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# THE VOICE OF THE WINDS VERSUS THE MASTERS OF CURE: CONTESTED NOTIONS OF SPIRIT POSSESSION AMONG THE LAUJÉ OF SULAWESI

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Spirit possession is often treated as a compensatory response to disempowerment. In effect, mediums use spirits as covert proxies for their own unsatisfied desires. But not all spirit possession can be analysed in this way. Among the Laujé of Indonesia, the significance of spirits speaking through mediums is hotly contested. Spirit mediums, primarily women, believe their possession exemplifies a model life of passive submission to spiritual forces. Interpreter-curers, who translate spirit speech and are mostly men, argue that some mediums fake possession. They claim that only they can identify real spirits and thus cause 'good' spirits to heal. I use these contested Laujé notions of spirits and agency as the foundation from which to question some of the more common assumptions anthropologists make about the meaning of possession.

## *Introduction*

Most anthropologists tend to treat possession as *legerdemain* in which the medium makes the invisible spirit speak by a kind of ventriloquism. The classic accounts of possession generally assume that a medium participates in possession because she gains a voice, the spirit's, which is more powerful and authoritative than the one she has as a human (Bourguignon 1973; Douglas 1970; Firth 1964; Lewis 1971).<sup>1</sup> The medium uses the spirit as a proxy to express what she cannot normally express (Belo 1960; Broch 1985; Harris 1957; Mead & Bateson 1942; Messing 1958). This literature assumes that possession overtakes women more than men, for women are less free, more disenfranchised and more in need of a proxy. In short, anthropologists tend to resolve the ostensible loss of human will or agency during possession by focusing on the medium as agent.

In this article, I would like to explore another aspect of spirit possession. What are the implications of regarding the spirits as the mediums do, of taking the loss of human will seriously, and of believing that the spirit is the agent or force speaking through the voice of the medium? Here I follow research by Boddy (1989) and others (for instance, Karp 1990; Lambek 1981; 1988; Giles 1987; Steedly 1993),<sup>2</sup> as well as the lead of spirit mediums among Muslim Laujé of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia.<sup>3</sup>

As Boddy points out in her study of Hofriyat possession in the Sudan, it makes very little sense for anthropologists such as Lewis (1971) to infer that

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women are covertly resisting or compensating for their powerlessness through possession. Lewis's perspective

place[s] unwarranted emphasis on the assumed intentionality of women and thus insidiously underestimate[s] the factuality of spirits in the Sudanese world. Words like *strategy* imply volition, which may certainly be present ... in some cases of possession, but not ... in all (1989: 139).

Boddy notes that Hofriyati women act as though possession is real. Boddy believes that the 'fact' of possession proves to the mediums that they, and only they, are capable of enacting and maintaining a moral order based on selflessness. During possession, Hofriyati women give up their own agency in favour of the spirit just as in everyday life they give up their own desires for those of their parents, spouses and children. By examining possession as an extension rather than an inversion, of what is morally normative for the mediums, Boddy gains new insight.

Nevertheless, there are two weaknesses in Boddy's argument. First, at times she slips back into the kind of analysis she critiques. For her, possession is an 'allegory'. What the possessed mediums 'say' or act out in song and dance refers 'allegorically' to social factors such as gender, class and personal history. The medium-as-agent is more real than the spirit-as-agent. Such views contradict Boddy's support for the 'factuality of spirits in the Sudanese world' (1989: 139). Secondly, Boddy's work remains largely the product of her perspective as an observer of possession, and is not an outgrowth of native commentary on what possession means. Because Hofriyati do not elaborate on the realities of possession, these realities remain, as Karp puts it, 'interpretatively opaque' (1990: 79).

Though the Laujé case does not resolve whose interpretations of agency are more valid, it does clarify the issues. Among the Laujé the question of who is the agent speaking, and who or what is the agent healing during spirit possession, is a topic of discussion and debate between members of two implicitly distinct, but sometimes overlapping, categories of religious specialists. One includes the mediums (*boliang*) who are usually commoners and female (though a few males are mediums). The other includes the curers (*sando*) who are almost exclusively men of influence and authority. During a community-wide spirit possession rite called *Momosoro*, spirits take over mediums' bodies and speak through them in order to restore the community to physical and moral health. Not all Laujé, however, understand the spirits' language, and some audience members therefore rely on *sandos* to translate or to introduce them to the spirit who can cure their particular illness. Spirits are said to speak in 'old Laujé' which uses words and phrases no longer common in vernacular speech. Most Laujé in the audience claim they cannot understand the spirits' old Laujé, and that only *sandos* can. Yet when I sat with the audience they could effectively translate to me what the spirit said. I can only conclude that the *sando*'s role as interpreter is an honorific one, and that the audience deny that they can translate as proficiently as the *sando* when in fact they can. *Sandos* are allegedly able to see and communicate with spirits in ways ordinary mortals cannot. Laujé who trust *sandos* believe that they are the masters of cure. *Sandos* claim that they alone can distinguish healing spirits from 'poisonous ones', and genuinely possessed mediums from those who are 'faking' possession. These curers, then, focus on themselves as agents of cure and as gatekeepers. They believe it is their

task to evaluate the mediums' performances. *Sandos* 'name' and call attention to particular spirits, so as to unmask, or in some other way call attention to, particular mediums.

By contrast, mediums, or rather the spirits who speak through them, assert that spirits are the primary agents of cure. Moreover, they emphasize that spiritual power is a collective phenomenon. During possession, the mediums speaking in the spirits' voices refer to spirits collectively as 'winds' and to mediums' bodies as 'passive vessels'. They say a cure results when many spirits 'sit in front of the mediums' selves' and when mediums work in concert. These voices, in short, assert a certain moral order which privileges submission to the relatively anonymous spiritual collectivity over and above the individual. Spirits focus on the factuality of spirits as collective agents, while *sandos* focus on mediums or themselves as individual agents.

