

## Who Owns the World? Recognizing the Repressed Small Gods of Southeast Asia

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Throughout the past century Christian highlanders in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, have engaged in a quiet symbolic struggle with missionaries over the nature of their region's "small gods." Western missionaries insisted that the spirit "owners" [*pue*] and deified ancestor spirits [*anitu*] of their indigenous cosmology be consigned to a category of malicious devils or satans [*seta*]. For many Tobaku people, however, these spirits remained the owners of particular local resources. Some were their historical forbearers. In their capacity as owners and sometimes punishing guardians of land and custom, small gods oversaw communities' moral propriety. Outsiders' initiatives to deny small gods became, in practice, a path to denigrate highlanders' cultural heritage, ethical pathways to adulthood, and systems of explanatory coherence. Theological policing by missionaries posed material and existential threats, endangering familiar guardians of ritual transactions and ethical mores among Christian converts.

This chapter begins with a fundamental question raised by the tension between Protestant clerics' effort to suppress small gods and Indonesian

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converts' continued reliance upon them: Why do so many Southeast Asian people still describe small gods as part of the Christian God's cosmic plan? In other words, what do local small gods do for many communities that bigger, trans-national gods like the Christian God cannot? To address this question, the sections below examine contexts in which a variety of Southeast Asian groups retain an enduring association with small gods, using the small gods' historic position as owners to address present-day problems.

I draw on my fieldwork data of small gods as owners among Tobaku Protestants in Sulawesi to illuminate comparative cases in other regions, as well as recent phenomena such as the revival of tradition in Indonesia. I end with an analysis of copyright law among Desa' weavers in West Kalimantan, where arts and crafts producers view themselves not as authorial owners but rather as authorized vehicles of tradition who turn to small gods such as ancestral spirits, rather than intellectual property law, for their moral legitimization. The recent cases extend and complicate our understanding of how and why small gods endure within Christian communities. They show small gods not as vestigial cultural phantoms, but rather as intellectual resources for contemporary moral engagement and creative local politics.

A host of small beings created big dilemmas for colonial-era Protestant missionaries, who claimed to replace an absence of religion in Indonesia with godly Christianity. Their definitional struggles offer a fruitful entrée to reexamining discourses about syncretism and dichotomies between the natural and supernatural. This reexamination leads us to a larger conversation about ordinary Southeast Asian worldviews and the contemporary socioeconomic contexts in which small gods are found relevant. Key examples include advocacy for ethnic minority rights through appeals to tradition, protection from community land alienation, and indigenous claims about authority over traditional intellectual property and resources through privileged relationships to spirits.

### THE VALUE OF SMALL GODS FOR SMALL PEOPLE

Shaw and Stewart have reframed Western portrayals of syncretism as thought-provoking contestations in the politics of purification by agents of Christian orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> They provide a framework to analyze religious

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<sup>1</sup>Shaw and Stewart, "Introduction," 6–8.

boundary defenses and the often tacit local resistance to colonial hegemony. But the contemporary socioeconomic conditions and rationales that bind Christians to their traditional spiritual allies often remain little documented and theorized. Data from my Indonesian fieldwork reveal the high stakes of retaining certain small gods who legitimate particular locals' authority, which in turn prompted missionaries' compromises as well as campaigns to engulf small gods within localized Christian cosmologies. Using historical documents, ethnographic examples from fieldwork in Indonesia (1980s to 2011), and comparative examples from elsewhere in Southeast Asia, I argue that small gods are constructed as owners and guardians of local knowledge and resources, which makes them irrepressible irritants to Christian theological orthodoxy and capitalist modes of resource alienation through private property ownership. Small gods emerge and endure as allies of small people, meaning those living in small-scale or marginalized communities.

As Ostling contends, the contemporary presence of irregular Christian ideas and practices, suggesting the "survival" of indigenous ideas, does not offer a precise view of pre-Christian cosmology and practice.<sup>2</sup> Rather, indigenous variations hint at material and sociological continuities that encourage local inferences from what is inevitably a partially unseen, inconsistent, changing, and uncertain universe. In recent decades, disenchantment efforts by Christian missionaries and indigenous clergy, which aim to liberate uneducated people from their alleged fear of pagan spirits, often seem undermined and counterbalanced by the familiarity, ethical comforts, and autonomy that small gods provide in contemporary social, political and economic contexts.

To comprehend and recognize the continued significance of small gods to many present-day Southeast Asian communities, it is useful, first, to contextualize these spirits within broader local visions of cultural and cosmological coherence; and second, to place local narratives about spirits and their (dis)pleasure with human behavior in relation to present-day threats to community autonomy and political revivals of tradition.<sup>3</sup> Such contextualization renders intelligible the invocation of small gods to defend highlanders' communities from outsiders' efforts to alienate local lands or expertise.

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<sup>2</sup> See Ostling's Introduction, this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Becker and Yengoyan, *Imagination*; Henley and Davidson, "Introduction," 1–5, 38–42.

