

# 5. Trunk and Tip in West Timor: Precedence in a botanical idiom

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## Introduction

This paper brings together an appreciation of two related cultural themes from the island of Timor in eastern Indonesia. The first of these themes explores the expression of precedence in Timorese social contexts and its significance as an index of status differentiation. A second related concern, and one that arguably represents a key indigenous expression of precedence, is the enduring representation of social processes through botanical idioms and particularly the metaphor of the tree. In Timor, the botanical idiom of the tree is often expressed in binary metaphorical form as ‘trunk and tip’. It is this particular encoded configuration of process and relation that informs and expresses aspects of temporal precedence.

The proliferation of references and writings on the issue of botanical metaphors in the literature of eastern Indonesia attests to the importance of this classificatory dualism and its variants throughout the region (e.g. Fox 1971, 1988, Aoki 1986, Traube 1986, 1989, Platenkamp 1988, Grimes 1993, McWilliam 2002 and Therik 2004). This ubiquity of botanical imagery in social forms is perhaps unsurprising given that people reliant upon agriculture for their welfare tend to find in the vegetative properties of nature a rich resource for comparable association.<sup>1</sup>

For the Meto speaking communities of west Timor,<sup>2</sup> the use and expression of botanical metaphors is broad and compelling. Meto express a wide variety of social relations in terms of botanical analogy. They draw on many contrastive and reproductive properties of creeping vines, herbaceous plants, and tended and wild plants to create cultural metaphors of social process. Formal marriage, for example, may be expressed as the union of betel nut ingredients in which the conceptually ‘female’ areca nut is combined with the ‘male’ fruit of the betel vine. Progeny of informal marriages, otherwise known as ‘marriages in darkness’ (*kaib mesokan*), are referred to as the *koto ma boko* (beans and pumpkins). These agricultural products are grown in the more distant, less tended, forest gardens and grow in tangled indiscriminate ways. The Meto also describe the cyclical closure of certain marriage exchanges in botanical terms; namely, as the ‘return of the young banana and young sugar cane’ (*seb nafani uik ana ma teuf ana*). The image here is one of a type of reaping or harvesting the fruits of marriage alliance planted by the original wife-giving house.<sup>3</sup> Such marriages are auspicious

as they help to revitalize alliance relationships that may have grown slack with time.

In these and other ways the botanical idiom is a primary language of relationship and process among Meto speakers and it is within this idiom that I seek to focus upon the core image of the tree. With its extended cycle of woody growth, flowering and fruit, decay and renewal, the generic image of the tree parallels many of the central properties of social life. In its core representation as 'trunk and tip' (*uf ma tunaf*) the category asymmetry, I would argue, expresses an archetype of precedence. Trunk is superior to tip, but more than this, trunk comes before tip, both in a temporal sense and a spatial one. This self-evident relationship makes it an exemplary dichotomy for explorations of social precedence.<sup>4</sup>

### **Economic and Ritual Significance of Trees in Meto Society**

For the Meto, who occupy the hinterland and mountainous interior of west Timor, the biological world of plant life and forest regrowth is not simply a tableau from which social significance is drawn and metaphorically adapted. Rather it belongs to the world of practical knowledge, the lived in world of everyday experience and engagement. In a real sense fallowed regrowth forests and the land on which they grow are fundamental to the reproduction of Meto agriculture and society. Trees are significant in Meto society both as economic commodities and ritualised living forms.

One tree species that has had profound consequences for the historical development of Meto society is white sandalwood (*Santalum album L*) also referred to as *hau meni*. Formerly this tree species grew in great abundance across Timor and sustained a thriving export trade that attracted a variety of foreign influences to the island including Chinese, Portuguese and Dutch trading interests. For local populations the control and sale of sandalwood stocks provided a rich resource for generating wealth and political influence.

In contemporary times, with the long-term decline of sandalwood stocks through over-exploitation and mismanagement, other tree species have emerged as important part-replacement market commodities for the now poor mountain farming communities of west Timor. These species include Tamarind (*Tamarindicus indica: hau kiu*) which produces a seasonal source of income through the sale of the fleshy seed pulp. Meto sometimes refer to the tamarind as their *hau loit*, their money tree, which grows without tending and does not hinder the planting of seasonal crops around its base. Large palms are also classified as trees in Meto taxonomy. The ubiquitous coconut (*Cocos nucifera : hau noah*) and the betel palm (*Areca catechu: hau puah*) provide sustenance and items of trade. The lontar (*Borassus flabillifer: hau tua*) and the gewang palm (*Corypha elata: hau tune*) have long been utilized for a diverse range of products.

Both palms are tapped for their juice that is fed to domestic pigs, fermented to produce an alcoholic beverage (*laru* or *lalu*), or boiled with cow fat to produce red sugar discs for sale. The trunks are split and used in building and the leaves and stalks of the palms are widely utilized as roof thatch and house cladding, or fashioned into buckets, woven mats and a range of plaited baskets. Even the pith of the gewang finds a use as a starchy foodstuff in times of scarcity.

Other species which contribute in varying ways to the domestic economy include the mango (*Mangifera indica*: *hau upun*), candle nut (*Aleuritis mollucana*: *hau fenu*), *ficus* species (*hau nunuh*) and the forage legumes, *Sesbania grandiflora* (*hau kane*), acacia species (*hau kabesa*) and *Leucaena leucacephala* (*pates*). These and many other non-cultivated tree species of the remnant forests supply all manner of local community needs, including medicines and dyes, firewood and fencing materials, foodstuffs and farming tools.

This central significance of trees to Meto social and economic life is exemplified by their focus within a series of important collective ritual activities. One of the descriptive terms for the former indigenous Meto religion is *hau le'u faut le'u*. The phrase may be glossed as the 'sacred tree and the sacred stone' and refers to a central feature of Meto sacrificial ritual comprising an upright post or tree to which is attached a flat altar stone. Ritual offerings to the dualistically conceived deity (*Uis Neno-Uis Pah*) and the ancestors (*nitu*) were conducted at these sites (McWilliam 1991). They included prayer offerings for the conduct of rainmaking and harvest rituals in the agricultural cycle, as well as more personal invocatory rituals to house ancestors and those of the wider name group (*kanaf*).

