that these practices involve, I want to address in more detail the issue of the involvement of Catholicism in this spiritual landscape.

Inculturation, Land and Anti-Syncretism

Since the 1960s, the impact of Vatican Two has seen a number of initiatives by the Catholic church on Flores to ‘deepen the faith’ through processes of ‘inculturation’ or ‘contextualization’, integrating the Gospel with local ‘culture’ (Barnes 1992, 171; Erb 2006, 213). Such initiatives mirror post-Vatican Two strategies throughout the Catholic world (Cannell 2006, 25), which have involved a complex series of conversations with notions of culture, ethnicity and locality (Orta 2004). Although ‘inculturation’ on Flores attempts to be ‘more accommodating and tolerant towards local customs and practices’ (Molnar 1997, 403), it is, as Orta’s work on Bolivia reminds us, ‘an ideology of conversion’, involving the ‘pastoral pruning’ or ‘purifying’ of local practices (2006, 176). In Manggarai, the most successful initiative has been the production of a book of

‘Christian songs’, *Dere Serani*, which uses both the Manggarai language and the rhythms and cadences of more traditional songs. More contentiously, there have also been moves to create inculturated Catholic places. For example, in the coastal village of Borik in southern Manggarai, an inculturated chapel has been built in the style of a traditional, circular house, complete with drums hanging from a central post. Though this chapel is certainly found interesting by local people, many of my own informants seem puzzled by the presence of drums in a Catholic place, since drums are used in communal rituals to awaken ancestral and other spirits. In addition to inculturated chapels, crosses have also been built at key sites such as water sources. On a visit to another village, Lamba, young people told me excitedly of their plans to construct a Catholic grotto on top of the *sompang*, a circular stone platform found on the village yard of most old villages and associated with spiritual potency.

In my own highland fieldsite of Wae Rebo, and its connected lowland sites, people have so far resisted any such attempts to create syncretic places. This is largely because the ritual leader (*tu’a adat*), Amé Dorus, has very strong opinions about the ‘mixing’ of religion (*agama*) and ‘custom’ (*adat*) in this manner. When I talked with him about the plans in Lamba, he reacted angrily and unfavourably, arguing that the Lamba villagers would regret such a move in the future. He implied that they were putting themselves at risk of illness and infertility caused by the displeasure of ancestral and other spirits. What is interesting is that Amé Dorus is a relatively devout Catholic, who regularly attends prayer meetings and was once also a ‘religious teacher’ (*guru agama*). However, like many others, he sees Catholicism as ‘coming from outside’ (*mai pé’ang mai*) and therefore as not applicable to practices concerned with the land, its energies and fertility. This is why he also rejects changes to ritual practice that have occurred in other villages, such as pronouncing ‘*Yesus Kristus Amin*’ at the end of rituals, rather than the usual, affirmative chorus of ‘*Ehhhh*’.

As Stewart and Shaw discuss, the concept of syncretism has a somewhat contentious history within religious studies, since it has often been used to imply either confusion or ‘deviance’ from a ‘given’ tradition (1994, 5-6). However, embracing the term’s

contentiousness, they suggest the recasting of syncretism as ‘the politics of religious synthesis’, of which Catholic ‘inculturation’ strategies are a clear example. Moreover, Stewart and Shaw argue that we should give as much emphasis to what they term ‘anti-syncretism’, or the opposition to religious synthesis shown by those ‘concerned with the defence of religious boundaries’ (1994, 7). This notion of ‘anti-syncretism’ is extremely helpful in understanding the attitude of Amé Dorus and others who, unlike the East Timorese villagers described by Bovensiepen (this issue) have *not* integrated Catholic figures into their spiritual landscape. Though he enjoys inculturated songs, Amé Dorus abhors the mixing of Catholic language and ritual practice in fields and houses. His rejection of syncretic practices such as placing crosses on old stone platforms is not a question of policing the boundaries between two ‘religious’ traditions but, rather, maintaining a separation between ‘religion’ (Catholicism) and practices of ritual and naming that are thoroughly pragmatic and rooted in a historical landscape. *Adat*, for Amé Dorus, references a holistic phenomenon that is part of the very land itself. Thus, as I will describe in more detail below, sacrificial rituals are said to be held because they are ‘what the land wants’ (*ngoéng de tana*). If such rituals were stopped, people would become ill since they could no longer count on the protection of the ancestors and of the powerful ‘energy of the land’ (*ghas de tana*). To have a fully Catholic landscape, according to Amé Dorus, one would need to change the name of the land from Manggarai, and change the names of all the hills, rivers, mountains and villages (see Allerton forthcoming). In short, one would have to make it a completely different land.

