

# House-posts and the Baskets: Social Organisation of 'Udi Worowatu People, Eastern Keo of Central Flores<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstrak

*Tulisan ini membahas masalah organisasi sosial masyarakat adat desa 'Udu Worowatu, suku bangsa Keo di Kabupaten Ngada, Flores Tengah. Keunikan masyarakat ini terlihat dari sistem penataan stratifikasi sosialnya yang merujuk pada tiang rumah adat (deke) dan jenis keranjang adat (wati, gata, mboda) yang lazim digunakan untuk menghitung berat sumbangan wajib berupa nasi atau jagung pada saat penyelenggaraan suatu upacara adat. Setiap individu atau kelompok telah memahami status masing-masing, baik sebagai pemangku tiang depan atau belakang, tiang timur atau barat, keranjang kecil (wati), keranjang menengah (gata) atau pun keranjang besar (mboda). Rujukan pada tiang (deke) dan keranjang (wati, gata) itu menyiratkan pula tatanan sosial setiap individu atau kelompok, baik sebagai pemimpin adat atau anggota biasa.*

*Sistem pemerintahan desa yang secara seragam diterapkan di seluruh Indonesia berdasarkan UU no. 5 1979 dengan segala perangkatnya, merupakan suatu bentuk pelecehan terhadap khasanah adat dan budaya lokal. Pemilihan dan pengangkatan perangkat pemerintahan desa yang tidak mempertimbangkan tatanan sosial adat itu telah memarginalisasikan para pemimpin adat. Hal itu merupakan penerapan sistem sibermetik yang akhirnya bermuara pada kepemimpinan tanpa wibawa, tetapi yang memerintah secara otoriter, dan yang dapat menyebabkan kegagalan pelbagai proyek pembangunan.*

## Introduction

This paper discusses the social organisation of Udi and Worowatu people based on their house-posts and traditional baskets plaited from the lontar palm leaves. Before the introduction of plastic bags and baskets

into the region, the role of *lontar* baskets was central in their daily lives. These are still used to store betel nuts, to collect vegetables and other sorts of food from the gardens. However, their most significant function is to measure the cooked rice and corn (*ndoumapi*) collected by each family in the centre of their hamlets

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the data discussed in this paper were collected from my field research and living experience during several visits to my home village 'Udi Worowatu. The longest visit was in November 1996 to December 1997. I am grateful to a great number of my infor-

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and contributed to their community in a particular ritual. The sizes of the baskets differ according to the rank and social status of the persons in the hamlets, who are incorporated in certain houses (*sa'o*), i.e., source-house (*sa'o pu'u*) and ritual house (*sa'o nggua*).

My depiction of this sort of social organisation in the traditional village of Udi Worowatu is based on my living experience and personal observations in 1960 and 1997. In my observation, such a traditional organisation is still very influential in the lives of the people in those hamlets. However, the modern *sistem pemerintahan desa*, introduced by the Indonesian government, represents a foreign system of government (read organisation) that places the people in a bipolar situation between the adat leaders and the modern leaders. To some extent, such bipolarity has caused the modern government to be ineffective and lacking in authority, as it has taken no consideration of adat leadership.

#### **'Udi worowatu people**

'Udi Worowatu<sup>2</sup> is the name of a *desa* (administrative village) in the *Kecamatan* (sub-district) of Ma'uponggo on the south coast of Kabupaten Ngada, Flores, Eastern Indonesia. This village name is taken from the two major hamlets Udi and Worowatu. The administrative village of 'Udi Worowatu, as a *desa gaya baru* founded in 1959, nowadays consists of the *nua* (hamlets) 'Udi, Worowatu, Tudiwado,

<sup>2</sup> Worowatu is included here in Eastern Keo based on linguistic evidence. From the political-administrative standpoint, Worowatu is part of Western Keo because it is in the *Kecamatan* Ma'uponggo. However, recently there has been a new program of the provincial government of NTT to divide the *Kecamatan* Ma'uponggo into two divisions: Ma'uponggo and Ma'unori. The local leaders of *desa* 'Udi Worowatu have offered their clan-land (*tanah suku*) for the offices of the prospective new *Kecamatan* in Maundai. The suggested name for the new *Kecamatan* is *Kecamatan Keo Tengah*.