The motif of the tree is also evident in life cycle rituals within Meto communities. A good example in this respect is the 'birth tree' which, at least until the widespread conversion to Protestant Christianity during the 1960s, was maintained widely throughout Meto territories. As part of the post-partum rituals accompanying birth it was common practice to place the umbilical cord (*usan*) and placenta (*olin*)<sup>5</sup> of the newborn in a small plaited basket and to hang this in the branches of a designated tree. The practice is still maintained in some Catholic areas of west Timor. These trees, usually Chinese oaks (*Schleichera oleosa*: *hau usapi*), candle nut (*hau fenu*) or large banyan trees (*hau nunuh*), with their clusters of drying birth baskets, represented a graphic image of the related community's 'tree of life'.

A third example of the ceremonial significance of trees is evident in the former practices associated with the cult of headhunting and the incorporation of smoked and dried severed heads into the spirit collectivity of the victorious community. Headhunting and internecine warfare flourished in Timor until well into the twentieth century, and as part of the rituals of incorporation, many communities made use of large banyan (*Ficus virens*) or oak trees (*Schleichera oleosa*) as storage

places for the skulls of slain enemies. These trees were usually located adjacent to the enmity cult houses (*uim le'u musu*) of the hamlet community. Festooned with yellowing skulls these 'head trees' (*hau nakaf*) or 'head banyan' (*nunuh nakaf*)/ 'head oak' (*usaip nakaf*) stood as vivid markers of the murderous success of the local cult (McWilliam 2002). Like the 'birth trees' of new life, these 'trees of death' also communicated ideas around life, death and its inter-relation.<sup>6</sup>

These examples of the use of trees in both the economic life of Meto communities and as a focus for ritual elaboration hint at the central importance of the representational qualities of trees in west Timorese culture. In the following section I seek to expand upon these qualities, focusing in particular on the significance of the binary properties of 'trunk and tip' as an idiomatic set.

### Trunk and Tip as an Idiom of Precedence

The generic term for tree in the Meto language (*uab meto*) is *hau*. However, in its representation in ritual speech (*natonu*), the tree is abstracted as 'trunk and tip' (*uf ma tunaf*). Like other significant paired categories in Meto cultural schemata, the classification of 'trunk and tip' represents a complementary set of differentiated elements. Central to the relationship between the paired terms is a notion of asymmetry, whereby the status of one element is higher or greater than its complement. In this case it is the term *uf*, trunk, stem or origin, which is designated with a higher value in relation to its 'tip' (*tunaf*) complement.<sup>7</sup> I would argue that the particular application of this dualism in different social contexts provides a basis for Meto collective representations of precedence and the tendency to classify social and political relationships in differentiated or asymmetric terms. 'Trunk and tip' is a particularly instructive dichotomy because of its application across a variety of semantic domains within Meto cultural practice. The metaphor has a wide appeal in Meto society and carries with it a certain privileged valency as one of the primary ways that individuals and groups assert political and social seniority. This is not to say, that 'trunk and tip' represent an eastern Indonesian version of the hierarchical encompassment or unitary value of the Hindu pure/impure variety postulated by Dumont (1980). Rather, 'trunk and tip' needs to be viewed as only one of a number of equally central dual categories that serves to differentiate social relations and which are strongly dependent upon circumstance and context. Precedence in this context emphasizes the diversity of contrasting values which can be brought to bear on social contexts. Exclusion may be sought, but the extant plurality of relevant values in any social context remain dynamically contested and give rise to potential reversals and inversions of the logical categories (see Fox 1989, Platenkamp 1990, Vischer 1996).

Closely related to the formal metaphor of 'trunk and tip' are the associated dual categories of 'trunk and flower' (*uf ma sufan*) and 'trunk and twig' (*uf ma tlaef*). These metaphors express a synonymous kind of marked relationship, but

their application is associated conventionally with slightly different social and ritual contexts. Each of these representations exhibits the same concern with a temporal distinction that also expresses a spatial difference. Trunk and tip and its variants express the existential Meto truth that human relations are inevitably asymmetric in character, relatively unequal yet complementary. In the conduct of social and political life these status differences are also defined and contested on the basis of assertions and acknowledgments to temporal precedence

## The Trunk of Agnation

In exploring the relevance of the tree as a metaphor of social relationships, members of Meto communities recognize at least two types of what might be termed socio-cultural trees. In the following discussion I will describe these arboreal tropes as trees of agnation and trees of alliance. Generally speaking these distinctions are notional collectivities rather than interactive groupings. The distinction is also partial to some extent and involves a certain degree of overlap.<sup>8</sup> However, for heuristic purposes I would distinguish between people who are related through actual or classificatory agnation and others who are aligned through marriage and affinity.

In terms of agnation, all Meto individuals belong to one or another shared name collectivities or *kanaf*. Members of the same *kanaf* share the same name which is ideally perpetuated through the affiliation of children to their father's *kanaf* group.<sup>9</sup> Members of the same *kanaf* also share the same ritual observances and place of origin which, typically in Timor, is associated with one of the prominent limestone outcrops called *fatu*. In formal verse this 'rock and tree' (*fatu ma hau*) of origin constitutes the imputed ancestral beginnings of the *kanaf*.

Another characteristic feature of *kanaf* in west Timor is their dispersal over the Meto landscape. Segments of larger *kanaf* collectivities are found scattered throughout Meto domains usually in combination with other *kanaf* segments in co-resident hamlets. The complex pattern of *kanaf* settlement throughout the region is a consequence of politico-historical factors mediated by the enduring Meto orientation towards arable land for shifting cultivation. One result of this dispersal is that over time people and communities which share the same *kanaf* affiliation may have long since diverged and relinquished any continuing ritual or social ties with one another. In such cases these groups will often nevertheless acknowledge a shared origin by casting their relationship as one of *uf mese*, one trunk or one stem of origin (in Indonesian the equivalent is *satu rumpun*).

