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7/3/94  
WORKSHOP IN POLITICAL THEORY  
AND POLICY ANALYSIS  
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**HANGING THE OPO-OPO: CULTURAL POLITICS AND COMMON PROPERTY  
IN SANIGHE TALAUD, INDONESIA**

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**Paper to be presented at the Meetings of the International Association for the Study of  
Common Property, 5-8 June 1996, panel on "The State, Markets, and Local Property."  
in Southeast Asia, University of California, Berkeley.**

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The theory of collective action, developed partially in response to Hardin's myopic views on human nature and his bleak estimate of individual and societal capabilities to manage resources through cooperative endeavors, asserts that people can and often do often collaborate to rationally manage natural resources in ways which promote benefits for society at large (Zerner, in press). Ostrom (1990) provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the political and institutional variables affecting the possibilities for collective action. Ostrom's work, however, and that of other common-property theorists (Berkes 1989; Schlager and Ostrom 1992; Schlager et al. 1994), underestimates the force and significance of culture, and cultural politics in particular, in shaping the conditions for, and against, collective action.

We focus below on the cultural and cultural-political aspects of a collective fishing practice, known as seke, to illustrate how two nearby island communities in the Sangihe archipelago interpret nature as well as their own fishing practices, within the context of local beliefs about the "nature of nature," spirits, and political power. We use the history of seke fishing practices, moreover, to show how the cultural politics of extra-local forces, including Christian missionaries and regional Indonesian political figures, have significantly, and, perhaps unpredictably, affected the status and implementation of local collective fishing practices in this isolated corner of the Indonesian archipelago.

### The Contexts

Para island, located 140 sea miles north of Manado, the capital city of North Sulawesi Province and several miles south of Sangihe Besar island, is located within the

Para administrative unit consisting of eight islands including Para, Nitu, Siha, Nenung, Salengkere, Mamalokong, Singgahluhang, and Bawondeke. Only Para and Salengkere islands are occupied.<sup>2</sup> The population of Para is only 1,660 persons, made up of about 357 families (Village Monographs 1991). Para villagers are mainly engaged in fishing activities as a source of subsistence and income. Given the desiccated, rocky terrain of these small islands, it is difficult to grow plants.

### Political History

Para was formerly under the authority of Siau kingdom which included Siau, Makalehi, Mahangetang, Kahakitang, Kalama, and Para islands. Those islands are scattered near Para, although they currently belong to different village administrative units.<sup>3</sup> After the Indonesian Proclamation of Independence in 1945, the status of the Siau kingdom was changed and these islands were placed under the jurisdiction of a *Kepala Pemerintahan Negeri (KPN)*, now known as a vice-regent (*Pembantu Bupati*).<sup>4</sup>

Batunderang island is a tiny island, located at just few miles south of Sangihe Besar island, about one kilometer long and 500 hundreds meter wide. Batunderang is also the name of a village which consists of six hamlets. Administratively, it belongs to the district of Tamako. Batunderang village was also formerly under the sovereignty of Manganitu-Tamako kingdom which ruled Para island. When the king of this petty kingdom sailed to Ternate to pay tribute to the sultan of that formidable empire, he frequented Batunderang on his journey. Due to Bantuderang's strategic position, a representative of Tamako was designated to live there and maintain a presence.

### The Fishery

Although Indonesian fisheries laws state that the seas and their resources are the

property of the state, and managed for the benefit of the people (Zerner, in press), the Indonesian archipelago is punctuated by small-scale fishing groups which claim rights over particular sites, and manage access to these sites through a variety of changing customary common property practices (Zerner, 1994, in press b,c). In Batunderang and Para, villagers engaged in fishing use techniques such as long lining, spear fishing, and individual bottom line fishing. In recent times, Batunderang villagers have engaged in shark fishing, although it offers only seasonal employment.