Kodinggi, Tonga Tonggo and Ma'undai. Its boundaries are the administrative village Witu Romba 'Ua in the East, the administrative village Mbae Nuamuri in the West, the administrative village Kotowuji Timur in the North and the Savu Sea in the South. The hamlet Kodinggi used to be called Bedo and was located at the south end of the hamlet 'Udi. Bedo was destroyed by the 1927 earthquake and moved to Kodinggi. However, the name Bedo is still retained in the ritual language.

Up until the Dutch introduced the *Kepala Mere* system in 1917, the territory of Worowatu included the hamlets Worowatu, 'Udi, Bedo, Tudiwado, Tonga Tonggo and Ma'undai, with its satellite hamlets Witu and Mau'ara. The last two used to be incorporated into Bedo, which was known as the confederacy of Bedo-Dokare'a. In 1997 the total population of the village was 707 and it occupied only 147 hectares of land. It is the smallest *desa* in the whole *Kecamatan* of Ma'uponggo. Out of this total population, there are 164 Muslims (38 families). The majority of the people are Catholics and only a few elders are still adherents of local beliefs. Most of the people are coconut farmers and dry-land farmers who produce maize, yams, cassava, fruits and vegetables. The majority of the muslims are traditional fishermen.

#### **Social organisation based on the house**

In December 1960, as a six years old and a son of the hamlet, I witnessed a ritual of *pala*. It was a ritual of sacrificing the buffaloes for the sake of the people in the hamlet of Udi, both in the now and the hereafter. Twenty-one buffaloes were slaughtered, three or which were contributed by the neighbouring hamlets as part of their ritual confederacy. The rests were provided by the individual families in the hamlet, based on their promises in the past: for example promises made when one of their mem-

bers had recovered from illness, or when a mother had given birth to seven children, and many other personal reasons. The buffaloes were tied up in a line in front of a sacrificial post (*peo*), with the strings united in the *peo*. Before the buffaloes were killed, each possessor proclaimed a chant (*bhea*) of their genealogy and the motive for the sacrifice. However, the main message echoed from every chanter:

*pala pau ne'e 'ana kamba*  
we are sacrificing the buffaloes  
*mona 'uru ko'o ngada;*  
not to display our ability and richness  
*bhodo 'uru ko'o lo dara;*  
but because of sickness  
*ta la mo'o tau mbasa tana*  
their blood should wet the soil  
*mo'o tana ma'e udhu adha,*  
that it will not be shaky  
*mo'o watu ma'e weru we;*  
and the stones will not be trembling;  
*ta boge mo'o tau pati 'ata*  
their meat will be shared by the community

After the buffaloes were slaughtered, the men went busy cutting and cooking the meat. A hamlet leader then stood at the centre of the hamlet and announced that the women should prepare their cooked rice and corn (*ndoumapi*) based on their baskets (*wati gata*). In the afternoon, when the time for the communal meal (*nado mere*) arrived, the women representing their households (family) brought their contributions (*ndou mapi*) in *wati* (small baskets), *gata* (middle-size baskets) and *mboda* (big baskets) to the centre near the *peo*. My question at the time was why they did not contribute the same quantity of their cooked food—a question that was answered when I started to look at the social organisation of this hamlet.

Reading from my experience above and examining the attached figure, we can understand that the society of 'Udi Worowatu as a tribe (*suku*) can be seen as organised into sev-

eral levels of social units such as *Ngapi* or *Idi Eo* (clan), '*Embu Kajo* (sub-clan or an extended family under a male ancestor/ '*Embu* and *Kajo*) and *Bapa* (the nuclear family). However, all of these social units are always referred to by the name of *sa'o* (houses) under the name of an '*Embu*<sup>3</sup>.

