CHAPTER VI

Stranger-kings and myths of xenarchy in the eastern Lesser Sunda Islands

Myths about the origins of people and social groups are found throughout the eastern Lesser Sunda Islands and in all of the islands’ communities. These myths typically are the stories of the origins of founding ancestors, in some cases named and in others not, at places more or less distant from the places inhabited by their descendants. Many origin myths recount, frequently in considerable detail, the journeys whereby the founders left their places of origin and arrived at the places occupied by their descendants. As one of my informants in Tana ‘Ai, referring to all the peoples of the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (N.T.T.), once remarked to me, ‘here we are all pendatang’ (BI, ‘immigrants, newcomers’). Indeed, he was right, if the innumerable myths of the origins of houses, clans, ceremonial domains and villages are counted as evidence. Thus all, or at least most, eastern Lesser Sunda Islanders represent themselves in myth as newcomers to their land or the descendants of immigrants. Only rarely (if at all) do people claim to be autochthons and thus to have always lived in their land. When such claims are made, it is frequently by people other than themselves, as when Ata Sikka have told me that the Ata Tana ‘Ai are the ‘original’ indigenes of the land of Sikka, an attribution denied by the origin myths of the Tana ‘Ai clans.

The origin myth of Sikka’s rajas makes clear that the first of their line came from overseas, and that they were strangers to Flores. The myth also makes clear that the Sikkanese region of Flores was already inhabited when the rulers’ ancestors arrived, but the myth is all but silent on the origins of those autochthons and how they themselves account for their origins is yet to be recorded in the literature.¹

As the origins of ancestral founders of social groups are represented in myth as from outside, so, too, the origins of rulers. But is a stranger-king just another founder who, finding his destination already inhabited, establishes a state instead of a society? The brief answer is, no, as I hope I have shown.

¹ See Chapters III and VII for what little the Hikayat tells us of the origins of the autochthons of Sikka.
Myths of xenarchy are not only about the origin of one group among others that make up a society. They are about the origin of the sovereignty of rulers, something not found in these islands before the arrival of outsiders of a special kind.

Thus, I am here concerned with myths of a particular kind, a subset of origin myths, that recount the origins of rulers and their sovereignty, that is, myths with xenarchic themes that tell the deeds of the stranger-kings. Because not all of the peoples of the region lived in petty states or had rulers before the coming of the Europeans, stranger-king myths are by no means universal in the eastern Lesser Sunda Islands. And if, say, in the 1920s, it appeared that all of the eastern Lesser Sunda Islands apart from Portuguese Timor were neatly divided into principalities, the apparent order was a consequence of Dutch colonial policies.

The Dutch government designated its possessions in the region as Residentie Timor en Onderhoorigheden, with the town of Kupang near the southern tip of Timor as the residency’s capital. The Residentie was subdivided into swapraja, semi-autonomous and local principalities, for administration. In many cases, as in Sumba and western Flores, before they created a local state, the Dutch had to appoint a raja or someone as ruler with whom they could treat. Thus, while all the peoples of the eastern Lesser Sunda Islands are, in myth, immigrants and newcomers, not all lived in principalities or petty states before 1859 and stranger-king myths are not found universally among the islands’ peoples.

Table 4. De zelfbesturende landschappen in de Residentie Timor en Onderhoorigheden [Self-governing rajadoms in the Residency of Timor and its dependencies], after Van Dijk (1925, 1934).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timor (53)</th>
<th>Alas Weolain</th>
<th>Amabi</th>
<th>Amabi Otifeto</th>
<th>Amakono</th>
<th>Amanatoeng</th>
<th>Amanoebang</th>
<th>Amarasi</th>
<th>Amfoan</th>
<th>Amfoan Naiklioe</th>
<th>Amfoan Timaoe</th>
<th>Amnoebang</th>
<th>Anas</th>
<th>Beboki</th>
<th>Beloe</th>
<th>Beloe Tassi Fettoh</th>
</tr>
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