As I will show, there are clear philosophical differences between spirits' and *sandos*' views. As most *sandos* are men, I will argue that their perception of the spirit world is filtered through the lens of their gender. Historically, Laujé men have perceived themselves and others as individuals assuming assertive and public roles. Today they are encouraged to make names for themselves. I argue that this emphasis on individual persons and on quests for reputation influences men's perception of spirits as named individuals. Moreover, because *sandos* tend to belong to the elite, their dialogues in the *Momosoro* reflect the Sufi Islamic knowledge to which elite Laujé have historically had access. Finally, because these same men are engaged in community-wide discussions about whether or not spirit possession rites should be practised by faithful Muslims, their identity as Muslims and their individualistically-oriented Sufism are underscored in the context of the ritual.

I shall conclude, however, that it is less productive to analyse the utterances of spirits solely in terms of the mediums' sociological milieu. While one can plausibly assume that the social background of mediums influences what they say when possessed by spirits, and then sociologically 'decode' those utterances, it is much more interesting to seek to understand the utterances in their own terms. This, after all, is what most Laujé (and in some cases even *sandos*) do. Thus I conclude by taking seriously what the spirits say about the selfless morality of possession and its deep differences with the self-aggrandizing morality of *sandos* trained as Sufi healers. I assume that the gender and class backgrounds of participants, and their reflexivity concerning Islam in a changing nation-state, influence the dialogues between spirits and human beings, but I let these issues emerge out of the problem most relevant to Laujé: the factuality of spirits and the ways in which spirits' intentions differ from those of *sandos*. This approach shifts attention away from the medium as ventriloquist or agent, and allows the plurality of native voices to speak for themselves.

### *The setting*

All Laujé who participate in the *Momosoro* spirit possession rite are Muslims. The Laujé live in the northwestern corner of Tomini Bay, a district far from the regional capitals. The Laujé capital, Dusunan, and its county capital, Tinombo, were once the centre of a colonial Rajadom ruled not by Laujé, but by outsiders from distant ethnic groups (the Bugis and Mandar of South Sulawesi).<sup>4</sup> During

the nineteenth century, elite Laujé rulers called *olongians* embraced the immigrants from South Sulawesi whom they traded with, learned Sufi-influenced Islam from and even married.<sup>5</sup> Sufi knowledge enabled elite individuals to empower themselves by acquiring protective spells, prayers of persuasion and so forth (cf. Acciaioli 1989 for similar practices in nearby Lake Lindu). Elements of this esoteric Islamic knowledge became an integral part of elite *sando* tradition.<sup>6</sup> Acolytes learned to identify by name individual spirits (*jinn*) that caused particular illnesses. Aristocratic Laujé exchanged secrets only with members of their own class who could afford to pay. An acolyte learned Islamic verses or prayers 'between four eyes,' that is, in secret from a teacher whom the acolyte paid. As one informant put it, a single verse might 'cost seven palm lengths of coins'. Thus some kinds of knowledge were effectively restricted to the wealthy, mostly elite, Laujé. Their exclusive control over Sufi Islam lasted until the twentieth century. Elite Laujé shared their status with immigrants, not Laujé commoners, whom they regarded as 'still pagan'.

In the twentieth century, the local religious and political landscape changed in several dramatic ways.<sup>7</sup> In 1905, when Dutch colonialists selected an immigrant, and not the Laujé *olongian*, to rule over the area, the Laujé elite became politically marginal. The *olongian*, whose home moved from the highlands to the lowland village of Dusunan, survived as a ritual figure but retained little political power. The *olongian's* Sufi religion, which once allied him or her to the immigrants, became marginal too. Immigrants and Rajas began to embrace a new, reformist, anti-Sufi Islam. The reformers regarded the multiple spirit names of Sufi esoterica as sacrilege; such names evoked pantheism. *Olongians* and elite Laujé continued to call themselves Muslim, but no longer shared their Islamic knowledge with immigrants.

The immigrants, though disdainful of elite Sufi practices, maintained a live-and-let-live policy towards Laujé spirit possession rites such as the *Momosoro*. In the 1970s, however, more radical elements of reform Islam took hold. These reformers began an informal educational campaign, lecturing with loudspeakers every Friday night at the mosque and drawing non-elite Laujé youth and immigrants alike. They preached against elitist syncretism in Islamic practice. True Islam was monotheistic, they argued, and only followed rites outlined in the Qur'an and the Hadiths. Anything else was satanic. By the late 1970s, non-elite members of more fundamentalist sects (see Peacock 1978a; 1978b), who were in low-level government positions, instituted a ban on the *Momosoro*. They said the *Momosoro* was a form of 'satanic worship'. Eventually, in 1984, local Laujé leaders persuaded immigrants to rescind the ban. The local leaders threatened to vote *en masse* against the immigrants' party in upcoming elections if the ban was not rescinded. The spirit possession rites were once again performed after a long and emotionally tense hiatus.

Despite the reinstatement, Laujé were sensitive to the accusations against them. These allegations form the subtext of the *Momosoro* ceremony. Elite Laujé resent immigrants who tell them that they are not Muslims, while Laujé commoners resent the elite Sufism to which they were historically denied access. As we shall see, elite *sandos* are anxious to prove their status as Muslims. They continually reiterate their role as agents of healing, as curers steeped in ancient Sufi notions of purging fake mediums from the ceremony, and glorify their

ability to name and identify spirits. In this way the *Momosoro* has become an arena within which some Laujé meditate upon, and argue about, what it means to be ‘Muslim’ in the modern Indonesian state, while spirits advocate a morality of selflessness and collective acquiescence to ancient ways.

### *Ambiguities inherent in the Momosoro*

The *Momosoro* begins in a series of ancillary rites in hills above Dusunan and ‘moves’ downstream to the *olongian’s* house.<sup>8</sup> It is here that all the spirit manifestations of illnesses and cures are invited to the *olongian’s* house to possess mediums. These embodied spirits spend their time either in the public space of the *olongian’s* house (the ‘parlour’ or ‘big house’) or in the ritual hut behind the *olongian’s* living quarters (the ‘hearth’ or ‘little house’). The gathering of the spirits of the ‘little house’ to chant the story of the creation of the world is considered the ‘core’ or ‘essence’ (*pokoé*) of the rite. Their chanting is thought to reinvigorate the *olongian’s* power.