The houses in the hamlets of 'Udi and Worowatu can be grouped into: *sa'o ndi'i* (dwelling house), *sa'o mere* (large house) or *sa'o pu'u* (source house) and *sa'onggua* (ritual houses) such as *sa'o jara* or *sa'o enda* (the house of a wooden horse) and *sa'o wondi* (the house of gongs and drum). In the hamlet of Worowatu, there are three *Sa'o Mere*. These are *Sa'o Mere Waja 'Ake* (the oldest brother), *Sa'o Mere Waja Sebho* (the younger brother) and *Sa'o Mere Waja De'e* (the eldest Sister). From these three source houses, there have been several stages of multiplication of households into dwelling houses (*sa'o ndi'i*) as symbolised by the multiplication of pig troughs (*bagi kana wawi*). In 1997, ten dwelling houses were listed in the hamlet Worowatu in addition to ten others located in the hamlet of Tudiwado.

In hamlet 'Udi, the two *Sa'o Mere* (*Sa'o Mere Doka Ora* and *Sa'o Mere 'Udu Wawo*), which to some extent function as the *Sa'o Pu'u* (the source houses), are multiplied into 15 *sa'o ndi'i* (dwelling houses). *Sa'o Mere Doka Ora* is regarded as the *Sao Mere ta pu'u* (the source) because its founder was 'Embu Rangga 'Ame 'Ari, a male sibling. However, the *Sa'o Mere 'Udu Wawo* is regarded as *Sa'o Mere ta dhodho* (the derivation) because its founder, 'Embu Ndiki 'Ari, was a female sibling. She married 'Embu Ndapa Ranga from Daja, but he stayed forever in Udi, *tau tu'a ka'e*, '*eja 'ari*

<sup>3</sup> In daily use, '*Embu* means a grandfather (FF, MF). However, in the context of the social organisation of a hamlet, it always refers to the male ancestors as the founders of the whole clan (*Ngapi*, or *idi eo* or *sa'o pu'u*) or the founders of the sub-clan ('*embu/kajo*).

(to be affinal brotherhood). That is why the two branches of the *peo* (sacrificial post) in *kampung* Udi are owned by these two *Sa'o Mere*. The eastern branch (*nda'a mena*) is for Embu Ranga 'Ame 'Ari, and the western branch (*nda'a rade*) is for 'Embu Ndiki 'Ari. In their daily lives, they believe that *Peo nda'a mena* (the eastern branch) belongs to the descendants of Ranga 'Ame 'Ari, while *thenda'a rade* (the western branch) belongs to the descendants of Ndiki 'Ari.

*Sa'o Mere* (large house) or *Sa'o Pu'u* (source house) in *kampung* 'Udi refer either to a house of a wife-giver, that is *Doka Ora*, from where a person or a group derives, or to the senior houses (these are *Doka Ora* and '*Udu Wawo*) of two localized sub-clans (Rangga 'Ame 'Ari and his sister Ndiki 'Ari). *Sa'o Mere* is also used as opposed to ordinary residential houses (dwelling houses). The classification of the hamlet into dyadic sets (as in 'Udi) and into a three-fold division (as in Worowatu) and so on, seemingly dividing the people into groups, has a positive aim. The aim of this division is that each category may impart life to one another, that they may intermarry, compete with one another, make offerings to one another, and to one another whatever is required by their theory of prosperity (Hocart 1936: 290).

Such a notion can hardly be found in the various tribes of eastern Indonesia. Clamagirand's essay on 'Social Organisation of the Ema of Timor,' as an example, does illustrate it briefly—when she describes the division of the basic unit of Ema society into the groups of younger brothers and elder brothers, and into east core houses and west core houses that seem to be opposed to each other. However, she argues that this should be interpreted according to a single system of a society which is made up of several core houses ordered in a hierarchical structure around the chiefly core houses that play a central part in

the marriage alliance pattern and in collective rituals (Fox 1980: 146).