Many authors have argued that the politically-constrained definition of ‘religion’ (*agama*) in Indonesia has led most of the country’s ethnic groups to re-conceptualise ritual practices in terms of a folkloristic, aestheticised category of ‘tradition’ (*adat*) (Acciaioli 1985; Kipp and Rodgers 1987). However, in southern Manggarai, *adat* practices retain a strong moral and spiritual force. In keeping matters of *adat* separate from those of ‘religion’, people have not necessarily accepted an aestheticised (or purified) version of the former (*cf.* Telle, this issue). Some people I know, aware that Catholicism does not encompass all aspects of their life, call themselves ‘half-half people’ (*ata setengah-setengah*). A few others take the separation of Catholicism and *adat* to imply that there

are actually ‘two religions’ (*hua agama*) and that, in the words of one older man, ‘We must use them both!’⁵ Further east in Flores, the northern Lio are said to ‘creatively embrace the tripartite categorization of socio-political life’ into the domains of ‘religion’, ‘government’ and ‘tradition’ (Howell 2001, 145). Indeed, Howell describes one man, Martinus, a retired schoolteacher, devout Catholic and traditional priest-leader, who seems to personify the ‘scrupulous’ attempt at maintaining the boundaries between such domains (2001, 148). Martinus clearly has much in common with Amé Dorus, and such boundary-maintenance may partly explain many Manggarai people’s distaste for inculturation.

A rejection, amongst most of those I know, of overt attempts at the inculturation of either place or ritual means that Catholic rites are often simply ‘added-on’ to events concerned with the spiritual landscape. Indeed, one man told me that separating *adat* speech from Catholic talk was right since priests taught that ‘you mustn’t mix pagan talk with that of the angels’ (*néka neki sa toambo de kafir agu de anjel*). Following the Wae Awéng ritual described above, crowds of villagers walked to a large clearing, where chairs and benches had been lined up beneath a temporary structure of bamboo and tarpaulin. Here, the local priest, who had not attended the sacrificial ritual, held an open-air Mass, which included a speech by Amé de Sana, the descendant of the original owner of the lowland fields. This speech gave thanks to God for water, and for all that we receive from him each day. Amé de Sana also presented the priest with a white chicken, some rice and some money in gratitude for holding a Mass at such an event. However, what most engaged the attention of those I was accompanying was not the Catholic thanksgiving, but the section of Amé de Sana’s speech in which his eyes filled with tears as he remembered his father. They told me that this was no doubt because being at the dam site evoked strong memories of his father, who had overseen the dam’s construction, but had died before the buffalo sacrifice could be held.⁶

However, though this kind of structured event, in which *adat* talk is followed by Catholic speech, maintains an anti-syncretic boundary between ‘culture/ tradition’ and ‘religion’, in non-ritual contexts such a boundary is not always considered necessary or important.

We have seen how the southern Manggarai landscape is one that, to its inhabitants, almost seethes with spirits and energies. Many people incorporate Catholic prayers and objects into an armoury of practices protecting them from the more harmful aspects and forces of such a landscape. Before embarking on a journey through the forest to the west, my friend's father insured the spiritual protection of myself and my friend by infusing ginger for us to eat with his 'magic' (*mbeko*), but also by marking our foreheads with the sign of the cross. Meren, an unmarried woman who lived by herself in a field-hut, stressed the potency of her bible and rosario as protective devices. In particular, she considered these objects to protect her against various spirits (*poti*), and saw them as more appropriate and more powerful than traditional medicines prepared by healers. She and other informants were fond of telling me the story of a European priest who had been involved with the building of the stone road connecting this area of Manggarai with the 'Trans-Flores Highway'. They described one area of rocks that had been impossible for the workers to get through, and that only became passable after the priest held a Mass at the site, placating the evil spirits (*jing*) who had been obstructing the work. This story does not question the existence of land spirits, but confirms both the personal power of priests (who are often said to have strong magic) over spirits, and the more general power of Catholicism as a highly-effective means of protection against the spiritual dangers immanent in the landscape.