After seven nights, the spirits are feted. Community members bring offerings of food to fill two outrigger boats, which are carried in procession to the mouth of the river and cast out to sea. This act rids the Laujé land of disease. The scattered Laujé communities are ritually linked, once again, with the *olongian* and opposed as one entity to an ‘other’: the accumulation of illnesses from the ‘centre of the sea’, from ‘outsiders’ or immigrants.

Inside the little house, on each of the seven evenings of the *Momosoro*, the ceremony begins in the same way. To induce possession, several mediums chant in sequence at the altar of the ‘little house’.<sup>9</sup> An assistant lights damar incense and crushes betel nut for the mediums. The scent of incense and the mild stimulus of betel nut trigger trances. The mediums begin with closed eyes, seated cross-legged on the floor, rocking back and forth. A few moan as they sway languidly. Their moans slowly meld into recognizable tunes. Onlookers often comment at this point that ‘the spirit has come to sit in front of’ the medium. After a few minutes of trance, the spirit possessing the medium moves to the altar. There the spirit chants a prayer to the tune of a lullaby.<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously, the spirit places kernels of raw white and yellow rice (husked and unhusked) in the offering plate at the altar. When the spirit is finished, another spirit possessing a medium approaches the altar.

The spirits’ melodies are similar. ‘Gentle’, ‘like a lullaby’, these chants, so spirits claim, should not be distinct one from the other but meld into ‘one voice and one tongue’. Though chants vary, each is meant to recreate the Laujé genesis. The following chant does so by referring to the birth and growth of the original tree that sprouted at the centre of the earth dividing earth from sky. In this chant, the tree is ‘budding from the headwaters ... to the river’s mouth’. The tree’s growth also refers to the extent of the Laujé territory, which spans the length of the Tinombo River from the coast up into the mountains. The chant is as follows:

<i>O Bija nu ayué</i>	O Progeny of the tree
<i>Boi ne pamayolé</i>	Just a tap-root
<i>Saba mapamayalonyé</i>	Rooting, rooting deeply
<i>Meboto sobobotonyé</i>	Sprouting a single trunk
<i>Neungkulé soung kulunkulaonyé</i>	Grew a single skin [bark]

<i>Nolongi sololongonyé</i>	Sprouted a single leaf
<i>Noloba solobalobanyé</i>	Budded a single bud
<i>Nebansa sebanza bansanyé</i>	Bloomed a single flower
<i>Nevua sovua vuanyé</i>	Grew a single fruit
<i>Bia maloba'é</i>	Then it began budding,
<i>Moloba lae matanyé</i>	Budding from the headwaters,
<i>Dua dua li bambanyé</i>	Arriving, arriving at the river's mouth
<i>Moloba la bambanyé</i>	Budding from the river's mouth
<i>Dua dua li matanyé</i>	Arriving, arriving at the headwaters
<i>O Malindung Ranté Ranté</i>	O Radiant Spirit
<i>Alam apat sulapaé</i>	Of the four corners of the world
<i>Liita nai nonjagai</i>	You came to protect the
<i>Ummat i Nabi Mohama'é</i>	Disciples of the Prophet Mohammed
<i>Li Angkopu Bayalé</i>	Under (the protective canopy of) the wind.
<i>O Nabi Alla'é</i>	O Prophet of Allah
<i>O Nabi I Sa'Alaé</i>	O Prophet of the One Allah
<i>O Nabi Kuasa</i>	O Prophet of Power (Strength)
<i>Li Angkopu Bayalé</i>	Under (the protective canopy of) the wind.
<i>Umat Nabi Mohamaé</i>	Disciples of the Prophet Mohammad
<i>Momongi meampuni</i>	Beg for forgiveness
<i>Njo manyumbam metapa</i>	If you will just listen to our prayer.
<i>O Ranté Alif</i>	O Spirit of Alif
<i>Ranté Galang</i>	Spirit of the Bracelet
<i>O Ranté Tambaga</i>	O Spirit of Copper
<i>O Ranté Vilaani</i>	O Spirit of Gold
<i>O Ranté Selaka</i>	O Spirit of Silver
<i>O Manurungé</i>	O First Ancestors
<i>O Ranté Umur'é</i>	O Spirit of the Ages
<i>Li amat murungé</i>	O Guard of the Ancestors
<i>Momené li vuyulé</i>	Who come from the mountains
<i>O Laga Robo</i>	O Laga Robo
<i>O Laga Rotong</i>	O Laga Rotong
<i>I O Raja Iotupu</i>	O King Iotupu
<i>I O Raja Moomini</i>	O King Moomini
<i>O Elé Gandisi</i>	O Elé Gandisi
<i>Nombali salam</i>	We send our greetings

The last lines of this psalm create potential disagreements and different interpretations of agency and spirits. Phrases such as Spirit of Alif, King Moomini and Elé Gandisi seem to refer to individual spirits, but not all Laujé interpret them this way. On the one hand, some Laujé, including *sandos*, claim that Spirit of Alif and Elé Gandisi are 'names'. The 'names' designate spirits with individual personalities, who live in a particular place, and the names had been learned from Sufi Muslim teachers. On the other hand, some Laujé, including mediums out of possession, likened phrases such as Spirit of Alif to what we might call 'refractions' (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1956), and considered them to be manifestations of a single essence. In this view, the ostensibly multiple spirits are merely refractions of this encompassing essence, which they generally called *umputé*, or 'connexion'. '*Umputé*', they would repeat, is no more or less than 'our bodies'. It is the essence, created by Allah, that comprises all aspects of our bodies. Though one may focus on different aspects of the body and different refractions or spirits of those aspects, and give them names such as the spirit of blood, the spirit of bone, the spirit of the placenta, and so forth, the spirit essence is not an individual and cannot be named as such. It is better, in this view, to focus on

the whole entity of *umputé*, not its individual parts. To focus on the individual names of *umputé* would insult it and deny its wondrous essence as a collective entity created by Allah, since *umputé* is the collective essence that makes up our individual bodies, the bodies of humanity in general and the body of the world. For these commoners, then, the *Momosoro* rite serves to propitiate *umputé* in general and to ask it to keep 'our collective bodies' healthy.

