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Public affairs; Institutionalized nonmarital sex in an eastern Indonesian society


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A recent revival of anthropological interest in kinship has evidently extended even as far as such long-standing questions as the universality of 'marriage'. More particularly, Cai Hua (2001) has argued that marriage is encountered in all societies except one: the matrilineal Na or Moso of southern China, who ensure biological and social reproduction by way of impermanent sexual liaisons called 'visits'. Continuing in a universalist vein, Cai (2001:426) further claims that marriage and the Na arrangements, whereby a man and a woman meet solely for the purposes of sex, are mutually exclusive; in other words, that an institution of marriage precludes all other forms of institutionalized sexuality. The present essay controverts Cai's thesis in an especially telling way: it explores an eastern Indonesian society in which an approved and institutionalized form of temporary sexual relationship exists (or until recently existed) not only in tandem with marriage, but also with affinal alliance, a system in which marriage and marital sexuality form an essential part of connections between structural groups, and which has usually been conceived as entailing a marriage prescription (Forth 1993:96-7). Insofar as it provides an alternative means of social as well as biological reproduction, the Indonesian institution also bears significantly on continuing theoretical debate in anthropology regarding such analytical categories as descent, filiation, and social kinship.

Drawing on accounts of numerous informants I have known during a series of visits to Indonesia over a period of twenty years, in what follows I describe a form of premarital or extramarital sexual relationship among the Nage and Keo of the island of Flores. The relationship involves young unmarried women regularly and openly becoming temporarily attached to men – either married or unmarried – for the purposes of sex. Nage and Keo
not only permitted such relationships, but positively valued and encouraged them. The local term for the women is ana bu'e, which I translate as '(temporary) mistress'. In its widest application, ana bu'e can refer simply to a nubile young woman, but is regularly understood in the special sense, in which respect it is comparable to English 'girl' or 'girlfriend'. A man involved with an unmarried woman is described as 'having an ana bu'e (ana bu'e ne'e). Otherwise, there is no special term for the institution. As a man wishing to take a woman as a mistress had to negotiate with her parents, I shall refer to the relationships as publicly contracted affairs, or simply as temporary affairs.

Apart from the interest of such affairs in regard to the concept of 'marriage' and cross-cultural variability in practices connecting human males and females, the eastern Indonesian institution appears unusual. Nothing quite like it is found in the published ethnography of Indonesia, nor even in reports from other parts of the Malayo-Polynesian (or Austronesian) speaking world, a region perennially famous in the history of sexual anthropology. Although I am the first anthropologist to investigate the Nage and Keo practice, it was twice alluded to in print by no less a figure than the former Indonesian president, Soekarno (1947, 1965). Reflecting on his five-year exile in the Flores port town of Ende during the 1930s, Soekarno (1965:130) wrote:

Oddly enough, in backward, antiquated Flores there was a district (Keo by name) where even now it is allowed for girls to engage in intercourse with any man; and the most outstanding among them – outstanding in satisfying men – are in great demand for marriage.¹

Although this representation is not entirely accurate, there is no question which local institution Soekarno was referring to; in fact, it was a Nage man who informed me that Soekarno had referred to publicly contracted affairs in his book of 1947. By 'Keo', Soekarno very probably follows Endenese usage and refers indiscriminately to the two central Flores populations distinguished as Nage and Keo (Forth 1994, 2001). Henceforth, I shall mostly refer to Nage alone. But it should be understood that almost all of my remarks apply equally to the culturally closely related Keo people.

How far the practice I describe survives in recognizable form to the present is controversial. Details of the most recent cases indicate that in the vicinity of the chief Nage village of Bo’a Wae, from where most of my

¹ In the Indonesian original, Soekarno (1947:145) says that the girl who is ‘first rate among these young women’ (jang paling ‘djempol’ diantara ‘gadis-gadis’ itoe) is the one who will ‘be the quickest to get a husband’. The Dutch translation corresponds more closely to the English version, except where it states that the first to find a husband is ‘the girl who is able to satisfy the most men’ (het meisje dat de meeste mannen weet te bevredigen, Soekarno 1966:81)
information is taken, temporary affairs were still being publicly contracted well into the 1960s. Nage themselves attribute their disappearance partly to mass conversion to Catholicism in the 1950s, but more specifically to changes wrought by the anti-communist counter-coup of September 1965. After this time, practices considered contrary to world faiths were viewed not only as evidence of communistic irreligiosity, but as contrary to new nationalistic values of economic development and modernization. Nowadays, Nage residing in the vicinity of Bo’a Wae thus consistently claim that temporary affairs are no longer publicly contracted in their region. At the same time, they suggest that this may still be possible in the more easterly, and less wealthy, Nage regions of Réndu and Ndora.2 The survival of the institution is however a complex issue that cannot be resolved in the present article. Therefore, I shall, as it were, invert the ‘ethnographic present’ and speak throughout in the past tense.

The sort of nonmarital sexual relationship with which I am concerned can hardly be called marginal to Nage social life. Indeed, the custom of taking a mistress was at one time so central that it would be impossible to discuss marriage, clan and house affiliation, legitimation of offspring, and even kinship terminology (Forth 1993:108-9, 1996:229-30) without making reference to it.3 By the same token, twentieth-century Nage history would necessarily include mention of several well-known, even famous, instances of such relationships. As children born to mistresses are regularly recorded in Nage genealogies, I first encountered the institution when I began collecting genealogies during my initial visit to Bo’a Wae in 1984. Other information concerning publicly contracted affairs derives from numerous Nage men and women, most of whom I have known for nearly two decades, who had participated in the institution or were closely related to people who had. Among these were several men in their sixties, all long-term informants who I had consulted on a variety of cultural matters before discovering that they had had extensive experience of relationships with mistresses, both as participants and as intermediaries on behalf of others (see below). After an acquaintance of many years, they were not at all reluctant to share their experiences with me. Much of what they told me I was able to verify with others, and I have no reason to believe their information was exaggerated or atypical. In fact, the practice of taking a temporary mistress is so widely known,

2 On the other hand, one case I recorded indicates that affairs may have been openly contracted in Bo’a Wae until the late 1980s.
3 As regards terminology, I refer mainly to coghe, which in Bo’a Wae denotes WZH but in other Nage dialects is used reciprocally by men who have, serially, engaged the same mistress. The latter sense is also known in Bo’a Wae, where it is generally expressed instead by lami, a term otherwise meaning simply ‘male friend (of a man)’. Dialectal kin usages of ngene, the Bo’a Wae term for ‘lover’, are discussed in Forth 1996:230.
and the formal procedures involved are recounted with such consistency, that fabrication would virtually require a conspiracy.\(^4\)

\section*{Nage society and the practice of engaging temporary mistresses}

The Nage are a population of about 50,000 cultivators residing to the north of the Ebu Lobo volcano in central Flores. They are organized into named and mostly non-localized clans. Affiliation to clans can be called ambilinéal, but is preferentially patrilineal. When bridewealth is paid (as it usually is), a man’s children belong to his group; otherwise, they belong to the mother’s. Clans typically comprise unnamed segments called ‘houses’ (sa’o). Only these houses are strictly exogamous, although in practice clans are usually exogamous as well.