Interestingly, ideas about the potency of water that influenced the Wae Awéng ritual have been particularly ripe ground for Catholic reinterpretations and blessings. When a baby enters any house for the first time, people mark its forehead with water and intone, in an informal house baptism 'this is your house' (*ho'o mbaru hau*). At *penti*, the Manggarai 'new year' fertility ritual, one of the main sites at which sacrifices must be performed is the main spring (*wae*), where the women of a village collect water. Interestingly, Amé Dorus, the same man who so vociferously rejects syncretic practices, told me that the *penti* ritual was held at the spring so that God would not forget to bless (*berkat*) the water that the village uses every day. Other villagers told me that although water sources are often places associated with more malevolent spirits (*poti*), the main water source in Wae Rebo was safe since it had been blessed by a priest. One man who farms a field with a

stream associated with a harmful spirit, told me that when he goes to work there he always takes a bottle of water collected from the main village stream. Again, he stressed that this water has been blessed by a priest, showing both the influence of Catholic notions regarding holy water, and the power of Catholic blessing as protection against spiritual harm.

Agricultural Animism, Agency and Change

In this paper, I have been concerned to demonstrate something of the diversity of attitudes towards both Catholicism and spirits or spirit-places. Rural Manggarai villagers do not hold one point of view on such issues as inculturation, the existence or description of spirits, or the consequences of failing to hold sacrificial rituals. Though many of the people I know reject explicitly syncretic places, at other times they utilise the power of Catholic blessings to protect them from spirit-places. Nevertheless, I think it is clear that theirs is a resilient, dense and powerful spiritual landscape that has only marginally been affected by their Catholic identity. For example, though people find Catholic holy water powerful, it is hard to imagine its substitution for chicken blood in communal rituals, as has occurred in Lamalera (Barnes 1992, 175). Therefore, rather than simply noting the lack of either purification or syncretism in this context, I want to go further, and to begin to sketch how we might best approach and understand this potent landscape.

Recent anthropological approaches to the resurgent topic of ‘animism’ have urged a shift away from earlier, intellectualist understandings towards both a more phenomenological approach and a focus on the environmental sensitivities and relationships that animism implies. Indeed, just as phenomenological approaches to landscape critique the notion of landscape-as-representation, so the new theorists of animism stress that animism is ‘best analysed as an active way of being in the world, and not merely as a passive representation of it’ (Pedersen 2003). For Bird-David, animism is a kind of ‘conversation’ with the environment, a ‘two-way responsive relatedness’ with trees, elephants, rocks or whatever else has ‘relational affordances’ for the people concerned (1999, 77). Similarly, arguing against the characterisation of animism as a ‘system of

beliefs', Ingold argues that animism is a 'condition of being *in*' the world, of being sensitive and responsive 'in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux' (2006, 10). Much of this work has stressed how distinctions between nature and culture, or between human agents and animals or objects fail to comprehend hunters' conceptions of the world (Nadasdy 2007) and, moreover, have political implications for fourth-world communities (Povinelli 1995).