Though to reformist Muslims such a focus on *umputé* and not on Allah contradicts Laujé claims to Muslim status, it is highly likely that these Laujé believe their focus on *umputé* is within the spectrum of doctrinal Islamic belief.<sup>11</sup> One of the chief arguments reformists posed against the *Momosoro* was that the participants were making offerings to *setan*, or praying to a multiplicity of spirits rather than to Allah. It is fairly clear that the reformists' critique of the *Momosoro* led some of these participants to play down the individuality of the spirit entities and to emphasize their collectivity, their monotheistic quality, as refractions of *umputé* writ large. This view is opposed by *sandos*, who advocate 'naming' and identifying individual spirits in order effectively to cure and thereby shore up their own skills and reputations as Muslims. The ambiguity of the names in spirit prayers may be a longstanding phenomenon and intrinsic to the chants themselves, but Laujé reflexivity about this question, expressed at times as an urge to resolve the ambiguity, was exacerbated by the reformists' recent attacks on the *Momosoro*. Ultimately, both mediums and curers disagreed about how to interpret the spirits' words at the *Momosoro* because each group had different interpretations of local morality *and* of the meaning of Islam.

*Who is in charge: the sando or the spirit?*

The *Momosoro* of 1985 was primarily arranged by Sumpitan. He was a renowned *sando*, nephew of the *olongian*, former mayor of Dusunan, and one of the richest men in the village. It was Sumpitan who had led the group of Laujé who convinced immigrant politicians to rescind the ban on the *Momosoro*. Sumpitan also held ceremonial office in the *olongian*'s shadow court. He was *jogugu*, 'talking chief' or 'spokesperson', who gave orders in the *olongian*'s name. Sumpitan choreographed the ceremony – inviting various *sandos* and *bolians* from surrounding communities, collecting cash and food contributions from the villagers and, in some cases, overseeing how offerings were to be made and proffered during various points in the ceremony. It was Sumpitan who invited me to tape-record the *Momosoro* and made it possible for me to attend the 'secret' or 'private' rites in the 'little house'.

Each day during the ceremony, Sumpitan and I listened to the tapes of the previous evening's events. I subsequently asked others, mediums and curers, to comment on the recordings and help me transcribe them. In the process of transcribing, I began to see how Sumpitan dominated events in the little house. Insisting that I place the tape-recorder next to him, he began identifying for me, in a booming voice so loud it often muted the spirits' chants, where each spirit came from and whether or not it was genuine. I gradually learned that his domineering and opinionated manner was not idiosyncratic, but revealed something essential about his role as a curer and his disputes with spirits he regarded as not genuine. Sumpitan was not performing just for my benefit, but also in his capacity as a curer.



Each night in the little house, Sumpitan would engage spirits possessing mediums in what seemed to be a conversation, but as often as not consisted of two parallel monologues – Sumpitan on one tangent, and the spirit on another. Spirit (or medium) and *sando* (or human) did not really speak as equals in defining the rhetorical terrain. Spirits' utterances were abstruse and oracular. Spirits, if they were to be 'authoritative', had to speak in couplets; they used obscure and convoluted constructions (cf. Fox 1988; Metcalf 1989). It was the *sando*'s role to interpret this esoteric speech to audience members who might not understand. Sometimes this meant that the *sandos* contradicted or overruled the spirits. This is not to say, however, that Sumpitan or other curers did not respect spirits. Sumpitan listened very intently to what they said and told me their words were sacred if the medium was not faking possession.

The following vignette exemplifies the differences in spirits' and *sandos*' positions during the *Momosoro*. It concerns a spirit possessing the medium Siinai Alasan, who was a widow of about 40 and a descendant of commoners. Siinai Alasan's spirit spoke on behalf of all spirits, defining their position in direct opposition to Sumpitan's and *sandos*' in general. The events began when Pak Lamané, a man of about sixty, entered the little house seeking Sumpitan's aid in finding a spirit to cure his persistent cough. Lamané was a 'half-Laujé' from Tinombo who had grown up speaking Indonesian and only a creolized Laujé, and therefore needed Sumpitan to translate spirits' words. Ironically, Lamané was the father of one of the reformist officials who had been instrumental in banning the *Momosoro*. Sumpitan relished his role as Lamané's intermediary, telling me after the curing session that he, Sumpitan, had shown Lamané 'how Muslim our ceremony really is'. When Lamané nervously entered, Sumpitan said:

Come on in ... Later when that spirit is finished, that one is the clear one that is white. That spirit is from the centre, the navel. Later we'll speak with that spirit. That one is strong.

As Lamané entered, the spirit possessing Siinai Alasan began to lecture Lamané on the interdependence of religion and custom (*adaé*):

This rite should not be destroyed, it is said ... This rite which is being observed now, it is said ... is not just a custom which was just picked up on the streets. This is a ceremony of the ancients ... It is the heritage that has been passed down to us humans.

Sumpitan interrupted the spirit:

We ask forgiveness, O Honoured One. This one, the disciple of Prophet Mohammed, has a pain in his chest. O Pure White Spirit, it seems that something has been forgotten ... Before the connexion [to the spirit] is broken we come to [you] spirit asking for help. That is how it is.

The spirit entity possessing Siinai Alasan responded:

This ceremony, this customary rite, this here, this now, that which is seen now, that which is before you now, is not to be trifled with, is not to be played with ... We of the spirit collectivity (*umputé*) were put before you by Allah to speak the words that are the ceremony, to give the words that heal, that are the charms.

Sumpitan leant over to Lamané and said:

The spirit says a little side ceremony, probably a white offering for the Spirit-of-those-who-have-died-on-the-way-to-Mecca should be given. It is obvious you have forgotten to give an offering to the white Spirit-of-those-who-have-died-on-the-way-to-Mecca.

