Chapter 1

Things, cycles and exchanges

Liturgical sequences differ not only in shape, length, mode of regulation and bases for the occurrence of the rituals composing them, but also in the frequency of the rituals composing them, in the regularity with which those rituals occur, and in the length of individual rituals. Little thought has been given by anthropologists to such differences, and I can do no more here than speculate upon some of their possible correlates and concomitants. (Rappaport 1999:196.)

1.1 Introduction

Ritual episodes are self-evidently central to the acquisition and transmission of religious representations (Boyer 1994:186), and this monograph seeks to make an ethnographic contribution to the development of a general theory of the way in which rituals are reproduced. It will especially address issues of frequency and periodicity that I believe are important, but which are still much neglected in existing descriptions of ritual corpora. Frequency is a theme that has recently become central to certain cognitive theories of ritual transmission (for instance, Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002; Whitehouse 2000, 2004), but as yet there are few full-length ethnographic accounts that examine the relationship between events, memory and transmissive frequency in a single connected body of ritual. Like Lawson, McCauley and Whitehouse, I ascribe a causal role to ‘ritual form’ in driving ‘frequency’, but it is not clear to me that I am using either concepts of frequency or ritual form in a way that is entirely consistent with their theories, nor do I think it sensible to claim to have done so. Moreover, I am less concerned with cognition at the individual level than with the
connection between cognition and the emergent properties of a system of rituals in a particular place and population.

By frequency in this context is understood the total number of ritual events of a particular kind during a specified period; by periodicity, the time lapses between them. The work is based on the systematic analysis of data on ritual events collected between 1970 and 2003 (cumulatively, approximately 31 months of fieldwork) amongst an eastern Indonesian animist population. It compares different categories of ritual event (comprising different ritual forms) in terms of how frequently they occur and the length of the interval that elapses between one event and the next. It tries to determine those factors influencing the temporal distribution of such events and the consequences of this distribution for the effective reproduction – through ritual – of traditional Nuaulu life. From this, I hope, emerges an analysis of ritual reproduction that properly integrates the themes of frequency and periodicity, and the way in which systems comprising religious ideas and practices persist, replicate and change over time.

The empirical focus of the study is the Nuaulu, a people of the island of Seram in the Indonesian province of Maluku (the Moluccas).

It might be thought necessary to defend my apparent typological use of the term ‘animism’ given current debates. How we describe peoples who adhere to local sets of beliefs and practices that are not parts of institutionalised domains of social activity of the kind we describe as ‘religion’ remains problematic. Moreover, there is a particular issue when such people coexist with populations who have converted (sometimes several centuries previously) to institutionalized world religions. In the Dutch colonial literature (say, in lists of population figures) such populations are described as heathen (Heidenen), Alifuru (Alfoerische), or even Hindu (see for instance Tichelman 1925). In Indonesian government documents and dictionaries, the terms ‘animis’ and ‘animisma’ are also sometimes found. None of these terms are entirely appropriate, and some are positively misleading. They are discussed further in Chapter 9 in terms of their contemporary ramifications.

We may agree with Boyer (1994) that animism – the attribution of human characteristics to non-human objects and forces in the environment – is an intrinsic way in which the human mind uses social cognition to understand the natural world; or we may agree with Descola (1996:87-8) that it constitutes ‘a fundamental modality’ of human thought (an ontology, in other words) found almost everywhere. However, the balance – to use Descola’s categories – of ‘animistic’, ‘totemic’ and ‘naturalistic’ modalities varies. In the Nuaulu case all three are found in a distinctive combination, but because the main beliefs inherent and motivating Nuaulu rituals involve the recognition of spirits associated with non-human natural objects, and of the activity of spirits of dead humans, it is convenient to refer to the whole package, and to the people in whose way of life they are instantiated, as ‘animist’. This does not mean that Christian and Muslim peoples with whom Nuaulu interact do not also share, to a considerable extent, parts of that same ontology, nor should it imply any Tylorian evolutionist or, indeed, ethnocentric assumptions (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Moreover, to use the term ‘animist’ in this sense is at the same time to admit that, comparatively, those populations we so describe may exhibit extraordinary diversity in the social presentation of those beliefs; as much, if not more so, than the more institutionally constrained and centralized ‘world religions’.
(figures 1.1 and 1.2). From a regional and ethnographic viewpoint, the data presented here are important for three reasons: because the Nuaulu are virtually the only viable animist society on the island of Seram; because Nuaulu data permit a historically unfashionable focus on practice and performance in a part of Indonesia where previous studies have emphasized metaphoricity, symbolism and social structure; and because Nuaulu live in an area where the dominant political tension is between two non-animist confessional groups: Christians and Muslims. Let me expand on each of these a bit more.

Firstly, the Nuaulu are the only animist group in Maluku where a general account of the kind described could still be credibly undertaken. Elsewhere, where animist groups still exist, demographic decline has led to the severe erosion and disarticulation of ritual cycles (for instance, Huaulu; see Valeri 2000). In the Nuaulu case, although there has been a steady rate of conversion to both Christianity and Islam since 1970, the number of practising animists – at the beginning of the twenty-first century – has actually increased. This makes the Nuaulu probably the largest single group of this kind in Maluku.

Secondly, the principal focus amongst those working on traditional religion in eastern Indonesia has historically tended to be the association between symbolism and social structure, following the influential work of the Leiden school of structuralism (see for example De Josselin de Jong 1977), and that of Rodney Needham at Oxford and several decades of his research students (for instance, Barnes 1974). Such work has tended to emphasize an ‘all-embracing classification’, ‘an essential interconnection’, a ‘discussion of categories and relations’ (Barnes 1974:245), an ‘order of a “total” kind’ (Van Wouden 1968:2; Needham in Barnes 1974:vii), or what Lévi-Strauss has called an ‘orde des ordres’. Although the Leiden and Oxford variants of this structuralism were always more empirically grounded, this approach was absolutely consistent with the French philosophical approach identified by Audrey Richards (1967), speaking of the francophone anthropology of West Africa. It was through this type of anthropology that Lévi-Strauss – its most distinguished exponent – had somehow inverted the Durkheimian sociology of religion (see for instance Leach 1965). By contrast, I wish to do the opposite: to emphasize ritual practice and performance (Tambiah 1979) and, to some extent, exemplify the stereotypical British approach identified by Richards. She was sceptical of convenient homogeneities
Figure 1.1. The geographic location of the Nuaulu area in relation to Maluku as a whole and Seram in particular.

Key: The boxed area is reproduced in more detail as Figure 1.2. Key: 1. Sawai; 2. Rumah Olat.
and consistencies in patterns of belief, and of overly elegant systems of ideas. There are still few studies for Maluku which conform to this approach, though there are a growing number for eastern Indonesia more generally which display particular features of the approach advocated here (for instance, Atkinson 1989; Kuipers 1990; E. Lewis 1988; Traube 1986). I follow Barth (1987:84) in his advocacy of studying a living tradition of ritual knowledge rather than the abstract ideas held in ‘collective representations’ – an emphasis not on ‘mentation’, but rather on what people do.

