CHAPTER II

Mama Raja
The case

In the heat of the discussion over the causes of Mama Raja’s illness, one of Ayawasi’s elders, Bapak Simon Turot, climbed the steps of the little pile dwelling and entered the house. Bapak Simon turned out to be a *wuon* healer, that is, a ritual specialist who had received years of training during initiation in the *wuon* cult house. He was a member of Mama Raja’s matrilineal kin group, and had been called by Mama Raja’s relatives to release the woman from her misery.1

For a moment the healer stood in the doorway, his eyes focused on Mama Raja. He then asked for a glass of water. One of the women got up, took a glass from a shelf and rinsed it thoroughly, before filling it with clear, cold water from the water barrel outside. Bapak (Mr) Simon was about to perform the *ksa aa* divination ritual by ‘reading’ the water, in order to ‘search for answers’ for Mama Raja’s illness.2 He took the glass, held it close to his mouth, and muttered secret formulas into the water. Other people were not allowed to hear the words, otherwise the spell would lose its strength. While the healer muttered the formulas, everyone fell silent and, with great expectancy, closely watched Bapak Simon’s doings. Undisturbed, he murmured his formulas until ‘all the words were used up’. Concentrating, he then walked up to Mama Raja and kneeled by her side. He put one arm under her head and helped her to sit up a bit. Gently, Bapak Simon let Mama Raja sip some water, after which she wearily laid her head down again.

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1 It is an unspoken rule that healers come into action only after a request, either by the ill person or by one of the patient’s kin.

2 ‘Reading’ water (or leaves) is one of the main techniques healers are taught during initiation in the *wuon* cult house. Through ‘reading’, the water or leaves are blessed, either to search for the cause of the illness or to transfer healing strength. The collective term for ‘reading’ is *potekief* (Indonesian: *baca*). Reciting secret formulas may thus be done either for diagnosing illnesses (*ksa aa*) or for healing purposes.
The healer then took some prickly leaves, *afa* (*Laportea decumana*; Indonesian: *daun gatal*), out of a woven mat that he had held under his arm all that time. He ‘read’ the leaves by muttering the appropriate formulas over them. Sitting next to Mama Raja, he then brushed her body with the leaves. Going from head to toe, he first brushed her arms, then her legs, and next her torso, after which he started all over again. He repeated this several times. It was clear that Mama Raja appreciated the massage. *Afa* is known for its pain-relieving effects, and it eased the pain in Mama Raja’s stiff, contorted limbs. She relaxed perceptibly, and for a short while the convulsions diminished.

When he was done, Bapak Simon got up, took the glass with what was left of the water, and walked to the doorway. While he stood there with his back turned to the others, he emptied the glass at one draught. Then, with one pull he forcefully squirted the water on the ground, just outside the dwelling. By doing so, he reinforced the words he had muttered into the water.

**Searching for answers**

This act marked the end of the *ksa aa* divination ritual, to ‘search for answers’. By performing the rite, the healer hoped that the culprit who had caused Mama Raja’s illness would be revealed. For the healer it was beyond doubt that someone had made Mama Raja ill. The only question was who. Others shared this opinion, like Yustina Yumte, a young female relative of Mama Raja’s, who sat next to me and said:

Mama Raja was completely healthy while she was staying in Sorong. When she returned to Ayawasi she suddenly fell ill. Mama Raja was taken ill so abruptly; that is definitely a sign that someone made her ill. Besides, she has been ill now for several weeks and has already tried various treatments, including herbal medicine. She also asked *wuon* healers to perform the *saws* ritual and lived in seclusion for several weeks observing the strict food taboos that go with the ritual. It all came to nothing. Even this morning when the convulsions started, one of the nurses from the missionary hospital was called in. The sister came and gave Mama Raja an injection. She thought Mama Raja was having a severe attack of malaria. But after the shot the spasms only became worse. I know for sure that someone made Mama Raja ill!

In the search for answers to the question who it was who caused Mama Raja’s illness, several options (according to indigenous beliefs) were conceivable. The wrongdoer could be a malevolent spirit who had taken possession of Mama Raja’s body and in this way made her seriously ill. Such spirits could be ancestral spirits who were punishing Mama Raja for violating or disregarding ancestral rules. Or the spirit could be that of a villager who had died of an ‘unnatural’ cause. These spirits are believed to be unable to find peace