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## [Introduction to] Conceiving Spirits: Birth Rituals and Contested Identities among Lauje of Indonesia

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### Recommended Citation

Nourse, Jennifer W. *Conceiving Spirits: Birth Rituals and Contested Identities among Lauje of Indonesia*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999.

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# CONCEIVING SPIRITS

Birth Rituals and  
Contested Identities  
among Laujé  
of Indonesia

Smithsonian Institution Press

Washington and London

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# INTRODUCTION: IN THE BEGINNING

## Ethnography and Theory

"It's here!" shouted the breathless eight-year-old outside my window as the morning sun peeked over the mountain. "The baby came out. Father said I should fetch you as quickly as possible."

Fumbling through my precoffee haze I leaned out my bamboo window toward Saudara's daughter to hastily ask, "What is it? Boy or girl?"

"Girl. Father said to hurry."

"OK, I'm coming," my voice trailed off as I quickly hunted for my research tools, notepad, and pen. I turned to my husband, Eric, also an anthropologist, asking him to grab our camera. Not wanting to squander my first chance to witness the all important Laujé birth rituals, which my mentor, Siamae Sanji, had told me so much about, I frantically dug in my daypack for a baby gift. "Where did I put those cigarettes?" I muttered out loud to no one in particular.

Suddenly a voice from the front room interrupted my self-musing. "Who do you need cigarettes for?" I remembered that Sair, who was the son of Siamae Sanji, had decided to spend the night on our "living room" floor.

"Saudara's family," I told Sair. "Their baby has just arrived and I need a gift. I've also gotta go. I'll see you later," I announced, halfway out the house.

"Oh." I stopped in midstride. "I'll come get you at your house after the ritual for the baby is done. We can finish translating your father's tape this afternoon after everything with Saudara is finished."

Sair, his voice still husky from sleep, managed to collect his thoughts enough to reply, "I'll wait here. You'll be back in an hour. Saudara doesn't know much ritual. His ceremonies will be brief."

I didn't stop to question Sair, only minimally murmuring, "OK,

fine," as I followed Saudara's eldest daughter down the back path. "It's not fine, though," I fumed as I ran down the hill. "That Sair, he's such a snob. Sair thinks only his father has full ritual knowledge about how to perform lengthy birth rites and that only Siamae Sanji and his children can talk at length about birth spirits."

Siamae Sanji, I thought, may have spent the last six months telling me how much he knows about birth spirits and childbirth rites, but surely everyone in the whole mountain village knows about birth. After all, this is Saudara's seventh daughter. By now he has to know this stuff.

My internal dialogue ended abruptly as we arrived at Saudara's house, a small ramshackle lean-to on stilts. Eric and I climbed inside the narrow doorway. All six girls gathered around us as their father, Saudara, nestled the baby close to his chest. "Very good," I said, not knowing any Laujé equivalent to congratulations. I knew Saudara had desired a son to take care of him in old age. Another girl was a bit of a disappointment, but as he cooed and held her, his disappointment seemed, from my perspective, to dissipate. I hoped to cheer Saudara with my gift of clove cigarettes. With his free hand he gave both packs to the children, who, to my chagrin, lit up immediately.

"Hey," he said "don't smoke them all! I'm busy with your new little sister now." Mesili, the new mother, climbed up the stairs from the garden and found a place to sit in the crowded lean-to.

"It's time," said Saudara, "to prepare her first bath and wash the placenta. Here, you hold her." Saudara gingerly handed the newborn to its mother, Mesili, who rather stiffly grabbed the swaddled bundle, holding it far from her body, as if, it seemed to me, the baby would contaminate her. Meanwhile, Saudara warmed water for washing the babe and the placenta. When it was time he gently unwrapped the babe and scrubbed the blood from her extremities, dabbing her eyes and cooing to her as she squirmed. Saudara carefully avoided the dried umbilical blood he had already dotted on her forehead and cheeks when he had cut the umbilical cord before we arrived. Finished, Saudara patted the babe dry and tightly swaddled her in layers of blankets. He nestled her closely to his chest, asking his oldest daughter to light him a cigarette as he gazed adoringly, so it seemed to me, down at the newborn. He smiled and sang the child a lullaby.

Hmmm, I thought. No difference here as far as I can see between what Siamae Sanji said and what Saudara was doing; fathers nurture

and mothers neglect. This father may be sorry he didn't have a son, but he certainly seems to genuinely care for his daughter. His ritual actions are just as Siamae Sanji predicted. I asked the mother how she felt.

"Fine. Didn't you see me in the garden?"

"Yes, of course. I saw you working. What about the birth and labor?" I asked.

Mesili looked toward Saudara. Rather than the long, detailed narratives my friends in America had given of their experiences, Saudara preempted his wife and said matter of factly, "We were asleep and she woke up right before the cock crowed. The baby was out before sunrise. The placenta out at sunrise. That's when I sent my oldest up to your house. I'm so used to this I had the prayers for the umbilical cord uttered while she was at your house. The cord is wrapped up right there." Saudara pointed to the rafters. "Here," he said and handed the bundled baby to his wife who again rather awkwardly held her (see Figure 0.1). "I've got to clean this placenta before something bad happens."

Just as Siamae Sanji had told me, Saudara wiped all blood from the placenta. He patted the placenta dry (just as he had the baby), wrapped it in a banana leaf bundle, and placed it in a coconut shell cradle. He gently took the baby from its mother's arms and placed her in a cloth cradle—a stork's bundle hanging from the rafters. When finished Saudara looked at me as if embarrassed. "I'm going to hang this placenta [bundle] in the tree, but you shouldn't come. It's dangerous. Eric, he's a man, he can come."