In this conception the founding/origin ancestor is considered the trunk (*uf*) and their progeny the twigs (*tlaef*), tips (*tunaf*) and flowers (*sufan*). The collective name group is therefore considered to be a tree (*hau uf mese*: one tree trunk) in which there is an unbroken and organic link to the ancestral 'trunk' father. The emphasis here is upon a male ideology. It is the image of the permanent tree

with its spreading branches representing the divergent agnatic segments of the dispersed *kanaf* group which are linked organically, biologically, to their ancestral origins at the base or trunk.

A further cultural conception of the collective agnatic group is found in the phrase *sufaf ma kauf*. This expression refers to a gender distinction between types of flowers of a tree. *Sufan* (female flowers) and *kauf* (the male flower or part thereof) combine to produce fruit of the 'agnatic' tree. The cognate term *kaum* is often used to refer to the extended family tracing links to putative origin ancestors.

In stressing the importance of origins, this needn't necessarily mean privileging some ancient beginnings. Origin structures in Meto representations can be of relatively short duration and precedence invoked or asserted by proximity to a relatively recent trunk of agnatic origin. One characteristic distinction made in this respect is that between 'before' (*nahun*) and 'after' (*namuin*) in the reckoning of locally contextualized authority. People may speak disparagingly of another's claim to local knowledge or entitlement with the dismissive phrase, 'Ah ... he came later' ( .. *in nem namuin*). Such a statement implies the idea of distance from a trunk or origin or the issue at stake, of only grasping the 'tip' and therefore lacking any authoritative claim.

Similarly, for co-resident *kanaf* segments within a defined region, status distinctions are typically cast in terms of 'younger/elder' (*olif tataf*) which designate birth-order of siblings and classificatory siblings. To be the elder sibling (*tataf*) is to be closer to the origin trunk (*uf*) and the authoritative place of the ancestors. As such there may be a claim to seniority or precedence in terms of *kanaf*, hamlet or domain authority. The precedence here is primarily a temporal one, an antecedence which confers seniority or status (see Schulte Nordholt 1971:395 who reiterates this finely articulated attention to status difference)

In such a conception of affiliation to the ancestral past it seems culturally inappropriate to speak of descent as the mode of agnation. Meto botanical models of agnation are perhaps more productively viewed as ascending systems which place cultural emphasis on temporal and spatial distance from the source of life (Fox 1988). In this regard I note the Meto classificatory kin term for grandchild, *upuf*, and thought this might well refer to an organic connection with or extension of an ancestral trunk. No-one I spoke to agreed with this suggestion, however, although everyone would acknowledge that the relationship between the alternate generations was a special one. Indigenous names (*kan meto*) for example, tend to be passed from the grandparent generation to the newborn and the *upuf* is thought to be inextricably tied to its ancestral trunk. However, linguistically the [f] in the term *upuf* functions as a suffix in generalized reference and is dropped in its spoken address form '*upu*'. It is therefore not cognate with the term, *uf*. Nevertheless, the point remains that one expression of the concept

'trunk and tip' in Meto classification is its application to the name group (*kanaf*) which conjoins generations of agnatically related men and women in an assemblage of shared rights and interests. The former practice of maintaining the hamlet 'birth tree' where the birth by-products of newborn members of the *kanaf* were stored is a visual representation of this metaphorical understanding.

What remains significant in this affirmation of shared *kanaf* origins is the moral authority of the ancestral trunk in relation to the present tip progeny. In an important sense all moral authority in Meto society derives from the ancestral past, or rather, via an appeal to the past conveyed in narrative form.

In speaking of a *kanaf* 'trunk of agnation', a tree of life so to speak, the image also expresses the historical trajectory of the ancestral name from its putative place of origin to the multiple de-centred scatter of contemporary membership. Meto speak of this process of *kanaf* expansion in terms of a continuing movement from the narrow confined lands (*pah malenat*) characterized by discord and dispute, to the broad and wide lands (*pah manuan*) of agricultural plenty and grazing space.<sup>10</sup> Oral records and collective memories of these travels and generational wanderings are maintained through the recitation of formal poetic narratives. These ancestral chants are expressed in a formal parallel speech known as *naton* and recount the heroic and formative episodes of the particular *kanaf* history. A characteristic feature of this oral genre is its topogenic quality. In place of a genealogical recounting of sequentially named ancestors, these narratives typically trace the origins of the *kanaf* spatially as a journey of place names through a landscape (Fox 1995). Named places are markers of events, settlement and points of divergence along this ancestral path of the name (McWilliam 1997).

Another way people describe these narratives is in terms of 'trunk speech' (*uab uf*), 'narratives of origin' which recount the beginnings of the group and among other things, authorize the contemporary legitimacy of territorial claims. Traube (1986), speaking of the neighbouring Mambai people of east Timor, uses the term 'trunk of discourse' for describing a similar narrative concern with origins. It is a concern with carrying the words of the ancestors, the trunk speech (*uab uf*), which confers or at least asserts the legitimacy of place in the branching tips of the contemporary world.<sup>11</sup>

All *kanaf* maintain and reproduce their 'trunk speech', their discourse of origin. However, individual knowledge and capacity to narrate the origin journey of the *kanaf* is restricted. There are two main reasons for this. Within any particular region, certain *kanaf* hold an historically based politico-ritual seniority. These *kanaf* are the representatives of the former indigenous political and ritual leaders of Meto domains. Their privileged narrative perspectives on the past contribute to the prominence accorded one broadly shared narrative discourse into which lesser *kanaf* groups articulate their own positions.