We focus here on the technique and history of seke fishing, a historically long-term practice for capturing flying fish (Decapterus spp) associated with group tenure and ritual practices linked to specific fishing spots. Seke fishing is remembered as a popular fishing technique in throughout the Sangihe and Siau archipelago, and reputed to be practiced as far as Bunaken and Siladen islands near Manado peninsula.

Seke is also the name of fishing gear associated with seke practices--a portable fence-like contraption made from bamboo lengths bound together by coconut fiber cord which, when extended, measure about 15 meters long and 82 cm tall. In a seke fishing group there are always two pairs of seke, which when tied together, form a circular fence within which schools of flying fish are trapped. Seke gear is stored and transported to fishing sites on two kengkang boats. Once the seke fences are installed, the fish are captured using a seine made of woven palm fibers, which have recently been replaced by commercially made nylon purse seines.

Seke fishing is a communal activity and villagers participate in it regardless their age, gender, social status, or expertise. Seke fishing practices, are, however, linked to cultural and religious conceptions of the marine environment, power, and social ideas of the

natural environment. A ritual practitioner known as a tonaas, skilled in flying fish capture techniques and knowledgeable concerning the needs of the spirits, *coordinates* seke fishing enterprises, assisted by several divers and seke fishers.

Seke fishing is customarily conducted only at dawn or dusk, when the members of a seke fishing group embark together to an assigned fishing spot in which they have sole rights to fish. As soon as they arrive, the tonaas asks divers to observe the movements of an incoming school of flying fish. When the school has settled down, the tonaas orders the crew to encircle the fish with the seke fences, and, when the fish are surrounded by the bamboo fence, other crew promptly open the purse seine and make their catch.<sup>5</sup> The tonaas is not merely a commando, a social conductor, and a technical fishing expert.<sup>6</sup> He is also a ritual practitioner who is responsible for relationships between the seke crew and the spirits and powers associated with particular fishing spots. It is the tonaas who must "take care" (Ind., *memelihara*) of the fishing spots through performing ritual practices. When conducting seke fishing, a tonaas deploys amulets (opo-opo), which are hung on the sides of the seke gear, and the recitation of spells.

Para has several fishing spots near the island as well as a "special" fishing ground at Singaluhang island, just a few miles south of Para. Each spot is named,<sup>7</sup> and some names refer to local origin myths while others refer to landscape or ecological features of the site. In Batunderang, there are six fishing spots and each of them is associated to a legend and a sacred site on the island.

### **Power, History, and Cultural Politics**

It is clear that local ideas of the nature of power--embodied in historic political institutions, sites, journeys, and ancestral figures including sea goddess, in(fused) and are

linked to the tenurial and religious practices which surround and permeate seke fishing sites and practices. We explore below some aspects of the cultural politics of seke fishing sites and practices, not so much as to offer simple answers, but rather to examine and to complexify the nature of these relationships. Our thesis is that collaborative seke fishing is a religious and cultural activity: to understand seke fishing practices, what it means to local people, and why and under what conditions it survives, or declines, we need to understand the cultural politics of seke fishermen, Dutch and Indonesian Christian missionaries, and national electoral politics in Indonesia.

The history of seke fishing in Para linked to village history and remembrances. Local villagers recount the story of a Portuguese ship which sank near Para in the sixteenth century. Not long afterwards, three local ancestral figures (dotus), Takapaha, Dolongpaha, and their sister, Site, arrived on the site of the wreck. There they found Beatrix, a survivor of the sunken ship, cast out on the beach and seriously injured. Beatrix died and her corpse was buried on Para, where it became a sacred place, periodically maintained through ritual performances. People believe that there is a relationship between the power of particular marine fishing spots and Beatrix's terrestrial burial site. Once a fisher stated succinctly: "Beatrix always supervises and protects fishing spots with her supernatural powers."<sup>8</sup>

In Batunderang, seke practice are also said to have begun in the seventeenth century. But villagers in Bantunderang link these practices to the powers of a local sea goddess who is believed to "own" and enjoy "playing" with flying fish. Because Bantunderang villagers respect and fear the power(s) of this marine goddess, their historical ancestors, the <sup>dotus</sup> ~~dates~~, are said to have taken steps to "take care" these fish. Ritual practices and sea tenure are among the more palpable signs of these intense religious and political conceptions. A local

ruler is said to have ordered Batunderang people to do perform these rituals as a perpetual enactment of their respect for the sea goddess' supernatural power and presence.