Rather than seeing Manggarai understandings of the spiritual landscape as a matter of 'belief' or 'traditional religion' (Molnar 1997), I prefer to follow some of the leads of this literature on animism, and to stress how both everyday and ritual activities imply an openness to conversation with the environment as an animate realm of multiple agents. Among many Manggarai people, the landscape is thought to not only communicate signs of impending human misfortune—as when a woman interpreted the strange swaying of a tree as a sign of her husband's impending death—but also to give signs of its own needs (*cf.* Amster and Telle, this issue). For example, an elder who is the ritual leader (*tu'a teno*) of a particular, named field (*lingko*), might notice a spider appearing on the field's ritual centre (*lodok*). Here, the spider proceeds to walk round and round in a circle. This spider is one form taken by the *mori de tana*, the 'lord/ owner of the land' (included amongst the 'ancestors of the land') and its circular movements are a 'sign' that the land wants to have an *uma randang*, an agricultural festival involving significant sacrifices and the opening up of a number of new fields. I was told that fields should be regularly planted 'in case the land should cry'. Similarly, if the land is dug in order to build a new house without the appropriate rituals being held, the land might cry, 'What are you doing? Why are you injuring me?' When I asked Amé Dorus, the ritual leader of Wae Rebo, if the land could really talk like this, he emphatically replied, 'It *can* talk. Its *appetite* [*nafsu*]. The appetite of the land. Don't let anyone say this, that the land doesn't have an appetite. It *does*'.

For Amé Dorus and others, the land has agency, expressed in terms of its 'appetite' (*nafsu*). Such understandings are also seen in people's descriptions of sacrificial rituals, including that for Wae Awéng, as 'what the land wants' (*ngoéng de tana*). People say

that if they don't hold rituals, they will be 'scared of the accusations of the land' (*rantang babang le tana*), accusations which could take the material form of human sickness and death, or of weak crops and a poor harvest. By contrast, if humans *do* maintain a conversation with the 'land' (which includes its water sources and rivers), if they do satisfy its specific wants and needs, they will receive health and good harvests. Following the sacrifices at the Wae Awéng ritual, buffalo horns, pig feet and chicken wings were all left on a post by the river, as communicative offerings, or material signs of the ritual speech spoken (see Allerton forthcoming). Moreover, in the days after this ritual, various forms of ancestors (*empo*) came to 'do agricultural work' in the rice-fields. By contrast with people's conversations with this energetic landscape of spirits, the concrete cross next to the dam seems somewhat static. The problem for many Manggarai people with the idea of a 'Catholic landscape' is that Catholicism does not acknowledge the (beneficial) agency of the land itself. Rather, it assumes an essentially passive environment in which protective signs and symbols can be planted, without ensuring the continued potency of the land.

This Manggarai focus on the *land* and its fertility offers a Southeast Asian agricultural contrast to relationships between animals and hunter-gatherers, which have tended to be the default focus of recent work on animism. Bird-David has herself acknowledged that '[a] diversity of animisms exists, each animistic project with its local status, history and structure' (1999, 79). By contrast with the hunter-gatherer animism that her own article outlines, Manggarai 'conversations' with the environment constitute what might be called a kind of 'agricultural animism'. Though, when trees are felled in the forest, rituals are held there for forest spirits, the primary conversations that take place in this context are focused on the fertility of land and water, and the connected health and fertility of humans. Moreover, when people do engage with wild animals, it is predominantly as manifestations of ancestral or land spirits. The *ancestral* element to this agricultural animism is worth stressing: because the ancestors are buried in the ground, and because clear distinctions are not always made between *human* ancestors and 'ancestors of the land', agricultural fertility flows when all forms of ancestors are remembered. It is therefore noteworthy, given the 'anti-syncretism' of the spiritual landscape, that the

church in rural Manggarai, as amongst the Lio (Howell 2001, 49), has largely left matters of death and burial to villagers. In southern Manggarai, there are no church graveyards, and the priest has little involvement with most death practices. Though people do hold prayer meetings at set intervals after a death, the primary focus of death ritual is a series of sacrificial events. The church is therefore left out of the reciprocal relations between the living and the dead that are necessary for fertility. This situation offers a strong contrast to the Sasak village described by Telle (this issue), where Islam is central to the places and processes of death, and where the ancestral landscape cannot therefore be so easily separated from 'religion'.