More specifically at the level of individual ability to narrate origins, such skills and knowledge are thought to be bestowed upon select members (usually male, but I have met female chanters) of the *kanaf* as a kind of inspirational gift. The majority of people may only hold a schematic outline of the ‘trunk speech’ and would defer to more knowledgeable seniors. Moreover, the words of origins are considered to be an inheritance from the ancestors and therefore imbued with ancestral sanction. To speak the formal phrases incorrectly or without due regard is therefore potentially dangerous.

Among the diverse properties of this genre of narrative discourse on the past, trunk speech (*uab uf*) asserts a legitimacy of both origins in terms of place, and authority in terms of named *kanaf* groups. At the level of domain, certain canonical oral texts serve as political statements of claim to political leadership; forms of Malinowskian charter that legitimate contemporary political configurations. At more local levels, chanting one’s origin may serve to define rights to contested lands. In either case the veracity of one’s assertion rests upon the linking of precedence in terms of place and political alliance. This narrative linking can be seen in the following segment which, in total, addresses the political order of the former domain of Amanuban in central southern Timor. Here, I simply stress the opening stanza where the speaker begins this segment of the narrative by establishing both a place of origin and a named political ordering;

*Neon apinat neon aklahat* Shining day glowing day<sup>12</sup>

*ma amakau ma enakau* and (honouring) my father and my mother

*nok neno afi neno ahunut* together in those days, the origin days

*fai ahunut ne* the origin nights<sup>13</sup>

*Koli na Toli na Ami na Nope* the Lords — Koli, Toli, Ami, Nope

*na Nuban na Toi* Nuban and Toi

*ambi Klabe Tainlasi* in Klabe, Tainlasi

*Maun nu Niki Nik* ..... Maun nu Niki Niki .....<sup>14</sup>

In most areas of west Timor the existence of the ‘trunk settlement’ (*kua uf*) from which the contemporary *kanaf* segments have dispersed, represents an important focus for orientation in both the political and physical landscape. The ‘old settlement, the old place’ (*kuamnasi balemnasi*), although nowadays largely abandoned and uninhabited, remains the critical link to the ancestral trunk and the origins of Meto personal identity. This linkage is often given as a reason why in many areas, a few households of the contemporary community maintain relatively remote residences in the origin settlements of the group.

## The Tree of Alliance

An alternative representation of trunk and tip is found in Meto notions of marriage and alliance between *kanaf*. As elsewhere in eastern Indonesia and as a recurrent theme in broader Austronesian social constructs, marriage exchange and the creation of affinal alliance relationships between groups has been characterized as a 'flow of life' (Fox 1980). The gifting in marriage of a member of one social group to another in exchange for certain prescribed or negotiated reciprocal gifts and services typically provides the basis for the social and culturally acceptable, biological reproduction of the *kanaf*. Among Meto communities of west Timor, ideally it is women, or rather daughters of the *kanaf* group, who move between agnatically constituted houses (*ume*) in marriage. Women are the source of life for their husband's group and the basis for the continuity of his *kanaf* over time. More particularly it is the inherent fertility of a new wife which is keenly sought as one component of marriage exchange. The movement of a woman to another *kanaf* group in marriage, and by extension the children she will bear, adds to the collective life of her husband's name group.<sup>15</sup> Conversely a woman's marriage also represents separation and a potential loss to her natal group. This is why in some Meto areas of west Timor, the first born child of the new marriage is returned to the woman's family in exchange for the life they relinquished.<sup>16</sup> Frequently too the cost of fulfilling bridewealth obligations may require extended periods of residence with the wife's natal group and the provision of labour and other 'bride' services to secure the formal incorporation of children of the marriage into the father's *kanaf*.

One way Meto characterize *kanaf* relationships between 'givers of life' and 'receivers of life', progenitors and progeny, is as male and female respectively.<sup>17</sup> The gender distinction emphasizes the status asymmetry of the exchange. Those houses which 'give life' are symbolically male (*atoin amonet*) and establish precedence vis-à-vis their categorically female affines (*atoin amafet*) who thereafter commit themselves to a lifelong series of obligations and formal respect. In this indigenous representation 'male' groups engender and procreate 'female' groups in negotiated orders of precedence.

The conduct of marriage exchange also engages what I term a Meto 'tree of alliance'. This is evident in the preparatory exchanges and meetings between the marrying groups which are cast in botanical idiom. In formally requested unions, those said to be conducted in the light of day (*nenopupu*), references are made to the bride as a ripening fruit, a green lemon (*hit leno, hit muke*). This image is developed and elaborated in the main formal exchanges which represent the public expression of the transfer of the bride to the husband's group. In this ceremonial exchange, termed 'the gifting of the old areca and old betel' (*fe puah mnasi manu mnasi*), two sets of prospective affines come together for feasting, ritual exchanges of goods and formal speeches (*naton*). Typically, the formal

meeting of the prospective affines is marked by a mock battle in which the two sides attempt to wrestle their respective gifts from one another. In this faux *mêlée* the bride is represented by an elaborate bamboo framework known as a *skiki*, decorated with sprouted coconuts or areca nuts, as well as various woven baskets and cloths (all conceptually female objects). The symbolism here is fairly transparent as is the objective of the 'wife-takers' in wrenching the *skiki* from the protection of the bride's mother's brothers (*atoin amaf*). In another example I witnessed, the *skiki* was fixed upon a pole that had been smeared with fat and oil and planted in the ground making it slippery and difficult to 'uproot'. The idea of the bride as the fruit of a tree was even more pronounced in this case.

From the perspective of the wife receivers,<sup>18</sup> the wife giving affines are constituted in terms of at least three significant groups who must be acknowledged and who represent the groups to whom they remain indebted during the life of the marriage. The actual number, in fact, will vary with circumstance, but each identified representative group should receive a formal gift which has been determined in consultation prior to the gathering.