Among other services, small gods help keep ownership local. An example from my fieldwork that I explore further below revolves around the following question: If local spirits and ancestors are the true owners of the land and the originators of all “traditional knowledge,” how can any living member of the community sell that land or knowledge as alienable property to outsiders? By bringing such profound questions to consciousness, small gods present powerful witnesses and supporters of community interests in the face of outsider-driven developments.

Such questions are not simply political or economic, however. What makes them doubly powerful is the way they emerge from the everyday actions and language of rationales that Michael Lambek has termed “ordinary ethics.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically, inferences about what deities expect, and who has authority over what behavior, emerge from ordinary local ideas about local social relations, negotiated access to resources, and cosmological knowledge transmission. It was into this deep forest of ideas and relationality that Victorian-era British Salvation Army missionaries unwittingly stepped when they journeyed to the Dutch East Indies island then known as The Celebes, now called Sulawesi.

### SULAWESI’S SALVATION ARMY MISSION AND THE ATTEMPTED PURGE OF SMALL GODS

The first British Salvation Army missionaries who arrived in western Central Sulawesi, to proselytize highlanders such as the Tobaku, claimed in mission reports that they were making “religion where there was no religion before.”<sup>5</sup> The ministers were motivated to travel halfway around the world in the late 1800s and early 1900s to bring Gospel to people described as primitive headhunters. Although missionary leaders justified proselytization and their need for monetary contributions from European congregations by claiming that the natives had no gods, they in fact expended considerable effort to eradicate natives’ veneration of local deities and spirits.

Missionary families made painstaking journeys through the rainforest to deliver sermons, set up mission outposts, translate Bible stories, and

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<sup>4</sup>Lambek, “Introduction,” 1–4.

<sup>5</sup>Aragon “Reorganizing the Cosmology,” 356; Aragon, *Fields of the Lord*, 127.

sponsor village-wide exorcisms and conversions. Becoming the sudden beneficiaries of Dutch colonial attention and European mission resources that funded the first primary schools and health clinics, most highland communities in the area gradually converted to Protestantism between the 1920s and the 1942 Japanese Occupation. By the 1980s, Tobaku people even described themselves as “fanatic Christians” [*Kristen fanatic*]. The claim was heartfelt. It also assured the world of highlanders’ zealous commitment to a monotheistic world religion, which was in accord with independent Indonesia’s state policies against Communism and for modernity.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the small gods of Central Sulawesi’s indigenous cosmology did not just disappear as the early missionaries wished. The Dutch Reformed Protestant missionary Albertus Kruyt worked with a linguist named Nicolaus Adriani, documenting many named indigenous deities and tried to describe local ideas of motile soul elements and animistic forces, which Kruyt termed “personal soulstuff” [*persoonlijke zielestof*].<sup>7</sup> Kruyt and his European colleagues found most local spirits and small gods puzzling and their pantheon inchoate.<sup>8</sup> There were “lords” or “owner” gods called *pue*’, which each seemed to have a sphere of control such as trees (uncut forests), rice (agricultural fields), bodies of water (rivers and lakes), the skies (weather), or even disease (specifically, smallpox). Notice the parallel with European ideas of feudal “lords” overseeing land tenure. Sulawesi highlanders emphasized a genealogical connection, specifying ancestors as owners, rather than a class-based one. The local term for owners [*pue*’] was the same as the kinship term for ascending grandparents and great-grandparents in some regional languages [*pue*’, Da’a Kaili].

Kruyt decided that the Christian God, which he glossed and capitalized as *Pue*’ or “Lord” or “Owner,” should be associated with the indigenous Owner of the Skies or Heavens [*pue*’ *langi*’]. Jesus would be called “*Pue*’ *Jesus*,” meaning “Lord (or Owner) Jesus.” The other spirits or small gods would be dispensed with by lumping them into the category of evil spirits or Satan [*seta*], an Arabic cognate term that was

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<sup>6</sup>Aragon, *Fields*, 27–28.

<sup>7</sup>Kruyt, *Het Animisme*, 1–2, 66–68.

<sup>8</sup>Aragon, *Fields*, 163–175.

already known from trade contacts with Muslim converts who resided in Sulawesi's coastal towns.

In addition to the owner gods, Central Sulawesi highlanders described a category of deified ancestral spirits [*anitu*] and a somewhat amorphous group of trickster spirits, angry souls, and dangerous forest monsters. Foreign missionaries deemed Tobaku people's narratives about encounters with the recently deceased [*kao*'] and with dangerous forest beings (such as the mischievous *tau lero* and the placenta-eating *pontiana*'—the vengeful soul of a woman who died in childbirth) to be delusion at best, superstition at worst. The early European missionaries simply classified all the local spirits and deities, below the introduced slots of God and Jesus, as Satans. They then decreed that these small gods should no longer be addressed or provided food offerings—formerly routine activities. In sermons, the missionaries and local clerics urged indigenous converts to banish Satans from their lives and pray only to the Christian God.

