Outdoor altars that are used only temporarily do not need protection against rain; nevertheless their leaf-decoration is sometimes arranged so as to indicate the contours of a roof. Also, the basic structure of altars built with four posts rising considerably higher than the platform sometimes resemble the roof-supporting post and beam construction of a granary or a small house. There is no way of knowing whether such similarities were due to mere accident or to a process of adapting altars which originally had different forms – triangular altars, altars with crossed legs, square altars raised on a single post, and the like – to the form of the house or granary, but it is noteworthy that an altar’s decorative foliage forming a shading superstructure sometimes assumed the character of a sort of roof. At the end of the preceding chapter we have just seen that the rotan leaf superstructure of a Batak anjapan was gathered together at the top, turning the altar into a hut-like shrine. We must distinguish, however, between roof-like forms that derive from symbolic canopies and rain-proof coverings that imitate dwelling-house roofs. In this chapter we deal with both categories, beginning with various forms of canopies. The purpose is to show that the two categories tended to merge and to be regarded as symbolically equivalent, a fact that has consequences for the interpretation of the roof and its features in dwelling architecture.

A shading canopy placed separately over an altar

An old photograph from an unknown place in Halmahera shows a canopy of large palm leaves above two structures, the larger of which supports an offering dish (Fig. 72). The palm leaves are mounted horizontally on separate sticks so as to hover above the two platforms, the long drooping leaflets veiling the platforms so that these are only partly visible in the picture. The exact construction of the palm leaf canopy is not clear; the commentary added to the photograph only says that the whole was an ‘offering place against evil spirits’. Interpreting the picture in comparison with the Batak anjapan, it seems likely that the palm leaf canopy was intended to attract and guide the spirit(s) to the offering. As such, it corresponded to the long sugar palm leaf called ‘path of the gods’ (dalan ni debata) of certain Batak altars which on Halmahera had a parallel in the palm leaf used in a shamanic ritual to mark ‘the way for [the spirit] jini’ (Chapter 4).
Another method of using palm leaves for making a canopy was to erect them vertically around an altar and tie them together halfway up. This was done in the case of a simple field altar in the district of Sangalla’ in the eastern part of Tana Toraja. In that case, which is not typical of Toraja altars, the canopy looked from afar like a tree growing in the fields. Erected on the dam in a corner of a rice field, it was formed by six upright sugar palm leaves which were assembled and carefully knotted together to look like a slender conical hut with a large bushy top (see Fig. 73, 74, 75). The whole structure was more than two metres high, and in its interior stood an altar on two bamboo posts about eighty centimetres high. The projecting upper ends of the posts were ornamented with incised patterns.

Normally the Sa’dan Toraja used bamboo poles as large-scale spirit attractors (see Chapter 3, Fig. 35), but materials of the sugar palm could be used as well. The tadoran, for example, a simple type of altar consisting of an inclined bamboo and an offering basket suspended below the leafy top, usually had a young leaf of the sugar palm added; and the pandung balo discussed in the previous chapter mainly consisted of the slender rib of a sugar palm leaf added on top of a bamboo post with incised patterns. In the present instance, pandung balo were lacking, presumably because their function as spirit attracting elements was taken over by the large palm leaves of the enclosing structure.1

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1 For a more detailed discussion of this and other Toraja altars, see Nooy-Palm 1979:269-73; Domenig 1985.