In the case of Worowatu, where the triple division of 'Embu (ancestors) is recorded, the precedence of the male over the female and the elder brother over the younger brother becomes a central issue. However, an exceptional story has broken the precedence of the elder brother over the younger brother. Through a long process of claiming the genealogy, the descendants of 'Embu Waja Sebho, the younger brother, have taken back the position of leadership (*kepala suku*) from the elder brother 'Embu Waja 'Ake's descendants. The reason for re-transferring leadership from Waja 'Ake to Waja Sebho was that the elder brother had no children. He adopted 'Embu Bajo Dhema, someone from outside the group who was employed as his worker, and made him son and successor to leadership (See Figure 1 in which the dot lines show that someone has no children).

That is why the appointment of 'Embu *Seme Rau* by the Dutch to be the Kepala Mere of Worowatu was based on insufficient information about the *primus inter pares* of Worowatu. The Kepala Mere 'Eo Mbe'e, Seme Rau's successor, seemed more appropriate, although he was from the female line after Waja Sebho. Then, when the Kepala Mere was abolished, the position of '*Ine Tana Ame Watu* (the landlord) was handed down to his younger brother, Je Mbe'e, both from the female line. In late 1980, Mr. Je Mbe'e called for Mr. Jamaludin Husein, a son of 'Embu Sebho Ndola who escaped to Daja a long time before, to return home, and made him a new Kepala Suku ('*Ine Tana Ame Watu*) in Worowatu, because he was the only man from a purely male line after 'Embu Waja Sebho.

Another core point to be taken into consideration in relation *tosa'o* (house) is the significance of the *deke* (the house-post). The *deke* of the ritual houses always refer to the

role and the embodiment of the house-members. The structure of the ritual house of kampung 'Udi may give us an illustration. In kampung 'Udi there are four *deke* for the *sa'o enda* or *sa'o jara* (ritual houses). However, every two house-posts of the ritual houses constitute a large house. The two *deke nia* (front house-posts) constitute the existence of *sao mere* (a large house) *Doka Ora*. These *deke* are held by the descendants of 'Embu Mame (the wife-giving group). The *deke nia dera singga* (front-eastern house-post) is reserved for the descendants of the first wife. In this case this is Hamid Abu Bakar, the acting Imam of the mosque Ma'undai. While the *deke nia dera mese* (front-western house-post) is for the descendants of the second wife, who are Nuga and Jata. On the other hand, the two *deke dudu* (back house-posts) constitute the existence of the *sa'o mere Udu Wawo*, as the descendants of the 'Ana Weta (the wife-taking group). The *deke dudu mena* (eastern-back *deke*) is observed by the descendants of the older brother: Niga and Reja. The *deke dudu rade* (western-back *deke*) is observed by the descendants of the younger brother: *Dhae Medi*.

The role of the legs of the ritual wooden-horse is also significant. The *deke 'udu jara papa tenggo* (front right leg of the ritual horse) is also reserved for the descendants of the first wife, and the *deke 'udu jara papa eku* (front left leg) is for the descendants of the second wife. Meanwhile, the *deke 'eko jara papa tenggo* (right back leg of the ritual horse) is for the descendants of the older brother, and the *deke 'eko jara papa eku* (left back leg) is for the descendants of the younger brother. The organisation and undertaking of various rights and responsibilities of the house-members demonstrate the various duties to take care of the *deke*. These four *deke*—which also refer to four groups of people ('ana 'embu koo

Rangga 'Ame 'Ari and Ndiki 'Ari) derived from these two *Sa'o mere* or *Sa'o pu'u*—constitute the ritual house (*sa'o nggua*) named *Sa'o Enda* or *Sa'o Jara* as a central place of their ancestral spirits, where the groups bind their sacrificial animals (i.e. pigs) in every *deke*. We can see that this ritual house (*sa'o nggua*) functions as the representation of the ancestors.