Nevertheless, there remained some thoroughly Christian categories in which most small gods could reside, hide, and endure: devils, ghosts, and hell. The small gods that foreign missionaries called ghosts or evil spirits persisted in local Sulawesi narratives. After funerals that afforded only paltry family contributions, anxious surviving relatives often would hear their deceased loved ones enter the house in the middle of the night to moan or complain with displeasure. The living kin would reply that it was not their fault. It was invariably the fault of this or that other relative, living elsewhere. Relations between living and dead continued.

Similarly, when a villager's dire sickness did not respond to treatment, elders would infer that the patient, or an immediate relative, was guilty of a familiar trespass, such as moving a rice field border marker to her or his advantage.<sup>9</sup> Such acts were known to anger the "owners of the land," spirits who surely had sent the sickness as punishment. In my observation, the well-tutored indigenous minister would emphasize that God was the one who recognized human sins and oversaw all earthly punishments; Salvation Army ministers routinely scolded congregations to stop petitioning the old gods and ghosts.<sup>10</sup> To local people, however, distinctions regarding sources—whether God or the local deities—seemed

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 223.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 236–239.

moot. The logic of punishment for social transgression and the criteria for proper ethical adult behavior were deemed identical.

In my analysis, all Tobaku small gods can be defined systematically by what they do or do not own.<sup>11</sup> The *pue'* gods are owners of earthly resources such as land, trees, and water; the *anitu* ancestor spirits are owners or leaders of living kindreds; and the various malicious spirits that everyone now calls *seta* are dangerous precisely because they own nothing. They thus seek to take resources or even human life in the form of flesh and blood from the living.

But what makes “small gods” still seem logical, desirable, and irrepressible to contemporary Sulawesi highlanders, most of whom are enthusiastic Protestants and do not wish to resist the teachings of either past or present-day Indonesian ministers? I suggest that it was not just the clever reclassification of all their small gods and dangerous forest spirits into a Christian category that has kept them viable under the foreign supervisory radar. Rather, it is their continued conceptual usefulness on many practical fronts, including familiar explanations for accidental misfortunes.

Whereas Protestant clerics often blamed victims of calamity as sinners in the eyes of God, the irrepressible *seta* were deemed by locals to be responsible for many misfortunes among the blameless. Sometimes, it was said, an innocent person was just unlucky and ran into a forest monster by coincidence. In addition, highlanders know well how to approach and petition small gods with brief family-level rituals and food offerings. These acts require no special coordination with church officials who must be paid for their ministrations. In this way, the spirits that support health and well-being remain widely understood as more accessible than the distant Almighty Christian God who, just like a king or president, would hardly seem to know and care about some less-than-wealthy highlanders on the Indonesian periphery. Highlanders feel confident that if the big politicians and Gods did care for and transact with them directly, the costs would be more onerous.

Ultimately, the pioneering European missionaries and their successors failed to banish the spirit owners, deified ancestors, and numerous other place-based spirits or Satans. For many Tobaku people, these beings were known as their powerful helpmates and age-old agents of the universe.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 173.

Many Tobaku I met described them to me as an obvious part of the Christian God's cosmic plan, just like the flora and fauna of their mountain forests. Small gods were seen as ancient local beings who aided God by working to support the now-Christian village's well-being and standards of moral propriety. Before going further, then, a broader discussion of Southeast Asian cosmologies is warranted to illustrate three recurring principles that guide all gods, including small ones.

### THREE COSMOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

Three observations concerning Southeast Asian ideological systems, which to my knowledge have never been linked, illuminate small gods' dynamism while highlighting sparks of tension between local and European Christian cosmologies: Southeast Asian cosmologies operate on a model of center and periphery, a tripartite layering of the cosmos, and a concept of power as homogeneous, pervasive, and fixed in amount. European missionaries' limited success in eliminating small gods is illuminated by the first of these: a widespread Southeast Asian adoption of ideas related to what Stanley Tambiah termed "galactic polities" and Oliver Wolters termed "mandalas" or "court centers."<sup>12</sup> These were early Southeast Asian Hindu-Buddhist political centers, whose diffuse and radiating political power diminished with distance. Most important for the present discussion, the macrocosmic world of nature is seen as parallel with the microcosmic political system, and vice versa. Although most Indonesian highlanders remained distant from Hindu-Buddhist officialdom, many rites use emblematic mandala imagery, such as the differently colored rice offerings that Sulawesi groups set at each cardinal direction of a house or other ritual space. The general worldview that equates cosmic protection and political power is observed across various religions, regions, and scales of Southeast Asian societies, as exemplified by Nicola Tannenbaum's research on Shan Buddhists in Thailand.<sup>13</sup>

Despite European missionary efforts to cast local spirits as useless, many Southeast Asians observe that lower-status deities—much like low-level political officials—are the most approachable and successfully petitioned for help. The isomorphism that is recognized between political

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<sup>12</sup>Tambiah, "Galactic Polities"; Wolters, *History, Culture*, 32.

<sup>13</sup>Tannenbaum, *Who Can Compete*, 1–20.

and divine bureaucracies is a framework through which Southeast Asians maintain that “small people”—rural village people, the urban proletariat, and ethnic minorities—*need* small gods.