After speaking directly to Siinai Alasan and identifying her possessing spirit as 'the white one', a reference to the purity and high status of the possessing spirit,

Sumpitan turned away from Siinai Alasan and spoke *sotto voce* to Lamané, naming each spirit possessing the mediums who were sitting in the room. In a loud stage whisper, Sumpitan said:

That one, which is from the Centre of the Sea, it sits on a golden throne ... that spirit helps to cure chills and aches, it wears red and white clothes and carries a machete ... That spirit is a quiet one, it is a white spirit, named the Spirit-of-those-who-have-died-on-the-way-to-Mecca. It is old.<sup>1</sup>

Siinai Alasan's spirit then responded to Sumpitan's attempt to identify the spirits as discrete individuals:

Generation upon generation, the inheritance from our ancestors is this ceremony here. This is the voice that is heard here. What is seen before [you] is one. Everything. Just one. We [spirits] are many, but of one view, of one body, of one tongue ... This ceremony, this chant [uttered by spirits] is what comprises your muscles, the blood in your body, this ceremony of custom here. We [you] must bow our heads low, so that all can be heard, be seen. This is the chant, the regalia, the words that comprise us [and you], punishes you with illness and heals you of illness. This that you hear is what will heal you. We submit to it.

This custom, this inheritance should not disappear ... This is the spirit collectivity (*umputé*) which connects us to our past, our ancestors, who gave us knowledge of the spirit collectivity ... This, here is the root ... When the root of a tree is pulled up and ... one looks up into the sky and sees that the leaves of that tree have shrivelled and died ... If all one waits for is to pray to Allah [but forgets the root, the customs], then the tree will die branch by branch.

Despite the spirit's admonishments, Sumpitan persisted in labelling her:

That spirit who speaks is the *olongian* of all spirits. It says that you will be cured if you follow the white ceremony.

In this curing episode, it is clear that the spirit possessing Siinai Alasan says nothing about performing an additional 'white ceremony.' The spirit says that Lamané will be cured if he submits to the chants and cures uttered by the collective spirits, the spirit entities that made his body, the collective spirits which are like the tap-root of a tree. Siinai Alasan's spirit uses this metaphor to equate the root of the tree with Laujé custom and the branches of the tree with Islam, emphasizing that *umputé* existed prior to Islam and therefore should be recognized alongside Islam. The spirit warns Lamané not to follow Islam exclusively and forget custom.

Many people who talked to me later about this conversation between Sumpitan and Siinai Alasan's spirit agreed with the moral stance taken by the spirit. Listeners also commented that Sumpitan was showing off for Lamané by claiming to know spirits personally. Sumpitan's grandstanding, however, was not idiosyncratic. Other *sandos* have a tendency to use the *Momosoro* as a showcase for their interpretive skills. *Sandos* such as Sumpitan use the ritual to assert themselves as famed and successful agents of curing by showing that they can distinguish genuine spirits from fake or bad ones and can act as interlocutors between spirits and human beings.

### *Seeking ilmu: the quest for names*

*Sandos* did not, however, merely treat their encounters with the spirits and mediums as opportunities to show off. They also saw these conversations as yet another chance to pursue *ilmu*; that is, 'knowledge' or 'power'. *Ilmu* among the Sufi-influenced *sandos* often concerned 'names'. According to these *sandos*, to know the 'names' of the 'spirits for the four corners and the centre post of the

world', who anchored the earth to the heavens, could make one impervious to bullets or machetes if uttered along with a prayer (cf. Acciaoli 1989).

In his quest for this *ilmu* knowledge, Sumpitan on several occasions used a lull in the chanting as an opportunity to ask the spirits to reveal secrets associated with their own and other spirits' names. In one conversation with Siinai Alasan's spirit, Sumpitan pursued 'knowledge' of individual spirit names while Siinai Alasan's spirit resisted this pursuit and argued in a characteristic way for a selfless collective view of the spirit world. Sumpitan began by pleading with the spirit for help:

The people here on earth are in the dark. The people here need the spirits' edification ... We must look for the pure essence ... I ask for the secret of that which gives life.

Siinai Alasan's spirit dodged the question and reasserted that Sumpitan's proper role is to submit to the ceremony. But Sumpitan persisted:

Look, those around the house, they've not come in yet. There aren't a lot of people here. This honourable spirit can tell me the secrets now. No one else will hear.

Siinai Alasan's spirit entity refused to acquiesce:

Because we believe in our bodies, we also believe in the prayer, the chant acknowledging the spirit collectivity (*umputé*) ... But come on now, *sando*, all this about secrets. We don't know anything about secrets that the *sando* is speaking about.

Sumpitan took the spirits' words as a challenge and continued to press the spirit to reveal something of value to him. He said:

So we each don't know the secret? So the spirit says I don't know. Maybe it's that the secret I know can't be told to these people because that which is on top and that which is below, the deep, the surface, all is known by the spirits. For example, honourable spirit, what is known by this honourable spirit?

Siinai Alasan's spirit warned him that his probing was annoying:

These secrets are not to be known by humans ... The winds are becoming stormy ... they will capsize the vessel. As for people ... they must turn their palms up, so with this secret all must just submit, turning all palms up.

Here the 'winds' are the spirit, the 'vessel' Siinai Alasan. To 'turn one's palms up' is at once the gesture possessed mediums make as they pray at the shrine, and also the iconic gesture of submission in Islam. Sumpitan starts to interrupt. Siinai Alasan's spirit admonishes Sumpitan to desist, but he continues. Sumpitan persists in probing for empowering secrets, saying 'the Honourable Spirit is probably the male spirit of the seven levels? Not so? So how about it?' No matter what the entity possessing Siinai Alasan says, Sumpitan, following his Sufi training, believes he must proceed in his quest to name that entity. Otherwise, he told me later, he will have to wait another year to ask the spirit what its name is, since one can only ask the spirit its name during the *Momosoro*. Sumpitan also believes that this quest for names 'proves' that he and the ceremony are Muslim.