Disappointed because I was unable to see the rest of the birth rites, I was simultaneously excited that gender played such a central role in this ritual and confirmed what Siamae Sanji had told me. Siamae Sanji had said that for the highland Laujé, the things of birth—placenta, blood, umbilicus, and fluids—were not merely substances, but homes for spiritual entities that, like persons, were gendered. If treated properly, nurtured by the father, they would aid the child's spirit. If neglected, however, as they inevitably were while the mother was giving birth, then the spirits could bring sickness and death. It was thus incumbent upon every father to propitiate the good placental spirit so it would protect the child from harm. Though I couldn't watch what Saudara did with the placenta, I knew I could rely on the pictures and meticulous notes Eric would take to tell me the rest of the story.

That afternoon when I read Eric's notes I was very pleased. The results were just as I had expected. Despite Sair's disparaging remarks



Figure 0.1. Mesili holding her newborn child

about Saudara's ritual knowledge, the ritual Saudara performed was almost exactly as Siamae Sanji said it should be. Moreover, what Saudara said about the ritual echoed, if in a more truncated form, what I was learning from Siamae Sanji. I took this as proof that one articulate, insightful informant's interpretation of the ritual—Siamae Sanji's—could represent everyone's understanding of what the ritual meant.

My theoretical assumptions at that time were loosely based upon Émile Durkheim's notion of a "collective representation."<sup>1</sup> I had been taught in the early eighties that a ritual like this one was a crystallization of Laujé thought. As one of my professors put it, with an ironic smile, "If two people say it, it's a collective representation." His intended joke was meant to spoof the anthropological tendency to weed out idiosyncrasies by using as few informants as possible, but it also spoke to a general truth in anthropological fieldwork: Using just a few informants and glossing over their differences allows the anthropologist to focus on collective ideas and draw general conclusions about what a whole culture thinks.<sup>2</sup> Following this and more complex lessons, I saw my task during fieldwork in Indonesia as an effort to collect and learn from the most knowledgeable members of the Laujé community, like Siamae Sanji, and to see how their ideas represented those of others, like Saudara, unable to articulate as effectively. From my fieldwork interviews I could rely on others to fill in the blanks left by key informants and then assemble an approximation of collective thought—the mind behind the external object—about the ritual's meaning. As such, then, I saw fieldwork as a kind of quest, an attempt to solve the mysteries of others' meanings, by finding the one or two people who could unlock the ultimate secret that would explain Laujé thought.

Very early on in fieldwork I was doubly sure I had followed my professors' lessons and unlocked the mysteries of highland Laujé life, because I had found a similarly articulate leader, an aristocrat in the lowland "court" of Dusunan. This other Laujé man, named Sumpitan,<sup>3</sup> explained, like Siamae Sanji, how central the secrets of the birth spirits called *umputé* were to his community of lowland Laujé.<sup>4</sup> Now, through what these two men told me, usually without my prompting them, I assumed I had come to understand how each group of Laujé, lowland aristocrats and highland commoners, constructed their own unique, but collective and systematic notions of self, world, and spirit

in the two separate communities. Each man told me his own mystical, sometimes secret, stories about birth spirits that nurture fetuses in the womb, follow their soul-twins to heaven, and plague those soul-twins when neglected. They each spoke of good spirits and bad, healing and pestilent, and local and distant spirits.

Their ways of dividing and symbolizing spirits, while different from each other, nevertheless resonated with some of my training as a symbolic, structural anthropologist. Their categorized spirits also echoed what anthropologists of the late seventies and early eighties, studying other parts of Indonesia, had written following symbolic and structural theories.<sup>5</sup> Structuralism presumed that people think and collectively represent their world in categories that oppose one another. For instance good, white, and male may be opposed to bad, black, and female. The goal of a structuralist was to find what ideas or things were opposed in a culture, thereby enabling the theorist to understand the underlying logic of "native" thought. Symbolic anthropology built on this idea by presuming each "cultural system" used core, dominant, or key symbols that congealed thought about the mysteries of life.<sup>6</sup> Symbols, then, if decoded properly, were the master tropes through which the anthropologist sought to understand a particular "culture." These tropes explained the way locals understood the world. Structuralism aided in seeing how people classified those perceptions into neatly opposed categories.

What was exciting about my early fieldwork was that it so perfectly coincided with my structuralist/symbolic training and the other research conducted throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Not only were Sumpitan's and Siamae Sanji's views in and of themselves structured around core birth symbols, but they also formed perfect symbolic oppositions in ways that paralleled the opposition between lowlands and highlands, aristocrats and commoners. I was thrilled to find, so early in my fieldwork, articulate informants who provided the key to understanding the Laujé world in structural and symbolic terms. At the time I did not realize how wrong I was to presume, as many structural and symbolic theorists did, that others in each of their respective communities generally agreed with Siamae Sanji's and Sumpitan's structuralist interpretation of the symbolism of birth spirits.

Sadly, it was only through their deaths in 1985, each within a month of the other, that I came to understand how mistaken I was to have believed that their voices represented the most complete and en-



compassing explanations of the range of meanings the Laujé attributed to birth spirits. After these two men died, a number of people who had been reticent, women like Siinai Alasan, as well as men like the Haji, began to reveal to me their own versions of how and why these birth spirits nurture or plague humans. Some people, especially Siamae Balitangan, argued that spirits were not gendered or person-like. The spirit world was vast, mysterious, and nebulous. To interpret spirits otherwise was to misrepresent them. Besides revealing a sometimes confusing, but always intriguing assortment of ways to view the birth spirits, these people exposed my mistake of relying too strongly on Sumpitan and Siamae Sanji to speak for an entire culture.