Thirdly, the research reported here is of additional pertinence given the civil unrest in Maluku between early 1998 and 2003, unrest largely expressed in confessional terms. As events unfolded from 1999 onwards, local populations that had previously been religiously mixed began to fragment. That they had mostly lived in peaceful coexistence was in part accounted for by the fact that they shared a common syncretist worldview: ‘agama Nunusaku’ (the religion of Nunusaku) (Bartels 2000). Christian minorities fled to areas where Christians were in the majority, and Muslim minorities fled to the safety of areas with a Muslim majority. Nuaulu Christians fled from the Muslim domain of Sepa, though the animist majority remained, partly out of a traditional loyalty to the raja of Sepa, but most importantly because no pressure was put upon them to flee. Caught in the middle, they were able to continue their rituals relatively free of disturbance. I shall have more to say about the consequences for ritual performance and religious continuity of these disturbances in Chapter 9. Although they mainly involved conflict between Muslims and Christians in the provincial capital of Ambon, in North Maluku and in Banda, there were also disturbances on Seram, accompanied by much population displacement. The destruction of effective infrastructure at the political and economic centre of the province led to increased administrative and economic independence on the periphery, reinforcing traditional Nuaulu practices and the security people find in them. As Nuaulu animists do not belong to either of the two main confessional groups involved in the conflict, it is an open question as to how they perceive it and the extent to which they are caught up in it. Historically, Nuaulu have maintained equally strong allegiances with the Muslim settlement of Sepa, the domain of which they are formally a constituent part, and with Christian villages such as Nueltetu, Hatuheno and Rouhua-Kristen, with which there has been most intermarriage and conversion.
I have never been amongst those who subscribe to the view that theories of ritual are, or should be, mutually exclusive. Ritual behaviour is complex and varied enough to admit many explanations, on different occasions and in different contexts, and, indeed, simultaneously at different levels, without any one being fatally falsified through mutual exclusion. So, if I have little to say here about existing general theories, it is not that I reject them or fail to see their relevance to the Nuaulu case, but rather because I see it as my task to concentrate on previously lightly considered aspects: on ritual as process, on the connection between ritual and demography, on the interlocking and interpenetration of ritual cycles, on the importance of ‘ritual form’ at the expense of ritual content and on the notion that people work with ritual models (kinds of cultural schema) based on some familiarity with the general structure of all ritual. The increasing tendency in ethnography to describe and examine in minute detail the dynamics of a particular ritual, while important in its own right, does tend to detract from an overview of the relationship between the totality of rituals and their systemic properties. It is upon this that I seek to focus.

Precise definitions of ritual have proved elusive, though anthropologists generally agree that whatever else they may be, they are minimally stereotypic and scripted forms of collective action recognizable through combinations of acts, gestures and utterances (Gluckman 1975; see also Goody 1977a; Rappaport 1999:24-68; Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002). But although the boundaries of ritual as a category of social or cultural practice may evade us, the psychological salience of ‘ritualized behaviour’ is somewhat easier to understand. Many definitions of ritual are unsatisfactory because they anticipate content and function (Tambiah 1979:119) or ‘aspects of the representations attached to rituals’ (Boyer 1994:189). I follow Boyer and Lienard (2006:2-3) in accepting that rituals in this sense are a ‘behavioural modality’ intuitively recognized by their compulsion, stereotypy, rigidity, internal repetition and redundancy, and by a restricted range of themes and an apparent lack of rational motivation. This definition in turn follows Rappaport (1979) in permitting us to accept as ritual: (a) actions divorced from their usual goals, or for which there is no clear empirical goal (as in washing or wiping things that are evidently already clean, as
occurs in many Nuaulu ceremonies); (b) compulsory and rigidly scripted actions in which deviations are seen as life-threatening (most major Nuaulu rituals described in this book); and (c) actions that create an orderly environment quite different from that of everyday interaction (for example, constructing the platform used in Nuaulu male puberty ceremonies), but nevertheless generally involve a modification of everyday practice through formalization. This is evident in the Nuaulu case, for example, in the use of the betel quid, where normal rituals of politeness, deference and exchange are accentuated (Feuchtwang 2007). Ritual is not simply the translation of a world of meaning into practical action (Turner 1967:50), nor simply the making explicit of social structure (Leach 1964:15). I agree with Whitehouse (2004:3-4) that rituals do not have intrinsic meanings and with Sperber (1975) that most rituals do not need to convey coded meanings except in the vaguest sense, and that it is probably a mistake to try and find meaning in sacred propositions. For Paul (2002:525), this latter is because ‘it is essential to their success as ultimate propositions that [rituals] are without discursive meaning, so that (a) no one actually understands them and (b) they are not refutable’ (cf. also Bloch 1974; G. Lewis 1980; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). Thus, paradoxically, ‘the meaning of ritual’s informationlessness is certainty’ (Rappaport 1999:285). Indeed, ritual actions often seem to reduce the likelihood of providing crucial information, acting like some kind of ‘tunnel’ in which each action only points to the next in a prescribed sequence (Bloch 1974; Staal 1990). However, as I argue later, rituals can instantiate almost any number of meanings, but must at least encode meaning sufficiently to replicate an action on a subsequent occasion, or to ensure successful transmission. In making these claims I depart from the orthodox approach adopted by many students of eastern Indonesian religion, in which ‘coherent’ and internally consistent shared codes are everything, whether established through semantic inter-reference (e.g. Geertz), as evinced through structuralist analysis (e.g. Needham) or through Dumontian ‘ideology’ (Bowen 1995:1049).

But although we might understand ritualization as some kind of evolved precaution system, ceremonial rituals are not simply the elaboration of ‘ritualization’. Thus, I am here not concerned with any disembodied underlying function of ritualized behaviour to which all rituals must conform; rather, I take this for granted. I am much more interested in observing that the consequences of ritualization are culturally
transmitted collections of interconnected actions and events that obtain a certain integration over time through the dynamic properties of the systems of which they are part, and by virtue of which they themselves display certain emergent epigenetic characteristics. Over time this process may be understood and represented by actors as a stable system, an equilibrium. It is of course a ‘false equilibrium’ in the sense that it is only assumed to exist in order to make sense of the world and to make planning easier. Assumptions about the equilibrium status of cultural practices may, therefore, themselves impact on the character of ritualized behaviours.

People performing and consuming the ceremonies and ritual actions described in this monograph have, like all humans, mental systems designed to respond to stimuli that are characteristic of ritualized behaviour. But people, on the whole, do not hold a ‘theory’ of their own rituals, and it is precisely this that makes ethnography both indispensable and difficult (Boyer and Lienard 2006:34). Neither do people participate on the basis of mere imitation; rather, they respond in a psychologically evolved way to some of its features, activating a ‘hazard-precaution system’ resulting in cognitive capture of ritualized behaviours that are important in other contexts. In other words, the disposition to participate in coordinated action may be maturationally natural, encouraged by the cognitive evolution of ritualization proclivities, and appearing according to a relatively fixed developmental schedule.

1.3 THE CONCEPT OF RITUAL REPRODUCTION

I wish to emphasize here dimensions of Nuaulu ceremonial ritual that other theories have less to say about, organized around the vital statistics of frequency and periodicity. For example, birth rites of passage are those rituals which occur most frequently and for which I have the most complete data. Female puberty rituals generally only occur at an individual level, and therefore more frequently than collective male puberty rituals. By comparison, male puberty ceremonies are collective ‘mega-rituals’ (cf. Bemba chisungu; see Richards 1956), with a salience that makes them historical reference points, not only for dividing time into socially meaningful stretches, but also as symbolically charged moments through which to articulate the synchronic relations of Nuaulu society. Most death rituals,
being of un-induced minors, are perfunctory; and those of inducted old people are not on the whole socially visible beyond the circle of close kin. As frequent as birth rituals are those rites concerned with the construction of particular parts of houses (Ellen 1986) and their contents, such as sacred shields (Ellen 1988a, 1990), though the most infrequent of all rituals are those in the cycle reproducing the suane (a sacred house shared by several clans constituting a ritual community), where the intervals may be 30 years or more. I am concerned, therefore, to compare rituals in terms of their frequency and periodicity and to examine the consequences of any emerging patterns of difference. I want to explore how periodicity and frequency serve to connect rituals into a series of interlocking cycles, and to determine channels of information flow. I also want to explore the tension between the extent to which frequent rituals provide a performative and interpretative guide to more infrequent rituals, and the extent to which (increasingly) infrequently performed but culturally more important rituals provide a ‘virtual’ organizational grid of which more frequent rituals are simplified exemplars. To what extent can these salient rituals provide a framework for understanding key beliefs and practices more generally? We can see that here we have an idea that resembles McCauley and Lawson’s (2002:6) ‘ritual form hypothesis’, in which they propose that ‘aspects of the representation of ritual form explain and predict levels of sensory pageantry’, and which determines frequency of performance.

