CHAPTER TWO

SACRED GROVES AND TABOOED MOUNTAINS

In the preceding chapter we have seen that the comparative study of stories and reports about forest clearing allows us to reconstruct a basic form of clearing rituals according to which such rituals included three parts that could be performed in many different ways. In the present chapter it is one aspect of the third part that interests us: the sacred grove as a new dwelling place of the spirits in their new identity as guardian deities. It is understandable that the higher status of guardian deities usually entailed that their new dwelling was situated somewhere higher up in the landscape, usually beyond the upper boundary of the opened area and often on the flank of a mountain. However, when in the course of time a hierarchy of different opened areas came to be established, including not only cultivated fields but also whole villages and regional territories, the higher order groves were likely to be moved to the very top of mountains. The result of such developments corresponded to the situation that has been reported, for example, from some of the Batak groups settled around Lake Toba in North Sumatra. The more detailed discussion of sacred groves which follows in this chapter focuses mainly on conditions reported from three of these ethnic groups, namely from the Karo Batak, the Toba Batak and the Pakpak Batak. To begin with, a few general notes on sacred groves and other tabooed areas in premodern Indonesia are presented.

Sacred groves of various kinds

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tabooed mountains and sacred patches of forest land were still a common sight in most parts of Indonesia. Foreign travellers who wanted to climb a high mountain often had difficulties to find native guides willing to enter the ‘realm of the spirits’; and botanists often felt frustrated because they knew of the rich plant life of tabooed areas but were not allowed to collect specimens there. Henry O. Forbes, an English naturalist who travelled through a great part of the Archipelago between 1878 and 1883, describes a common situation when he adds to a few words about the flora of a region in eastern Timor:

Whenever considerable patches of trees have attained the dignity of a wood, one may be sure that there the land is Luli – sacred territory – where, if he is permitted
to enter, the botanist may not break or cut a single branch. These spots – often the highest peaks of mountains – having been *hallowed* for generations, must be the richest store-houses of all the rarest plants and trees in their localities. How aggravating to the spirit it was to be prevented from collecting there it is needless to describe. (Forbes 1885:454)

Some of these sacred territories were probably regarded with awe because they were believed to coincide spatially with a terrestrial ‘land of the dead’ (see Chapter 3). The Dusun of North Borneo, for example, believed that the souls of their ancestors were dwelling on Mt. Kinabalu, so they observed certain taboos and made offerings when climbing it (Evans 1923:33-5; Enriquez 1927:78-81). Numerous examples of this kind are known, but in the ethnographic literature authors often also mentioned tabooed mountain regions without telling us why exactly they were tabooed. On Buru, for example, there are still many taboo places called *net koit* (‘avoidance places’) where people have to avoid certain kinds of behaviour or the use of certain words. These places are now apparently thought to be inhabited by nature spirits (Grimes 1997:124-8). In the nineteenth century, however, there were still many places on Buru where everything was thought to belong to the souls of ancestors and where a small offering was needed to prevent negative consequences when one had to violate a taboo there (Wilken 1875:27-8). We can only guess that some were perhaps places where a land of the dead was imagined to be,¹ whereas others may once have been sacred groves such as Arndt describes for the later situation in East Flores:

In many places there are sacred groves, called Duan Geraran, Duan Gedan, or Duan Nuba Tua. They lie on the top of mountains and hills but also further down; yet one often also finds *nubanara* stones. Nothing may be lopped off there, no liana may be cut through, and no stone be taken away; nor is it allowed to collect firewood; for all is property of the *nitu*, who have their dwellings there. Whoever steals or damages something belonging to them will have bad luck. In many places one makes offerings there when sowing. (Arndt 1951:98; from the German).

The mention of offerings in connection with sowing suggests that these were groves established in opening up agricultural land. The same may partly be true for the recent situation in Bukit Saban, a cluster of steep hills in Sarawak situated near the Kerangan Pinggai longhouse of the Saribas Iban in Paku. As Clifford Sather writes:

> Parts of the summit of these hills are under ritual interdiction (*pulau mali*) and the ‘islets’ (*pulau*) of forest that cover them may not be felled or fired. These islets enclose a series of sacred precincts, including a spring-fed pool frequented by the spirit-heroine Kumang (*telaga Kumang*) and the unseen house (in the form of a large *kara’*)

¹ This is perhaps so in the case of Garan, the largest taboo area, which is about 30 km long and 20 km broad and where it is taboo to speak in Buru language (Grimes 1997:124-5).