This argument is well illustrated by an incident recalled in the memoir of Pascal Khoo Thwe, a Burmese highlander of the Padaung Kayan, a Red Karen subgroup.<sup>14</sup> Thwe relates that although his village, under his grandparents’ leadership, converted to Roman Catholicism, everyone continued to pay ritual respects to their butterfly-shaped guardian spirits [*Yaula*]. In the following passage, he describes the local negotiation and perceived relative merits of adhering to both faiths. A key point illustrated by the passage is the way Southeast Asian deity hierarchies are envisioned as functioning like local political bureaucracies. He writes:

Our *Yaula* [guardian spirit] ceremonies might sometimes be performed to remember our dead, and to cherish the lives of the living. When that happened a thanksgiving Mass would very likely be celebrated as well. The Church did not ban the animist ceremony, but we had to perform it discreetly and with mutual respect. We reconciled the two approaches by believing that while the traditional ceremony worked more quickly, the Christian ritual was an excellent guarantee for the long term.

My grandmother had her own way of reconciling the two faiths. She would kill a chicken, slitting its throat and offering its blood as a libation to the spirits of the farm after each Mass of thanksgiving. The priest told her that it was unnecessary to do that because the Mass had already pleased the highest God. But Grandma had her own reasons: “The gods are like government officials. If you want things done quickly, you have to bribe the small ones.”<sup>15</sup>

The quote clearly illustrates two sensible reasons why so many Southeast Asian peoples refuse to extirpate their small gods. First, it can never hurt to appease all possible gods, just in case they have different points of efficacy. Second, just like the big political bosses in the national capital, no distant High God is likely to care about them as much, or be nearly as accessible, as their own deceased kin and place-based spirits. Clearly, the innumerable beings now called Satans are interpreted in different ways

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<sup>14</sup>Thwe, *From the Land*. The former nation of Burma is now renamed Myanmar.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

by ministers and local Sulawesi highlanders. They persist among congregants because many small gods realize and defend the distributed, often negotiable, authority structures of kinship, reciprocity, and ownership rights that Southeast Asian highlanders understand and adhere to. As Kirsch notes in his assessment of plural belief systems among Zambian Christians, deities may appear to gain or lose power and presence in people's lives over time and are not necessarily equally helpful for every human problem.<sup>16</sup>

A second cosmological connection worth noting is the widespread existence of tripartite cosmologies in Southeast Asia. Cosmic layering of Upper, Middle, and Lower Worlds are reported in numerous Southeast Asian ethnographies, regional tales, and indigenous documents. These include Sulawesi's "La Galigo" epic (where Upper and Lower World deities traverse ladders to the Middle World to mate with human culture heroes); Balinese calendars (which illustrate the astrological influences of Upper and Lower Worlds on Middle-World humans each day, week, and year); and spectacular rites such as the Balinese Eka Dasa Rudra (where once a century, Hindu priests supported by lay people seek to recombine and rebalance the elements of all three worlds through island-wide ritual activities).<sup>17</sup>

The tripartite Southeast Asian cosmos also is spatially visualized and materially indexed in widespread three-level architectural plans.<sup>18</sup> Demons, serpents, and other beasts belong below the house among the bottom pilings or foundation. Deified ancestors and sky gods inhabit the upper, roof zone, the place where house elders store their heirlooms and other treasures. Humans mostly reside in between the upper and lower spirit zones on the middle floor of the house.

Note that the technique by which European Christian missionaries coped with Southeast Asian small gods was to place them geographically into the Christian meta-cosmology of an analogous tripartite universe: heaven, earth, and hell. God, Jesus, and the souls they save occupy heaven, while Satan and the damned occupy hell—a location to which the missionaries also condemned most small gods. According to local Indonesian narratives, though, it seems that important and beneficial

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<sup>16</sup>Kirsch, "Restaging the Will," 700.

<sup>17</sup>Lansing, *The Balinese*, 117–121; Abrams, "Three Worlds."

<sup>18</sup>Waterson, *Living House*, 52.

small gods refuse to go there. Highlanders do not think their prominent ancestral spirits deserve to be banished to hell. They are understood instead to inhabit the upper world as servants of God, and both are associated symbolically with the high and semi-sacred roof zones of the house.

The third cosmological connection worth noting begins with Ben Anderson's well-known analysis of Javanese ideas of power. Anderson asserts that, for the Javanese, there is a fixed amount of homogeneous and natural but invisible power in the universe.<sup>19</sup> This model of power opens up our view of small gods' dynamic potential, even as it points to the common misrecognition of Southeast Asians' deities or layered universe as "supernatural." As I argue elsewhere, the natural-supernatural dichotomy that is assumed to be universal by most adherents of Abrahamic religions makes little sense to Indonesians who see cosmic power, as Anderson describes, as uniform in type yet in flux with respect to its distribution at any given time.<sup>20</sup> Indonesian cosmic power, termed *sumanga'* or a similar cognate in various Indonesian languages, is similar to the energetic and efficacious power called *mana* in Polynesia.