Nage marriage is governed by a principle of asymmetric affinal alliance, nowadays somewhat modified owing to the conversion of over 90\% of the population to Catholicism. A man classifies his sisters, female parallel cousins, and patrilineal cross-cousins as weta. All of these women are forbidden in marriage. Among cousins, only the matrilineal cross-cousin (called li ana) is a possible wife, and the particular value placed on a union between genealogical MBD and FZS survives, even in spite of the Catholic ban on all first-cousin marriages. In accordance with rules referring to local kinship categories, Nage further articulate a contrast of ‘wife-givers’ (moi ga’e) and ‘wife-takers’ (ana weta) and prohibit unions that constitute a direct (or symmetrical) exchange of women between affinally related groups, mostly defined as ‘houses’.

In the pre-Christian era, a man could take two or more wives, although according to the genealogical evidence, polygyny appears to have been less common than in some other eastern Indonesian societies. In contrast, a woman could only ever marry one man at a time. Accordingly, adultery committed by a married woman has always been severely punished, whereas a sexual relationship between a married man and an unmarried woman, however else it might be received, is not considered adulterous.

To become a man’s mistress (ana bu’e), a girl had to have her teeth cut short (or ‘filed’). For Nage women, shortened teeth are a prerequisite for

\(^4\) I stress this because reviews of previous drafts have elicited, if not outright incredulity, then a suggestion that my evidence may be skewed by selective or faulty memory. A great deal of what ethnographers record is based on informants’ memories, but it seems to be only in regard to certain matters, prominent among which is sexuality, that such evidence comes into question. As regards the regularity of the practice, moreover, any distortion from Nage accounts is likely to lie in the direction of under-reporting, especially among a population recently converted to Christianity and frequently wishing to represent themselves as modern or modernizing.
legitimate sexuality and therefore marriage and sex with a woman who has not yet undergone the operation is still a most serious sexual transgression. Nowadays, parents often have a daughter's teeth shortened just before her marriage, or even as part of the marriage proceedings. This, however, is described as a relatively recent practice. In former times, parents would arrange for the operation as soon as a girl was physically mature and therefore likely to engage in sex.

Both unmarried and married men could engage an unmarried woman as a mistress, while women could participate in publicly contracted affairs only before marriage. Since widows and estranged wives are considered still married, women in these categories could not properly participate in such relationships, and neither their husband's kin nor a widow's parents (when, as sometimes happens, a widow returns home after her husband's decease) could legitimately make such women available as mistresses. (This is not to say, however, that widows, on their own account, never indulged in clandestine affairs.) Special terms distinguished spouses from people engaged in temporary affairs. The male partner in an affair was called ngene, a term also applied to a man illicitly involved with a married woman. Ngene contrasts with haki, the term for 'husband'; similarly, ana bu'e, 'mistress', is unrelated to fai, the Nage word for 'wife'.

To engage a temporary mistress, a man entered into a contract with her parents. He could approach them himself or employ an intermediary (pada wiwi, 'mouth bridge'), usually another man; using an intermediary was sometimes preferred, since this person could then serve as a witness to the agreement. The initial proposition was usually made to the girl's mother, who, if agreeable, would then approach the father to secure his approval. Once all were agreed, the man gained exclusive sexual access to the woman for a specified period of time, usually a number of months, but sometimes a year or even longer. Alternatively, the period could be shorter than a month, that is, a number of nights, or even, according to some, a single night.5

In return for the woman's sexual favours, the man would agree to pay her parents a sum of goods. Being discharged when the affair was concluded, the payment was called 'the end of the journey' (sepu leo; compare western Keo sepu rala, 'end of the path'), referring to the termination of the lover's visits. At one time, the payment consisted entirely of livestock and metal valuables – thus the same sorts of goods as are used as bridewealth – but during the twentieth century money also came to be used. There was no strictly required counter-gift, although the woman's parents would regularly slaughter a pig to provide a meal which they and the woman would take

5 Some Nage thought a single night was not possible; however, in western Keo, one-night affairs were specified as requiring the payment of a parang.
with the man on his final visit. Also, a decorated textile customarily provided by the parents at this time would be given to the intermediary (if one were employed) in return for his services. For the duration of the contract, the parents made their house available to the couple whenever the lover called. Depending on the length of the affair, the man might visit his mistress every night or less often. But it was he who decided the frequency of his visits, not the woman or her parents.

Although men would typically arrive at a mistress’s house towards nightfall, fellow villagers were aware of the visits, and the lover would often take a meal with the woman and her parents before everyone retired for the evening. Here I refer specifically to what Nage call ‘daylight’ relationships (dhodho poa, wau da, ‘descending in the morning, going out in daylight’), where the man would come and go in full daylight. On the other hand, one or both parties might wish to keep the visits from public knowledge – for example, when the man did not wish his own parents or, indeed, his wife if he were already married, to know of an affair. In this circumstance, Nage speak of ‘midnight’ relationships, employing the standard expression kisa kobe, manu kako, which refers to the fact that the man would arrive quietly in the middle of the night (kisa kobe) and leave when the cocks crow (manu kako) before sunrise. Nage also apply these phrases to purely clandestine affairs which, formally speaking at least, are unknown to the girl’s parents as well. They further describe a ‘midnight’ relationship as more appropriate when an affair was to last only for a short period (for example, several nights or less than a month), a qualification suggesting that brief affairs were publicly less approved than were longer ones. However that may be, it is noteworthy how the two Nage modes of sexual sojourning are closely comparable to the contrast between ‘open’ and ‘furtive’ visits which Cai (2001) describes for the Chinese Na.

