As things stood

Budgeted to go to the Netherlands, I had been studying the modernization of the Endenese people of central Flores, eastern Indonesia, focusing on the impact of recent immigration to Malaysia and cash cropping. Regarding the former, I had published a mildly critical article (Nakagawa 2003) on modern anthropological theories about ‘place’ (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1997), in which I concluded that there were two discrete language games operating in Ende which we might label the ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ language games. The traditional language game includes ‘modern’ phenomena as one of its constituent parts, by treating schools and labour migration as outside the meaningful world of kinship, and hence as non-gifts and non-places (see Augé 1995). For its part, the ‘modern’ language game includes ‘traditional’ phenomena, by representing adat and ceremonies as conservative, as in the way of the progressive world of development (‘pembangunan’). In a way, two language-games – with which most Endenese are fluent – are like two legendary serpents eating each other’s tail.

A few months after my arrival, I read a paper at an IAS public seminar entitled ‘From Paddy to Vanilla, Elephant Tusks to Money’ (hereafter the ‘vanilla paper’) which dealt with three generations in an Ende village, from around 1960 up until now. Beginning with the idea of the Endenese triple economy (comprised of the subsistence, gift, and market spheres), the vanilla paper criticized the idea of money being an all-destructive agent, as advanced by P. Bohannan (1967), who described a society with a similar multi-layered economy (Tiv). The vanilla paper described how the Ende people, with the aid of some indigenous conceptual devices, managed to make the idea of money fit into their own cosmology – to tame and domesticate its power.

I had been fairly fed up with post-modernist hegemony in my old territory (cultural anthropology) and this was one reason why I temporarily converted to ecological anthropology.

I came to the Netherlands with its vast colonial archives with the hope of acquiring data on cash cropping in colonial times, thinking again vaguely, of writing a historical analysis of cash cropping in Ende or perhaps in Flores more generally. At least, I thought, I could expand the time-span of my vanilla paper (three generations) to more than 100 years. Even if I could not find any data of theoretical interest, I said to myself, I could still collect numerical data and do some very primitive economic-cum-ecological-anthropology-type-of-analysis.

Truth to tell, I didn’t have a clear idea of what I would find and what I hoped to prove – in a way, the result would depend on the data I would find in the archive.

The only idea I had of any theoretical relevance came from the controversy between Marshall Sahlins (1983, 1993) and Nicholas Thomas (1992, 1993, etc). Sahlins emphasizes the importance of Fijian traditional exchange, called kerekere, in understanding Fijian history while Thomas contends that kerekere was an example of ‘invented culture’ in the Fijian’s struggle against western influence. In a sense, it was a debate about facts – whether kerekere had existed or not. My argument in the vanilla paper can be compared to Sahlins’ argument, in that I, like Sahlins, emphasize the importance of the ‘traditional institution’ to fully understand Endenese history. Thus it is conceivable that one could devise a similar argument against mine, insisting that Endenese ritual exchange was another example of ‘invented culture’. With this controversy in mind, I entered a hazy hope of finding some historical data on Endene ritual exchange in the past.

I have a CD by Rowan Atkinson, a British comedian. One of his punch lines wonderfully describes my situation upon arrival in the country: ‘like a blind man groping in the dark for a black cat that wasn’t there.’ I was hoping there was a cat, though.

In the beginning

I arrived in Amsterdam at midnight on a Sunday in April 2005. I was hungry so I wandered around near my apartment, to find that I was in the centre of the seemingly busiest part of the city. Surprise...

I began by picking up two books, one a ‘scripta’ (MA thesis, University of Amsterdam) on the history of Flores (Oele 1995), and another by an agricultural scientist on the Sikka people adjacent to the Ende (Müetzer 1981). With the vague hope of acquiring data on cash cropping in colonial Indonesia, I had been fairly fed up with post-modernist hegemony in my old territory (cultural anthropology) and this was one reason why I temporarily converted to ecological anthropology.

...if not?... My argument in the vanilla paper can be compared to the second-hand data collected by Oele helped me to form an idea of what kind of data I could expect to find in the archive and thus what kind of theoretical line(s) I should pursue. Unfortunately, the only conceivable line I could take, as far as Oele’s data suggested, was the one I called an economic/ecological anthropology type of analysis.

So I began re-reading the book by Metzner to guide me in the kind of data I should collect and what kind of arguments I was to advance in these new (to me) fields of economic and ecological anthropology. Manon Osseweijer’s thesis (2001; she was kind enough to give me a copy) was of great help in verifying in me the anthropology of ecology. I read a few works cited in her dissertation and then others cited in those. I think I expanded my vocabulary immensely at this stage – I was being trained as a part-time economic/ecological anthropologist.

Armed with ideas of what kind of data I would find as well as the theoretical lines I was expected to take in assembling those data, I plunged into the formidable corpus of colonial documents at the National Archive in Den Haag. As the door to the archive announces to the visitor: ‘100 km of 1,000 years of history’.

Population density and other dull matters

I attained some tentative results from my library work at this stage – these were not to my personal taste, though (I found out that I’m definitely a cultural anthropologist). First of all, the population figures are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1915</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manggarai</td>
<td>760303</td>
<td>785505</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Flores</td>
<td>173693</td>
<td>179044</td>
<td>57227</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikka</td>
<td>141868</td>
<td>146216</td>
<td>189871</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ende</td>
<td>98142</td>
<td>101164</td>
<td>143763</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manggarai</td>
<td>204987</td>
<td>211278</td>
<td>320543</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flores</td>
<td>250000</td>
<td>482100</td>
<td>336885</td>
<td>480000</td>
<td>716165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Flores</td>
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<td>89752</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>120500</td>
<td>89752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ende</td>
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<td>82054</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>66000</td>
<td>116015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manggarai</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>124908</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>120500</td>
<td>155283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second was closely related to the first – if I should research Buginese and Makassarese traders and their role in trade in and out of Flores, then I could not do without mentioning the slave-trade in this part of Indonesia, especially around Flores and Sumbawa (the Endenese were famous slave-traders). Fortunately there is a booklet on slavery in this region by an anthropologist (Neetham 1983) who claimed himself not to be a real historian. I decided to let the booklet cover this part of my research, at least for the time being.