In addition to the above, the social ranks of individual members can also be identified through their contribution of cooked rice and corn in the traditional rites. The contribution, called *ndou mapi*<sup>4</sup>, is measured by their traditional baskets made of lontar palm leaves. The largest portion is called *mboda* (the big basket), the medium portion is called *gata* (the medium-size basket), and the smallest portion is called *wati* (the smallest basket). The spatial orientation (such as front versus back, Eastern versus Western, Right versus Left) of the *deke* (house-posts) and *a'ijara* (the legs of the ritual horse) is related to the notion of precedence of an individual person or a group (such as WGG over WTG, first wife over second wife, elder brother over younger brother) in the social, political and religious sphere. The organisation of *deke* (house-posts), *a'ijara* (legs of the ritual wooden-horse) and *wati-gata* (the traditional baskets) as depicted in figure 1, shows the social organisation of the hamlets Udi and Worowatu.

Based on my observations on the binding of their sacrificial animal of *wawi* (pigs) on the house-posts of *Sa'o Enda* and the buffaloes on *peo*, I tend to conclude that the *sa'o nggua* represent the ancestors and function as their *altar* as well. This second aspect (altar) can be seen from the rights of migrants to also bind their sacrificial animals, although they are not of autochthonous ancestors.

<sup>4</sup> *Ndou* means to contribute collectively. It has a rather similar meaning to *bou*. *Mapi* means to cook rice or corn.

## Marginalisation of adat leaders

The Indonesian government, in line with the principle *bhineka tunggal ika* (unity in diversity), should encourage people to respect the role and leadership of the adat leaders. In reality, the local adat leaders seem to be marginalised. Such a trend has inspired me to observe the structure of *pemerintahan desa*<sup>5</sup> based on the *Undang-Undang no.5, 1979*, juncto by the *Presidential Decree no.20, 1980* and by the law issued by the *Minister of Internal Affairs no.7, 1983*. All of these national laws imply that the modern administrative village system (*sistem pemerintahan desa*) applied in various parts of Indonesia, including in Udi Worowatu of Central Flores, is a foreign system. The Indonesian government seems to neglect the existence of various local social organisations that seem to be effective and well-organised.

In 1997, I spent the whole year in the village of Udi Worowatu, travelling around its neighbouring villages. I noted that most of the individuals were chosen to be staff members and leaders of the administrative villages on the bases of certain educational qualifications. They should have reached a certain level of secondary education or high school so they had the necessary administrative skills. However, as leaders skillful in administration and

management, they have no moral authority and leadership in dealing with the villagers.

I do not overestimate such a stratified system in an era of egalitarian trends. However, my hypothesis is that the success of the administrative village leaders depends also on the social rank in their traditional organisation. The failure of some *Inpres Desa Tertinggal*<sup>6</sup>, a project for eradicating poverty at the village level, and many other developmental projects, are caused by the lack of moral authority of these leaders in mobilising the villagers. The reality shows that the villagers are still loyal to their adat leaders.

I heard a group of villagers complaining that their village leader (*kepala desa*) was very skilful in writing project reports, but was an authoritarian leader and did not want to involve himself in the adat assembly. The reason was that he did not know how to deal with *adat*, because he was not a descendant of the *adat* leaders. On the other hand, in another village, the leader was praised for his wisdom and ability to guide his villagers both in government and adat affairs. The reason was that he was a descendant of the adat leaders. This illustrates that the ideal administrative village leaders and their staff members should be those who are qualified both by their education and by their social stratification.

In the district of Ngada (Flores), in the midst of the egalitarian movement, the Ngadha tribe still appreciates the existence of social stratification. Although many social analysts have underlined the dark aspect of *Ga'e Meze* (high rank), *Ga'e Kisa* (middle rank) and *'Azi 'Ana* (the lowest rank) among the Ngada tribe (Arndt, 1954: 539), there are still some positive values

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the *Undang-Undang no.5, 1979*, each Indonesian village administrative system should consist of *Kepala Desa* (village leader), and a secretary with his three *Kepala Urusan* (working staff). These three working staff members have roles in government, development and social formation, respectively. In addition to these, there are several *Kepala Dusun* (*dusun* leaders). A few years later, the Minister of Internal Affairs issued another *Peraturan Menteri No.7, 1983* about the formation of *Rukun Tetangga* (neighbourhood association as the lowest administrative unit) and *Rukun Warga* (administrative unit at the next-to-lowest level in the village). Both institutions are semi-governmental, but have an absolute role in the national integration process.

