CHAPTER FOUR

TEMPORARY ALTARS AND THE ATTRACTION
OF FRESH LEAVES

This chapter deals mainly with offering stands temporarily erected under the open sky; the focus is on the religious function of the decorative features and particularly on the use of fresh plants for decoration. To begin with, we may briefly recall what has already been said in this respect in the general Introduction. I mentioned that the fresh leafy plants used for decorating an altar had the aesthetic quality of providing contrast as movable elements with the firm supporting substructure, in the same way as a tree top contrasts with the firmly rooted trunk; that the foliage was understood as a sign showing the spirits the place of the ritual; that the leaves’ waving motion was sometimes said to beckon the spirits to draw near; and that a large palm leaf or a pole with a leafy top was often added to serve the spirits as a sort of ladder along which they would climb down to the offerings prepared for them. The custom of decorating altars in one way or another was apparently based on a religious ideology according to which an altar without decoration could not function, as the spirits would not care to approach and accept the offerings.

The ethnographic literature on Indonesia contains numerous instances of authors describing and sometimes illustrating a temporary altar, but a comparative study of altar stands on a wide scale seems not to have been done yet. There are, however, certain traditions of building temporary altars that have received more attention by researchers than have others. The outdoor altars of the Sa’dan Toraja are relatively well known because various authors described and/or illustrated examples of different types that could formerly be distinguished (J. Kruyt 1921:74, 162, 166, 183; Van der Veen 1965:8; Nooy-Palm 1979:269-73). The altars of the To Pamona – close neighbours of the Sa’dan Toraja to the north-east – have been discussed and classified by Adriani and Kruyt (1912, I:278-9, 382-4; II: 163 [fig.]), who noted that a bamboo or palm leaf was usually either attached to the altar or erected close by it to serve as a ‘ladder’ for the descending spirit. The altars of the Pardembanan Batak – a subgroup of the Toba Batak of North Sumatra – deserve special mention because various types have been illustrated and described in much detail by Harley Harris Bartlett, an American botanist with a professional interest in the plants with which such temporary structures were built and decorated (Bartlett 1929: pl. IV-VI, XI, XVIII; 1934:17-20).

In the simplest case an outdoor altar might consist of a bamboo or a palm frond that was stuck into the ground in an inclining position supporting a small
offering which was tied to it or suspended from it, often together with a sort of basket containing it (see Fig. 38). Composite altars were usually formed like tables (see Fig. 39). They were often made with bamboo posts and decorated with added plants, palm-leaf fronds, colourful cloths, and the like.

In the present chapter and in the two which follow, examples of outdoor altars are introduced to allow us to discuss various features that are of interest in view of the subject of the third part of this book. In particular, we first deal with the aspect of beauty that could be added to an altar by decorating it with foliage. If temporary altars had consisted of nothing but a support for keeping an offering some distance above the ground, their usually rather rough construction would hardly be worthy of note. It is because of their decorative features that they deserve our interest and sometimes even our admiration as short-lived works of animate architecture. Yet what is more important here is that an altar’s beauty was thought to attract the spirits invoked and thereby to guarantee that the offerings would be accepted and, therefore, be effective.