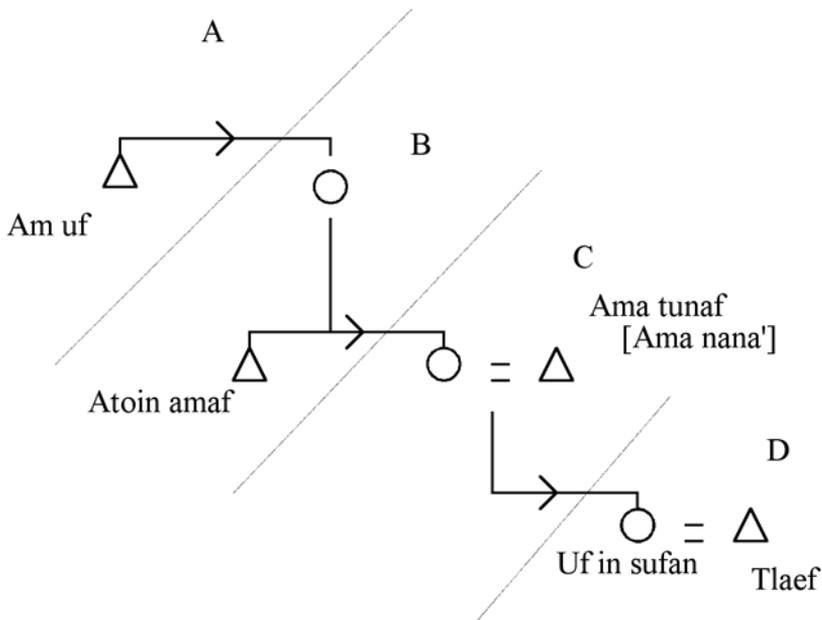
These formal gifts represent an acknowledgment of an ordered series of life giving exchanges which have preceded the new union. The conceptual framework which links these prior exchanges to the present marriage is contained within a relationship of trunk and tip, or more specifically as one between a 'trunk father' group (*am uf*) an original wife-giver, and the 'flower of the trunk' (*uf in sufan*), namely the bride. In this perspective the groom, who becomes known as the *moen feuf* (the new man), is metaphorically said to be a *tlaef*, a small twig, attached to his own named 'tree of origin', or *kanaf*.

Between these markers of extended alliance lie two key affinal groupings. Firstly, the bride's mother's brother, the *atoin amaf* (father people) who is ritually responsible for his sister's children's development and who maintains significant rights in respect to their life cycle transitions.<sup>19</sup>

The second key affinal exchange group focuses upon the bride's father and his male siblings. They are referred to as the *am tunaf* and *ama nana* (inside fathers) respectively. Initially I assumed the term *am tunaf* to mean 'tip father' in distinction to the originating 'trunk fathers' and still feel that this is a consistent interpretation. However, most people with whom I discussed this issue stated that the term '*tunaf*' in this context refers to a stone hearth. Hence the meaning of the phrase is really that of 'hearth' father. This is consistent with the collective ritual phrase describing both the bride's parents as *oe maputu ai melala* (hot water burning flames), where the reference alludes to the process of the bride's birth and the role of the father in maintaining the smouldering fire under the 'roasting' platform (*hal se'it*) used in post-natal heating rituals (McWilliam 1994).

Notwithstanding this mixing of metaphors in the classification of marriage exchange the point remains that one primary indigenous representation of the creation of marriage alliance is the conjoining of trunk and tip/flower. In other words, the gifting of life in marriage is one that implies a kind of planting and prospective fertile growth. Marriage alliance is a kind of tree that must be fertilized in order to grow. That is why barren marriages are thought of as marriages with ‘no stem, no growing tip’ (*kama u kama tunaf*). They simply dry out and die off like their botanical counterparts.<sup>20</sup> An alternative phrase used is marriage ‘without (female) flower and without (male) flower’ (*kana suf ma kana kauf*) meaning in effect that there is no ‘fruit’ forthcoming from the union.

**Figure 1. The tree of alliance**



The ‘tree of alliance’ also engages an order of precedence which is reproduced through the conduct of mutual rights and responsibilities between respective alliance groupings. That a man’s wife’s relatives are socially superior is uncontested. Meto describe this relation in a variety of ways. In one sense they are perceived in terms synonymous with the ruler of the Meto domain. For the blessings of marriage one responds with *tolas* or *ut leot*, forms of harvest gifts offered to the ritual centre. Upon marriage, it is said that a man should not arrive at the house of his *atoin amaf* or *am tunaf* with ‘empty shoulder or empty hand’ (*kanemfa ben luman, kanemfa nim luman*). Young married men may genuinely fear their wife’s father. To speak discourteously of one’s wife’s father, or wife’s mother’s brother, may result in sudden misfortune or illness. These sanctions and conventions all emphasize the main point that, in Meto terms, the movement

of women between *kanaf* in marriage is a gift of life between houses, and for this gift, one paternal house is indebted to another.

An example of this botanical formulation of alliance can be seen in the following segment of ritual speech. These words were offered during the conduct of a formal marriage exchange between two previously allied groups in the mountains of south west Timor. Something of the stylized etiquette of formal speech which characterizes the public conduct of such occasions can also be read in this segment.

.....

*he palmis lek leko* with proper humility  
*ma baisenu lek leko* and proper obeisance  
*neu au ena mahonit neknon* to my cherished mother of life  
*ma ama mahonit neknon* and revered father of life  
*uf tunaf* trunk and tip  
*na kubiok nalalien* have joined together  
*na peniok nalalien* folded together  
*es au baisenu lek leko* so that I beseech properly  
*ma lonaen lek leko* and supplicate properly  
*ma toti manpenit* and ask and obtain  
*mau nahe nau fon nai* that the woven mats be opened  
*ma benon nai* and laid out  
*manbian haek nai* [for] those who are assembled  
*namni nai* and [those] in place  
*manbakus nhake nai* and for the facilities assembled  
*namni nai* and in place  
*henati sut ambi fufuk* so that which is carried on the head  
*ma loit ambi benak* and that carried on the shoulder<sup>21</sup>  
*nanebton ma nasaunton* be taken down and put down  
*es na usikau on i* for my lord in this way  
*tua kau on i.....* my master in this way.....