#### Cultural Politics and Seke Fishing in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Eras

It is probable that Para and Bantunderang villagers have been performing elaborate rituals linked to the capture of flying fish since the seventeenth centuries, and these rituals are linked to the collective fishing and tenurial practices associated with flying fishing. When the Dutch came to Sangihe, however, seke fishing--as a praxis and as religious practices--became the object of serious interventions organized by Christian missionaries.<sup>9</sup> Christian opposition to seke fishing and its ritual complex has continued to the present day. A Christian missionary stated the case against seke fishing baldly "Seke is an animistic practice, it completely against the Christian religion".

Christian opposition to seke fishing resulted in a serious conflict between Para villagers and a local missionary in the 1970s. A fisher told the story:

"At that time there was a missionary who was trying hard to abolish the seke practice. In doing so, during the sermon he always said that God doesn't like the practice since it entirely against religion. Therefore, he asked people to abandon it. Since people didn't listen to him and continued the seke fishing, he then got angry. He went to the Beatrix burial place and... pissed on it in order to show that it has no supernatural power as people believed. But people got really angry with such a behavior, and they went up to the hill, chasing after him and trying to kill him. He almost got killed when a village leader was eventually successful to prevent people in doing so. After that accident, the missionary was moved to other place".

The violent nature of local resistance to missionary suppression of seke practices, and blatant contempt for local cultural and religious beliefs, has not prevented missionaries from continuing to condemning seke practice in Para or in Batunderang. Given the opposition to Christian contempt, however, local missionaries have devised a new kind of suppressive politics bases on a distinction between fishing practices and pagan religious

acts. Contemporary missionaries do not condemn seke fishing and its common property practices, but rather, they proscribe and condemn the use of opo-opo. In their sermons and conversations, they do not preach against seke fishing per se, but rather, they discourage the use of opo-opo. Nowadays, tonaas use opo-opo 'secretly' and avoid discussing the practice in public. Most people continue to believe that inappropriate use (or lack of use) of opo-opo will result in unsuccessful fishing. If the fishing venture is unsuccessful, they often blame the tonaas for failure to 'take care' of the fishing spot or the gear. The conflict between missionaries and local fishers occurred in Batunderang as well, but it never reached the flash-point of violence, as it almost did in Para. Bantunderang missionaries, like their Christian brethren in Para, trying to persuade people to abandon using opo-opo when they practice seke fishing.

Despite missionary attempts to suppress seke fishing in Para, seke fishing continues to flourish vigorously. In part, the survival of seke fishing is the result of successful negotiations between Para villagers and government officials, and the support of higher government interventions, attempting to resolve an intense dispute over Para's control of a seke site. Para villagers claim control over a special seke fishing site located around Singgaluhang island, just a few miles south of Para. This site is special because flying fish only frequent it between August and October. During that period, a Para group regularly visits the island, building temporary huts and sleeping there for three month's fishing. After August, fishing for flying fish in that area is strictly prohibited.

A Para fisher saw fishers from Mahangetang island arrive on Singgaluhang island and attempt to catch flying fish during the prohibited period. Para fishers observed the Mahangetang group using a purse seine, rather than seke gear, to capture the fish. They

became attacked the group, stating they "did not respect the tradition" and two fishers died at the battle between the two communities.

Local fisheries officials refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of Para's customary claims, claiming that all the seas and resources are the property of the Indonesian nation. Local village officials, however, strongly supported their community's tenurial claims, which they recognized by issuing village regulations (*peraturan desa*). Fisheries officials refused to recognize these tenurial and cultural practices, and they were supported by the Regent of Sangihe-Talaud, who issued a Regent's Decree (*Surat Keputusan Bupati*) No. 63 of 1983 formally prohibiting any local, customary claims over fishing grounds.