Once an affair was concluded, and payment was complete, the couple were supposed to cease their meetings. Although the man might apply to engage the woman again at some later date, it was not usual to renew the agreement. If the lover wished to stay with the woman, her parents might allow him to marry her; the option of subsequent marriage could also be raised when contracting the purely sexual relationship. The parents might then ask whether the man wished ‘to keep climbing the toddy palm or to come down’ (tua nai, tua dhodho); that is, to continue the relationship as the woman’s husband or simply to conclude the affair. It is important to stress that, if a lover did decide to marry a mistress, he would have to discharge both the promised payment (the sepu leo) and, later, a bridewealth. In other words, the amount paid for the girl’s favours could not be counted towards bridewealth. The two sorts of transactions – pertaining to a purely sexual relationship in the one case, and a marriage in the other – were thus kept quite separate.
A prospective mistress should herself have consented to an affair, even though her parents might sometimes have persuaded her to accept a particular man. In one well-known case, dating to the late 1930s, the second colonial raja of Nage, J. Juwa Dobe (1900-1972), is reputed to have pressured the parents of a famous beauty – A. Bi’i Sada of the clan Mudi in Tiba Kisa – into accepting his proposal. The woman, too, was initially opposed, but as her younger kin told me, she gradually accepted him, even to the point of romantic attachment; she also bore him a child.

Once a woman had agreed to an affair, she was expected to make herself sexually available until the period of the agreement had expired. During this time, the mistress could not enter into a sexual relationship with any other man. While thus engaged, her parents also could not entertain a proposal of marriage, even from the woman’s patrilateral cross-cousin (FZS), the most valued sort of prospective husband. Nage are quite clear that a man could not engage two or more mistresses simultaneously, at least not with the knowledge of the two sets of parents. This circumstance, then, suggests an exclusive relationship that was not ‘casual’ or purely carnal; it also reveals a contrast with the polygynous possibility of Nage traditional marriage.

When visiting, a lover would bring gifts for the woman and her parents. These typically consisted of fowls, a dog or a goat, palm wine or gin, betel and areca, rice, and – in more recent times – money, coffee, and sugar. Sums of money, and modern items such as soap and cosmetics, are sometimes described as presents brought specifically for the woman herself. A lover’s gifts, I was told, were not obligatory but were, rather, a token of the man’s respect for the woman and her family. It is noteworthy that fowls and palm wine or gin are things Nage wife-takers always bring when they visit wife-givers. In fact, this practice informs the contrast between ‘continuing to climb or coming down from the toddy palm’ (tua nai, tua dhodho), the metaphorical contrast of subsequently negotiating marriage with a mistress or simply ending an affair. By the same token, the mistress’s parents’ gift of a pig, slaughtered on the lover’s final visit, recalls the requirement that wife-givers always serve pork to visiting wife-takers, while the textile sometimes presented with the pig recalls counter-gifts made by Nage wife-givers to wife-takers in connection with marriage.

The social identity of lovers and mistresses

Nage state that any kin relationship between a man and a mistress should be such that they could marry if they wished. As Nage society admits a division of ‘nobles’ (mosa laki) and ‘slaves, hereditary servants’ (ho’o), a division which in some contexts is still recognized to the present, a related principle entails
that they be of the same rank.\textsuperscript{6} Just as a high-ranking man's marriage with a lower-ranking woman is sometimes tolerated (if never completed approved), so a man of higher rank might occasionally take a woman of slave status as his mistress. In this circumstance, however, it should be the woman's master, rather than her parents, who receives payment for her services. Unmarried slave women belonging to a nobleman's own group could simply be taken as concubines (see below), while a desired female slave belonging to another could be purchased from an agreeable master.\textsuperscript{7}

All this suggests, then, that women formally engaged as mistresses were rarely sought among the slave rank. Recorded cases suggest that they were most often women whose families, while not of the lower rank, were less wealthy and politically less prominent than their male lovers. Nevertheless, some mistresses belonged to the very highest stratum of Nage society. Indeed, some of the best-known instances in the Bo'a Wae region concerned women from wealthy families of high rank.

One such woman was Wea Jago, the daughter of Jago Déde, the principal Nage leader in the nineteenth century. Taken as mistress by a man from the Keo region, Wea Jago gave birth to a son, 'Oga Wea, the ancestor of one section of the leading Nage clan Deu, resident in Bo'a Wae. Also born of a high-ranking mistress, and a nobleman from the village of Deu Olo, was Dapa Gu, a contemporary of Jago Déde. After marrying a woman of the Wolo Pogo nobility, Dapa Gu sired 'Oga Ngole (1855?-1928), the first colonial raja of Nage. 'Oga Ngole himself took as mistress another high-ranking woman, Bupu Dëku from clan Mudi in Wolo Bidi Au. Yet another mistress of high standing was the aforementioned A. Bi'i Sada, one of whose lovers was J. Juwa Dobe, the son of 'Oga Ngole.

Often, men would engage mistresses who lived at a considerable distance. For men of Bo'a Wae and vicinity, these included women resident in the eastern Nage districts of Réndu and Ndora. Distant relationships would sometimes be contracted while men were away from home for a period of time in connection with trade, ritual performances, or military campaigns.

\textsuperscript{6} Mosa laki might more accurately be glossed as 'leaders', or even as 'free persons'. Uta tua ('vegetables and palm wine') is a pejorative expression for poorer people who Nage describe as being able to afford only food and drink. But since these are not slaves (ho'o), they too are nominally mosa laki (Forth 1998:15, 2001:70-1).

\textsuperscript{7} I recorded just one case, dating from the colonial period, where a nobleman from Légu Mo'o had requested as a temporary mistress the slave of a nobleman of clan Naka Tebhe. In view of the rank difference, the woman's master objected, but relented when the other agreed to give him a plot of land in return for the woman's favours. My informant, a surviving relative of the Naka Tebhe man, described this unusually high payment as compensating for the rank difference; he further noted that, as this was the colonial period, it was no longer possible to purchase desired female slaves outright.
More recent contexts included obligatory public works, instituted as corvée during the colonial period and continued until the 1970s. Although by no means all affairs were conducted at great physical distances, Nage remarked that it was unusual to have a mistress in one's own village or an immediately neighbouring village, although even the former was not unknown. For married men, this was described as a way of keeping a mistress from the knowledge of a wife, or containing the jealousy of a wife who was aware of a husband's affair. If affairs did not always involve partners residing at considerable physical distances, they were typically marked by social distance. A man should not engage a genealogical MBD as a mistress, nor did I record instances where mistresses had been other close female kin. Nage also describe mistresses and their lovers as usually being unrelated or distantly related. The implication is therefore quite clear: female matrilateral kin could only be married; mistresses, on the other hand, were typically sought among relative strangers.