### *The 1986 rite: the mountaineer and the lowlanders*

A few months after the *Momosoro* of 1985, Sumpitan unexpectedly and suddenly died of a heart attack. Although many Laujé mourned the death of this influential community leader, others suggested more critically that his death may have been a spiritual retribution for his excessive arrogance, his obsession with questing for *ilmu*. Without Sumpitan, the *Momosoro* of 1986 had a very different

tone. It was more disorganized, less climatic (see Nourse 1989). No single *sando* acted as *de facto* master of ceremonies. The various elements of the rite were organized by a committee comprised of members of the elite as well as commoners. The *olongian* invited a *sando* from the mountains, Siamae Balitangan, to serve as chief *sando*. Balitangan was not a true ‘pagan’ from the highlands. He was born a poor lowlander, worked as an indentured servant in a Sufi imam’s house and moved to the highlands after marrying a mountain woman. His religious knowledge and his social status thus bridged the gap between the commoner mediums and the elite *sandos* and so did his actions at the *Momosoro*. Not having participated in the *Momosoro* for twenty years, he was unaware of the pall that Sumpitan’s death cast over the rite. Female mediums were initially ecstatic over Balitangan’s arrival. They hoped that because he still wore the ‘traditional’ Laujé head-wrap and could recite versified Laujé histories (*balag*), he would support ‘tradition’ and be an advocate for their perspective – which they took to be traditional.<sup>12</sup> Although Balitangan was not concerned at all with probing spirits for secrets he nevertheless began to respond to them in a manner similar to Sumpitan’s and to make overt distinctions among the spirits possessing the mediums. After shaking a possessed medium’s hand, and talking to her in her trance for a minute or two, he would tell me in a loud stage whisper whether, and to what degree, the medium’s spirit was really powerful, or whether it was the medium speaking and not the spirit. Balitangan also remarked that some of the mediums’ chants mentioned names not in the chants he recalled from the *Momosoros* he had attended before. On one occasion, while a spirit was chanting, Balitangan leaned over to me and stated loudly so that all could hear:

Child, that one there, she sings of ‘O Yelé Ijati’é, O Elé Gandisié’. I say, child, there is no such spirit. That is all bent talk, child. I say, I know ... all the names that are needed. Child, anything else is false.

Such comments continued. Out-of-trance-mediums complained about Balitangan’s ‘arrogance’. In retaliation, several began to mock Balitangan when he turned his back. They moved their heads in a rapid, jerky manner, miming Balitangan’s deformity from a childhood illness. I am fairly certain he witnessed several of these attempts to mock him. Such petty cruelties, however, did not stop his comments. Balitangan continued to tell mediums, both in and out of possession, that their songs and chants had too many names in them, while bragging that he alone knew the ‘true’ names.

As it had with Sumpitan, this behaviour prompted a strong protest from Siinai Alasan’s spirit, even though her spirit was praised by Balitangan as ‘strong’ and ‘true’:

We spirits cross over to the world of humans. If ... there are those who [think they] know the meaning, or the reason that we were brought here, it is because we are to educate/inform you all. I say, you are all new ones here.<sup>13</sup> We spirits who gather jointly to bless cannot compete with one another as to who is on top. Long blessings are not allowed. If we compete foolishly, the result will be that some people will no longer want to act as intermediaries between humans and spirits. There cannot be one medium, one spirit, one *sando* on top.

Here Siinai Alasan’s spirit reminds Balitangan that to distinguish spirits or mediums by praising one and denigrating another will destroy the ceremony. Mediums will no longer want to act as ‘vessels’ for the spirit. Siinai Alasan’s spirit continued:

We have been drawn together, yet there comes the enemy. I won't point out one in particular. Why are our blessings short? Because we hear the one on bottom first and only add a bit, reinforcing what has already been said. If you want to start with the branch rather than the tap-root, then our blessing or prayer will be ineffective ... That which is short is added to, one blessing follows another, building upon the other.

The spirit possessing Siinai Alasan kept asserting that *sandos* and spirits must act in concert and not compete with one another. All spirits play their part, their chants a kind of cumulative reiteration. Later, the same spirit added: 'We are like the boat carrying human's wishes. If the boat is not paddled forcefully, if there is only one, it will not arrive at shore. The winds push the boat'. Spirits regard mediums as vessels or boats. Spirits themselves are 'the winds'. A boat requires many paddlers working in unison. Her point was that when the assembled medium-spirits united as a single crew they would be successful. Or, as she also put it, they would become 'one tongue, one mouth', creating a voice loud enough 'to pierce the seven layers of heaven, and to plunge through the seven layers of earth'.

The spirits were far more talkative with Balitangan than they had been with Sumpitan. Yet, no spirit began speaking or chanting without first saying to the spirit who preceded, 'Your words will not be cut, but only added to'. Balitangan, as a male curer, was like Sumpitan in that he questioned the power of particular mediums, hinting that some might be faking possession. His individualistic actions could be explained by his role as a male curer or his youthful training in the Sufi imam's house. Like Sumpitan, Balitangan characterized spirits possessing mediums in terms of their names and identities. Nevertheless, Balitangan was unlike Sumpitan and more closely aligned with spirits when he commented that too many names for spirits were 'bent talk'. Perhaps because he, like mediums, was born a commoner, Balitangan ultimately adopted the spirits' and the mediums' moral stance. Though Balitangan acknowledged that some spirits could be identified and named, he ultimately resisted the *sandos'* urge to identify *all* the spirits possessing mediums. Balitangan's stance was halfway between that of spirits and mediums on the one hand, and that of curers on the other.

### Conclusion

When studying spirit possession, we generally assume that the medium, not the spirit, is talking. From this perspective, we might conclude from the encounters discussed above that mediums (disguised as spirits) resist the *sandos* as a form of self-protection. Steedly (1993) takes this approach in her exploration of a related case of possession among the Karo Batak of Sumatra. She notes that mediums are well aware of the ambiguity of voice (or what I, borrowing from Karp (1990) would call 'the paradox of agency') that possession entails. According to Steedly, because it is hard to tell who is speaking when a medium opens her mouth, audiences are constantly

looking for definitive answers and singular messages. Official interpretations of the mediums' words seek a determinate identity for that which speaks through her, a name, a history, a simple fixed subject-position ... and any lapse from this clear determination of voice-identity tends to be interpreted by the audience as a sign of either fraud or incompetence on the mediums' part (1993: 197).