I realized that it had been Laujé men who had first provided me with an articulate and all-encompassing exegesis about the “secrets” of birth spirits. Even though this philosophy did focus on things feminine—wombs, fetuses, placentas, and fluids—the way I first came to understand the Laujé philosophical universe was biased by the men who spoke about gender and birth spirits from their own perspectives. Once I understood that women as well as men, lower- as well as upper-class people had alternative perspectives, I found I could juxtapose their stories and interpretations to present on the one hand, a more fragmented picture, but on the other hand a more general picture of how Laujé of a particular class, religion, or gender looked at the world.

It is these juxtaposed stories and patterns of interpretations about birth spirits, overheard and elicited among mountain and lowland Laujé of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, during my 1984–86 fieldwork,<sup>7</sup> that form the heart of this book (see Figure 0.2). The Laujé I studied live on the coast and in the mountains overlooking the Tomini Bay.<sup>8</sup> These Laujé communities are divided among seven riverine systems of which Tinombo is the largest. Along the Tinombo River and its branches live about 6,000 Laujé, almost half of whom reside in coastal communities. One coastal community, Dusunan, was at one time the royal court for the Laujé polity. Even today, its autochthonous leader, the *olongian*, continues to oversee important community rituals that are a mixture of Islamic and “animist” beliefs. Sumpitan claims this leader and all elite Laujé are devoutly Islamic and distinct from their highland, animist subjects. Highlanders such as Siamae Sanji, however, make broad claims to a longstanding Muslim heritage, and he and others are generally dismissive of lowlanders’ pretensions to political sovereignty. Instead, men such as Siamae Sanji recognize, indeed em-

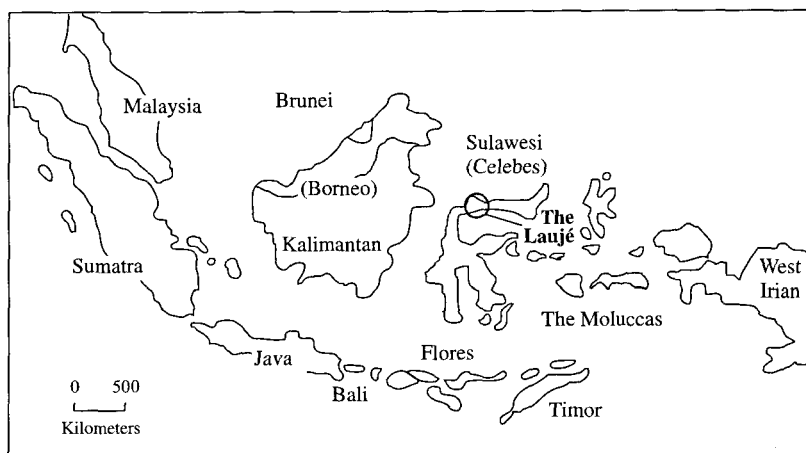


Figure 0.2. The Indonesian archipelago

phasize, highland *and* lowland incorporation as lowly subjects into foreign kingdoms, colonies, and states. Laujé from a number of “subject positions,” therefore, articulate vastly divergent and constructed perspectives of their history and identity. The way these perspectives are revealed through contradictory and overlapping stories about birth spirits form the subject of this book.

By characterizing Laujé “subject positions” and by juxtaposing fragmentary stories, I am writing about the Laujé from a particular theoretical perspective, one that is sometimes labeled postmodernist. I learned about this set of perspectives when I returned from the field in 1986. At that time I thought this cutting-edge theory was, as it claimed, a radical break<sup>9</sup> from classic anthropology and could best explain various Laujé’s representations of *umputé*. Now I realize that the best, most useful, conclusions of anthropology’s postmodern movement deal with enduring ethnological questions. Differences between classic and new theory are more arbitrary than real. My anthropological training actually gave me the tools to analyze data in subtle and complex ways, but I was so enamored of this new theory’s claims against older theory that I failed to recognize the virtues of my solid training. In hindsight I also recognize the limitations of postmodernism, especially if it ignores questions as old as anthropology and fieldwork itself. When I returned from the field, however, postmod-

ernism offered fresh and exciting insights into the limitations of symbolic and structural approaches. I thus embraced it with open arms.

My shift toward the postmodern approach began when I tried to “write up” my Laujé experiences. I could not “get on top of the data” as one professor said I should, because I could not find one person to give me the skeleton key to cultural truth, the answer to what the Laujé thought rituals meant. I could not reconcile the ordered, symbolic data I had collected in conversations from Sumpitan and Siamae Sanji with the varied interpretations given me after Sumpitan and Siamae Sanji died. I took my problem of making sense of “the Laujé” as a problem with the theory I had been using, a problem with my fieldwork methods steeped in the search for key informants who could offer collective representations. I knew it was wrong to assume (as I had in the birth scenario above) that one person’s actions corroborated another’s interpretations, and that both could provide the sound bites and images from which I could construct a picture of Laujé thought. But until I learned about postmodern theory, I did not know any other way to frame a narrative without losing its essential coherence.

Similar problems plagued scholars in other fields. In literary criticism, postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984) and Bakhtin (1981) taught that even novels obviously authored by a single person comprised, in fact, an essential multivocality. Novels were “dialogic”—they spawned conflicting interpretations, offered conflicting exegeses or explanations. Scholars such as Jameson (1984) and Rorty (1979)<sup>10</sup> questioned whether the scholarly tendency to create ordered systems and unifying categories describing natural patterns were real or merely constructed representations of reality. Such questions began to percolate into anthropologists’ conversations. Two such anthropologists, George Marcus and Michael Fischer, along with James Clifford, a pioneer in cultural studies of anthropology as a literature, took this “corridor talk” and made it theoretically central to anthropology by publishing two books interweaving postmodern ideas into anthropological concerns about culture and ethnographic writing. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* was published by Marcus and Fischer in 1986 and *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Writing Ethnography*, an edited volume with essays by Tyler, Clifford, Pratt, Rosaldo, and others, was published in 1986 by Clifford and Marcus. Together the two books had a profound impact on my work and that of others trying to rec-

oncile the concept of a collective culture with the chaos of their field research.