Using the approach outlined in the previous paragraph, I shall examine a series of themes: (1) variation in practice and interpretation; (2) order and disorder in ritual practice, especially ‘disorder’ deriving from opportunities, or absence of opportunities, for performance; (3) how rituals change through frequency and periodicity of performance, and through the dependency on material and social conditions, such as the availability of people to participate in rituals and the scarcity of sacred valuables. I shall also examine: (4) the temporal connections between rituals of different kinds and their dependency on each other, the way they interlock and work as cycles and how such cycles might or might not interconnect in an overall ritual process. Finally (5), I shall consider the coherence of rituals, particularly that coherence arising from frequency of performance, the notion that people work with a ‘model ritual’ as a default script for other rituals, and the extent to which such models are based on the temporal distribution of experience as opposed to the
salience attached to one kind of ritual over another in local or expert exegesis. What all these themes share – and none are, really, mutually exclusive – is a concern for form at the expense of content, and an emphasis on the materiality, physical constraints on and embodiment of ritual practice (but see McCauley and Lawson 2002:10; Whitehouse 2004:7).

The first of these issues, variation, has been addressed before, most conspicuously perhaps by Firth (1970:233-60), who characteristically offers meticulous illustrations of different kinds of variation in Tikopia ritual practice, distinguishing ‘circumstantial’, ‘systemic’ (or ‘structural’), and ‘personal’ variation, noting the absence of fixed formulas in ritual phraseology and showing how a rite as basic as the kava is subject to change between individual performances. Also, there is a long-standing Indonesianist interest in the subject of ritual variation, found for example in Geertz’s critique (for example, Geertz 1961) of the Leiden School, and in scepticism displayed towards the idea of ‘total structural analyses’ (Ellen 1980, 1986). The second issue, disorder, which in a sense is the moral and practical consequence of variation, revisits debates in the Melanesianist literature of the 1980s (Barth 1975, 1987; G. Lewis 1980; Juillerat, Brunton and Gell 1980; but see also Whitehouse 2000:81-98).

I examine what need Nuaulu have for coherence in their ritual practices and to what degree they can tolerate ambiguity, contradiction and uncertainty as constant features of their belief systems. I shall argue that practical, consistent frameworks for reproducing ritual practices are important, but that Nuaulu can tolerate ambiguity and contradiction in the content. The third issue, change, addresses the way in which ritual performances are constrained materially and ecologically (Whitehouse 2004:7); it also examines the question of the resilience of religious systems to innovation and the depletion of their parts, and, ultimately, the conditions for their collapse.

Two material conditions that influence the ability to perform rituals, and which I will analyse in detail, are the availability of concrete valuables upon which ritual depends and the demography of participating groups. For Nuaulu, objects are regularly the currency, and sometimes the explicit focus, of rituals: Chinese porcelain and European plates are offered to ancestors in certain rituals, and circulate between clans as bridewealth and other payments. Imported Asian textiles are important for the effective accomplishment of female puberty ceremonies. If these items cannot be obtained, or are in short supply, problems emerge and
the ritual may not take place. Thus, Nuaulu have been under pressure to sell porcelain over the years to itinerant traders. Most of the plates in non-animist villages have already been sold, mostly disappearing into the international antique market. The traditional source of plates has long dried up. Nuaulu have until recently resisted such pressures, but there is a loss through breakage. The replacement of such items represents a real problem. Some plates are available for sale in the provincial capital of Ambon – the very ones acquired from people like the Nuaulu – but, because of national and international market pressure, these are now at prices that the Nuaulu cannot afford. Timorese textiles, also in demand, are obtainable with difficulty, but the much-coveted ‘patola’ cloths of Indian origin are not available at all. Where objects are locally produced, delays arise mainly through lack of time to engage in ritual production; where objects are imported, even where resources are available to acquire them, their availability is ultimately not under local control. The problems posed by the unavailability of textiles for exchange rituals in the Bird’s Head of New Guinea is well documented by Elmberg (1968) and Miedema (1984). Such concerns emphasize the primacy of things in ritual (Ellen 1988a, 1990; cf. Appadurai 1986).

In the same way that the availability of material things influences the distribution of ritual and its relative density through time, so, too, does the availability of people to participate in, or contribute to, them. If the sex ratio is such that a clan produces few female offspring, it may be many years between first-menstruation rituals; if there are insufficient young men of an age to warrant performance of a matahenne male puberty ritual, it will not happen. In other words, the demography of individual and exchanging clans will have an impact on the frequency and periodicity of rituals. This can lead to various paradoxes, such as a clan – let us say, Matoke – being on the verge of demographic collapse, but rich in terms of valuables. If there are lots of females they will bring in material things, but in a patrilineal society it is males that are needed to effectively reproduce the house and clan. I shall consider sex ratios for each clan and the implications in each case. Tensions arise because rituals cannot happen unless certain material conditions are satisfied, and yet if they do not happen, there is a risk that non-performance will incur ancestral wrath and increase the likelihood of misfortune. In other words, there is a necessary trade-off between one kind of risk and another (Howe 2000).
The fourth theme, that of temporal connections between rituals of different kinds, explores the sequencing of ritual events, and the assertion that few are really free-standing. There cannot, for example, be a death ritual without there first having been a birth ritual. Many major rituals depend on the prior accomplishment of other rituals that enable them to take place, such as rituals connected with the preparation of barkcloth in male puberty ceremonies. The analogous case is also true for those non-human things that are the focus of ritual, such as houses or sacred objects, and most ritual is based on the model of the human developmental cycle. I shall examine how the availability of people and objects affects the problems of coordination between celebrating groups, and the differences between rituals that must be performed immediately and those that can be delayed. Thus, while the performance of some rituals is forced by natural events – birth, death and first menstruation – others can be delayed for inordinate amounts of time. Thus, as many have argued before, rituals provide a framework for the cultural construction of notions of time, its division and direction, and these may in turn entail different and contradictory experiences of duration related to periodicity.

Finally, in identifying model rituals, I hypothesize that these will derive from what people experience first as they mature and emerge into adult persons, reinforced by what they experience most frequently thereafter. It is these rituals that we might suppose to be the most stable and to have the greatest influence in instantiating people’s performative knowledge, and which they most readily recollect and retain (McCauley and Lawson 2002:48-50). The Nuaulu data suggest that both semantic and episodic features of ritual memory may compensate for simple repetition in making them memorable. I shall draw on the schema and cultural models literature to suggest that models of ritual performance are generated by the mind from the accumulated experiences of those participating in ritual, both passively and actively. I suggest that cognitive patterns emerge which specify the relationship between elements of a ritual not so much in terms of symbolic meanings, as in terms of related actions and practices. These models are unconsciously constructed out of repeated experience, in a language-like way, and only to a lesser extent learned through direct verbal instruction. In this respect, I concur with Whitehouse (2000:10) when he observes that ‘scholars since Durkheim have often projected mnemonic properties of doctrinal religion on to
the sorts of imagistic practices with which Durkheim was concerned’. Indeed, ritual is intrinsically a form of knowledge that is difficult to express explicitly and verbally. Schemas themselves are not rigid but flexible constructs, such that wherever there is doubt about an appropriate procedure, a default mode will normally be brought into play (Bloch 1998; Shore 1996).

As individuals grow older, they learn more about the ritual system, attach new meanings to practices, rearrange elements and shift emphasis. But however young the participants, however much changes, the ritual world will always appear as ‘sufficiently’ coherent. Thus, from the point of view of experience, socialization is a constant restructuring, a reassembling of the ritual world, with coherence arising in part from frequency and the regularity of occurrence. Looked at this way, the most frequent rituals, such as those accompanying birth or house-building, act as templates for less frequent rituals. Set against this is the widespread view that the plethora of lesser rituals is somehow evident in the depleted and partial variants of some less frequently occurring but culturally salient and complex mega-rituals. In the Nuaulu case, the most obvious candidate for this is the male puberty ceremony, and I will examine this case in order to gauge the extent to which such an interpretation is plausible.