With Anderson's vision in mind, we can see that Southeast Asian small gods are just as natural as the trees and water that they often are said to own. Similarly, the small gods are just as natural and real as the Christian God and Jesus, beings in whom the missionaries are happy for Indonesian highlanders to believe as real, albeit supernatural. If all deities in highland Southeast Asia usually dwell in unseen and unlikely to be seen (yet natural and real) territories, this is not understood as qualitatively different than other unusual but natural facts; for example, that I visited Sulawesi first from the United States in the 1980s via an airplane. The United States was then a fantastical place that no one in my fieldwork community had ever visited. Yet my narratives, and those of others, made it a natural fact. In short, homogenous and fixed-sum notions of power in Southeast Asia challenge us to place small gods in ongoing reciprocal relationships with political leaders, big monotheistic gods, and ordinary persons who may experience benefits or losses in their daily encounters with deities of all sizes.

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<sup>19</sup>Anderson, "Idea of Power," 22.

<sup>20</sup>Aragon, "Missions and Omissions," 131–133.

In the sections below, I consider recent examples of how small gods continue to benefit Southeast Asian highlanders as they defend their indigenous traditions of regional arts and land use. Contemporary political debates illustrate cases where small gods are invoked to resist the alienation of community lands and traditional cultural expressions through government-sanctioned development projects and intellectual property rights law.

### SMALL GODS AS GUARDIANS OF COMMUNITY LAND

Although Christian missionaries and many indigenous clergy now view the persistence of small gods as vestigial pagan tendencies or syncretism, the language of “owner gods” can serve to justify local prohibitions against the seizure or individual sale of community lands. One cannot seize or sell parts of the earth that one uses and shares in rotation with other relatives, but technically does not own. In this way, the *pue*’ owner gods and the *anitu* or deified ancestors are said to proscribe the sale or alienation of familial or community lands to outsiders, government projects, or other corporate entities.

I encountered narratives of this type during the religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims that troubled Central Sulawesi between 1998 and 2005. When Christians in the Lake Poso region felt under siege by Muslim militias, they told me that the owners of the water [*pue*’ *ue*], which appear to humans in the form of crocodiles, were thrashing in anger over the political capture of indigenous peoples’ lands by newly arrived immigrants. This kind of protective discourse by small gods over land was not confined to inter-ethnic conflict situations. On other occasions, such as when developers were putting in tract housing for migrants on what the state considered “unoccupied” lands, or when migrant merchants demanded debt payments in kind through land transfers, local people resisted land alienation through a discourse based on the displeasure of local owner gods or ancestral spirits. By contrast, the Christian God seemed little involved with whether community’s forested swidden reserves or shared common foraging and hunting lands remained in local hands.

The economic resistance I describe here correlates with an early twenty-first-century turn to political decentralization in Southeast Asia, which accompanied what is called the revitalization of “tradition” [*adat*] in Indonesia. After the resignation of President Suharto in 1998,

Indonesia began a series of democratic and decentralization reforms to award more local control to peripheral regions. Scholars then reported “adat revivals” in many provinces as local groups began to invoke the authority of indigenous custom to defend their contemporary interests before the state.<sup>21</sup>

Such revivals often demanded increased respect for indigenous cosmological perspectives in comparison to imported monotheistic pronouncements. As few citizens in Indonesia or elsewhere realize, all of the country’s national religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and now Confucianism were imported from other world areas and later officially allowed by the Dutch. Under the Suharto regime (1966–1998), discussion of indigenous cosmological ideas was disallowed and persecuted, but public speech opened up considerably after 1998. In 2006, I encountered a surprising conference in South Sulawesi. One panel I attended even privileged the views of ethnic minority religions, including ethnic Bugis’s transvestite and transgender priests who bless community rituals by reciting the ancient “La Galigo” epic, which narrates the relationships of Upper, Middle, and Lower World beings.

In sum, although relationships with small gods never were abandoned by most Indonesian Christians (or Buddhists and Muslims, for that matter), the twenty-first century has emboldened them with new purpose as notable protectors of community common lands, advocates for local-scale politics, and, as I will detail below, guardians of traditional knowledge in the face of expanded intellectual property law.

### SMALL GODS AS TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE OWNERS

Textiles are Southeast Asia’s most elaborate two-dimensional art forms and bearers of cosmological meanings and symbols that are thousands of years old. The Ibanic people of Borneo (an island now divided among the nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei) attribute much of their indigenous religious knowledge and related weaving skills to communication with spirits that occurs in dreams. Many Ibanic backstrap loom weavers residing in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, are now Roman Catholics. They say they evaluate the handmade textiles they produce

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<sup>21</sup>Henley and Davidson, “Introduction.”

not just according to size, material costs, labor time, or technical difficulty, but rather to each cloth's "story," which is read according to nested patterns that often convey ancient tales.

Women weavers say that complicated designs and techniques new to their skill set are revealed to them during sleep. Weaving new designs is considered risky because it brings weavers into dangerous contact with the spirit world. Commonplace designs that are copied from ordinary cloth types are considered less dangerous than those that are newly created on the basis of dreams. Yet risks are taken because well-executed, innovative designs are believed to please local deities and attract their beneficence to rituals where they are displayed. Weaving accomplishments gain prestige for individual women artisans.