According to Nage, at one time most young women were engaged as mistresses. Girls betrothed in infancy could not become mistresses, but infant betrothal seems always to have been a minority practice among Nage. It almost goes without saying that the women most in demand were the most physically attractive. Such women, I was told, might have had dozens of successive lovers; less attractive women would become involved with one, two, or three men. According to another local estimate, most mistresses had between two and five lovers, before finally taking a husband.

Men attached a particular value to virgin mistresses, who always fetched a far higher payment than did other women. Nage men still claim that sex with a virgin confers physical strength and a youthful appearance and demeanour upon a man. Although these benefits should be especially attractive to older men, I was assured that young men preferred virgins as much as did their elders, not least because the youthful appearance which intercourse

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8 I recorded three affairs conducted in the same village and at least four where the partners resided in closely neighbouring villages. However, over half of these appear to have been 'midnight', or partly clandestine, affairs, while one that took place within a village was conducted with not only the knowledge but also the approval of the man's wife.

9 Sisters or other close kin of a wife may be a different matter. Although one man stated that anyone who requested his wife's sister as a mistress would likely receive a thrashing from her brother, another regular informant claimed to have engaged his wife's cousin (WFBD) as a mistress. Similarly, the last raja of Nage had an affair with the younger sister of one of his several wives, who bore a child by him.

10 This generalization probably relates not to the 1960s, when publicly contracted relationships reputedly came to an end in Bo'a Wae, but to a somewhat earlier period, in or before the 1920s or 1930s.

11 In 1985, I was told that men still sought out virgins, who could charge five times the rate for sex as non-virgins (for example, 10,000 rupiahs as opposed to 2,000).
with virgins can bestow is supposed to last a lifetime. In the traditional view, women also benefit from becoming mistresses, by acquiring sexual experience that makes them better wives. A woman who married without previous experience of sex, I was told, might out of curiosity seek adulterous liaisons after marriage – an idea obviously comparable with the western notion of ‘sowing one’s wild oats’. By the same token, Nage still recommend that men should have experience of other women before marrying; the standard phrase is ne’e fai molo ne’e ana bu’e kole, ‘(when one) marries it is good to have first had a mistress’.

Nage further say that boys should engage in sex soon after undergoing ‘circumcision’ (gedho loza), an indigenous ritual still practised today. Since casual sexual relations initiated by youngsters themselves (that is, without the knowledge of parents) are disapproved, a youth’s first sexual experience could properly be gained only in the context of a relationship with a mistress. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Nage maintain that the majority of men had mistresses. Wealthier men would of course have had more than others. One also hears stories of married men who, during the early part of the twentieth century, impoverished themselves by expending large amounts of wealth on these relationships.

As the requirement of contracting with a woman’s parents suggests, the status of mistress (ana bu’e) is described as having been an honourable one. Such women were not stigmatized in regard to their later marriage to other men. Being a mistress was never an alternative to marriage, as it has sometimes been in the modern west (Kedgley and James 1975). If anything, formally contracted premarital sexual affairs were viewed as a prelude to marriage, for women and men alike. Insofar as premarital experience was believed to produce more faithful wives, it evidently enhanced a woman’s value as a prospective spouse. Engaging a mistress could equally serve as a marital prelude for married as well as unmarried men. Since pre-Christian Nage were polygynous, taking a former mistress as a junior wife would always have been a definite possibility.

Especially as affairs could last for several months, women not infrequently had children by their lovers. Normally, the child then belonged to the mother’s natal group. However, if the woman’s parents were agreeable, the lover – being thus recognized as the genitor – could establish paternity and affiliate the child to his own group. The woman’s parents could also agree to patrifiliation prospectively, when first negotiating a daughter’s affair. Several cases I recorded in Bo’a Wae illustrate this possibility. The second colonial raja of Nage, J. Juwa Dobe, was thus able to legitimate the son he had by his mistress, A. Bi’i Sada;
hence this man is now recognized as a full member of his father's clan, Deu. Similarly, L. Jago, a son of J. Juwa by one of his wives, had two daughters by two different mistresses, of clans Dhuge and Naka Sodha respectively. Born about 1961, the younger daughter was incorporated into Jago's own clan (Deu), while the older one remained with her mother and, until her own marriage in 1984, was counted as a woman of clan Naka Sodha.13

In order to patrifilliate a mistress's child, a man had to provide her parents with goods known as *tau ana ame* ('to make child and father'). Since these goods are of precisely the same sort as those used as bridewealth, it is important to note that a genitor thus establishing paternity had no claim whatsoever over the mother. Once a man and a mistress had concluded their sexual relationship, the woman was perfectly free to marry someone else, even while her child became recognized as the legitimate offspring of its genitor.

A corollary to the possibility of patrifiliation by a mother's former lover is the fact that, for Nage, marrying a woman with children does not automatically secure their affiliation to the group of the mother's husband. In other words, bridewealth only secures rights to a wife, not to any children she may already have, who remain members of their mother's natal group. In this way, 'Oga Wea, the son of Wea Jago by a Keo lover, continued to be recognized as a man of Deu, his mother's natal clan, even after Wea Jago married a man of clan Koba Jawa. As noted, Nage allow matrifiliation even within marriage, specifically when a husband resides uxorilocally and does not pay bridewealth; hence the birth of children to mistresses was quite readily accommodated by the local social order.

A qualification to the foregoing concerns the children of mistresses born after the relationship between the mother and her lover has been concluded. Thus, if a biological father had not contracted to patrifilliate a mistress's child, and the woman subsequently married another man while still in an early stage of pregnancy (or 'before three months', as Nage regularly express this), then the child would be treated as the legitimate offspring of her husband, even though he was known not to be the genitor. In this way, Dapa Gu – the father of 'Oga Ngole, the first colonial Nage raja – came to be recognized as a member of clan Deu, since he was born after his mother (a woman of clan Bolo Bale named Gu Tiu) had left her lover and had married a man of Deu in Bo'a Wae. Similarly, Bupu Déku, who was a mistress of 'Oga Ngole, married Mite 'Uda, a henchman of the colonial raja and a leading man of clan Tegu.