One central theme was that culture was not whole, or static. Culture was contested and constantly created by a variety of individuals. As Clifford said in his own 1997 summary of his 1986 book: "I worried about culture's propensity to assert holism and aesthetic form, its tendency to privilege value, hierarchy and historical continuity in notions of common 'life.' I argued that these inclinations neglected, and at times actively repressed, many impure, unruly processes of collective invention and survival" (1997:2). Clifford as well as other postmodernists critiqued symbolic and structural anthropology for its preoccupation with the perfectly coherent depictions of culture, because such "systemic" views ignored the reality of individual voices, contest, difference, and chaos. "If 'culture' is not an object to be described," said Clifford, "neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted" (1986:19).

Though authors in the Clifford and Marcus, and Marcus and Fischer volumes criticized symbolism and structuralism for highlighting coherence, most of their criticisms focused on older, "classic anthropological texts." Marcus and Fischer, for instance, suggested that anthropologists should expose hidden colonialist agendas<sup>11</sup> of earlier anthropological texts to point out their egregiously racist mistakes, but also to turn those mistakes into more positive goals for an activist discipline. Marcus and Fischer, then, wanted to "repatriate anthropology as a cultural critique," to work multiple voices into their texts or, at least, multiple points of view, which reflect the actual research process and constructive task of writing ethnography" (1986:164). Their point was that classic anthropology avoided the contests between people, the resistance to authority, the general chaos of life because classic anthropology emphasized order, structure, and consensus.

Postmodern anthropology, then, saw itself in opposition to classic anthropologists such as Malinowski (1929), Evans-Pritchard (1940), Mead (1928), Firth (1936), and Benedict (1932; 1934) whom they criticized as writer/agents erasing the messiness of life in the field, denying individuals a major role in creating diverse and contested perspectives of the world. These classic anthropologists, said postmodern critics, believed they alone could explain "native" life, because they alone could give objective, scientific explanations of "natives'" odd customs and practices (Clifford and Marcus 1986:23).

Tyler claimed that the reason the early anthropologist's voice drowned out the locals was because most anthropologists used the authoritative tone of science:

The urge to conform to the canons of scientific rhetoric has made the easy realism of natural history the dominant mode of ethnographic prose, but it has been an illusory realism, promoting, on the one hand, the absurdity of "describing" nonentities such as "culture" or "society" as if they were fully observable, though somewhat ungainly, bugs, and, on the other hand, the equally ridiculous behavioral pretense of "describing" repetitive patterns of action in isolation from the discourse that actors use in constituting and situating their action. (1986a:131)

Pratt too believed the older ethnographies were too objective, erasing the subjective from the ethnography. Pratt wondered how anthropologists, who were "such interesting people doing such interesting things [could] produce such dull books" (Pratt 1986:33). She concluded that contemporary anthropologists should include their own thoughts, subjective desires, and motivations in ethnographies so that the fragmentary dialogues of fieldwork could be more faithfully evoked. By making anthropologists less authoritative, Pratt believed that local interlocutors, in all their diversity, could finally have their say.

An implicit, often explicit theme in such critiques of older ethnographies was that everyone's interpretations, the anthropologists' and the locals', were subjective and thus not reflections of the whole truth. They were merely "partial truths" (Clifford 1986). Clifford's phrase "partial truth" subverted "classic" assumptions that empirical data was collected objectively, that there was an observable reality that could be summarized in systemic and structural terms. In making such claims about the constructed quality of knowledge, Clifford implied that postmodern approaches were superior to those of earlier anthropologists because they erased bias and false unity, allowing locals to speak for themselves.

I certainly agreed with Clifford, Tyler, Pratt, Marcus, and Fischer when I rushed to adopt their theories and drop my own structural symbolic assumptions. Now, however, I realize that some postmodern assumptions may have been too extreme. In their effort to let other voices speak, to knock the anthropologist off his or her authoritative pedestal, postmodernists unwittingly emphasized a contrived equality or multivocality. For instance, Tyler, borrowing his dialogic theory

from the Russian theorist Bakhtin, claimed ethnographies should be filled only with dialogues. By erasing the anthropologist from the text, Tyler avoided the troublesome problem of an anthropologist deciphering “native” motivations and allowed the speakers to speak for themselves. Tyler claimed good ethnographic writing is: “a denial of the metaphor of surface vs. depth in which our deciphering ‘penetrates’ the hymenal surface of the text fathoming its underlying real meaning and reveling in the revelations of orgasmic mystery” (1986b:25). Tyler confidently eradicated all anthropological explanations from his work, rejecting “writing which forms a picture of reality . . . in favor of a writing that ‘evokes’ or ‘calls to mind,’ not by completion and similarity but by suggestion and difference. The function of the text is not to depict or reveal within itself what it says. The text is ‘seen through’” (ibid.:45).

Though Tyler’s approach seemed to sidestep the problems of anthropological, colonialist bias and collective conclusions about culture, it created confusion in many readers’ minds. Part of the problem was that Tyler’s “dialogic” approach did not originate in anthropological circles, but in literary criticism where the readers understood the same subtle linguistic and cultural cues as the speaker. Ethnographic readers, however, have different needs. Readers of ethnographies not only desire, but require some sort of explanation. The cross-cultural reader needs to be told, for instance, what particular cultural nuances mean, what the social position of the speaker is, and what the political and historical contexts are that frame the speech act. Ethnographic readers have no embedded references to the linguistic and visual cues that signal those meanings within their own (and studied) languages. Ethnographic readers are thus completely dependent upon the anthropologist to act as cultural broker and translator.