Though Manggarai 'agricultural animism' remains strong it does, as Bird-David's comment suggests, have a specific history, which involves not only anti-syncretic responses to Catholicism, but also accommodations with state-sponsored resettlement and agricultural development. As mentioned, the Wae Awéng ritual was held to renew the rapidly-declining fertility of lowland, wet-rice fields. These fields, and the dam which ensures the flow of water into them, were constructed by the local Manggarai government in a development project in 1972. This project was connected with a resettlement program in the mid-1960s, when many villages were encouraged to move down from older highland sites to specially-built sites in the lowlands, near to church, school and market. This resettlement program is referred to by many people in southern Manggarai as 'transmigration' (*transmigrasi*), and can be seen as a state attempt to 'make a society legible' (Scott 1998, 2). Only one village in this area, Wae Rebo, refused to abandon its highland site, though it did establish a lowland site, Kombo, in which at least half of its inhabitants now spend most of their time.⁷ The land on which both Kombo and the wet-rice fields was built was donated by families from the village of Lenggós, who were the acknowledged owners of the land in the lowlands.

This partial or complete resettlement in the lowlands, and the introduction of wet-rice agriculture, have both involved consequences for people's relationship with the spiritual landscape. For example, Wae Rebo villagers do not hold any large-scale communal rituals in their lowland site of Kombo. They explain this with reference to the donated

land on which Kombo is built, and with which the original owners retain a connection. Whilst the inhabitants of Kombo may legally own their house-plots, they say they do not have any ritual ‘rights’ (*hak*) over the land. In particular, the ancestors (*empo*) of the community are thought to reside in the mountain site of Wae Rebo though, as we saw for the Wae Awéng ritual, they may be invited to travel down for specific events. For people such as Amé Dorus, this situation means that the lowland village of Kombo, despite being over 40 years old, still has a rather temporary status, and why its food ‘just fills our stomachs’ but cannot really ‘feed us’, in the sense of true, fulfilling nourishment.

In other words, for the villagers of Wae Rebo-Kombo, and notwithstanding the practical benefits that wet-rice farming has brought about, resettlement has accounted for a marked difference in spiritual potency between highlands and lowlands. Whilst the lowlands do not lack general *poti* spirits, they do, on an everyday basis, seem to lack ancestral spirits. This situation also partly explains why, although agricultural rituals are very common occurrences in the highlands, ritual events have been relatively rare in the context of agricultural work in the wet-rice fields. However, undoubtedly another reason for ritual absence in the wet-rice fields is their origin in a government development project. As a relatively recently-introduced technology of farming, wet-rice agriculture lacks the kind of ancestral connections of upland, swidden agriculture. Similarly, the planting or harvesting of highland coffee trees is also less ritually-marked than the planting and harvesting of maize and hill-rice in swiddens.

In his account of the ‘ritual, spirit-oriented’ side of Gayo agriculture, John Bowen (1993, 173-201) describes the ways in which the ambiguities or unspoken aspects of ritual allow for the accommodation of a range of religious positions. He also notes that for many modernist town-dwellers, agricultural rituals are ‘best construed as entirely social and technical, with the goal of coordinating farm labor’ (1993, 180). Does this explain the uniformed appearance of several state officials at the Wae Awéng ritual? Though rituals in southern Manggarai, unlike in Gayo, are never conducted in Indonesian, there were aspects of the organisation of the Wae Awéng ritual that would support a view of it as a technology of cooperation and coordination. Formal ‘letters of invitation’ were typed for

all teachers and other officials in the local area. Participation in the ritual, both through attendance and through financial and other contributions, was compulsory for all families with wet-rice fields fed by Wae Awéng. Even those *karismatik* Catholics who would not normally organise their own sacrificial events were still required to contribute to the event. At their speeches (in Indonesian) following the Mass, the *Camat* and other state officials stressed the need for harmony and cooperation between those farming the wet-rice fields. People were told not to block water when it was scheduled to flow into a neighbour's field. They were also told to be very careful about accusing others of stealing land, since such accusations have led to violent conflict in other areas of Manggarai.