These rulings, however, were reversed due to the political savvy and negotiating skill of Para villagers. When the Regent visited their isolated island, in a pre-election tour, local villagers told him that they would not vote for Golkar, the national and regional party which controls Indonesian elections, unless their rights was acknowledged formally. Eventually, the Regent and the rest of government recognized the legitimacy of Para villagers' customary claims over the Singgaluhang fishing ground. In effectively arguing for the recognition of centuries-old tenurial, cultural, and religious practices by using the lever of national elections, Para villagers deployed the materials of cultural politics as smartly as backroom politicians in the national political center.<sup>10</sup>

The cultural politics of common property persistence in Para are not only contests about competing cosmological conceptions, religious ideologies, or the power of national elections. Para villagers may also be exploiting links to a larger, and more powerful world of national media to support their local practices. In 1993, the national government selected Para seke fishing practices as representative of North Sulawesi culture, in a

national competition among local TV stations for the best documentary film. TV crews from Manado traveled to remote, tiny Para, to videotape and report on seke practices. The tapes were broadcast on Indonesia's main national channel, Televisi Republic Indonesia, and the film was awarded a runner-up in the national competition.<sup>11</sup>

### **Toward a Conclusion: Culture and the Cultural Politics of Common Property**

This paper has attempted to broaden common property analysis by exploring how cultural patterns and cultural politics of common property practices are deployed in a particular environmental site with a particular environmental history. We have investigated how particular cultural beliefs and values shape, and often drive, the actions of a variety of differently positioned individuals and institutions, and how ways in which they construct meanings about common property affect the way they act, intervene, collaborate or context<sup>s</sup> the continuing performance of these practices. Much common property analysis of the conditions for collective action have been based on the assumption of a rational individual who calculates, rather like an economist or cost-benefit analyst, the costs and benefits of collaboration:

[When individuals who have high discount rates and little mutual trust act independently, without the capacity to communicate, to enter into binding agreements, and to arrange for monitoring and enforcing mechanism, they are not likely to choose jointly beneficial strategies unless such strategies happen to be their dominant strategies (Ostrom 1990: 183).]

[One common property theorist (Ostrom 1990) explains when and why people are willing to cooperate:

The commitment is to follow the rules so long as (1) most similarly situated individuals adopt the same commitment and (2) the long-term expected net benefit to be achieved by this strategy are greater than the long-term expected net benefit for

individuals following short-term, dominant strategies (1990: 186). 7

Utilitarian and economic understandings of common property practices tell only part of the story: they constitute an excessively rationalistic, calculating image of humanity and the reasons for human action. The persistence of collective, collaborative seke fishing practices in Para can only be understood by illuminating the distinctive cultural conceptions of nature, society, and spiritual power and politics which are put into play each time a seke team goes fishing. We have seen that ~~impalpable but~~ crucial links exist between conceptions of seke fishing and how they are linked to regional memories of history, power, and political organization, on the one hand, and images of sea goddess, spells, and amulets, on the other hand. We know that when two men were murdered on Singgaluhang island, they were fighting because their religious and cultural conceptions of acceptable behavior were violently offended, as much as they were fighting over control of a particular site.

We have also seen how offensive and revolting Dutch Christian missionaries found seke fishing practices to be, due to the distinctive cultural and religious beliefs, which underlie these practices. Moved by his own cultural politics and religious ideology, a Dutch missionary was almost killed as he defiled a seke site, enacting his own form of symbolic politics. We have also seen how Para villagers cleverly deployed the dynamics of contemporary national elections to threaten and negotiate with a powerful regional government official: their arguments ~~about cultural recognition about legal and political legitimization of the same cultural practices which revolted Dutch and Indonesian Christian missionaries~~ were won, in part, through a clever rhetorical use of national politics and political culture.