Without this analytical “guidance,” ethnographic readers can make even more egregiously hegemonic and ethnocentric assumptions than a biased anthropologist might make.<sup>12</sup> When, for instance, Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa, Story of a !Kung Woman* (1981) was selected as one of the books to be taught in a freshman core course at my university, some of the humanities professors complained that Shostak’s cultural analysis of *Nisa* intruded on *Nisa*’s own words. Thus they taught *Nisa* by deleting Marjorie Shostak’s commentary. After the course was over I was appalled to hear from students that they and the professors had deduced from their readings that “All !Kung women and probably all

African women are promiscuous,” “The !Kung have no family values,” and “Sexual promiscuity always leads to violence.” Even when readers did not draw such dreadful conclusions, in almost every other case, readers assumed Nisa represented all of !Kung culture. Though Shostak’s representation of !Kung culture may be, as her critics sometimes note, ahistorical, circumscribed, and overly idealized, Shostak at least provides a context for Nisa’s idiosyncrasies within a broader pattern of !Kung culture (Pratt 1986:43; Behar 1995:79; Vail and White 1991). Certainly Shostak’s portrayal is more sensitive and subtle than the dangerous assumptions that the educated core-course readers made on their own. If the core-course reading of Nisa is any indication of how “raw” dialogue is interpreted, the anthropologist’s voice is not only better than nothing, it is absolutely necessary for a nuanced understanding of an ethnographic text. In retrospect, then, I can only conclude that Tyler’s approach of avoiding anthropological commentary, which he borrows too naively from another discipline, undermines his own goal: to fairly represent the speaker’s words.

To avoid similar theoretical mistakes, I think it imperative to be aware of anthropologists’ unique circumstances as cultural brokers. Moreover, it is best not to reject the answers past anthropologists have proffered in response to questions of how to represent the native voice, how to analyze the field experience in nonintrusive and fair ways. Granted, until recently many anthropologists wrote their ethnographies in a way that glossed over the individuals they interviewed, making those individuals anonymous, using their words as the raw material from which to construct “culture” or “thought.” But anthropologists are a diverse group. Despite “new theorists”’ claims otherwise, anthropology’s focus on the individual in the life-history ethnographies of Radin (1926), Parsons (1936), T. Kroeber (1961), Sapir (1938), Griaule (1948), Briggs (1970), and Casagrande (1960) and its attempt to integrate subjective perspectives and context in ethnographies by Geertz (1968 and 1976), E. Turner (1992), Sapir (1924), and Bohannan (1954) have been at the heart of the discipline. And even some of the most egregious emphasize of culture as a collective representation, Benedict (1934) and Mead (1928), have considered individuals and how to present those individuals in a non-ethnocentric manner.

The point is that the goals and aims of classic anthropology and postmodern anthropology, while not always accomplished, have been

roughly the same. The dividing line between the two is less defined than postmodernism portrays it. Both perspectives want to present local interlocutors in as fair and unbiased a manner as possible. How to do this, though, is not as simple as it would seem. Some of the same dilemmas facing postmodernists about the complexity of representing local voices were noted by Edward Sapir back in 1938 in an article called "Two Crows Denies It." Sapir highlighted the basic dilemma in anthropology then and now. "Respectable anthropology," on one hand, believes it must "assay source material" to find cultural patterns and discern "truth from error." Otherwise it believes it "passes the buck to the reader," making the reader do the job the anthropologist should do. On the other hand, Sapir points out that anthropologists "ahead of their time" recognize that in any society humans give themselves the "privilege of differing from one another." The dilemma that Sapir noted in 1938 is the same one highlighted in the cutting edge theory of the 1980s and 1990s: Does the reader draw conclusions from the material or does the authoritative voice draw those conclusions for the reader?

In a similarly prescient manner Victor Turner's work demonstrated the postmodernist point: It is through personal, subjective interactions between anthropologist and informant that conclusions are drawn. In "Muchona the Hornet, Interpreter of Religion" (1967), Turner describes Muchona, an eloquent philosopher and healer, and the various personas he undertakes to deal with his outsider status in Ndembu land. In this poignant article, Turner explains that he chose Muchona, like many other anthropologists chose their informants (Shostak 1981; Behar 1993; Crapanzano 1980) because Muchona was articulate and able to philosophize about his own culture from the margins. Despite Muchona's outsider status, Turner finds Muchona's philosophical interpretations the ideal key to an understanding of Ndembu ritual. Turner emphasizes, however, that Muchona's view is not the only one. Others in the community have competing voices. Muchona's views are expressed in, and perhaps constructed during, conversations with Turner.

Like postmodernists, Turner's classic study of society depended upon dialogues with an individual who was an articulate outsider. Turner's training in the Manchester school emphasized rebellion and dissension just as postmodernists emphasized the same thing thirty years later.<sup>13</sup> Members of the Manchester school recognized that indi-



viduals act as agents to construct their own views of themselves and their world, which may be at odds with mainstream beliefs, an idea that coincides with some postmodernists'.<sup>14</sup> And most important, like the postmodernists, Turner recognizes his friend Muchona as an equal. Muchona's and Turner's ideas develop in reaction to each other through dialogues (a process Turner calls reflexivity). Muchona does not merely interpret and Turner does not merely provide questions. Their views and perspectives are intimately intertwined. Turner's example directly and indirectly inspired a whole subdiscipline of anthropology, often called reflexivity (Myerhoff 1978; Karp and Kendall 1982; Crapanzano 1980; Lacoste-Dujardin 1977; Shostak 1981), which in many respects resembles the postmodern quest.

