CHAPTER SEVEN

SPIRIT PATHWAYS IN THE TANIMBAR HOUSE

The Tanimbar Archipelago is situated to the north-east of Timor in the South-East Moluccas (Regency of Maluku Tenggara). It consists of the main island Yamdena and a number of smaller islands including Fordata, Larat, Selu, Sera and Selaru. Culturally, Tanimbar is most closely related to the island groups of Babar in the south-west and of Kai in the north-east (see Map 5).

There are three reasons for choosing a typical house of the Tanimbar Archipelago in eastern Indonesia as a model for discussing how architecture responded to rites of offering. First, the structural system of the house shows clear traces of a house type that had been formed by extending the floor space of a smaller structure. In this respect it is comparable to numerous other house types of Indonesia, although it presents an unusually clear case. Second, the particular type of a Tanimbar house to be discussed in this chapter is characterized by ritual double orientation and usually has two main offering places in the interior, one related to the longitudinal axis, the other to the transverse axis of the building. This makes it a good example to use in dealing with the question of how to explain this kind of double orientation. The third reason for focusing on houses of the Tanimbar Archipelago is that in many of them the main place of offering (tavu)
was on an attic beam just above the place where this beam was supported by an otherwise free-standing upright plank which was sometimes beautifully carved, assuming traits of a human body with outstretched arms. Whereas the traditional Tanimbar house is said to have become obsolete since the end of World War II (McKinnon 1987:5) and is known now mainly from descriptions and photographs and house models, some of the carved tavu planks have been preserved and are kept as precious pieces in various museum collections. They are famous as mysterious forms of artistic beauty; but what they represent is still an open question, the usual interpretation as ancestor figures being not fully satisfying if we consider all circumstances.

As we are going to see, on special occasions the tavu plank served as a spirit ladder leading down from the attic to a low bench at its foot, which was the seat of honour in the house. It is therefore a major challenge to see whether dealing with the tavu plank in our new perspective can lead to a better understanding of this enigmatic kind of figurative art. Before we can address this problem in the second half of this chapter we must, however, first take a close look at the physical aspect of a typical Tanimbaresen house, discuss the places of offering in its interior, and make an attempt to understand the evolution of the house type from earlier types such as have partly survived in other islands of the southern Moluccas. As the traditional Tanimbar house discussed here is no longer extant, we will naturally have to rely mainly on the older ethnographic sources.

The spatial order of a traditional house in Tanimbar

Some of the structural characteristics of a house from Tanimbar were already well represented in a work by the Scottish botanist Henry O. Forbes (1885:319). His drawing probably represents a house from Larat, one of the northern islands of the Tanimbar group where he had stayed eleven weeks in 1882 (see Fig. 150). The jetting floors at the gable sides and the hanging posts indicate that the house was a noble one built with a developed carpentry technique. Here we are more interested in the way in which the typical Tanimbar house of the nineteenth and early twentieth century had been formed, so we had better turn to a study of an old-style house which was built with a less refined technology. Petrus Drabbe, who lived as a missionary on Tanimbar for twenty years (1915-1935), describes such a house by referring to a model which a local architect of Awear on Fordata had made for him in 1926.

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1 For a house model from Tanimbar that also has jetting floors at the gable sides, see KIT 595-3 in the online database of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.