Substitute here *sando* for ‘audience’ and we have the Laujé case. As we have seen, *sandos* such as Sumpitan seek eagerly to unmask mediums, enhancing their own reputations in the bargain. It is therefore perfectly plausible that mediums, as a defence against aggressive *sandos*, might assert their right to remain part of a collectivity who speak with ‘one voice, one tongue’.

It is not my intention to analyse *sandos*’ and mediums’ conversations in terms of social psychology. I do not believe mediums such as Siinai Alasan are merely defending themselves against being exposed as less than whom they claim to be. Rather, what is more important is that the mediums in their trances are genuinely articulating a particular moral and religious vision of life without acting manipulatively or with self-interested strategy. By submerging multiple identities into a single collectivity, spirits-speaking-through-mediums portray the manifold spirits as a monotheistic essence – as refractions of a single spirit, *umputé*. I would suggest that it is the possessed mediums at the *Momosoro* who have become the most forceful advocates of that position, as they ‘enact’ that spirit and become ‘one voice’ in front of a Laujé audience.

We could interpret the mediums’ position as an extension of the logic of possession itself. Possession, after all, implies the erasure of the human will in favour of a spiritual entity, and submission to a higher power. For Laujé mediums, the spirit takes over, or ‘sits in front’ of, the human body it temporarily uses as a vessel. For spirits or mediums to argue for a more general notion of submission – that all spirits speak with ‘one tongue, one voice’ – is to make the experiential fact of possession into a consciously expressed ideology.

This ideology implies a certain ‘selflessness’ and contrasts strongly with the self-aggrandizing stance *sandos* sometimes take. Perhaps there is, therefore, something to the enduring theory in anthropology that possession partakes of a kind of Nietzschean ‘ressentiment’. In Laujé spirit possession women may be resisting or denigrating male assertiveness, and commoners may be contesting the individuating powers associated with elite Islam. Female mediums resisted male curers, but quasi-commoners such as Balitangan aligned with other commoners to contest the elite Sufi’s tendency to name the refractions of *umputé*.<sup>14</sup> Class and gender, here, were factors that split the community.

Nevertheless, class and gender by themselves do not provide a complete explanation. Possession does not involve a covert appropriation of individual power by the powerless. The female mediums are not claiming that they were once women and therefore powerless, nor that they are now spirits and therefore powerful. Rather, the spirits who speak through the women are asserting that individuating agency is immoral and that collective agency is moral. The ‘vessel’ reaches its destination only if all paddle in unison, and if all mediums deny their own selves so that the spirit is supreme.

To explain why the spirits are so concerned with ‘paddling in unison’ we have to take into account the fact that at the time of my research both the mediums’ practices, and the Sufi-influenced practices of the male curers such as Sumpitan, were under attack by reformist Muslims, some of whom were in positions of power within the government. These attacks threatened to fracture the Laujé community from within, for reformist Islam had also become a compelling practice for many Laujé.

Recall that the attacks were two-fold. The reformists claimed that the *Momosoro*'s participants were not Muslims but worshipped multiple spirits which were satanic. The Laujé participants' answer to this was likewise two-fold. The elite curers emphasized their claim that they were Muslim by drawing upon their Muslim knowledge; namely, their Sufism. Though their response to the reformists was perhaps misguided, in their own eyes they proved to outsiders that they were indeed Muslims. I believe this is one reason Sumpitan was so anxious to have me tape-record his interpretations of the spirit speeches, for he wanted to prove to the 'outside world' that the Laujé were not pagan. Likewise, the commoners' emphasis on the collective spirit, *umputé*, could be a response to reformists' assertions that the ceremony is satanic and polytheistic.

There is, however, more to the spirits' statements than these contemporary political issues. Siinai Alasan and other possessed mediums emphasized personal passivity in the face of *umputé*'s agency, and the underlying unity in the seeming diversity of the refractions of *umputé*.<sup>15</sup> They remind us that, to understand possession, we cannot focus only on the medium as the agent, and on the sociological factors that influence her utterances during spirit possession. The moral stance conveyed by the spirits' speech deserves to be understood in its own right, and cannot be reduced to the sociological factors impinging on the mediums as individuals. If we take seriously what the spirits say, the Laujé spirit possession rites remind anthropologists not to assume that possession is merely a means of individual empowerment or just a puzzle concerning agency. In the Laujé case, it is also an expression of a morality of selflessness and of the mediums' belief in the factuality of spirit agency.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In most of the literature, spirit possession is an affliction which effects a cure (Broch 1985; Constantinides 1977; Crapanzano 1977; Kessler 1977; Taussig 1987; Wagner 1977). Among the Laujé, spirit possession is not clearly linked to particular illnesses. It is often an inheritable capacity and considered a sign of favour from the spirits.

<sup>2</sup> Karp's work is on the Iteso of Kenya and Boddy's is on the Hofriyati of Sudan. It is not surprising that their work, despite its African ethnographic base, is relevant to the present discussion. Until recently, most theories of spirit possession were based on African ethnography. Certainly, Lewis's seminal work (1971) has had a major impact on the field, as have other African analyses by Bourguignon (1973; 1976), Constantinides (1977), Crapanzano (1977), Douglas (1970), Giles (1987), Harris (1957), Lambek (1981; 1988), and Messing (1958). Until Steedly's recent (1993) analysis of female mediums among the Batak of Sumatra, most discussion of spirit possession in Asia has been primarily ethnographic (cf. Connor 1986; Kendall 1985; Laderman 1991; Roseman 1991) or focused on shamanic possession (Atkinson 1989; Graham 1987; Tsing 1993) and the theoretical implications of shamanic trance. Steedly's (1989; 1993)

work on Batak spirit mediums and the ambiguous domain they occupy while possessed will be discussed in the conclusion of this article.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Indonesian government census of 1980, those who identify themselves as Laujé number no more than 15,000 (Anema 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Bugis and Mandar traders had settled in the Tomini Bay region of Central Sulawesi in the nineteenth century. According to Riedel (1870) and van Hoevell (1892), the Dutch were anxious to find 'educated' and noble' men to act as Rajas. Because the Bugis and Mandar could speak the trade language, Malay, which the Dutch knew, they were favoured over autochthonous leaders such as the Laujé who could not communicate through writing or speech with the European overseers.