Fabian explicitly defined the reflexive method in 1971 and later in 1983. "It is imperative for anthropology to recognize the subjects of research as equal" (he called the process coevalness). Rather than placing the anthropologists' view above the "natives'," rather than dividing the "West from the Rest" or the rational/logical beings from the metaphoric/symbolic ones, Fabian maintained that the "project of dismantling anthropology's intellectual imperialism must begin with alternatives to positivist conceptions of ethnography. . . . I want language and communication to be understood as a kind of praxis in which the Knower cannot claim ascendancy over the Known" (Fabian 1971). Karp and Kendall's "Reflexivity in Fieldwork" article (1982) takes Fabian's notion one step further, arguing that equality and interaction with locals goes "beyond just the notion that 'natives' construct reality along with the anthropologist" (254): "The interpretive procedures through which natives render their experiences intelligible are just that, interpretive procedures. They no more provide actors with true statements about the internal states of others than they provide anthropologists with true pictures of 'what the natives really think'" (1982:266).

Thus, prior to the postmodern movement, especially in the reflexive school, but also in other arenas, anthropologists had been trying to resolve the dilemma between relying solely on what people say they think and conveying in a nonintrusive, nonimperialist way what the anthropologist thinks. There has always been a recognition, at least in some anthropological corners, that partial truths, approximations of "native" thought, are all that sensitive anthropologists can hope to reveal to Western-educated audiences unfamiliar with the context

evoked in local dialogues. The said is never the real. Moreover, there has always been a recognition, in some circles, that contest, rebellion, and dissension are the stuff of life in other communities. Anthropologists can convey that contest and dissension through their unique role as cultural brokers.

When in the past anthropologists have talked about "culture" in rather holistic terms, it has often been to speak about the constructed quality of "culture," not, as postmodernists claim, about its "static" quality. For instance, Roy Wagner, one of my professors, wrote *The Invention of Culture* in 1975. His ideas presaged postmodernists' thinking, discussing the processes through which people constantly create and change their ideas about the world. Three of my other professors, David Sapir and Chris Crocker in *The Social Use of Metaphor* (1977), and Victor Turner in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974), discussed the complex and contradictory ways in which metaphor and symbols could be used instrumentally by individuals or social groups. In other words, my own professors as well as other prominent anthropologists were not as guilty of collective-static structural sins as I had presumed when I jumped onto the postmodern bandwagon.

In dredging up past approaches to ethnographic issues I am not merely using this as an opportunity to enhance my own professors' reputations, nor merely to show that classic goals (in the hands of thoughtful analysts) are similar to those embraced by the postmodern critique. Nor am I merely urging postmodernists to recognize their debt to theoretical ancestors. I hope to also demonstrate that in their attempt to sever ties to historic theories and claim their own innovations, the postmodernists have at best drawn the same conclusions as older theorists, sometimes with less profound insights, and at worst have ignored the insights past anthropologists have gained when analyzing the same set of issues. As a result, postmodern claims have often been self-defeating and contradictory. For instance, in their introduction to *Writing Culture*, Clifford and Marcus characterize reflexive methodology as both "sophisticated and naive" (1986:14). They criticize this classic approach because it merely "stages dialogues" and merely narrates interpersonal confrontations. They contrast reflexivity with Tyler's dialogic approach, saying Tyler goes "well beyond the more or less artful presentation of 'actual' encounters" (ibid.:14-15), by providing actual, not artfully constructed, dialogues. As I said earlier, however, by advocating dialogue over analysis, postmodernists

make the local voice even more obscure than necessary, defeating their own goal of presenting the untainted local voice. Moreover, when the dialogic approach denies anthropologists a role as analysts, it is ultimately at odds with Marcus and Fischer's call to repatriate anthropology as critique. One cannot use anthropology as critique if one silences the anthropologist.

This contradiction I have noted in the first postmodernists' critiques of anthropology had been realized ten years later by one author, Clifford. In looking back at his earlier work, Clifford recently critiqued his (and Tyler's) naïveté: "My own attempt to multiply the hands and discourses involved in 'writing culture' aims *not to assert a naive democracy of plural authorship* [my italics], but to loosen at least somewhat the monological control of the executive writer/anthropologist and to open up for discussion ethnography's hierarchy and negotiation of discourse in power-charged unequal situations" (1997:23). Clifford now recognizes that his own and others' postmodern approach to the anthropological task was naive.

Despite Clifford's desire to bring postmodern literary criticism in line with the anthropological task, given past problems in joining the two theoretical perspectives, I think it is best to resolve the dilemma in another way. Classic anthropological questions and answers, as they relate to the postmodern critique, must be repatriated into contemporary anthropological theory. The point Clifford made above, in the nineties, as well as points Sapir made in the thirties; Turner in the fifties through the eighties; and Fabian, Wagner, Sapir, Crocker, and Karp in the seventies and eighties are that the ethnographic writer must always make clear how various perspectives differ and how the anthropologists' desire to explain that variety involves negotiation, interpretation, and power differentials. Past anthropologists have dealt with these issues by making the anthropologists' voices equal to the locals', not as Tyler advocates in dialogics (1986a, 1986b, 1992), by denying the anthropologist any voice at all.