### **The Grafting of Residence**

If the symbolic gifting of women as brides in marriage creates the basis for affinal precedence between marrying groups, it is the relative residential location of the exchange groups which helps enact that precedence in local places.

Precedence is not an abstract quality or status but a binding claim on practical services and obligations. Its enactment in local contexts is the consequence of certain marriage outcomes mediated by place.

I have introduced this section with a botanical allusion of grafted residence. In fact the Meto have no traditional practices associated with grafting, nor do they use the metaphor to describe social process. Strictly speaking it is only in the relatively rare occasions of 'marrying-in' (*kaib natam*) when a man upon marriage is fully incorporated into his wife's *kanaf*, that a process akin to grafting might be said to occur. From my point of view, however, the notion well expresses the spirit of Meto hamlet development and dynamics. Here we need to understand the process of classification of households within Meto hamlets and something of the political strategies employed to secure precedence and status.

All Meto hamlets, or *kuan*, be they a small family cluster of closely related houses or larger settlements of several dozen houses, recognize three broad categories of people. The first category is a senior name group segment (*kanaf*) which represents simultaneously, the central political leadership of the hamlet, the senior land custodian and, typically, the contemporary senior agnates of the founding name group of the hamlet, that is the trunk (*uf*) of the place. Collectively this cluster of houses is referred to as the *kua tuaf* (hamlet boss or lord).

A second significant grouping is households of the hamlet that represent a union between daughters of the *kua tuaf* house, and in-marrying men, that is, men who reside in their immediate wife-giver's hamlet. These houses, affinal allies of the *kua tuaf*, are known as *atoin asaot* (marrying people). In return for placing themselves under the political authority of their wife-givers, these affinal houses gain access to arable land in the vicinity of the hamlet. They are said to 'eat' from the *kua tuaf* and in return offer political and ritual support.

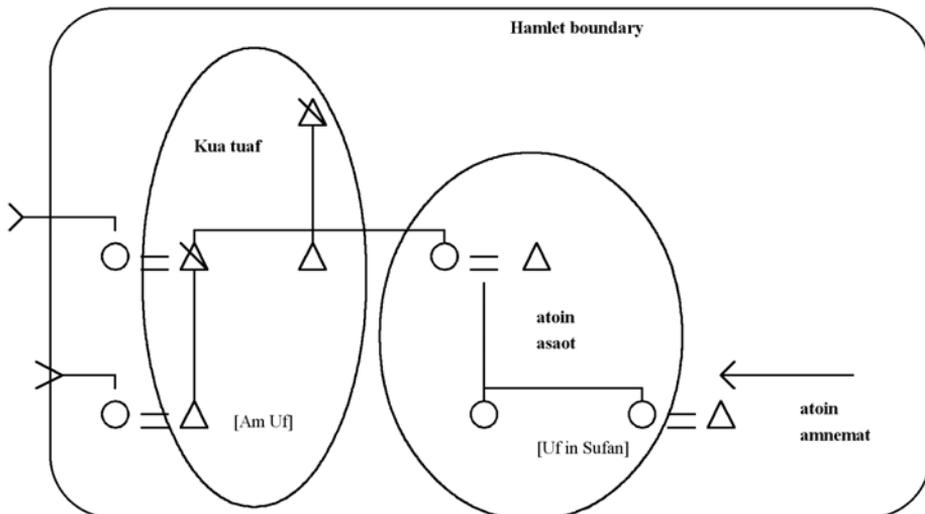
A third notional category of resident is what is termed the *atoin anao amnemat* (lit., the people who come and go). These people are strangers to the extent that they have not yet secured an affinal alliance with settled residents of the hamlet. In this respect their social position is somewhat peripheral or marginal to the hamlet. Their right of access to land may become tenuous in the absence of any local marriage alliance. Significantly these people are also spoken of as having 'no stem, no tip' (*kama u kama tunaf*). Like 'barren' households they have no grounded fertility to enable them to prosper.<sup>22</sup>

In this threefold division of the community, which in terms of relative numbers can vary enormously between settlements, marriage exchange becomes one important strategy to secure and promote relative precedence vis-à-vis other households in the community. In this respect I would highlight two aspects of these relations.

Settlement endogamy is relatively common in Meto regions and for the majority of individuals the direction of marriage exchange between houses has little bearing on the structural precedence of community. Over time continuing exchange relations may result in alliance relationships being described as *feto mone* (female male), meaning they recognize a relative equality of status at a generalized level while still marking precedence at the level of individual exchange.

This is not the case for the senior *kua tuaf* group, or more specifically for the senior house of the senior *kanaf* in the settlement which represents the ‘head of the settlement’ (*kuan in a nakan*). In order for this house to maintain its position at the apex of a general order of precedence within the community, and as the trunk house of the settlement, it must seek wives from outside the settlement. This is because to marry within would place the senior house in a debt of life to one of its wife-receiving affines and political subordinates. Such outcomes are widely avoided for the ambiguity of authority they bring, but if unavoidable such outcomes can lead to bitter social divisions within the community.<sup>23</sup> My point, however, is that the position of *kua tuaf* at the local level, and by extension the political heads of indigenous Meto domains (*pah tuaf*), make use of the botanical idiom and image of trunk and tip in the construction and reproduction of precedence. To remain the trunk and source of authority requires conscious strategies of particular alignments and alliance.

**Figure 2. Hamlet formation**



Newcomers and relatively recent arrivals over one or two generations are typically positioned at the periphery of these orders of precedence. To secure land access and the obligatory social networks of reciprocity these individuals need to marry into established *kanaf* groups of the settlement.