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13 The formalities for incorporating the first daughter were not actually carried out until the woman was in her teens, and were completed not by the genitor, who died in 1978 after a long illness, but by his younger brother. Although children of mistresses were usually taken once they were weaned, as in this instance some children were patrifiliated at a significantly later age. One son of a mistress, a regular informant from the western Keo village of Muka, was over forty.
while her child by 'Oga Ngole was still in the womb; the child, named 'Ajo Bupu, was thus recognized as the legitimate son not of the Nage raja, but of Mite 'Uda.¹⁴

Specific purposes of temporary affairs

Other than as a source of licensed nonmarital sexuality, Nage describe several particular reasons why a man might engage a mistress.

First, the previously mentioned idea of publicly contracted affairs as a prelude to marriage is further reflected in a local interpretation of the arrangement as a kind of 'trial marriage'. However, even though a woman's parents might allow the man the option of subsequently marrying their daughter, how often mistresses were actually engaged with marriage in mind is questionable. The evidence of particular affairs indicates that most men did not later marry former mistresses; in fact, in Bo'a Wae I never recorded a single case where anyone had done so.¹⁵

Nage also describe taking a mistress as a way a man might obtain a legitimate child without marrying a woman, and thus without paying bridewealth or initiating an affinal relationship. In accordance with the procedure outlined above, this can occur when the man's wife is unable to bear children. Around 1970, a Tegu man in the village of Ola 'Ewa took a mistress from clan Boa for this very purpose. Resulting in the birth of a daughter, the arrangement proceeded with the encouragement of his childless wife, and even the reluctant approval of the local Catholic priest (a Nage man who died in 1984). To an interesting degree, the practice suggests a kind of surrogate motherhood, not dissimilar to modern, technologically assisted western varieties. Yet legitimating the mistress's offspring appears never to have been a usual way of obtaining a child among Nage.¹⁶ Adoptive children were more often sought among a (married) sister's children (ana pedo) or the children of other relatives (ana ghawe), practices that continue to the present. In addition,

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¹⁴ Actually, 'Ajo Bupu's paternity is controversial. According to another version, although 'Ajo Bupu was the biological child of Mite 'Uda, it was claimed that his genitor was 'Oga Ngole in order to induce the latter's wife-giver to allow 'Ajo Bupu to take one of their women in marriage. This was Ngole Mola, 'Oga Ngole's MBSD and simultaneously WBD, who bore the same name as 'Oga Ngole's mother. Whichever version is correct, the case illustrates the value Nage place on biological kinship, a matter that deserves far more attention than I can provide here.

¹⁵ Things may have been different in western Keo, where according to one local estimate, between 20% and 30% of affairs formerly led to marriage.

¹⁶ Taking a mistress specifically to obtain a child may well be a relatively modern phenomenon, bound up with the Church's ban on polygynous marriages, since men with sufficient wealth could formerly have taken a second wife when the first was childless.
adopting such children involved less material cost than did affiliating the offspring of mistresses. On the other hand, whereas ana pedo and ana ghawe are normally males, it is noteworthy that patrifiliated children of mistresses have often been females, as in two cases described above. (As I explain presently, sisters and daughters, whether adoptees or not, are valued by Nage as the initiators of ‘maternal lines of origin’, and the means by which men, and groups constituted patrilineally, become ‘sources’ of wife-taking houses.)

If impregnating a mistress was not a usual way a man obtained a child, making daughters available as mistresses could nevertheless have been motivated by a desire to increase the membership of the woman’s natal group. Yet, not only were there other ways of achieving this end, including both adoption and uxorilocal marriage, but making daughters available as mistresses was evidently so widespread in an earlier day that it was practised by many more groups than those in demographic decline. Another purpose possibly served by taking a temporary mistress, and one equally insufficient to explain the practice in its entirety, concerns the post-partum sex taboo. As Nage remarked, a wife who had just given birth, and was still breastfeeding, might even encourage her husband to ‘take his meals elsewhere’ (nalo loka) – that is, to consort with another woman – in order to avoid becoming pregnant before the first child was weaned.

However, while nonmarital sexual relationships may have served secondary social purposes, it is beyond question that Nage men took mistresses primarily for the sake of sexual gratification. It would be too naive to ask how this applied to married men with multiple wives and concubines besides, as for example in the cases of the colonial Nage rajas. One may assume that a major attraction was sexual variety and adventure, not to mention the greater charms of younger women for whom one bore no real responsibility. There was also a competitive element in all this, as men, and especially married men, would regularly boast about the number of mistresses they had had. Despite manifest differences in social evaluation and public recognition, therefore, from the perspective of the men Nage affairs appear in certain respects to have differed but little from extramarital sexual relationships in the modern west.

If men engaged mistresses primarily for sexual pleasure, in making their daughters available for this purpose parents were largely motivated by the prospect of material compensation. But this does not mean that their interest was purely mercenary. Although lovers were not always of significantly higher social standing than a mistress’s family, it is probable that some parents offered their daughters with a view to gaining the general patronage of a wealthy or powerful man, even if the latter was unlikely subsequently to take the daughter as a wife. Since the women themselves had some say in relationships contracted by parents, their interests also need to be
considered. This is problematic, not least because the testimony of women publicly engaged as mistresses is no longer readily available. In the 1990s, a few such women were still living, but most were quite elderly. Especially for me as a younger man, gaining direct access to elderly female informants willing to share accurately remembered experiences of sexual relationships long past was difficult, and I had to rely mostly on the testimony of their younger relatives.

Nevertheless, one may still speculate on benefits that mistresses may have derived from temporary affairs. As the status of mistress was not dishonourable, women would have gained in prestige from being the object of desire, particularly of men of substance and high standing. Reading between the lines, the same possibility can be discerned in Soekarno’s description, cited above. Evidence from individual cases also suggests that some women were romantically involved with their lovers, or became so in the course of an affair. And one should not rule out the possibility of young women enjoying sex, or what might even be called ‘free sex’, that is, physical relationships free of the considerable obligations entailed in the statuses of wife, daughter-in-law, and mother.

As Nage pointed out, a mistress could not easily break off a relationship once initiated, not only because her parents would then forfeit payment, but because they had entered into a binding agreement. Nevertheless, they also suggested that a mistress could reasonably end a relationship if she became bored or fed up with the man, even though her parents would then suffer materially. Nage further stated that a woman might discontinue seeing a lover if she learned or suspected that he had taken up with another woman; for she might then infer that the man ‘no longer desired her’. Apart from supporting the possible romantic nature of such relationships – at least from the woman’s point of view – this statement is interesting insofar as it suggests a jealousy directed specifically at other mistresses (rather than wives) of the sort documented for western societies (Kedgley and James 1975).