I believe equal, though not naively idealized, time for the anthropologists' perspective is the only way the discipline can move forward if it wants, as Clifford *now* says, to avoid asserting a "naive democracy of plural authors" and if it wants, as Marcus and Fischer (1986) say, to critique our own society. Rather than presuming that the locals' perspective is more "real" and more unbiased than the anthropologists' (Obeyesekere 1990), it might be more fruitful to see both in

equal terms: Both the anthropologists' and the locals' views are constructed and biased.<sup>15</sup> To allow for the constructed quality of both voices, the ethnographer must outline how and why she chooses some voices over others and how and why others in the community listen to particular voices. Karp and Kendall allude to such a method in their reflexivity and fieldwork article:

Actors' constructions of their own behaviors are not irrelevant data, no matter how curious or beside the point they may seem. Even if they are not *true reflections of interior states*, or full explanations of action, they have to be examined critically. This is so because there is always the chance that other actors will take such reports at face value and act upon them. "Untrue" interpretations may become true by virtue of their consequences. (1982:265)

By observing and recording who reacts to whom in a community, the anthropologist can document what locals regard as important and thus avoid naive assumptions that all utterances deserve an equal hearing. Individual agents, particular leaders, particular informants can have a profound impact on the way local ideas are accepted or rejected. In short, some voices, some informants' interpretations are more important than others. Some people speak more strongly, compellingly, than others. They are the agents of social and political change. Words, rituals, exegeses, then, are not merely commentary after the fact. They are the stuff of political and religious action. The words of theorists like Turner, Sapir, Clifford, or Marcus have compelled some anthropologists to change the way they write and talk about culture, agency, and society. Likewise, the words of Laujé like Sumpitan and Siamae Sanji, have compelled their consociates and descendants to talk about birth spirits and to carry out birth rituals in particular ways. These people acted not only as self-interested agents, but also as visionaries creating and describing key cultural notions that resonated with others' ideas of how the world did or did not work as a system. They were not just creating their view of the world from "scratch." These informants were compelling because they went beyond their own self-interests to address a self-less, moral vision that touched some fundamental (dare I say cultural) chord. There were basic cultural ingredients, the fundamental building blocks, which they used to erect their own visionary structures. It is imperative that the anthropologist document these fundamental features for the reader.

In this Laujé case, Sumpitan and Siamae Sanji erected visionary structures of *umputé*, which they divided into binary opposites (*umputé* was either white or black, male or female, native or foreign). These men expressed their visions structurally not just because that particular approach fit the questions I asked them, nor only because I was predisposed (through graduate training) to hear their answers in structural and symbolic terms. Seeing the world through a categorically opposed lens *also* resonated with and appealed to perceptions of the world they and others in the community already shared. As Errington (1989) notes, it is no accident that structuralism was first discovered in island Southeast Asia (by van Wouden in 1935). The profusion of binary oppositions, which often line up in two clear columns in these Austronesian societies, is ineluctable (see Fox 1980; Traube 1986; Forth 1981; Hicks 1972, 1973; Kuipers 1990; Hoskins 1988a).<sup>16</sup> Thus, Sumpitan and Siamae Sanji created their own notions of the world through the lens of their own particular experiences, but the way they connected those experiences was circumscribed by shared notions that the world is structurally ordered. Granted, I may have noticed their structural and symbolic answers more than others because I was trained in structuralism and symbolism, but these ideas were floating around the community and shared in repeated conversations when I was a mere listener, not a solicitor of information.

In making claims that Laujé share notions about structure, I am not returning to a modernist or a structuralist theoretical model, nor am I claiming that the world is essentially structured in binary categories. I presume that there are cultural themes floating around in any community, which in the case of the Laujé (and others throughout Austronesia) happen to be structured. In conversations, some people highlight these cultural themes while others leave them dormant. Individuals use the bits and pieces, the fragments of these ideas, to construct their own views of the world, their own truths. These constructed truths are not random, nor can they be created into an infinite array of possibilities. These "truths" are limited by the ideas people have shared with each other for generations. These ideas change and vary from person to person. Some people build a bigger, more coherent collective structure than do others. Some people tie the "culture" together into a coherent theme, while others play around with its loose ends, its fragments. Some people believe what others say about these themes, while more cynical others focus on the self-interested quality

of agents' political agendas and challenge the moral selflessness of the visionary's statements.

The bottom line here, at least theoretically, is that the anthropologist must explain to the reader why one person's, one agent's, construction of reality is more important than another's. Why, for instance, were Sumpitan's and Siamae Sanji's perspectives more highly regarded in the community than Siamae Balitangan's? The simple answer is that these men said something that resonated with shared notions in the community, while the more complex answer has to be explained in the ethnographic context. To provide the simple and the complex answers, the anthropologist must move beyond an unreflective attempt to make all voices equal. Readers have to recognize the contests, the chaos, and the dissension in a community, but also whose voice counts more. We can move beyond Clifford's 1986 claim that all perspectives are partial truths and Tyler's 1986 assumption that the anthropologist should not analyze what she observes for fear of imposing her own cultural perspective on another. Anthropologists can and should present their own analytical interpretations (indeed, as Wolf (1992) says, it is our responsibility to do so) as long as we avoid claiming ours is the final, the only, and the most objective truth. We can assume that some informants, some narrators, speak not only as self-interested agents, but as persuasive cultural spokespersons whose ideas represent, at least in some cases, a collective vision of what the world should or should not be like. In other cases and at other times, there may be no visionary spokesperson, only marginal analysts like Nisa, Muchona the Hornet, or Siamae Balitangan. The reader, however, needs the anthropologist to listen to various people's fragmentary views and tell us how they fit. Whose voice is really central, whose is marginal? We must know if people with similar backgrounds have similar responses to events and experiences. If so, these patterns deserve to be noted too.