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<sup>6</sup> It is also known by its abbreviation *IDT*. *INPRES* is also an abbreviation for *Instruksi Presiden*, because the program is reinforced by Presidential Decree to eradicate poverty at the impoverished villages.

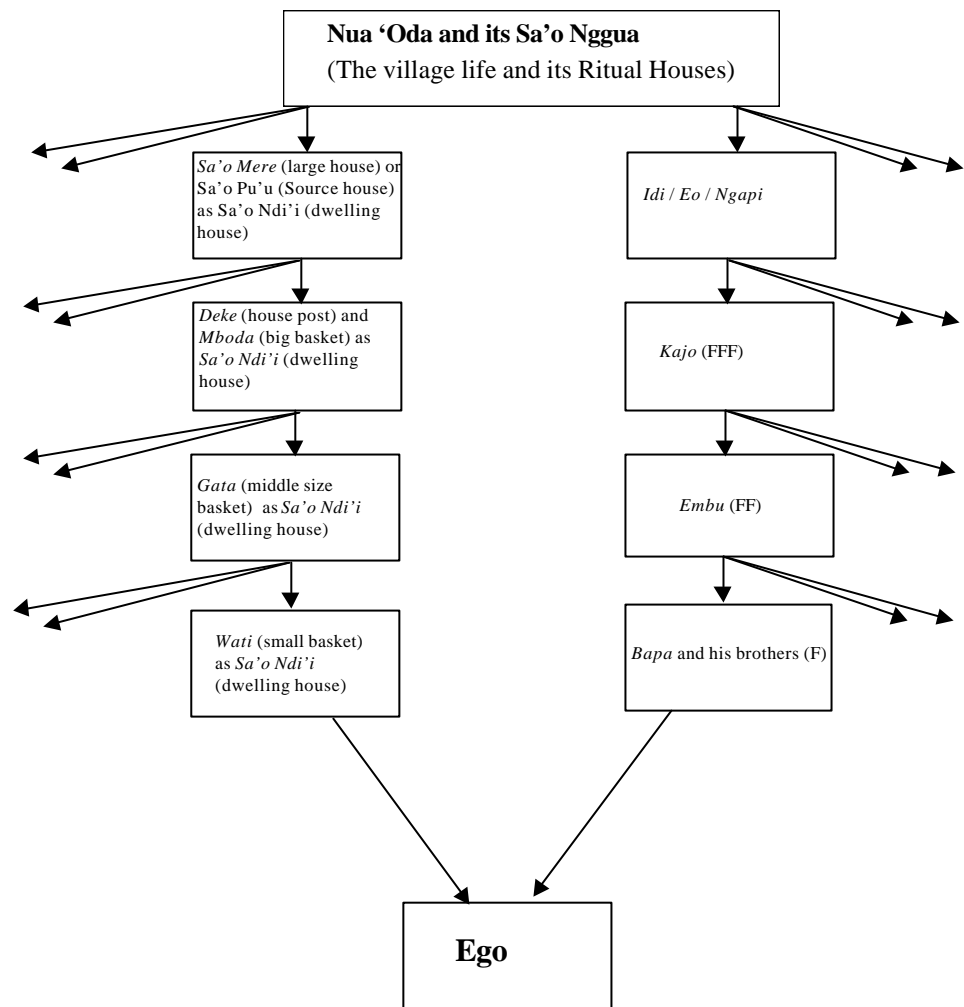


figure 1: The Social Organisation of 'Udi and Worowatu<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The structure, organisation and classification of social units in the hamlets and villages are basically made on the basis of three things, as appear in the above diagram: (a). Based on the *deke* (house-posts) of a *sa'o nggua* (ritual houses); (b). Based on the activity of *ndou mapi* (the quantity of cooked-food contribution) using the traditional baskets as the measuring instrument. Those traditional baskets made of lontar

leaves are *mboda*, *gata* and *wati*.; (c). Based on the ancestral generations, starting from the highest level of ancestors down to the EGO level, which the local language named *pi* (or *lapis*), such as *Kajo* (FFF), *Embu* (FF) and *Bapa* (F).

in the social and psychological spheres which are supportive of someone's leadership.