A turning point – have I seen you before?

While doing library research as a Sunday historian, my training as a part-time ecological anthropologist continued. Then, groping in the darkness, I came across something familiar: some ecological anthropologists claim to be ‘anti-essentialists’. Some even refer to Foucault. This was rather unexpected – I had grown fed up with the names of Foucault and other philosophers and post-modernist hegemony in my old territory (cultural anthropology), and this was one reason why I temporarily converted to ecological anthropology.

I found out, however, that these ‘new’ ecological anthropologists have done nothing new – they are pure, old-fashioned, ecology-oriented anthropologists; it is only the surrounding atmosphere that has changed. Before they said that ‘tribal’ people were practical; now they say the same thing, the only difference being the superficial and wrong assumption that tribal people are not culturally bound as some of the middle-headed cultural essentialists claim them to be. By ‘being familiar’ I don’t mean merely those philosophers’ names but the rhetoric in general. Replace ‘practical’ with...
The problematique of money with its two aspects, use-value and exchange-value, a process which a structuralist would be willing to analyse Buginese ‘commercial’ activities in ecological anthropology); (2) a moderate Sunday historian (analysing old data (rebellions and ‘movements’ so far analysed in political terms) in a new light, that is, in cognitive terms. So, at the time of writing this essay, I am: (1) an average part-time ecologist-reformer (I touched upon cognitive aspects, I think the data I found will be helpful as comparative material when considering the mentions attached to similar rumours in Indonesia. Especially the line that Erb (1991 and 1999) pursued looks, to me, promising; even though the Enden people I know have had little contact with tourists, their experience abroad (as wage labourers in Malaysia) is comparable to what Erb argues (1999)).

1. While being their additional comment that tribal people are not culturally bound as some of the muddle-headed cultural essentialists claim them to be. In this context, the ‘baptism of money’, a strange and seemingly unintelligible custom among some of the black planters, made sense. Money as they knew it (money as use-value) was natural but barren, as opposed to money in capitalism which was, to them, unnatural and fertile. ‘Barron money can become unnaturally fertile when transferred to God’s domain and stamped with his life-giving properties’ (Tausig 1980: 11). Money as use-value to their lives, while money in capitalist ideology is similar in some ways to money as they know it and different in others, while money in capitalist ideology is similar to animals in some ways and different in others. They must explain the transformation of money into interest-bearing capital and the conversion of use-value into exchange-value. (Tausig 1980: 11)

IIAS, or why I remained a cultural anthropologist

I really appreciate all the help and kindness I received during my stay in the Netherlands. I was going to mention all the names I could remember when my foster father’s wisdom dawned upon me, in Ende, I was playing back the day’s recordings to Bakap Epu, my foster father. One of the recorded pieces was a recital of a ritual chant. Any ritual chant in Ende begins by invoking ancestors; before coming to the main part, the hunter was reciting all the ancestors’ names he could recall when Bakap Epu said, ‘This is not good, not at all. If one should drop an ancestor’s name, then he (or she) feels affirmed and will do something helpful, not only to the reciter but to the society as a whole. It is much better to say merely emku kajo’iru’ero, ‘grand parents and great grand parents’/ancestors and forebears’ because, in that way, nobody will ever be affronted.’

Still, some names deserve special mentioning – Win Stikphoe, Heleen, Wouter. And let me continue – all other staff members and fellow fellows. I really am grateful to you all.

Select bibliography

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** cash cropping, ecology, headhunting/slave trades, stranger-businessmen and labour migration, all these bits and pieces were beginning to merge, revolving around: (1) the idea of money in capitalism, and (2) traditional societies’ encounter with it

Meanwhile, outside the archipelago, I extended my research into the so-called money cults, the kind of ‘movements’ explicitly aiming at money and wealth. While some analyses, such as the famous ‘At the edge of the bush’ (Worsley 1968) focus exclusively on politics, Burridge’s (1960) analysis and data were most insightful. Burridge presents Mambu and other prophets’ (society, church) oriented changes in society, and how the cargo-culls filled the gap. His data deserve thorough re-analysis.

Data were collected in other fields as well, including javanesse millennium movements and headhunting rumours. I initially thought these rumours were promising in more than one way: they might address a loose end (about the slave trade) in my research and, second, I had encountered similar rumours in my field. Though it turned out that only Erb’s analysis (1991) touched upon cognitive aspects, I think the data I found will be helpful as comparative material when considering the meanings attached to similar rumours in Ende. Especially the line that Erb (1991 and 1999) pursued looks, to me, promising; even though the Ende people I know have had little contact with tourists, their experience abroad (as wage labourers in Malaysia) is comparable to what Erb argues (1999)).

**Abrupt ending

Cash cropping (capitalism), ecology, headhunting/slave trades, stranger-businessmen (Bugis and Chinese) and labour migration, all these bits and pieces were beginning to merge into one large pattern, revolving around (1) the idea of money in capitalism, and (2) traditional societies’ encounter with it when, regrettably, my time was up.

Even though I can no longer visit the archipelago, I can pursue the line I now see clearly in front of me, and will, hopefully within a short period of time, present the result in a lengthy article, or, better yet, in a book.

‘rational’ and voilà! – you get the moral economy controversy, revolving around the book(s) by James C. Scott (1976) and Geertz’s isasters, and for-