The idiom adopted is the tree of alliance with the *kua tuaf* often taking the role of the *am uf* (trunk father) or mother's mother's brother. As one man put it to me in the context of his house's political relationship with the *kua tuaf* of the settlement and simultaneously the senior political house of the domain (*pah tuaf*), 'We marry the flowers of the trunk, sir' (*haim kabin nok uf in sufan, pah tuan*). In doing so the central origin group of the settlement, like a large spreading tree, serves as a protective 'canopy and shade' (*aneot am ahafot*) for the subsidiary houses which shelter beneath.

## Concluding Comments in Comparative Context

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that the inclination to cast social processes in botanical idioms is a pervasive and underlying orientation throughout eastern Indonesia. In this concluding section it may be instructive to make some comparative remarks on the general relationship between botanical ideas, notably trunk and tip or its variants, and orders of precedence as a strategic concern. I would add that this is not a comprehensive survey. It merely offers some exploratory comments on the scope and character of precedence in a botanical idiom.

Even a partial review of the ethnographic literature reaps a rich reward in terms of reported indigenous botanical imagery. An early example of work on indigenous metaphor is Fox's paper on Roti (1971) where the 'mother's brother of origin' grows the seed of his sister's children and provides a nurturing ritual supervision throughout their life. In a later reference, one Rotinese Dengka man remarked to Fox;

We men here are like a tree with one trunk but three roots; the main root is our father of birth. The second root, our mother's brother of origin, the third root our mother's mother's brother of origin. As long as a person lives, these three roots cannot be done away with for they are our path of life (1980:118).

I have not heard Meto individuals speak specifically of origins in terms of roots (*ba'an*) but the sentiment expressed here is highly resonant with a Meto outlook on social life.

A somewhat different but equally compelling view has been recorded by Platenkamp in writing of Tobelo society in Halmahera. The Tobelo are a non-Austronesian language community with decidedly Austronesian cultural expressions. In his lengthy study which, in part, analyses an elaborate utilization

of botanical imagery, we find a version of the familiar notion that ‘the male children hold the stem, the fruit/flower they can give away’ (Platenkamp 1988:62). Among the Tobelo, daughters of the agnatic ‘*fam*’ are given out or rather, ‘planted’, in marriage as conceptual fruit/flowers. This process creates a new stem from the marriage fruit. Hence ‘stems relate to other stems asymmetrically...one represents the giver of “life” and the other the [new] stem that has generated from that gift’ (Platenkamp 1988:64). In this way an order of precedence between stems is created because the life giving stem gives existence to the life receiving fruit/stem.

A variation on the same theme can be read in Grimes (1993:169). Writing on the indigenous Austronesian communities of Buru island in Moluccas, she notes that ‘prosperity and blessing are framed in terms of “roots” (*lahin*) and leaf tips (*luken*)’ and that this metaphor ‘labels a relation of cause and effect’. One of her conclusions in this study of Buru ‘metaphors for living’, is that ‘precedence creates categories that are asymmetric in that superiority is placed on that which came “before” — elder is superior to younger, source (that is, root) is superior to tip’ (1993:184).

For the Mambai of east Timor, the critical botanical categories are *fu* and *lau*, trunk and tip. In a detailed exposition Traube explores relations between Mambai notions of trunk and tip which are conceived of as both a product and a process. ‘Trunks come before the branching tips they support, and the multiple usages of *fu* and *lau* work simultaneously to temporalize space and spatialize time’ (1989:326).

Even in eastern Indonesian societies where alternative relational categories are more prominent in indigenous exegesis, botanical imagery is strongly evident. The Makassae community of eastern Timor have an ideology that represents the ‘flow of life’ primarily as an exchange of procreative fluids (Forman 1980). However, as Forman notes, a descent group (*sala fu*) is composed of a core of agnates who trace their connections to a founding ancestor who ‘planted’ the house. For Makassae, the progenitors are *oma rahe*, the house that spreads its branches like a shade tree for their progeny (*tufu mala* — little sisters or sister’s child) (ibid.:156).

Similarly among the Lewotala communities of the Larantuka region, eastern Flores, the flow of procreative blood is the predominant idiom of alliance and affiliation, but notwithstanding this emphasis local communities value highly a marriage with the ‘squash seed bean seedling’ (*besi kulun ulan era*). This type of marriage represents the closure of an asymmetric cycle of marriage exchange in which the (female) affinal seed which was given out in marriage is returned to the progenitor source (*puken*).<sup>24</sup> As Graham puts it, ‘So the seeds which stem from clan sisters are gathered, then germinate to reproduce life for the clan which is their source’ (1991:139).<sup>25</sup>

Stated in general terms we might conclude on the basis of this brief review that the conduct and reproduction of social relations in eastern Indonesia is a form of gardening by another name. Life giving trees, by definition generations old and continuing, are the source of fertile seeds/fruits which are transplanted to others who reap a harvest of new life and ensure the development of their own ancestral trees. In this forest of social relations the transfer of life engages obligations and establishes recursive patterns of precedence which are reflected in differential status.

This is not to say that a botanical casting of precedence produces predictable or largely identical social forms and practice. On the contrary, precedence is dynamic process, context dependent and usually contested. Any integrative or ordering authority inherent in the principle of precedence typically rests upon a negotiated and temporary consensus. As Schulte Nordholt has commented on Meto classification but the point remains valid for the wider region, 'time and again people rely on a few basic relations but every time they do this they create new configurations if only by construing relationships in several ways' (1980:247). In other words the tree of precedence in eastern Indonesia might be thought of as a taxonomic family of trees within which speciation produces sometimes exotic varieties in different circumstances.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am aware of the argument that natural objects do not function as metaphors for social processes because social relations are experienced as natural (Bloch 1992:130). My comment here is that the language of trunk and tip is that of the botanic and Meto do not confuse people with trees (see also Rival 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Also referred to in the literature as Atoni, Atoni pah meto, Dawan and Vaikeno (in the East Timor enclave, Oecussi-Ambeno). Meto comprise the predominant ethno-linguistic population in west Timor numbering around 750,000 people. The majority are smallholder farmers cultivating maize and secondary food crops. Domesticated livestock production forms an important component of rural economies, and seasonal off-farm labouring provides significant cash flow for many impoverished families.