Underlying these various themes is an enquiry into the primacy of practice – the observation that rituals are events with both social causes and effects – and a predisposition to privilege action and material experience over inner meanings, words and semantic webs. Ritual is performance and bodily action (G. Lewis 1980), something that has to be done because the consequences of not doing it are potentially life-threatening. In this respect, I rely on the work of a number of recent ethnographers and theorists, though I mention here only those from which I have drawn most inspiration. Thus, for Gibson (1986:63) ‘rituals are stable forms of collective action to which ever changing meanings and uses are attached over the course of history [...] what is interesting about them is how they constrain individual action rather than what they mean’. For James Fox (1979:147), the Savu ceremonial system is about ostensive acts rather than oratorical acts. Similarly, Rappaport (1979, 1999) has observed that the eagerness of anthropologists to explore the symbolic depths of ritual often leads them to overlook its ‘obvious’ surface forms. Symbols, for Rappaport, are the problem to which ritual is the solution, not the other way around. The problem with symbols and signs is that their very
arbitrariness, which gives them such great adaptive value and power, also makes them untrustworthy as a means of organizing collective action. Ritual can much better establish ‘collective acceptance of fundamental postulates so that orderly social life can proceed as if there were in fact ultimate and absolute truths’ (Paul 2002:525). What I am proposing might, in some ways, be described as a neo-Durkheimian theory, and indeed this is what in some important respects Rappaport offers us, though perhaps without the underlying notion that religion is the subliminal worship of society. For both Durkheim and Rappaport (1999:31), ritual is ‘the social act basic to humanity’, and it is ‘through ritual that society is able to perpetuate itself and ward off the chaotic tendency to entropy that is intrinsic to life by overcoming the threats to order implicit in the human capacity for language’ (Paul 2002:525).

1.4 A POINT OF METHODOLOGY

I depart from classic ethnographies of ritual also by focussing on the activities of ordinary participants and their knowledge, as much as on ritual experts. In this sense I seldom achieve a comprehensive account that would satisfy a local expert, or provide an account that plausibly reflects the authority of some omniscient speaker-hearer. My descriptions more closely reflect the outline knowledge of an ‘average’ participant, that is, a sufficiency of experience and understanding for them to play the roles demanded of them. It is a common occurrence for ethnographers to encounter participants in ritual who claim not to know much, and who refer the persistent enquirer to an elder or some main player in the ritual who, by virtue of their structural position, commands greater authority. But Nuaulu ritual performance is predicated on a perpetual and general anxiety about not knowing the correct script. Even the ritual experts may feel inadequate. I shall return to this theme in the final chapter, when I discuss the management of ritual activity.

There is, of course, no such thing as an ‘average’ participant in a ritual. This project, and the analysis that follows here, holds it as axiomatic that no two persons have exactly the same view of the ritual world that they inhabit, especially in the absence of generalizing written accounts. What we have instead is a complex set of interlinking and overlapping cycles, which individuals enter from different points depending on the
circumstances of their birth. When they are born will determine the order in which they experience certain rituals and the moment when they acquire certain knowledge. Their parentage will determine whether they participate in particular rituals and absorb particular bodies of knowledge. This is partly because there is variation between clans. This means that, in one sense, all individuals are unique in their experience, since they are born into the system at moments when the cycles are differently articulated. As an individual grows up, their model of the ritual world develops and changes because of their experience of new rituals and their acquisition of new knowledge; however, no one individual ever becomes as privileged as the anthropologists, who, though they may know less overall and be unable to appreciate many linguistic and cultural nuances, are relatively unconstrained by rules and opportunities for participation. Thus, I have undoubtedly participated in far more (collective) rituals of certain kinds for the periods I have spent in the field than many of my informants, or individuals in the settlements I was studying during the same periods. Whilst this can be the basis for interesting insights, it may also distort analysis in failing to grasp the multiplicity of restricted local experiences and understandings. This kind of misleading anthropological assumption, based on the privileged position of the ethnographer or analyst, is no better exemplified than in the problematic distillation of meanings into tables of symbolic contrasts critiqued by Goody (1977b).

In adopting the approach proposed above, and in exploring the particular issues specified, I am reacting not only to a widespread tendency in early anthropological fieldwork accounts to over-essentialize (and, in more recent studies, to privilege meaning over practice), but also to the tendency to generalize on the basis of partial evidence and from the vantage point of the ‘omniscient-speaker-hearer’. As Valeri (1994b:209) puts it, speaking of his own fieldwork on Seram, ‘anthropologists tend to generalize from a limited experience in a limited time and reify it by de-temporalizing and more generally decontextualizing it’. No one person has exactly the same view of the ritual world that they inhabit, especially in the absence of texts and records. Instead, experience is structured according to gender, locality, group affiliation and individual life-history. The oldest have acquired a structure to their ritual experience based on the largest number of events witnessed, and therefore the greatest redundancy. In this sense it is the most ‘complete’, although memory is always
fallible. By comparison, young adults may never have witnessed many rituals. But no one experience is any less real or valid in informing an account of ritual than any other. The elder’s view is not necessarily the folk model from which all else is derived, or the least corrupt and more authentic of all possible versions.

I have spent 30 months conducting fieldwork amongst the Nuaulu over 34 years. One of the objectives of the project on which this book is based has been to investigate the effect of fieldwork phasing on the analysis of ritual events that, by their intrinsic character, do not always correspond to the opportunities available to observe them. My own periods in the field have been as follows: 1970-71, 15 months; 1973, three months; 1975, three months; 1981, one month; 1986, one month; 1990, two months; 1996, four months; and 2003, one month. This is low by the standards of other ethnographers at my career stage, but is probably more than most people who write on ritual (Foster 1979; Brown 1984).

The main part of the work involved in producing the book, which began with receipt of an ESRC grant in 2001, involved the systematic organization and analysis of Nuaulu field data on different categories of ritual event collected between 1970 and 1996. The frequency of these events in relation to the groups for which they were performed was computed, as reported in my field diaries: recorded by date and ordered by month and year, with numbers of participants and the demographics of the groups for which they were held. These data constitute the empirical starting point of the research, and have provided the framework for subsequent further analysis. They are the kind of data all anthropologists must acquire during the course of extended fieldwork, but which are seldom published (though see Conklin 1980:12).

Beginning with the most frequently reported ritual events – birth rituals – I will review all case material in order to detect patterns of variation in particular categories of ritual, and how we might account for the variation. I shall pay particular attention to the planning phase and to people’s negotiation of problems that they encounter; for example, acquisition of materials required for ritual, problems of the absence of key specialists, or inauspicious impediments. I will dwell on why rituals were not held in particular instances, and on the discussion between key participants on the detailed conduct of rituals.

As with any other participant, how an anthropologist interprets a ritual and a ritual system depends on the point at which he or she enters
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it. A second or a third event will be described in a different way from the first, and if a funeral has been described before a birth, or a birth before a funeral, this, too, may influence our interpretation, as will the preponderance of different kinds of rituals we have witnessed. If the events are generically the same, it will influence the analysis if we have described a Soumori event rather than a Matoke event, since there are differences between these clans. Moreover, individual rituals of any kind have particular historical valencies by virtue of the time of their occurrence. In other words, no two rituals are ever equal and interchangeable in the way in which statistical comparison might suggest. How we enter the field, the order in which we witness events, our growing familiarity with their generic features: all of this will influence our analysis. For example, there is a tendency to become lax when rituals become common. After my first few birth rituals, I often felt that I knew what was going on and could focus on other things. This downplays variation and privileges earlier events in analyses. Ideally, we need to describe as many events as possible in a particular category of rituals until we have exhausted all likely variation; only when we find ourselves repeating what we have earlier reported is it time to stop. Obviously, the longer you spend in field, the more likely you are to witness all types of ritual.

