CHAPTER SIX

ARTIFICIAL LADDERS AND INVERTED POSTS

In Indonesia there was the widespread custom to orient house timbers with respect to the growth direction of the wood in the living tree. When raw timber was used, the ‘base’ or ‘root end’ was usually slightly thicker so that one could easily identify it, but when building with converted timber (timber cut to size) one either had to mark one end when felling the tree or use a weighing method for finding out later which had been the growth direction of the living tree. By letting the wood float in water or by balancing it on a support placed under its mid point one could see which part was sinking and identify it as the heavier one with the root end. Rules of timber orientation varied. The two basic rules were (1) that a ‘root end’ should always follow on a ‘tip’, so that neither two root ends nor two tips should meet, and (2) that in vertical and inclined positions the ‘root end’ should always be below, as it is in a living tree.

Often these basic rules were deliberately broken in certain parts of a structure, however, so that different patterns of timber orientation could result. Ever since R. H. Barnes (1974) first discussed a case of timber orientation in a way that drew the interest of anthropologists it has been generally assumed that vertical timbers must always have the root end below, whereas horizontal ones could be oriented according to different patterns. In Indonesia the biological tree metaphor played a great part in the description of social relations; consequently, scholars assumed that the same biological metaphor was also implied in timber orientation. Assuming therefore that vertical and inclined house timbers were always placed with the root end below, some came to think that house posts, for example, were symbolically permeated with tree life, that they were thought to channel beneficial influences from the ground into a building (Barnes 1974:71-5; Teljeur 1990:65-83). I have discussed and criticized these views elsewhere, arguing that metal pieces and other objects were placed into postholes to prevent influences from the ground from entering the house and that timber elements used to be oriented so as to adjust them to the ritual orientation of the house or of its parts, either relative to auspicious directions in a landscape or to the cardinal points. It was, therefore, the morphological tree metaphor, not the biological one, that was involved in timber orientation. In the same way as earth spirits used to be expelled when clearing a site for human use, tree life had to be ritually exorcized before timber could be used for building (Domenig 2008d).
Here it is not necessary to elaborate on these arguments again. Instead, I wish
to focus on cases of inverted timber orientation, a subject that has as yet hardly
been dealt with by anthropologists. For the most part, we shall deal with inclined
and vertical timbers and with artificial ladders that were used as spirit ladders. The
questions to ask are whether or not such elements were placed upside down
relative to the growth structure of the wood and whether spirits were supposed
to climb them primarily from above or from below.

**Inverted step ladders and the idea of the inverted spirit world**

The most obvious kind of an inverted spirit ladder was the notched pole or step
ladder used in an upside down position. The sources sometimes say that the
notches were upside down, but it seems that usually the notches were so because
the notched pole was placed upside down and, therefore, was not only inverted
with regard to form but also with respect to the growth structure of the wood
from which it had been cut. To speak, therefore, of a spirit ladder that is ‘set up
reversely’ is to describe a situation that usually implied both aspects. A nineteenth
century Toba Batak text is quite explicit about this point when it refers to the
inverted position of the base and top of such a ladder. Describing the correct
construction of an altar (*langgatan*), the text says that the notched pole must be
‘placed upside down (*suhar*), the top [*ujung*] directed downward, the foot [*bona*]
upward’ (De Boer 1946:373, 421). Although it is of course possible that in ritual
practice reverse notches may sometimes have been cut into a pole with normal
timber orientation, it is likely that formal inversion usually went together with an
inverted growth structure of the wood. That is to say, a notched spirit ladder with
downward facing steps was usually like a normal notched pole ladder being placed
upside down.

As for the meaning of a spirit ladder’s inversion, in the relevant literature it is
sometimes explained by saying that in the spirit world things are different and are
the other way round. According to Warneck, for example, the manner of the *begu*
spirits of the Toba Batak is opposite to that of humans: ‘When they go down the
stairs, they climb with the head foremost’ (1909:74). Similarly Joustra, describing
an offering post used in a Karo Batak ritual, regards it as ‘very logical’ that the
post was notched in the reverse sense, for it served as a ‘spirit ladder’ (*redan begu*)
and ‘the spirits are thought to come from above to below’ (1902:6). When the
To Pamona wanted to make the spirits depart from a piece of land which they
intended to clear, they would first decide by divination or dream which trees were
the assembly places of spirits. Then they would lean a pole with six inverted

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1 ‘*(E)en omgekeerd opgestelde trap (geesten of schimmen-trap)*’ (Kühr 1897:95).