Novice weavers confine themselves to simple, geometric designs, but may be taught and assisted by elder relatives to tie design sections that may be too potent for them. Complicated patterns with humanlike figures representing ancestors and spirits are attempted only by older, more experienced weavers. Weavers told me that tying dangerous patterns without the proper qualifications and spiritual support results in injury, madness, or death. Even when a woman does receive spiritual license to weave a new or dangerous design, she must then live in an endangered state and uphold personal taboos for the duration of the weaving process. Such weavings formerly required years of work, and the accompanying taboo-filled periods of danger were equally long.

Cases where artists invoke small gods or spirits of the deceased as sources of power and as authorities for new creative works challenge recent Indonesian intellectual property laws that award copyright authority over "anonymous folklore" or "traditional cultural expressions" to the state.<sup>22</sup> In essence, small gods are integral to the way many Southeast Asian weavers rebuff the state's intellectual property claims about personal authorship of works they consider as emanations of their family's or community's traditional knowledge.

In 2006, I traveled to interior West Kalimantan, Indonesian Borneo, to meet with weavers from an Ibanic-influenced Dayak subgroup called Desa'. Senior Desa' weavers make ikat cloths similar to the complex figurative *pua'* textiles collected in museums throughout the world.<sup>23</sup> Some

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<sup>22</sup>Aragon and Leach, "Arts and Owners"; Aragon, "Law versus Lore," 19.

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, Taylor and Aragon, *Beyond the Java Sea*, 162–166; Plate V. 26, 165.

women also have been encouraged by European NGO leaders to weave designs with new, “modern” motifs. My visit coincided with a weaving cooperative festival in the district capital of Sintang. Trophies were to be awarded for “best in show” weavings, and local Dayak dances provided evening entertainment following a textile seminar.

After the festival, during informal conversations, prominent village weavers told about learning to weave from their ancestors at night in their dreams. One also described the misfortunes that befall women, including her mother, who break ancestral taboos by weaving dangerous designs to which they are not entitled by lineage and ritual attainment. With such narratives, the Kalimantan weavers challenged both Westerners’ claims of individual original authorship and commonplace folkloristic assumptions that all traditional peoples own their sacred cultural knowledge collectively.

European scholars and textile enthusiasts, provincial government officials, and Dayak women weavers from roughly sixteen villages were in attendance at the weaving festival’s opening seminar. The European visitors and Indonesian government dignitaries praised the excellence of the local Dayak weavers, some of whom they noted were winning national contests. Speakers also promoted weaving as a viable means for little-educated Dayak women to help support their farming families. Large textiles for sale were elegantly displayed on the walls. Each cloth hanging in the exhibit and conference room sported an informative label including the weaver’s photograph and information that she provided about the meaning of the cloth’s motifs. This promotional device, suggested by European advisors, proclaimed the maker’s distinctive personal touch and potentially her creative authorship of individual works that, in principle, could be eligible for copyright. At the same time, some information on the labels drew on shared local terms and interpretations about the cloth’s design. Two-foot tall, silver-tone trophies were awarded by a panel of judges to those deemed the most excellent weavers.

One Desa’ weaver described how the sequential images in her cloth conveyed the plot of a mythical family’s encounter with frog spirits. She said the story idea had come to her in a dream. The weaver’s exegesis reiterated textiles’ position in Southeast Asia as pictorial literature, a way that narratives have been remembered and conveyed iconically for centuries, perhaps millennia, without the use of writing. Another weaver introduced the local Desa’ word for “story,” or “song” [*kana*]. She said that “before there were humans, there were already stories” [*sebelum*

*ada manusia ada kana*], thereby emphasizing the multiple modalities of these arts as well as the small gods-filled cosmos that they portray.

A few older Desa' weavers explained that they would readily teach their tying and dyeing design skills to any younger local women prepared to learn them. Teachers expect acknowledgment by pupils, who are usually younger relatives, and some recompense for their time if the kin relation is more distant. This material exchange tangibly and publicly marks the mentoring assistance and knowledge exchange. Some observers have suggested that this looks like "an indigenous copyright system" marking the authorship of the elder. I would argue otherwise because the compensation, which often is minimal, works differently from a royalty payment or a copyright transfer. It does not transfer ownership of the design or even signal an absolute permission for the pupil's weaving advancement. Only the student's own positive relationship with dream spirits, the keeping of personal taboos, and a future weaving process unmarred by ill omens can do that.

The weavers explained that if a woman begins a cloth and experiences unpleasant dreams or personal misfortune, she will terminate the project and even unravel the textile. The place of the dream spirits—deceased grandmothers and great-grandmothers—is to inspire and validate, in a sense to overshadow, a woman's personal authority to add new designs to her community's repertoire. In this way, women seemingly become unfettered to surpass their mothers' teachings by invoking the authoritative knowledge of their deceased grandmothers. These facts make the weaving achievement a collective one, which is supervised and carried out by certain highly trained and genealogically authorized individuals.