Wives’ attitudes towards husbands’ mistresses should also be considered. As in the case of the childless wife of the Tegu man mentioned above, sometimes a woman might have allowed, even encouraged, her husband to take a mistress. Most local accounts, however, indicate that wives were jealous of husbands’ mistresses, with several well-known stories describing violent encounters between mistresses and their lovers’ wives. At the same time, Nage equally recognize jealousy and conflict as possible qualities of relations between co-wives. Close friends of mine, a long-married couple, revealed that, in his younger days, the husband had participated in several extramarital affairs. A particular relationship had so upset the wife that she had stabbed her husband with a small knife. As she was telling me this, my friend lifted his shirt to show me his scars.
A fuller understanding of temporary affairs requires comparison with other heterosexual relationships, including marriage and concubinage. Taking a mistress and marrying a wife (ala fai) reveal at least seven differences:

1. While affairs with mistresses were restricted to a pre-specified period, Nage marriage is expected to be permanent, and normally is. Even in pre-Christian times, divorce with the return of bridewealth, although possible, appears to have been rare.

2. Marriage with bridewealth automatically confers paternity on a woman’s husband, who is presumed to be the genitor of any children she bears while married to him. By contrast, the genitor of offspring born to a mistress can establish paternity only retrospectively, by way of a separate procedure. By the same token, whereas with marriage both spouses are recognized as legitimate parents of offspring, only one biological parent of a mistress’s child – either the genetrix or the genitor – is formally recognized as the social parent.

3. Whereas Nage marriage involves a typical ‘bundle of rights’ mutually obligating the two spouses, and the husband in respect of the woman’s children, a mistress was obliged only to provide a lover with sexual services, while, formally, the lover owed the woman (as opposed to her parents) nothing at all.

4. Bridewealth, or the major part thereof, should be given before marriage partners initiate a sexual relationship, that is, before cohabitation. By contrast, goods given for a mistress’s services were always given when the relationship was concluded.

5. Bridewealth is always raised by a collectivity, the core of which comprises close agnates of the groom’s father. By contrast, a man taking a mistress had to ‘pay his own way’. Although Nage tell of parents (including adoptive and foster parents) spoiling favoured sons by giving them goods or money with which to contract affairs, a man could not, as a matter of right, call upon kinsmen to provide such assistance.

6. Only marriage initiates or perpetuates an affinal alliance between two notionally enduring groups. Consistent with this distinction, the prominent party in contracting an affair was the woman’s mother. In matters of marriage and alliance, by contrast, the principal participant is the woman’s father, who by contrast was usually not involved in the initial negotiation of a daughter’s affair.

7. Temporary affairs were always conducted by way of a series of visits to the woman’s house, whereas marriage entails cohabitation.

If Nage temporary affairs differ significantly from marriage, they are also not to be confused with concubinage. For this society, a concubine can only be...
defined as a woman of ‘slave’ (ho’o) rank who cohabits with her master. While the woman may bear children by him, such children are not recognized as the legitimate offspring of the high-ranking man but retain the rank of their mother. Whereas children of mistresses in the first instance belong to their mother’s group, affiliation is not an issue with concubines. As categorical subordinates of the male partner, the women already belong to the house and clan of their masters; hence their children necessarily do so as well. Nage also say that, formerly, high-ranking men did not allow male offspring of concubines to live.

As this should suggest, the status of a concubine is decidedly lower than that of a mistress. Nage call concubines fai sadha taga, a pejorative meaning ‘wife for resting the legs’. Although the phrase appears to designate such women as ‘wives’ (fai), this is to be understood figuratively. As Nage explained, fai applies in this context because, like wives but unlike mistresses, concubines typically reside permanently with their male partners. However, concubines are not legitimate wives (fai laki), since no bridewealth is paid. Apart from the usual difference in rank between the women, it is precisely in this respect that concubinage is of lower moral standing than publicly contracted affairs; for access to the sexuality of a concubine, unlike that of a mistress, involves no material exchange at all.

Full discussion of two other forms of sexual relationship – clandestine affairs and prostitution – would take us far beyond the scope of this essay. It is safe to assume that secret sexual liaisons, conducted without the knowledge of the partners’ parents, have always existed among Nage, even when ‘daylight’ affairs were regularly contracted. Clandestine relationships certainly occur at present. They differ from publicly contracted affairs mostly insofar as the man deals directly with the woman. Especially as secret male lovers typically provide the women with ‘gifts’ – including, nowadays, sums of money – secret liaisons bear a fundamental resemblance to affairs openly negotiated with the parents of a mistress. The point also applies to prostitution, a modern phenomenon among Nage. At the same time, Nage distinguish prostitution from both publicly contracted affairs and clandestine relationships, as encounters consisting of single sexual acts, quickly executed, which contrast with sexual liaisons lasting for months or even years. Prostitutes also seek out male clients, whereas with all other Nage sexual relationships, it is the man (or the man’s parents, in the case of marriage) who takes the initiative.

Nage are categorical in their disapproval of both clandestine affairs and prostitution. Although mistresses occupied a lower moral status than did wives, relationships with mistresses were considered morally superior to these practices as well as to Nage concubinage. From this it can be inferred that, while Nage do not object to nonmarital sex per se, what they do disapprove of are sexual relations which are uncontrolled, and which more specifically fall outside the control of a woman’s parents.
Cross-cultural comparisons and conclusions

A major aim of this essay has been to demonstrate peculiarities of Nage traditional affairs. The ethnographic literature is replete with examples of premarital and extramarital sexuality that is accepted and even expected. Yet the Nage institution contrasts with all of these. For one thing, it coexisted with a strict prohibition of female adultery, and so is not to be confused with the extramarital sexual relations allowed married women among the Dogon (Paulme 1940:377, cited in Pasternak, Ember and Ember 1997:169-70), Tlingit (Oberg 1934), or the polyandrous Todas and Nayar of India. By the same token, Nage affairs differed radically from practices reported for other Malayo-Polynesian speakers, for example, spouse exchange among the Gaddang of the Philippines (Wallace 1969, 1970:50-3), the ‘wife-exchange’ and ‘secondary mateship’ attributed to the Marquesans (Suggs 1966:129), and the wife sharing of the Trukese.\(^{17}\) Owning to their disapproval of a married woman’s adultery, but also the way in which the symmetry of such arrangements contradicts the fundamental asymmetry of their marriage rules, spouse exchange would be unconscionable for Nage.