In what follows, I show that despite the conflicting, idiosyncratic quality of individual interpreters' views, there are consistent patterns in the ways groups of people talk about birth spirits they call *umputé*, and there are certain eloquent figures whose visions stimulate others to think about *umputé* and act upon those thoughts in similar ways. On one hand, these ideas are enduring, in that many people speak of *umputé* as though it is divided into pairs, into structural oppositions. On the other hand, not all people speak this way. But even when

people do not speak structurally, they do tend to speak as others like them do, their words shaped by political, economic, and religious events that similarly affect marginal people throughout Indonesia. Thus their ideas about *umputé* are intimately intertwined with their perceptions of themselves and others in local and global contexts.

As elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago, many Laujé perceive themselves to be only marginal citizens of the Indonesian state and only partially integrated into the hierarchy of Islam as a world religion.<sup>17</sup> These persistently fluid notions of marginality, in turn, can modulate how people come to understand their social, political, and spiritual worlds. If a particularly eloquent person like Sumpitan or Sia-mae Sanji can describe these factors in such a way (usually moralistic) as to strike a chord in people's hearts and minds, then the speaker's words are more representative, more collective, and thus more ascendant than others'.

In sum, then, in this book I take a common theme stressed in books about marginal peoples in Indonesia and I highlight the varieties these themes take when individual Laujé creatively situate themselves vis-à-vis the state or global religion. I presume that locals actively create and reconstitute their own political, religious, and economic identity, not as passive victims of state intervention nor as one unified cultural group, but as assertive thinkers, as agents. Some people create their visions of the world not only according to their interests narrowly defined and clearly perceived, but also according to more altruistic, broadly shared notions of what counts as morality and inequity. It is these people's visions, and their voices, that deserve more attention. At the same time, though, it should never be assumed that the eloquent orators speak for everyone. Contest, chaos, and dissension do exist. Some people even view the world through partial, fragmentary perspectives. In the end, though, and this is the crucial point, whether people are systematic, fragmentary, or resistant to analysis matters less than that all the people with whom I spoke during the 1984–86 period, all of whom claimed to be Laujé, shared an assumption that *umputé* was *the* central concept defining all “Laujé.” In this book I delineate the subtle nuances of these many definitions of *umputé*.

In the first chapter I introduce individual people who have their own perspectives of *umputé*, and the way I came to know them. I also discuss my own romantic quest to find an isolated field site and the choices that led me to eventually conduct research in two places, one

more remote, and the other at the center of Laujé ritual life. More important than the place, though, are the people who explained it to me. I describe how I came to understand the two areas, the lowland village of Dusunan and the highland village of Taipaobal, through the eyes of my two key informants, Sumpitan and Siamae Sanji.<sup>18</sup> In Chapter 2 I go into greater detail outlining Sumpitan's and Siamae Sanji's persuasive arguments about history and the impact the perceptions had on how each man talked about birth spirits. Sumpitan divided historical and contemporary life into good and bad, Laujé, and all other ethnic groups (whom he called foreigners). In later chapters we will see how he also divided the world of birth spirits into good and bad, Laujé, and foreign. Using a different perspective of history, but similarly structured logic, Siamae Sanji divided the social and historical world into those who maintained connections to the past, males, and those who neglected connections, females. Siamae Sanji's historical divisions between good males and bad females had a direct impact on the way he defined birth spirits in rituals, which are the subject of Chapter 3. Here we learn how Siamae Sanji defined umputé in rituals, pregnancy, and birth. Siamae Sanji delineated the good, white spirits of the placenta, which are like the fathers who nurture them, and he juxtaposed these good spirits with the black spirits of childbirth blood that are like the mothers who neglect children while working. We see how similar, yet idiosyncratic, Siamae Sanji's views are to structuralist writings on Eastern Indonesia and anthropology in general. In Chapter 4 we turn to Sumpitan's ritual divisions of spirits, which are reminiscent of Siamae Sanji's divisions. In Sumpitan's household-curing rites he divided various umputé spirits into good and bad in the same way as he divided social history. Good spirits are like the good Laujé, bad spirits like the bad immigrants (who he called foreigners). Chapter 5 provides Sumpitan's visions of the communitywide rite for umputé spirits, the *momasoro* of 1985. We see how Sumpitan choreographed the rite so that his antiimmigrant, pro-Laujé message prevailed. He delineated bad umputé spirits bringing red and black sicknesses from non-Laujé territories, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, good umputé spirits bringing human and plant fertility from Laujé areas. In the ritual, Sumpitan choreographed it so that the bad foreign spirits were invited in for a week, given enough offerings so they would not bother the Laujé for a whole year, and then cast out to sea in boats. By con-



trast, the good ( i.e., Laujé) spirits were retained at the “center” of the Laujé universe at the ritual leader’s, the onlongian’s, house.

Sadly, it was before the next rite that Sumpitan, and coincidentally Siamae Sanji, died. Chapter 6 describes what happens to the momasoro of 1986 without Sumpitan’s masterful vision. Here the interpretations of the Haji and the onlongian’s wife, who are elite elaborators of umputé’s message, prevailed, but somehow their visions were not as persuasive as Sumpitan’s. They advocated bringing together the spirits Sumpitan had divided, but few people in the community listened to this message as they had to Sumpitan’s. Chapter 7 analyzes commoners’, mediums’, and *sando*’s interpretations of umputé spirits in the momasoro of 1985. It especially focuses on the perspectives of people like Siamae Balitangan and Siinai Alasan, who “refused” to interpret the spirit world in terms of the social world. It concludes that commoners and female mediums are the groups who most often take this perspective, while elites tend to elaborate upon umputé by dividing it into parts, by metaphorizing it, and by relating its parts to the social world. Chapter 8 summarizes everyone’s perspectives and discusses how these differences among interpreters advance anthropological study of ritual and symbolization. It reminds us that thorough ethnographies should always allow locals to speak for themselves and the anthropologist to comment on whose voice is more important and whose voice, if any, reflects general patterns and trends.