I spoke with two accomplished Desa' village weavers I will call Banyah and Teresa. Whereas outsiders generally focus on the design unit of figurative motifs, these weavers described patterns or "stories" [*cerita*, Indonesian] that they must know "from the feet to the head" [*dari kaki sampai kepala*] of the cloth before they are willing to weave them. The cloth is described anatomically, like a human being. This kind of anthropomorphizing of cloth is customary among weavers in other regions of Indonesia as well. In some areas, women's ability to create cloth is explicitly linked with their ability to create life.<sup>24</sup> This recognition

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<sup>24</sup>Hoskins, "Why Do Ladies," 142–145.

highlights women's creative powers in ways that do not threaten the small gods as they might the Abrahamic God's image as the sole and Almighty Creator.

The more senior of the two weavers, Banyah, is recognized within and beyond her village as a master weaver, the only one able to tie and dye cloths that include dangerous patterns such as the "snake king" [*raja ular*] and the crocodile [*buaya*]. Crocodiles and serpents symbolize ancestral spirits and power in many Indonesian regions. What facilitates Banyah's accomplishments is not described simply in terms of her considerable technical skills, but rather of her genealogy. She spoke of being from an "old descent line" [*keturunan tua*], which usually means being descended along elder branches from recognized village founders. It is her pedigree, her post-childbearing age, her personal strength or charisma, and the relationship she has with her dream spirits that licenses her authority over her group's most honored arts practices. Again, it is clear that the authority she has is neither an individual property that she can collect royalties from or transfer, like a copyright, nor a common property accessible to all Desa' people.

In our discussions, Banyah and Teresa avoided naming or giving specifics about either the dangerous motifs or the ancestral spirits assisting their creation. Banyah said, "If I want to try tying that kind of story, it [an existing cloth with that story pattern] must be stored under my pillow, and permitted by what's-its-name" [*anunya*]. As I listened to her circuitous explanation, I began to feel like Harry Potter asking about Lord Voldemort and receiving hushed words about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

In fact, Banyah's words reminded me of an Indonesian form of taboo whereby the collective descendants of particular ancestors, or the living subjects of particular place-based spirits, distinguish and regulate themselves. In highland Central Sulawesi where I lived in the 1980s, people did not dare to name their surviving elderly relatives, even with teknonyms. High-ranking elders received the taboo-naming status of ancestors prior to their deaths. Unlike Lord Voldemort, Sulawesi ancestors and Kalimantan dream spirits promise beneficent and fruitful outcomes after careful solicitations and respectful behaviors. Banyah clarified her method of persuasion and its intended recipients by saying that she feeds her (deceased) elders or "old people" by placing food at the base of her loom before she sleeps.

In Desa' Dayak communities, the stakes in performing these actions properly are high. Teresa said that one time a Catholic Church official I will call Bishop Paulus wanted to commission Teresa to weave a textile with a crocodile motif. This was an advanced design whose story she said she did not fully “understand” [*paham*]. She told the bishop she was not “bold” or “brave” [*berani*] enough to tie, dye, and weave it. The bishop responded disapprovingly, saying, “You’re a woman of faith, you can do this.” Teresa still refused. As she explained her thoughts at the time, “I like living. I want to live. It is not his life that will be at risk if I do this.”

Under further pressure from Bishop Paulus, Teresa’s mother agreed to make the crocodile weaving, which he purchased as promised. But Teresa’s mother was not rewarded for her compliance and industry. When she returned home from selling the textile, firewood piled high in a truck fell on her. She was badly injured. As Indonesian cosmic justice stories often suggest, ancestral proscriptions cannot be ignored or overruled by non-ancestral authorities, even Catholic bishops, without disastrous consequences.

The Desa’ weavers’ words clarified that, if anyone owns rights over the crocodile motif, that individual is not living, but rather a “transparent spirit” [*roh halus*, Indonesian] with some descent trail to particular weavers, present and future. Concepts of ancestral spirits remind the living to be aware of their descent, no matter how it is organized. As Maurice Bloch notes, descent is “the opposite of dispersal” because it is aimed at the retention of land, material wealth, and other human resources within the kin group.<sup>25</sup> When ancestors appear through dreams or dramas to inspire the continued use of powerful patterns or “stories,” that gambit seems appropriate to the trans-generational continuity of cultural practice and religious experience.

By sharing examples or knowledge of artistic practices, though, neither human resources nor land—the physical basis of traditional livelihood or survival—are alienated. Perhaps this is one reason why the concern to restrict artistic production techniques from foreign outsiders is rarely expressed by producers (as opposed to government officials who fear loss of national revenue). Indonesian artists often say that if outsiders, even foreigners, imitate or reproduce their traditional arts precisely and expertly, well then “bravo.” Cross-cultural dispersal is rarely a local

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<sup>25</sup>Bloch, *From Blessing*, 85.

concern. Even if foreigners imitate these genres poorly back in their homelands, Indonesian producers generally say that is no serious problem for the originating community. They say that they and their ancestors do not care what happens elsewhere. Why not? I would argue that the true concern motivating their traditional arts is the preservation of local community relationships and rank through hierarchical access to customary arts knowledge and use rights, not the prevention of sharing artworks or techniques outside the community. Master artists express pride in their disciplinary skills, authorized arts knowledge, collective identity, and religious morality, but their focus is just not oriented to monotheistic gods, state bureaucracy, and exclusively owned property—the key idioms recognized by clerics, the state, and national intellectual property law.