In the hamlets of 'Udi and Worowatu, as I have described above, there is a social structure of adat which reflects the existence of a stratified society. Around a *sa'o mere* (a large house) or a *sa'o pu'u* (a source house), the largest and highest social unit in the hamlet, we can discern a social network which is known by the local term *sombo gata* (a kettle steam and basket from lontar) which implies law and order (*tata krama*). Considering this law and order, each member of the hamlet should fulfil his obligation as *tutu mbotu penu mbora* (contribution in adat rituals). Both terms refer to the activity of contributing a certain quantity of cooked rice and corn, measured by three different baskets: *wati* (small basket), *gata* (medium-size basket) and *mboda* (big basket).

A source-house (*sa'o pu'u*) has its own leader, who owns the highest authority over the *mboda* (big basket) into which several *gata* (middle-size baskets) are collected from its supporters. Meanwhile, the contents of these *gatas* are collected from the *wati-wati* (small baskets). Referring to these three traditional we can discern a social network which is known by the local term *sombo gata* (a kettle steam and basket from lontar) which implies law and order (*tata krama*). Considering this law and order, each member of the hamlet should fulfil his obligation as *tutu mbotu penu mbora* (contribution in adat rituals). Both terms refer to the activity of contributing a certain quantity of cooked rice and corn, measured by three different baskets: *wati* (small basket), *gata* (medium-size basket) and *mboda* (big basket).

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baskets). Referring to these three traditional baskets (*keranjang adat*), we can see the existence of the three social strata in a hamlet with various social, economic and political consequences, such as, leadership as *mosadaki*, quantity of contribution in the sacrificial rituals, the house-posts (*deke*) where the sacrificial animals should be bound either to the front or the back house-post of a ritual house, the quantity of land ownership, and so on. All of these social and cultural phenomena still exert a significant psychological influence in the social interaction of the locals in their adat or traditional system of government and also in the modern administrative village (*desa*).

This is why the imposition of a foreign system of government on a certain local ethnic group is a control over the individual and social activities in a cybernetic order, which to some extent has resulted in various failures in developmental projects. Talcott Parsons, a sociologist, was right when he wrote that

'the systems located near the top, being rich in information and low in energy, control the systems near the bottom, which are low in information and rich in energy. Thus the cultural system which contains symbolic elements only of knowledge, ideas and beliefs is low in energy but rich in information, and therefore through its information directs and meaningfully orientates the action released by the plentiful but mindless energies of the lower systems, especially the behavioural organism which is at the bottom of the cybernetic hierarchy' (Hoogvelt 1986: 21).

In a state where a cybernetic bipolarity applies, we will find that many developmental agents will run the danger of marginalising the traditional institutions of the local ethnic groups along with a variety of their leaders and a set of their social and cultural systems.

## Conclusion

My experience living in the traditional hamlets of 'Udi and Worowatu clearly shows that



the notion of social organisation around their house-posts and baskets is still effective and functional. However, the Indonesian government, which reached its peak in the New Order Government (*Pemerintahan Orde Baru*) has mandated a uniform system of government for the whole nation, which to some extent has wiped out and marginalised the local system of leadership and social organisation.

Reflecting upon these phenomena of trivializing and marginalising both the human and the cultural values of the local ethnic groups, we can say that the uniformity of centralised government is a new form of social, political and cultural colonialism that should call for political and cultural reform. Such a call certainly implies an appreciation of local cultural values and also fits in with the national ideology of *bhineka tunggal ika* (unity in diversity).

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