1.5 CLANS, HOUSES AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

In 2003 animist Nuaulu comprised in excess of 2000 individuals distributed between six settlements in the subdistrict of Amahai (Figure 1.2). In addition, Christian Nuaulu lived in the settlements of Waraka and Hatuheno in Wai Pia, following the communal conflict of 1999-2002. Two villages in the north-coast subdistrict of Wahai (Figure 1.1) also consist of Nuaulu speakers (though of a different dialect): Sawai and Rumah Olat. Although there has been a steady rate of conversion to both Christianity and Islam since 1970, the number of practising animists has actually increased along with the overall population, making the Nuaulu the largest single group of this kind on Seram, and perhaps in the province of Maluku as a whole. Quite apart from the implications of this demography for the political profile of the Nuaulu and their role as representatives of animism in the province, the upward growth in Nuaulu numbers has interesting implications for understanding the
Figure 1.2. The eastern part of Amahai subdistrict, Seram.

The map shows historical, recent and present Nuaulu settlements and other places mentioned in the text. Traditional clan areas are marked, for example, as PEINISA and other Nuaulu toponyms, for example, as HATUHAHU. The numbered locations are as follows (Nuaulu settlements in italics): 1. Simalouw (Kilo 9); 2. Tahena Ukuna (Kilo 12); 3. Hatuheno; 4. Nuelitetu; 5. Bunara; 6. Watane; 7. Ahiisuru; 8. Hahualan; 9. Rouhua.
historical dynamics of their ritual cycles. I shall return to this issue in Chapter 9.

In order to understand anything connected with ritual it is important to recognize the autonomy of the Nuaulu patrilineal clan and variations between clans in terms of demography, history and cultural practice. Indeed, in many ways, Nuaulu identity as a whole might most accurately be expressed as ‘a consensual federation of originally separate and autonomous groups’ (Valeri 2001 [1990a]:293). Throughout the period of my fieldwork there have been 12 Nuaulu clans (ipane or ipan; ‘soa’ in Ambonese Malay), all resident in the South Seram area. At the time of my fieldwork in 1970-71, these were distributed between five main physical settlements (Table 1.1): Watane, Aihisuru, Bunara, Hahualan and Rouhua. By 2003 Aihisuru had been abandoned and there were new settlements at Kilo Sembilan (Simalouw) and Kilo Duabelas (Tahena Ukuna) in the Ruatan transmigration zone.

As can be seen from Table 1.1, there is considerable variation in clan size, and over time, where they have grown and their members moved, clans have segmented—though segmentation is not simply a mechanical function of demographic growth. Evidence of segmentation is found in the construction of clan (or subclan) names. For example, Matokehanaie and Matoke-pina, Sounaue-aipura and Sounaue-ainakahata, and Neipane-tomoien, Neipane-nesinopu and Neipane-nahatue all derive from Matoke, Sounaue and Neipane, respectively. We can assume that these clans date from a period before 1882¹ as the suffixes (except in the case of Matoke) indicate the names of long-abandoned settlement sites in the mountains. We might also suppose that these suffixes once referred to physically autonomous ‘houses’ (numa). However, despite these historical lineages, the concepts of ‘clan’, ‘subclan’ and ‘segmentation’ are of little relevance here—indeed Bolton (1999) prefers to avoid the terminology of descent altogether, preferring ‘affiliation group’—and all of the named groups for the purpose of this analysis at least can be accorded a rough functional equivalence.

Though Table 1.1 lists the main clans relevant to this analysis, it is pertinent to note the existence, until historically recent times, of a few others. Thus, between 1970 and 2003 two clans were resident in

¹ This date refers to the establishment of the first formal administrative districts by the Dutch (Sachse 1907:33). For summaries of Nuaulu history as best we can reconstruct this, see Ellen 1988b:118-19, 1993:6, 1999:131-36.
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Table 1.1. Distribution and size of Nuaulu clans by settlement: 1971 and 2001 compared.

Note: Figures in bold are taken from my 1971 field census, from the official local census of 2001 (based on data held in Watane and Rouhua), or otherwise confirmed by inference. Figures in italics are best estimates based on house counts and projections derived from aggregated totals. The geographic locations of ancestral settlements listed in column 14 are shown in figure 1.2.
Chapter 1  Things, cycles and exchanges

the North Seram settlement of Rumah Olat: Nakana and Makuana. One very small clan – Neipane-nahatue (with its ancestral settlement at Lekatuue) – had by 1970 merged with Neipani-tomoien in Bunara. Tapinunue, though possibly still present in North Seram, in the south had been absorbed into Kamama. Kunie, through conversion to Islam, had long become part of the settlement of Sepa, while Nasinuante is now part of Yalahatani, east of Tamilau. Sopanani-putie is extinct altogether, leaving only Sopanani-metine. Finally, Matoke-maseke moved to Waraka during the late colonial period, and this, interestingly, provided the genealogical link that was crucial in Waraka becoming a refuge for Christian Nuaulu fleeing the Sepa area in 2000. Thus, merging is a kind of structural counterbalance to segmentation. For the Nuaulu its occurrence is a vivid reminder, reflected in much of their ritual, that clans are the victims of low birth rates and high mortality. It is partly this that drives the desire for more children. In Nuaulu representations, clans and the houses that comprise them are more than the sum of their biological parts: their essence lies in the sacred houses that they maintain and in the objects (*monne*) and ancestral spirits that the houses protect. But when the last individual person dies, so does the *monne*, and the spirits of the clan become homeless. Thus, the imminence of clan or sacred-house ‘death’ stresses the importance of individual biological reproduction to ensure social continuity. I shall return to this idea in later chapters.

All Nuaulu agree that the first clans to arrive in the area around the Nua River, and in the central part of Seram that they presently inhabit, were Matoke-hanaie and Matoke-pina (as set out in a shared creation myth), followed by Neipane-tomoien and Soumaue-ainakahata. After this, there is much variation in the order supplied by authorities from different clans, though a widely shared sequence is: Soumori, Peinisa, Huni, Sopanani, Pia, Numanaeta, Tapinunue and Kamama. For a period of almost 100 years there has been little physical movement or change. Some clans were absorbed into other, non-Nuaulu settlements (such as Sepa), some may have become effectively invisible through conversion, and some have disappeared entirely through demographic extinction. Except for the disturbances occasioned by the Second World War (1942-1943) and the Republik Maluku Selatan (RMS) period (approximately 1950-1966), the Pax Neerlandica, followed by the effective writ of the Sukarno and Soeharto administrations, froze the distribution of clans between 1882 and the late 1980s. Transmigration policy, com-
bined with road-building, led to the movement of some Nuaulu clans (Matoke, Sounaue-aipura, Kamama and Peinisa) from the area around Sepa to the settlements of Simalouw and Tahena Ukuna (Tana Mera). These two settlements, in fact, structurally replicate the old relationship between Watane and Aihisuru (Asuru). Another clan – Numanaeta (Rumah Lait) – also moved to Rumah Olat at this period. The fall of the New Order regime and the administrative chaos and communal conflict that ensued in Maluku has only exacerbated this. Thus, looked at historically, not only are Nuaulu clans exercising considerable autonomy in matters of settlement, showing evidence of segmentation and division, but to some extent the data also indicate the category ‘Nuaulu’ to be flexible over the long term, despite evidence of use of the ethnonym by Sepa and other outsiders as early as the late seventeenth century (Ellen 1988b).

I shall have much to say regarding variation between clans in subsequent chapters, as we consider different categories of ritual. For example, not all clans have to seek a mat and dish from Sepa at the time of a death, and a corpse taken to the cemetery at Hatu Nohue does not always have to be covered with sago palm leaves. Suffice to say here, we have to be careful in claiming that the belief or practice of one clan, for example, the primus inter pares Matoke-hanaie, is somehow more ‘authentic’, ‘correct’ or ‘true’ than that of any other clan – even though the elders of this clan may say that it is. Claims of this kind depend on who is the source of data, and this is why I am here primarily concerned with rituals that I have actually observed, rather than some ideal construction in the minds of ritual experts. The reasons underlying different interpretation are various, from trivial cultural ‘drift’ to the ever-present tension between those Nuaulu who seek a unified settlement – perhaps under a raja of their own – and those who do not. However, the default position is the considerable autonomy that individual clans have, not only in matters regarding ritual (though particularly in regard to such matters), but in regard to other forms of social action and cultural practice as well – a situation well summed up in the proverb ipane osa nene, mansia panesi, ‘one clan, many people’.