For the state officials, though they are respectful towards its participants, and interested in its 'cultural' aspects, the Wae Awéng ritual was clearly a chance to re-educate the local population in the techniques of farming, the importance of cooperation and the avoidance of conflict. However, for most villagers, the ritual had a rather different significance, and shows how perceptions of the landscape and its needs are not unchanging, but may involve the reassertion of ritual procedures (*cf.* Bowen 1993, 194). As I described earlier, the inspiration for the ritual came after a number of 'signs' appeared to the original owners of the land. It was felt that if these signs were ignored any longer, the land would become 'hot', something that also occurs when there are land conflicts. Thus, fields, the ownership and agricultural techniques of which had their origin in a government development project, and that had to a great extent been devoid of ritual, now appeared to be undergoing a re-evaluation. The Wae Awéng ritual not only asserted the ability of these ancestral spirits to travel from the mountains, it also constituted a new conversation with the land and the 'ancestors of the land' in the lowlands. Most significantly, in the days following the ritual, there was much discussion of other possible future events, including ritual procedures to transfer the true, ritual 'rights' to the land to those living in Kombo. What this shows is not only the ever-changing nature of people's pragmatic relationship with a spiritual landscape, but also the resilience that they accord to the land as an agent.

Conclusion

The strength and resilience of the Manggarai spiritual landscape, given the ‘purifications’ found in the wider region (see especially Amster and Howell, this issue), seems to require historical explanation. In this paper, I have argued that a significant factor was the particular nature of the SVD mission on Flores which, by contrast with Protestant missions elsewhere in Indonesia (Keane 2007), was both interested at an early stage in the possibilities of inculturation, and tended to see ‘local religion’ as a fertile ground in which to plant Catholicism. A second factor I have emphasised is a pan-Indonesian split between the world religions (categorised as *agama*) and ‘traditional/ customary practices’ (classified as *adat*). In southern Manggarai, the particular character of both priests and ritual leaders means that this split is rigorously observed, without draining *adat* of its moral and spiritual force.

However, in addition to these historical factors, I have argued that the Manggarai spiritual landscape is resilient because it is a form of ‘agricultural animism’, less concerned with constructing representations of the world than with engaging, practically, with a capricious environment. Whilst Catholicism offers a welcome, extra layer of spiritual armoury for confronting harmful spirits, it does not engage with the more positive, fertile aspects of this landscape on which agricultural practice depends. If the ‘signs’ of the landscape can be read properly, if people understand what ‘the land wants’, then it follows, for Manggarai people, that they will be fertile, children will be healthy, and crops will be abundant. Although Catholic practices can bless and protect water, they cannot provide the kind of fertility ensured by the spilling of blood and the calling forth of long-buried ancestors. Whilst a Mass might be thought to have scared away spirits obstructing a road-building project, the church is currently unable to involve itself in more reciprocal relations with an ancestral, animate landscape.

In speaking of the ‘resilience’ of the Manggarai spiritual landscape, I do not wish to imply that it is unchanging or ‘traditional’. A key argument of this paper has been that the spiritual landscape of the lowlands has been profoundly affected by earlier state policies of village resettlement, and the building of wet-rice fields. Again, this shows the ability

of the notion of ‘spiritual landscapes’ to expand our appreciation, beyond ‘religion’, of the factors that influence understandings of spirit beings and places. Villagers in southern Manggarai, as they grapple with land conflicts and declining productivity that threaten to turn the land ‘hot’, are creating new forms of engagement with the agency of the land. In doing so, they prove both that landscapes and persons are permanently entangled, and that landscapes are always historical.

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² The most common way to refer to 'charismatic' Catholics is as people who 'don't eat medicine' (*toé hang rewos*), since they usually reject the efficacy of healing practices that involve 'blowing' spells into roots or water.

³ Gregory Forth (personal communication) suggests that eels may be 'doubly spiritual' in this context since eels not only look like snakes (associated, throughout Flores, with spirits) but are also connected with spiritually-potent water sources.

⁴ As in many areas of Southeast Asia (see Telle, this issue), Manggarai people associate the health of both people and the land with coolness and dampness.

⁵ On another occasion, one man, somewhat unusually, described the ‘two religions’ as the ‘pagan religion’ (*agama kafir*) and ‘the religion of only a few days’ (*agama ata piha bari koé*).

⁶ Amé de Sana’s tears remind us of the biographical and idiosyncratic aspects of landscape. Such ‘personal landscapes’ are explored in Allerton (forthcoming).

⁷ Significantly, many Wae Rebo people say that a state official who ordered them to abandon their highland site later died, and that his death was caused by the ‘energy of the land’ (*ghas de tana*).