Also within the Malayo-Polynesian region, Nage affairs recall the premarital sex, sometimes serving as a ‘trial marriage’, which Felix Keesing (1949:585, 589) reports for the Bontok of the Philippines (see also Barton 1938, on the neighbouring Ifugao). They are similarly reminiscent of the premarital sexual freedom reported from parts of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. A well-known example is the freedom allowed unmarried Trobriand girls, whose lovers provided them with ‘gifts’ for their favours (Malinowski 1922:53, 182). What seems to be lacking in these instances, however, as well as in the Philippine practice, is a transfer of goods to a woman’s parents, conferring a right of exclusive, albeit temporary, access to the woman’s sexuality. It is also noteworthy that in many societies that allow premarital sex, divorce tends to be easy and frequent, as it is on Truk, where, as among the Bontok, first marriages are described as being in effect trial marriages (Gladwin and Sarason 1953:121-2; Goodenough 1951:121).

In several respects, a closer parallel to publicly contracted affairs among Nage is Arabian mut’a (or mut’ah), characterized by Robertson Smith as a ‘temporary marriage’. Pre-Islamic in origin, mut’a, which is now associated specifically with Shi’a Islam, is a time-limited contract entered into for sexual pleasure, and providing a man with sexual access to a woman in exchange for a sum of money or other valuables. In its older form, any child born to the woman belonged to the mother’s lineage, whereas more recently a period of abstinence

\(^{17}\) Gladwin and Sarason 1953:102. Similar customs have of course been reported for better-known northern societies, such as the Siberian Chuckchee and Canadian Inuit.
for the woman following the conclusion of a relationship has allowed men to claim any offspring. At times, Middle Eastern mut'a has also been conceived as a ‘trial marriage’, while in twentieth-century Iran, before the Islamic revolution of 1979, it came to be viewed as a form of prostitution.\(^{18}\)

Although more westerly parts of Indonesia have long been Islamic, there is no ground for supposing that Nage temporary affairs reflect either direct or indirect contact with western Indonesians, nor indeed with Arabs. Apart from the fact that Indonesian Muslims belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, and the disapproval of mut'a by the majority of Southeast Asian Muslims, there are moreover several specific differences between Islamic ‘temporary marriage’ and the Nage institution. First, the Arabian arrangement can be contracted solely between a woman and a man, and need not involve her parents. Second, a man can enter into more than one mut'a relationship simultaneously, whereas a Nage man is not supposed to have more than one mistress at a time. And thirdly, although the mut'a agreement is temporally limited, the woman as well as the man can terminate the relationship before its expiry.\(^{19}\)

Comparison of Nage affairs with ‘temporary marriage’ among Muslims does however raise the question of whether the Nage institution might usefully be considered a form of marriage.\(^{20}\) Despite numerous differences demonstrated earlier, Nage marriage and temporary affairs nevertheless reveal similarities. Both require the provision of goods – in fact, goods of the same sort – to the parents of the female partner, and both involve a public agreement giving a man exclusive sexual rights to a woman (if only, in the one case, for a limited time). In this respect, Nage affairs appear to conform to the minimal definition of marriage proposed by Goodenough (1970), who argued that, cross-culturally, marriage reduces to a contract conferring on a male an exclusive right of access to a woman’s sexual services. Yet, in another respect, the Nage institution deviates even from this; for the affairs were not

\(^{18}\) Robertson Smith 1903; Haeri 1990. An indication of something similar to both mut'a and the Nage institution is found in the ethnography of Borneo. Writing on the Ngaju, Schärer (1963:54) describes how beautiful young slave-girls, who also functioned as shamans (or ‘priestesses’), once engaged, for a fee, in what he calls ‘sacred as well as profane prostitution’. Occasionally, free women as well engaged in the practice. However, apart from obvious differences (Nage mistresses did not operate as shamans, nor were they mainly of slave rank), information on the Ngaju case is insufficient to allow a systematic comparison with the Nage.

\(^{19}\) In thus characterizing mut'a, I mostly follow Robertson Smith. Other authorities (for example, Gibb and Kramers 1953; Hughes 1965) understand termination – or ‘divorce’ – to be impossible with the Arabian institution. Information on mut'a is complex and contradictory, in part because of changes in the practice and Islamic interpretations relating to different historical periods.

\(^{20}\) Classifying it as a form of nikah (Arabic ‘marriage’), Shi’a Muslims regard mut'a as a kind of marital union (Gibb and Kramers 1953). Similarly, a modern western Indonesian adaptation designated as ‘contract marriage’ (kawin kontrak; see Budaya kawin kontrak 2002) is also called nikah muta (or mutah, mutaah), the word nikah having been adopted from Arabic as an Indonesian national language term for ‘marriage’ and ‘to marry’.
merely impermanent (as 'marriage' can be, according to Goodenough) but explicitly time-limited and non-renewable.

Nage themselves may appear to conceive of temporary affairs as a kind of marriage, particularly when they represent them as a form of 'trial marriage'. One idiom also characterizes the affairs as a sort of 'play marriage': a mistress and her lover are described as 'scooping up dirt, playing with coconut shells' (aku awu, dhégha hé'a), as children do in imitation of cooking and serving food. But since Nage understand the phrases as depicting the relationships as 'false marriages', it is quite clear that they do not in any strict sense constitute a 'kind' of marriage, or even a standard way of initiating a marriage, and that treating them as such would detract from a proper understanding of the Nage institution.

A special interest of the Nage practice of engaging temporary mistresses is its coexistence with a system of asymmetric affinal alliance, a form of social organization widespread in eastern Indonesia. At first glance, the institution appears to sit oddly with affinal alliance. More particularly, if the matrimonial transfer of women is the principal means by which social groups and categories are constituted and articulated, it may seem peculiar that women's sexual services, and implicitly their fertility, could be expended in such a temporary and structurally inconsequential manner, in self-limiting contracts between an individual man and a woman's parents. The possibility of temporary affairs also tends to contradict any notion that Nage marriage involves less a contract than the realization of a pre-existing connubial connection between prescribed marriage partners (for example, MBD and FZS), a characteristic that has been attributed to affinal alliance systems in general. For if this were so, the affairs would arguably be tantamount to a licensed female adultery bordering on polyandry.