Each Nuaulu clan is a diarchy, ideally divided into two equal, reciprocally exchanging sections or ‘houses’, and Nuaulu religion can be summarily characterized as ancestor-worship focussed on clan houses (numa). These latter are moiety-like groups based on descent and affiliation to either the numa onate (large or main house) or the numa kapitane (house of the war leader). The two houses are, therefore, simultaneously
complementary and hierarchic. The \textit{numa onate}, alternatively called the \textit{numa mainae}, meaning ‘very large’ (sometimes glossed ‘rumah pusaka’ in Ambonese Malay), takes precedence in ritual matters and is therefore senior, but only as a kind of primus inter pares. Urbanus Tongli (1994) translates the term as ‘mother-house’. I have never heard this folk etymology from Nuaulu themselves, and neither does Bolton use it; but certainly all ritual houses are ‘mother-houses’ in the sense that they are a focus for a series of ordinary households which look to them as so many children. It is possible that this description arises from a misunderstanding; the interpretation of the term \textit{ina}, meaning ‘mother’ as an independent lexeme and as an infix carrying the same meaning; or it may be that \textit{mainae} also conveys the sense of ‘mother of all’ as in ‘greatest, most encompassing’. By contrast, \textit{numa kapitane} is associated with the brothers of the wife and the brothers of the mother, who are outsiders to all ritual held in the \textit{numa mainae}. The distinction between houses corresponds to an important distinction in Nuaulu kinship, namely that between the children of the brother and the children of the sister.

Each \textit{numa} has a name (and, in some cases, several names); for example, the clan Pia comprises Nesinusa and Neinisa, and Kamama, Hatupika and Hatunaka. Peinisa (in Rouhua) comprises Numanoji and Numatopi, Souaue-aikakahata Ainaka and Numasopite (house of the hornbill), and Soumori Atanupa (a toponym) and Ninita (meaning ‘mirror’). Other Soumori house names include Ainana and Numapate (this latter referring to a species of \textit{Ficus} associated with the snake totem). Neipane-tomoien names include Pinawasa (bamboo roofing piece), Tomone (a kind of bamboo), Sianana and Namanusa. Each \textit{numa} is linked to an identifiable historic settlement site in the mountains (sometimes reflected in the name, as in Soumori ‘Atanupa’; see Table 1.1), which in the past may well have been focussed on a single physical ‘house’. But the relationship between clan and \textit{numa} is fluid over time and, as we have seen, clans may segment and \textit{numa} separate, eventually becoming clans in their own right. This appears to be what has happened with Souaue-aiaihakata and Souawe-aipura, and much more recently – over the last 50 years – with Matoke-hanaie and Matoke-pina. In the latter case, Matoke divided into two independent clans – \textit{hanaie} (male) and \textit{pina} (female) – at the time of the split in clan allegiances during the 1930s that led to the founding of the settlement of Rouhua, and where Matoke-pina now performs the ‘lord of the land’ role. As a
result, neither Matoke-pina in Rouhua nor Matoke-hanaie (formerly in Aihisuru and now in Tahena Ukuna) have a numa kapitane. The second Matoke sacred house in Rouhua is a numa nuhune, used for birth ritual (Chapter 3). During fieldwork in 1996 and 2003 there was evidence that Matoke-hanaie and Matoke-pina were seeking to come together again to reinforce Nuaulu collective political identity, legitimated by a claim that this was the wish of the ancestors, reflected in a string of misfortune for as long as the houses had been separate. In 1970 Rouhua had only two clans described as having true kapitane, ‘war leaders’ (Neipane-tomoien and Sounaue-ainakahata), the kapitane of the other clans living in Bunara or Niamonai. By the time Bolton reported Rouhua clans in the 1990s four were said to possess numa kapitane. Where a clan does not have a kapitane other persons carry out the role until a new one is appointed. Thus, in 2003 Retaone was the acting kapitane for Soumori, but it was agreed that Soiile would take over once he was married. No wonder, therefore, that despite a general cultural expectation that clans are composed of two exchanging numa, there are often complex and idiosyncratic exceptions to this rule for good historical reasons.

Clan houses, as we shall discover in Chapter 7, are more than the people they contain and have a quasi-independent existence; when the descent line dies out, however, the clan house and the traditions (monne) it physically embodies dies with it. With reference to the sacred items they contain, and because they are themselves the subject of ritual, these physical entities are sometimes collectively called numa monne. Nuaulu are conscious of the mortality of their houses in much the same way as they are conscious of the mortality of their clans, and they actively seek to maintain demographic viability to ensure the perpetuation of physical houses and the monne that they protect.

Both clans and houses are linked together through exchange. Nuaulu ritual life is permeated by constant gift transactions between the (usually) two houses of the same clan and between clans, through intermarriage and other relations of dependency. The division of the clan into two houses and their symmetrical relationship is evident in most major rituals of the cycles described in this monograph. Thus, the exchange that accompanies marriage (mahu) forms part of a continuous flow between wife-givers (hanahanai) and wife-takers (tanaite). All clans are both wife-takers and wife-givers for other clans, a relationship underpinned by a complex series of prescriptions and prohibitions, though patterns of marital
exchange (a temporary exchange for the lifetime of the partners) and alliance (a perpetual relationship: cf. Valeri 2001 [1980]:143) between pairs of clans varies. Exchange is conspicuously symmetrical and egalitarian, with the aligned groups losing their hierarchical connotations and paired clans locked into expectations of role mutuality. Each clan as a whole is also engaged in reciprocal exchanges with other clans through marital alliance and puberty ceremonial. Although Nuaulu bridewealth is small compared with some other eastern Indonesian cultural groups, it must be understood in the context of other exchanges that occur at the birth of children: plates from wife-takers to wife-givers, betel-chewing items from wife-givers to wife-takers, and food from wife-takers to wife-givers that returns to wife-takers in the form of feasts. Nuaulu relationship terminology is consistent with bilateral cross-cousin marriage. However, such nemakae, or ‘strong’, alliances with a clan of a spouse are, in practice, more pronounced in the marriages of clan heads.

The exchanges between clans and the houses that compose them become socially visible, and theatrically expressed, in ritual. For example, in certain life-cycle rituals one house – that is, one half of the clan – will carry out rituals for the other: washing a newborn baby and its mother when both emerge from post-partum seclusion, or cutting the first hair of an infant. In other life-cycle rituals it is clans that perform this reciprocal function: at male puberty, or when an elder receives a decorated bark-cloth. In other rituals focussed on the communal (village) sacred house, or suane, clans share distributed ritual duties and collectively participate.

Most collective ritual is, therefore, about exchange. It cannot take place without it, and cycles of rituals are therefore in an important sense ‘cycles of exchange’. Valeri (1990a) speaks of a tension between autonomy and heteronomy amongst the Huaulu. A similar tension can be seen in Nuaulu society in terms of, on the one hand, the clan and numa assertion of independent identity through descent, and on the other (as reflected in the complementarities of ritual), in the evident periodic need to ally with other numa and clans to reproduce themselves.