### CREATIVE USES FOR SMALL GODS IN CHRISTIAN SOUTHEAST ASIA

My focus has been on the enduring relevance and creative uses of small gods among Southeast Asian Christians, both Protestant and Catholic. For such Christians, continued adherence to small gods entails no challenge to the supremacy of the Christian God or to biblical teachings. Rather, today's descendants of missionized converts usually assume an isomorphism between the moral teachings of their ancestral deities and Christianity. Ultimately, God's mastery of the universe—comprised of the Upper World of Heaven, the Middle World of humans, and the Lower World of Hell—is seen as compatible with local ownership of resources by small gods, including ancestor spirits who serve as vassals to the Christian God.

Although the wide-ranging uses of small gods described here are drawn from Christian contexts, I would be remiss not to mention that similar phenomena are found in the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist regions of Southeast Asia. In the case of Indonesia, the nation's many decades of Cold War propaganda promoted monotheistic religion as an antidote to Communist ideology and threat. This contributed to the harsh governmental and clerical repression of small gods. We should acknowledge, then, that parallel projects of spiritualization and purification exist beyond Christendom. And even within it, we know that Protestant and Catholic approaches differ, the latter usually being more tolerant of small gods. Overall, though, Southeast Asian Christianity thrives within an endless pursuit of theological purification that hardly makes a dent in the region's still vibrant and valued small gods.

I began this essay by asking why so many otherwise devoutly Christian Southeast Asian peoples continue to interact with, and speak about, the importance of localized small gods. The answers are manifold. Small gods legitimate a vast array of knowledge about local morality and theodicy, knowledge about which Protestant clerics generally remained tone deaf. Small gods also are more cheaply and readily summoned for help than the Christian God whose ministers often require cash payments for ritual services.

Small gods fit within a widely distributed model of a tripartite cosmology found in Southeast Asian mythology, ritual, and architecture, a tripartite cosmology that is structurally parallel to Christianity's heaven, earth, and hell. Small gods are the agents of action within innumerable local stories about ancestors, social reciprocity, and the natural world. They inhabit familiar, nearby places in contrast to the Abrahamic God who seems to emanate from afar. They justify local control over nearby natural resources in the face of global market forces, migrant capitalists, and government seizures of eminent domain. They are ancestral allies in the local politics of indigenous minority causes, what are now called revivals of custom. Small gods command and distribute traditional knowledge and aesthetic skills in ways that allow local arts producers to rebuff national intellectual property laws that shift authority over traditional cultural expressions to the state. What foreign Christian cleric ever suspected that Southeast Asia's minor gods could perform such major work?

I described West Kalimantan weavers' narratives at length because they neatly exemplify the way small gods are integrated into ordinary ethics within and beyond Christian faith and practice. Indonesian weavers must study to achieve, but they also depend upon pedigree, spiritual contacts, and their actions' outcomes to assess the validity of ancestral authorization. Unnamable ancestral spirits appear to own particular stories or weaving images. Similarly, in my 1980s fieldwork in Sulawesi, I heard analogous claims that ancestral spirits were the ones who really own highlanders' farmland plots and other natural resources. In all these cases, access to spirits and resources is understood as most readily and legitimately available through kinship links and the ritual acknowledgment of deceased forebears. Among living humans there exist multiple, but not necessarily evenly distributed, claims to resource access or use rights, all under the aegis of the ancestors or small gods who, amazingly, are considered to be in complete alignment with the Christian God.

Like other arts producers in Indonesia, weavers often speak seamlessly of their personal relations with ancestral spirits, God, or other "unseen" [*halus*] beings whose presence they experience when creating. West

Kalimantan weavers leave food each night at the base of their looms in anticipation of dreams in which their satiated ancestors will convey the secrets of dangerous, complicated motifs. Through their representational and performative capacities, artworks index and transform human and spiritual relationships during performance or transaction. Therefore, it is an analytic distortion, resulting from the application of property regimes to Indonesian regional arts, to propose legalizing creators' claims over "things" (artworks, motifs, styles), when the primary claims artists make are about relationships with the living and the ancestral.

When small gods are the true owners of the forests, these vital resources cannot be alienated through individual sales, nor removed by government or corporate fiat. When small gods, in the form of ancestral spirits, are the true sources of advanced weaving knowledge, no individual weaver can claim exclusive proprietary rights to any particular design element. Considered in light of their century-long mission and governmental repression, Indonesian highlanders' small gods must be understood as integral and necessary pillars of the contemporary Christian cosmological architecture. Rather than peg them into fixed forms and roles, however, we owe the small gods and their human relations sufficient recognition of their fluid and creative agency in contemporary, and future, societal conditions.

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