<sup>3</sup> There is also an allusion here to the ceremonial gifts of banana and sugar cane which are presented to the groom's family at the completion of the central marriage rituals as an explicit gift of provision for the journey home with the new bride.

<sup>4</sup> I acknowledge the logical counterpoint here that in one sense 'trunk and tip' is a simultaneous relation, existing in a contemporaneous mode. One cannot have trunks without tips and vice versa. My point however, refers to the biologically derivative character of tips vis-à-vis trunks and the idea of proximity to an origin or starting point.

<sup>5</sup> The term *olin* means 'younger sibling' and represented the counterpart of the 'living' infant.

<sup>6</sup> Today these headhunting cult trees have been emptied of their skulls and stand as a mute testimony to the ceremonial violence of the past. According to older residents, many of the skulls were destroyed under Japanese orders during their occupation of Timor during World War Two.

<sup>7</sup> The term *uf* is a metathesized version of common Austronesian variants for trunk or origin such as *hu, fu, pu* (Fox 1995).

<sup>8</sup> An example of overlap is the instance of FZD MBS son marriage exchange which is permissible in terms of the symmetric kin terminology and is classified as a valued marriage path (*fe lanan, moen lanan*). Such marriages have the logical effect of marrying within the 'agnatic tree of relation' in my terms. They belong to the same 'tree trunk' (*hau uf mese*). This may be one reason why such marriage unions are not favoured in Meto ideals while MBD, FZS unions are sought. The latter represent a union of two distinct 'trees of affiliation'.

<sup>9</sup> Actual jural authority over children depends upon marriage outcomes and negotiation. Children may be affiliated with their mother's *kanaf* group in certain circumstances. The conventional ideal, however, privileges paternal affiliation.

<sup>10</sup> Choices for continued expansion to underpopulated and forested areas are fast declining on Timor. For many communities the reality is a downward spiral of soil depletion and low crop yields leading to increased exploitation of marginal country and poverty. Opportunities for transmigration beyond the island to West Papua and Sulawesi Tenggara have been pursued by Meto farmers during the late New Order period of government.

<sup>11</sup> An alternative term is *lais nu'un* or *lais nu'uf* which is used in a variety of ways to mean issues concerned with high rock outcrops, group origins and sacred/spirit places.

<sup>12</sup> An honorific which has the sense of extending respect.

<sup>13</sup> Fox (1995) has suggested that the word *nahun* may well represent a variation on the idea of 'trunk' (*uf*) with its connotation of origin /originator. Similarly the term *afi unu* is also cognate with a notion of trunk or origin time.

<sup>14</sup> The naming of a region by four points or places is a common feature of formal narrative discourse. The ritual centre mentioned here is better known simply as Niki Niki which was the residence of the former raja of Amanuban, the *kanaf* Nope.

<sup>15</sup> This is literally true in the sense that new lives are created, but also refers to the vitality or life force (*smanaf*) that the new wife brings to the collectivity of the husband's name group. In 'traditional' terms maintaining the collective '*smanaf*' of the name group, which included the ancestors, was a vital concern.

<sup>16</sup> Such return 'gifts of life' are based on voluntary agreements and not formalized arrangements as in other well documented areas of eastern Indonesia (see for example Graham 1991 for eastern Flores; and Francillon 1967 and Therik 2004 for the *mata musan* institution among the Tetun of central Timor). The decision is at times made reluctantly by parents.

<sup>17</sup> The classification of 'wife-takers' as female is also related to the understanding that children of the marriage are regarded as de facto 'female' (*feto*) members of the wife-giving group and constitute one of the highly favourable female marriage partners for sons of the original wife-giver's name group (that is, matrilineal cross-cousin marriage).

<sup>18</sup> I am conscious that this characterization of marriage as wife-giver/wife-receiver relations tends to obscure women's agency in the marriage process. Marriage is of course an emotionally charged process where choices, intentions and understandings among all participants is complexly variable. Here I simply seek to highlight a particular cultural representation of marriage that undoubtedly reflects a male bias.

<sup>19</sup> Not infrequently the *atoin amaf* takes the role of the 'trunk father' (*am uf*). In part this may be due to the difficulty of deciding upon the appropriate 'origin wife-giver'. Disputes over the correct representative can occur between competing claimants. Political considerations and questions of proximity may also play a part.

<sup>20</sup> In such cases the dissolution of the marriage would be possible without recrimination. Alternatively, as part of the explicit notion that marriage is a gifting of fertility and life, a man may justifiably seek to marry one of his wife's younger sisters in the hope of securing children.

<sup>21</sup> The speaker here is clearly referring to female and male guests. The verb *sut(ae)* is one conventionally used in reference to women carrying goods on their heads. Similarly it is men who carry goods and prestations on their shoulders.

<sup>22</sup> The phrase has a generic appeal and I have heard it used by women speaking disparagingly about the fortunes of their men-folk with money. Nothing tends to come of it.

<sup>23</sup> One exception to this is the case where households associated by *kanaf* with political leadership of the domain or wider territory find themselves in a subordinate political position vis-à-vis an existing *kua tuaf*. It is possible for this relationship to be reversed through marriage exchange to bring the local authority structure in line with the wider political order, but many factors may come into play in such circumstances.

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<sup>24</sup> In local terms this relation is still described as 'following the blood'.

<sup>25</sup> See also Lewis (1988:215) writing on the Ata Tana Ai in adjacent Sikka Regency who speak of *mula puda* exchange as one of replanting the ancestral mother in the clan of origin.