1.6 NUAULU RITUALS AS EVENTS

Any analysis claiming to speak of the periodicity or frequency of rituals, and to address how they might be reproduced, must begin by defining
the unit of analysis. In my own work on ritual, I have always been influenced in a general way by the work of that group of American anthropologists, inspired by Ward Goodenough, Harold Conklin and Charles Frake, attached to the label ‘ethnosemantics’. In rereading Frake’s famous essay, first published in 1964, on the description of Subanun religious behaviour, I now realize just how much my own thinking on analytical protocols is consistent with what he has to say, and so now, more explicitly, I have used his guidelines as a beginning point. Subsequently, ethnosemantics has had a bad press (Berreman 1966; Harris 1969) or been ghettoized in cognitive anthropology, but one of its merits has been a methodological insistence on precision in defining units of analysis and terms of reference, and its systematicity as ‘the science of cultural description’ (Frake 1980:144).

One of the persistent problems in understanding ritual generally, but certainly in animist societies where the category is often absent (Frake 1980:148), is how to define ‘religion’. Nowadays, Nuaulu are compelled to think of their ritual practices and beliefs as religion, and will use the Indonesian word ‘agama’ to describe them. Historically they have accepted the description of what they do and believe as ‘agama Hindu’, deriving from the older, and mistaken, colonial-period designation of Moluccan animism as a variant of Balinese Hinduism, but convenient under the post-independence government where ‘agama Hindu’ allowed them for a time to be accepted as a religion under the terms of the doctrine of Pancasila. It is a constant and very practical problem for young, modernist Nuaulu who seek jobs in the army and civil service that their apparent lack of religion is seen as an official impediment to their progress, echoing an older view that they are ‘belum beragama’, not yet with religion. However, despite the desire to see what they do as religion, they also struggle with the fact that their religion diffuses throughout their cultural practice – their kinship and subsistence – in a way that provides for no separate institutional existence other than being Nuaulu. Their ritual practices, therefore, merge with their overall ethnic identity, such that those who convert to Christianity or Islam effectively cease to be Nuaulu at all.

If religion has only a weak and ambiguous existence as a cultural category, then what about ‘ritual’? I accept, following Frake, that the best way to start is with units of practice rather than of belief, but there is no Nuaulu word for ritual either. The nearest we get is mainisie, which might be translated as ‘invocation’, ‘prayer’ or ‘request’; or karisaa, a ceremony,
a formal public event involving the preparation of food. However, the events described in this monograph are organizationally more complex than invocations, many of which may occur during a ritual event. They are also more than secular ‘public events’, since they connect with things sacred and supernatural (monne) and are considered to be monne themselves. Now, monne is a portmanteau term, referring to the same sacred conceptual space as Polynesian ‘tabu’: simultaneously sacred and prohibited (forbidden). But monne may also refer to a passage, relation or movement, as in ancestral will achieved through performing the kahuea circle dance. Thus, all sacred objects, practices and knowledge are monne, while it is also monne (in the sense of being proscribed) for a boy to marry before he undergoes his puberty ritual, and it is monne (in the sense of being prescribed) to honour individual clan prohibitions (peneu). For Frake, ceremonies of the kind to which Nuaulu would attach the label monne may be simple or complex (that is, more than one offering), scheduled or unscheduled ceremonies. In this monograph I am concerned only with scheduled ceremonies. As Frake (1980:159) puts it, drawing an analogy with grammar: ‘the occurrence of a scheduled ceremony is, in effect, a structural marker of the anticipatable sequence of scenes in Subanun culture. It signals that events are unfolding as scheduled’ and ‘is also necessary if future anticipations of probable events are to be fulfilled’. For it not to happen is a crisis, just like a crop failure. ‘Correspondingly […] the failure properly to stage the correct ceremony on schedule can only lead to crisis’ so ‘the explicit rationale for performing scheduled offerings is to prevent the occurrence of crises, to ensure the proper unfolding of events’ (Frake 1980:160). I also follow Rappaport (1999:24) in accepting an individual ritual as ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers’, implying that, by performing in a liturgical order, performers publically communicate their acceptance of a social order. In this analysis a ritual is a set of practices that can plausibly be described as an event and whose purpose is to employ symbolic and supernatural means to achieve a material end.

Another problem of conceptualizing ritual as a particular kind of event is what constitutes its boundaries (Ardener 1989). In one sense, no ritual is autonomous, semantically or behaviourally: its performance depends on the performance of previous rituals, while in turn its performance is the necessary precursor of other rituals which in turn depend upon it. In particular, where we are dealing with cycles of events, one
ritual may merge into another; in a series of smaller, constituent or ‘em- bedded’ (McCauley and Lawson 2002:28) rituals, it is not always clear where one ends and the other begins, or, indeed, whether one small ritual should be treated as free-standing, or whether it is simply part of a larger sequence of events we might better group together. This is especially perplexing given that the anthropological orthodoxy is that rituals mark transitions and boundaries in normal life rather than themselves raising issues about their own boundaries.

For the purposes of this monograph, I have focussed on a particular group of rituals. This is partly to reduce the total number so as to make monographic treatment manageable, partly dictated by my theoretical interest in periodicity, and partly to better ensure commensurability. I therefore focus on what Frake would call ‘scheduled’ rituals: those rituals planned in advance. I have little to say about ‘unscheduled’ rituals, such as those prompted by illness episodes. Within the category of scheduled rituals, I have decided to largely ignore rituals linked to production. In some ways this might seem curious given that such rituals conventionally adhere to clear cycles, dictated by biological rhythms, most obviously those of the agricultural year. Such rituals occur in the Nuaulu case, for example those conducted when first clearing forest, or prior to harvesting, but they are inwardly focussed, not connected to other rituals. Moreover, many of the rituals, such as those conducted when extracting sago or hunting, are minimal, approaching Frake’s definition for unscheduled ritual. By ignoring these I am not denying that many of the observations I make here might also apply to other rituals, only reducing the corpus size in a way that is methodologically plausible.

1.7 Rituals as work and work as ritual

That ritual is about ‘work’ and bodily action is something anthropologists have appreciated for a long time (Firth 1967; Rappaport 1999:46-50), but what we mean by ‘work’ in this context is by no means merely metaphorical or restricted only to moments of performance. In the lives of all animist Nuaulu, the experience of ritual is for the most part the experience of preparing for ritual, which can take up enormous amounts of time (Firth 1965:184). Geertz (1975:176, 179) has made similar comments about the Balinese, who seem forever to be preparing.
for the next ritual and clearing up after the last, ‘much too busy practicing their religion to think [...] too much about it’. By comparison, performance for the Nuauulu, though less I suspect for the Balinese, is relatively perfunctory. In one sense, all the activity involved in preparation might be perceived as interfering with productive economic activity, but in another, it is absolutely intrinsic to it. This sense is perfectly evoked in that old structural Marxist notion of the ‘ritual means of production’, or in the Malinowskian claim of the integrity of magic to Trobriand gardening. Either way, the ramifications of ritual activity through social networks and over time properly allow us to speak in the Nuauulu case of a political economy of ritual-related activity.

The most commonly encountered Nuauulu word for work is *nana* (to work, to make). This can apply equally to mundane work in the swiddens as to ritually directly work, as in *au nana pinamou tau manananau* (‘I work for the *pinamou* ceremony’). Such a conflation is hardly confined to the Nuauulu. According to Astuti (1995:123), the Malagasy Vezo word ‘asa’ is used for ordinary work and also for the ritual work that the living undertake for the dead – building tombs ‘out of a sense of duty and under duress’, work providing a blessing. By way of contrast, *akanana* refers specifically to work involved in seeking meat or sago or resin for a major ritual, and may refer to a period of more than a month. *Tanei* is to work or provide a service for a specific task, as in *woi niane hohoka mai naunanma tane* (‘call the village here for work’); *tita* is also a kind of service. The word that comes closest to distinguishing hard, physical labour from more spiritual kind of work is *sona* or *msonae*, which refers to light work.