Any apparent incongruity with alliance-based marriage, however, is reduced when one considers that temporary affairs did not detract from the marital relationship. Indeed, in the Nage view, they served to produce better wives and husbands. Arguably, the impression of inconsistency derives from too close an association, if not a confusion, of sex and marriage, something about which Robin Fox (1967:54) warned anthropologists (in contrast to teenagers) many years ago. To reiterate, although they may have served secondary purposes in particular instances, for Nage men (and, not impossibly, for Nage women as well) traditional affairs were primarily about sex. What is more, even if the relationships resulted in children, this was readily accommodated by a social order that allows for matrifiliation of offspring, or alternatively their patrifiliation, without requiring the marriage of the biological parents or any adjustment to the alliance status of the parties involved.

Also noteworthy is the way several features of Nage marriage and alliance – all common concomitants of affinal alliance generally – facilitate, even
if they do not actually promote, the institution of temporary sexual relationships. These include bridewealth (a transfer of goods given in return for rights to female persons); arranged marriage (and thus control of women’s sexual and marital destinies by the senior generation); and polygyny (which allows a married man to initiate an extramarital sexual relationship without this constituting adultery). Yet, while these features may have provided the context in which Nage temporary affairs assumed their particular shape, it is obvious that Nage marriage and temporary affairs do not entail one another. Although the point cannot be fully demonstrated here, from a chronological perspective the latter may well have developed as a supplement to Nage marriage and affinal alliance, without affecting these fundamentally.

At the same time, the way temporary affairs coexist with alliance-based marriage does illuminate particular features of Nage affinity. Especially with regard to women’s sexuality, I have indicated that Nage marriage cannot be understood as the realization of a pre-existing matrimonial relation. Generally consistent with this, affinal alliance in central Flores neither implies nor requires a high rate of marriage between cross-cousins, as was recently demonstrated in regard to Keo society (Forth 2001). Instead, alliance for Nage, as for Keo, is largely a ramifying relationship constituted by what I have called a ‘maternal line of origin’ (Forth 2001).

By virtue of this last feature, Nage society excludes certain categories of people from the alliance system. Together with adoptees and the children of uxorilocal unions, these include the offspring of mistresses. Where such children remain with their mother’s group, they in effect lack mother’s brothers (since these, in a sense, become fathers), and thus a relationship with a distinct wife-giving house. In the Nage idiom, they lack ‘origins’, ‘houses of origin’, and thus ‘maternal lines of origin’, which require birth from a mother already married with bridewealth, as was recently demonstrated in regard to Keo society (Forth 2001). Instead, alliance for Nage, as for Keo, is largely a ramifying relationship constituted by what I have called a ‘maternal line of origin’ (Forth 2001).

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affinity. With respect to inheritance, succession, and other rights, children born to mistresses accordingly occupy a socially less secure position than what Nage and Keo call 'bridewealth children' (ana so topo seli bhuja).  

It is therefore clear why Nage marriage, as an entailment of affinal alliance, and nonmarital sexual relationships – which did not always result in offspring, and in any case are not the preferred mode of social reproduction – should relate to quite separate social spheres. By virtue of this separation, amounting to a virtual compartmentalization, temporary affairs had no necessary impact on the system of marriage alliance. They might have done so had publicly contracted sexuality been tied exclusively to marriage, either as an entailment solely of marital unions or as an inevitable precursor of these, a stage, as it were, in the regular development of a matrimonial relationship. But among Nage such was patently not the case.

Whatever one thinks of Cai's interpretation (2001:426, 438) of the Na as a society without marriage, Nage affairs contradict an important part of his general argument, namely, that marriage excludes other institutionalized sexual relationships. Concubinage, spouse exchange, and similar arrangements in a variety of other societies might also be considered contrary evidence. Yet the Nage institution is especially damaging to Cai's argument, not only because it was approved and common, but also because it provided one means (although not the most valued means) of social reproduction. In this respect, Nage society reveals how marriage and nonmarital sexual relationships can indeed coexist, and even complement one another. At the same time, insofar as these relationships also facilitate social reproduction in a patrilineal mode, they further illustrate how, universally, social motherhood is not a necessary concomitant of the status of genetrix (Holy 1996:21-2, 24-7). Prompted by the title of Cai's book – A society without fathers or husbands – one might therefore characterize Nage as a society sometimes without 'mothers' as well.

Forth 2001:111. This is why ‘Oga Wea, the son of Wea Jago, had according to one interpretation less claim to the leadership of Bo’a Wae than did ‘Oga Ngole, the first Nage raja. Although, unlike ‘Oga Wea, he did not belong to the house of Jago Déde (the famous nineteenth-century Nage leader and father of Wea Jago), ‘Oga Ngole was at least born of a bridewealth marriage. The fact that ‘Oga Ngole’s own father, Dapa Gu, was himself born of a mistress evidently did not reduce his status in Bo’a Wae. All the same, this account of Dapa Gu’s birth is publicly denied by his present descendants.

In a review of Cai’s book, Harrell (2002) argues that, in regard to the reputed absence of marriage and the possibility of nonmarital or extramarital relationships, Na society is well within the norm of matrilineal societies (see also Chuan-kang Shi 2000, who presents yet another interpretation of Na relationships). While Harrell’s assessment underestimates peculiarities of the Na system, it does serve to underline the way a similar pattern of sexual visiting among Nage is subsumed in a very different social order. Not only are Nage not matrilineal, but the practices, from various other parts of the world, to which Harrell refers (such as permitted extramarital sex by married women, which Nage strictly forbid), are features of regular marital relationships, whereas Nage traditional affairs were something quite separate from Nage marriage.
Note

Much of the information included here was presented in a paper read in May 2001 at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, during an appointment as Visiting University Professor. I am grateful to Cécile Barraud and the late Daniel de Coppet for inviting me to Paris, and for the generous hospitality they extended to me and my son Aidan during our stay. In facilitating my research in Indonesia, thanks are due to the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI, Indonesian Institute of Sciences), Nusa Cendana and Artha Wacana universities in Kupang, St. Paul’s Seminary in Ledalero, Flores, the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, and the University of Alberta. Issues raised in the present essay were further reviewed in a paper read at the Third International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS3) held in Singapore in August 2003. A visit to Flores during several weeks preceding the convention allowed me to clarify several matters that arose during earlier revisions of the paper.

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