1. This paper is the result of a collaboration between Fadjar Thufail (Indonesian Institute of Science (LIPI), Rutgers University) and Charles Zerner (Natural Resources and Rights Program, Rainforest Alliance). Original research for this paper was conducted by Thufail and colleagues in Sangihe-Talaud islands.

2. Administratively, the village of Para is comprised of four hamlets: Paralele I and II which are located at Para island, then Apenglawo and Salengkere which are located at Salengkere island.

3. Once upon a time there was a marriage between the daughter of Siau king and the King Willem Manuel Pandengsolong Mokodompis (1905-1944), and Para island became the "bride price". According to local history, the marriage was taken place during the late period of King Kansil of Siau, perhaps a few years before 1905 when the king Willem Mokodompis inherited the throne from his father, Johan Tampilang Mokodompis (1892-1905). After the marriage, the King Willem Mokodompis moved the capital from Manganitu to Tamako and the kingdom was called Manganitu-Tamako. From that time onwards, Para was under the sovereignty of the kingdom.

4. In 1950s, Manganitu-Tamako was assigned a status of a district (*kecamatan*). In 1962-1963 the district was separated and Manganitu and Tamako become a distinct district and since that time the Para island has belonged to the district of Tamako.

5. This entire process of observation, planting the seke fence, unfurling the seine and capturing the flying fish lasts only a few minutes. The tonaas must be a knowledgeable, gifted technician. If he misses just a few seconds in giving his orders, the fish will often elude their fishermen and disappear. Due to the risky nature of this technique, a tonaas is supposed to have good knowledge about fish behavior and its relationship to a particular fishing spot. A tonaas' technical knowledge is inherited from his predecessor, usually his father or a close relative.

6. See Zerner (field notes), on the role of boat boss and sando, or ritual expert, in the Mandar raft fishery of the Makassar Strait.

7. See Spyers (dissertataion, Duke U. Press), for a historical descriptio of named community-owned fishing and diving areas on the backshore of the Aru islands.

8. Para villagers also relate the history of seke gear to the power and journeys of Dotu Takapaha, one of the ancestral figures linked to the ancient Portuguese ship. On the way to Siau, Takapaha stopped by at a island called Singgaluhang, where he observed abundant malalugis fish (*Decapterus* sp.). He also discovered even more flying fish in surrounding islands such as Mamalokong, Siha, Nitu, and Nenung. Impressed by the abundance of

the fish, he then decided to make a seke. People believe that the first seke was made in the 17th century.

On the role of history and stories in making claims about particular resources and ancestral sites, see Tsing ( ), Zerner (Sea Change, in press; Sounding the Makassar Strait, in prep.), and Spyers (in press). More generally, on the relationship between landscape perceptions and local cultural conceptions, see Basso ( ).

9. Dutch-organized missionary opposition to indigenous ritual and economic practices was not uncommon throughout the Outer Islands. For accounts of similarly repressive interventions in local cultural practices among the highland Toraja people of South Sulawesi, see Volkman (Feasts of Honor, Great Performances).

10. In Bantuderang, where there were six seke fishing groups only a few years ago, here were only two in 1994. Batunderang villagers explain the decline in seke fishing groups to "the difficulty to find a good tonaas". During the last few years, a few have died, a few others have moved. There are no ritual experts with the experience to properly "take care" of the seke fishing spots. The remaining tonaas are lacking in spiritual power. Bantuderang villagers believe there is a close connection between a marine fishing spots and a sacred terrestrial places on the island, and only effective tonaas can maintain that cosmic relationship.

11. The use of national media including television are now part and parcel of cultural politics, including struggles over, and stories about local culture, identity, and increasingly, about the links between culture and environmental management. Barely a few hundred miles east of the Sangihe islands, social activist and environmental groups such as SEJATI, as well as HUALOPU and BAILEU MALUKU, are seeking to use national and international media, print and film, to advance the cause of social justice and cultural legitimizaion. See Zerner (1994) for an account of these activities in relation to Moluccan common property practices.