For Nuauulu, ritual is no less ‘work’ than hunting or extracting sago. To say so conveys both its ordinariness and its importance. Ritual work is conceived by them as an integral part of the production process, no less essential than carrying, planting or cutting, and something that has to be done because the consequences of it not being done are so awesome. Although Nuauulu do not use any phrase cognate with ‘The work of the gods’, the title of Raymond Firth’s classic (1967[1939]) study of Tikopia, this is certainly the sense in which they understand this activity. Ritual is work, sometimes very hard work, and its preparation in particular can take an inordinate amount of time. It may interfere with other economic activities and for this reason may sometimes be postponed. Ritual involves the expenditure of calories; it occupies time that competes with time available for other activities. It involves work that is identical to that
which is not designated ritual, and can therefore be measured in ecological terms, or using work diaries (Rappaport 1968). I conducted time and motion studies as part of my work on Nuaulu subsistence ecology in 1970-71. Between April and November 1970, I kept records of work allocation for 46 adult males in Rouhua. From these data I was able to calculate average times devoted to activities. The data and methodology for this survey are discussed elsewhere (Ellen 1978:226-8), but the categories and aggregate values for each category are shown in Table 1.2. The data were computed for these categories to serve a different purpose than we are concerned with here (the measurement of physical activity in relation to subsistence behaviour). I have retained the original categories, but in the context of the present study, I might have drawn the boundaries rather differently. Thus, on the basis of these data, 2.40% of the time is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of work allocation used in survey</th>
<th>Number of work-day equivalents over a 4-month period</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Subsistence activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. fishing</td>
<td>018</td>
<td>01.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. activities connected with cash-cropping</td>
<td>027</td>
<td>01.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. hunting and trapping</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>17.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. gardening</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>17.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. sago extraction</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>17.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. various secondary gathering activities</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>09.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Non-subsistence activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. communal labour</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>13.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. house building (other than classified under 7)</td>
<td>012</td>
<td>01.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. travel, ‘visiting’</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. meetings, disputes</td>
<td>009</td>
<td>00.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. ritual</td>
<td>038</td>
<td>02.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. miscellaneous village tasks</td>
<td>022</td>
<td>01.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. other recreational activities, sickness</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>07.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1,619 days</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2. 1970-71 survey of work allocation for selected adult males (modified with additional data from Ellen 1978: 227).
labelled ‘ritual performance’, though much work directed towards ritual comes under ‘hunting’, ‘sago extraction’ and, particularly, ‘communal labour’. Conservatively, I would estimate that at least another 10% needs to be added to this, making the overall contribution of ritually directed work more like 13%. In a smaller survey of 82 work-day equivalents for five adult married women conducted in August-September 1973, about 18 days (22%) were devoted to ritual itself and to preparation for ritual, or was time out in menstrual seclusion (7.5 days).

Rather differently, from Figure 1.3 (e) we can see that, over time, ritual performance activity seems to peak in July, whether we rely on the six-month time-allocation survey or on the numbers of events reported in my field notes for the twelve months starting 1 April 1970. This occurs at about the same time as a peak in hunting, after sago and communal labour peaks in June, and before the gardening peak in August and a second sago peak in September, showing a strong correlation between cycles of work and economic exchange activity and the occurrence of rituals of a kind that have been well reported elsewhere (Davis 1972; Rappaport 1968). The only odd thing about these data is that the peaks also coincide with the height of the rainy season, suggesting that, where choices are possible in the timing of ritual, heavy rainfall and the practical problems this entails in terms of work and transport have little impact.

As a data set, these time-and-motion records additionally raise some issues about how we classify physical activity and work. Thus, ritual is not only a kind of work to be contrasted with managing, harvesting and processing material things; it is also work in the sense that it relies on activities that are unambiguously classed as labour: collecting thatch or cutting wood. Such activities can be, and largely are, outside the domain of ritual, but when they are directed towards a ritual objective, such as the thatching of a clan sacred house, they are incorporated into ritual. This is clear from the way in which men engaged in building sacred houses are required to wear clothes that are worn for ritual generally, and have to prepare themselves spiritually, abstaining from other things. It is as if in undertaking these activities, though they do not differ technologically from the same activity performed on other occasions, they are different because they take place in an alternatively configured conceptual space. Clearly, there is a fine line to be drawn between the way in which subsistence activity is ritualized by virtue of it being necessary for events of ritual consumption, and the way in which subsistence activity involves
Figure 1.3. Bar charts for six categories of activity.

Source: Data are based on the six-month 1970-71 work-allocation survey in Rouhua, in relation to aggregated rainfall data: (a) hunting; (b) sago extraction; (c) collecting; (d) gardening; (e) communal work; (f) ritual performance. Number of work-day equivalents for each activity appear on the top of each black bar. Bar chart (f) additionally displays (in white) the number of days for which I have field-note data on reported rituals in the categories described in this monograph.

For further discussion of the original data, see Ellen 1978:212-4, 226-8.
ritual as part of its own successful accomplishment, such as those rites performed before hunting or extracting sago.

1.8 THE ORGANIZATION OF THE ANALYSIS

It is obvious that I cannot here examine all Nuaulu rituals over a particular time, or indeed all categories of ritual. I do not, for example, examine what Durkheim (1915:389) calls ‘piacular’ ritual, what Frake calls ‘unscheduled’ rituals, or what Turner calls ‘rituals of affliction’, and which in some societies represent the main focus of ritual activity. To ensure focus, coherence and comparability, I have selected – as I have mentioned already – rituals that are obviously parts of cycles rather than one-off, spontaneous events; amongst these, I have focussed on the human life-cycle and the rituals of sacred houses. This distinction is not entirely arbitrary. True, from a purely statistical point of view agricultural, hunting or sago rituals are more frequent than life-crisis rituals, and some are part of well-defined cycles (such as the swidden cycle). Indeed, in an average lifetime a person will have seen about 60 agricultural cycle rituals, and a mature male will have seen about 20 before he first performs one. These occur, therefore, with a frequency that matches birth rituals. However, they are very much underplayed culturally compared to other agricultural societies where cycles of agricultural ritual dominate the entire shape of the ritual practice and provide its framework (see for instance Iskandar and Ellen 1999). I cannot make this claim for the Nuaulu, and this is at least in part because their mode of subsistence and economic production is much more broadly based. I shall return to the relationship between different kinds of ritual cycle in Chapter 9.

I have decided to start with rituals rooted in bodily transformation, and move to those that are more encompassing and abstract, and that find their dynamic in cycles that are more under the control of collective human will. However, I certainly do not wish to imply from the order of the analysis that, in any sequential sense at all, rituals in the earlier chapters preceded in their development and elaboration those in the later chapters. Indeed, historically, all have constantly interacted to reinforce commonalities and to disseminate innovation. Rather, I am suggesting that by their frequency of occurrence (and, perhaps, comparative simplicity measured in terms of component parts) the earlier rituals
are reinforced more frequently and thereby are more likely to serve as cognitive models for the larger rituals of house and *suane*. In a sense, this is reminiscent of the observation that the ‘slametan’ represents a basic module of which all other Javanist rituals are no more than transformations (Geertz 1964a; Beatty 1999).

For each ritual series, I provide a description based on those events that Rosemary Bolton and myself have actually observed, and on general, second-hand accounts that to this extent must necessarily merge the variants of some of the individual clans. There is an important place for analyses of verbatim performance and language use in particular rituals on particular occasions. However, here I am deliberately seeking general aggregate and preponderant patterns, and descriptions of unique ritual events would be an impediment to this objective. Each ritual described is itself an analytical description in which I have attempted to separate out – on the basis of unique events that I have witnessed, those witnessed by others, and general Nuaulu descriptions – the main elements. This is not because I believe that there exists some statistically normal or ideal form of the ritual, of which all others are variants, but because it is self-evidently convenient to follow this procedure. These model descriptions are then followed by a summary of the major axes of variation in the ritual, as these occur between different clans and according to different circumstances – for example, mortuary rituals for different categories of ‘bad death’. This, in turn, is followed by a section on what can be said of the frequency and periodicity of the ritual based on the evidence available. Overall, I try to show how theory and ethnography seem to reinforce each other, by focussing on the practical engagements shaping (and, in turn, shaped by) Nuaulu ritual life.