<sup>5</sup> Islamic practices among the *olongian's* family, according to oral testimonies, typified Sufi forms then current in the archipelago at large (cf. Bowen 1993). Early *olongians* were often women and they were the first among the Laujé to marry outsiders or immigrants from the Bugis, Kaili or Mandar ethnic groups. The first imams among the Laujé were often these immigrants who married the *olongians* and brought Sufi Islam to elite Laujé.

<sup>6</sup> It is illustrative of the depth of penetration of Islam into local curing traditions that 'medicine' or 'cure' in the local Laujé language is *ulam*, perhaps from *ulama*. Moreover, 'prayer' or 'spell' is *doa*. The Laujé divide spirits into two overarching categories: *wali* and *jim* (from *jinn*). The Islamic influence in Laujé curing is certainly deep.

<sup>7</sup> The shift began in the 1920s when the immigrant Raja, Kuti Tombolotutu, a leading member of Sarekat Islam, the political party which was agitating underground for Indonesian independence, came into power in Tinombo. Raja Kuti was also a Muslim reformist and took an activist role in promoting reformist Islamic practice in his Rajadom until his death in 1963. The SwapRaja of Moutong remained under the jurisdiction of Raja Kuti until 1963, even after this region of Indonesia gained independence in 1952. In 1964, after his death, the SwapRaja was divided into four sub-provinces or counties (*kecamatan*) including Tinombo. At the time of my fieldwork, Kuti's grandchildren, nieces and nephews were either in power in the small regional subdistricts or had moved on to positions in the capitals of Palu and Ujung Pandang.

<sup>8</sup> It is a curing rite and seems to have begun in response to a smallpox epidemic at the turn of the century, which as local traditions have it, was brought to the region by pious Muslims returning from the *hajj*. A newspaper account of the pilgrimage to Mecca in the 1890s noted that 'smallpox and cholera killed pilgrims like sheep ... in one day nearly 500 died ...' (Du Plessis & Luckhoff 1953: 30).

<sup>9</sup> The womb-like altar called the *ginaling* or *vukeng* consists of a triangular bamboo frame (said to be shaped like the womb) covered with bark cloth. Inside the altar are the 'first four woods' from which the first plants and trees of the world were born. The first metal which divides the living from the spiritual world is also housed inside the altar. At one time, I am told, there were more valuables, such as gold and sacred swords (*kris*), but during various invasions, ancestors hid the sacred regalia and no one today knows where those places are.

<sup>10</sup> The style of Laujé prayers is typical of couplet versed prayers throughout Indonesia. See Metcalf (1989) for an explanation of the Berawan of Borneo's prayers and see Fox (1974) for an explanation of similar processes in eastern Indonesia.

<sup>11</sup> In the *Momosoro*, mediums believe that they are possessed by the original collective *umputé*. Male interpreters believe that the mediums are possessed by individual refractions or branches of the original seed of *umputé*. Though I believe the named spirits in the liturgies represent a whole pantheon which the present-day Muslim Laujé are embarrassed to acknowledge since they do not fit with monotheistic Islam, calling the spirits one term, *umputé*, serves as a make-shift or transitional form of monotheism. As I have argued elsewhere (Nourse 1994) Laujé responded to this attack by 'rationalizing' local religious practice or *adat*' (see Bowen 1993; Peacock 1978a; 1978b; Weber 1958). When contemporary Laujé men and women identify spirits as *umputé*, they are identifying an invented tradition perhaps inspired by animism, some Hindu-Buddhism (cf. Anderson 1972; Errington 1989) or Islam. The cluster of attitudes that *umputé* allows Laujé to express are fairly widespread throughout the Indonesian archipelago (Hooykaas 1974; Josselin de Jong 1965; Ossenbruggen 1977), suggesting pre-Islamic influences. It is also clear, however, that *umputé* fits well with Sufi notions and could have been part of Islam from the very beginning (cf. Bowen; 1987; 1993 on *umputé*-like beliefs among the Gayo of Sumatra).

<sup>12</sup> Balitangan did not dress as a lowlander. A lowland man usually wears long pants, sandals, a batik shirt, watch and a black *topi*, a fez said to be the symbol of Indonesian independence



(Adams 1958). By contrast, mountaineers such as Balitangan traditionally wear brown batik headwraps with the corner tucked back into the scarf. They rarely wear shoes or watches, preferring shorts and cheap t-shirts. This lack of lowland-style clothing signalled to the mediums that Balitangan had little exposure to the kind of Sufi Islam which teaches one how to quest for names. As a result, the mediums assumed that Balitangan would interpret the spirit entity as a passive collectivity just as they did.

<sup>13</sup> Spirits are regarded as 'old ones' while humans, no matter what their age, are considered 'new ones'.

<sup>14</sup> When it suited him, Balitangan used his elite religious knowledge learned while a servant in the imam's house to align himself with male *sandos* against female *boliang* but ultimately resisted elites' tendency to name and individuate all the spirits. Indeed, two weeks after the *Momosoro*, Balitangan came to visit me in the mountains and offered, Sufi style, to teach me the names of the four spirits of the corner-posts of the world if I offered him, as is Sufi custom, a white cloth for us to sit on and a machete as a gift (cf. Acciaiola 1989). This aspect of his Sufi training made Balitangan like Sumpitan.

<sup>15</sup> Because the mediums' emphasis on the 'one tongue, one voice' quality of *umputé* seems to be an accommodationist response to the incursions of reformist Islam, this raises a further question. This question has to do with the historicity of *umputé* itself as a belief system. The cluster of attitudes that *umputé* allows Laujé to express are fairly widespread throughout the Indonesian archipelago (Bowen 1993; Hooykaas 1974; Josselin de Jong 1965; Ossenbruggen 1977). Does this mean that the notion of submission and collectivity the mediums express through *umputé* predates Islam and endures despite Islam? Whether these are old beliefs modified under current conditions, or modern innovations, is discussed in Nourse 1994.

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## **La voix du vent contre les maîtres guérisseurs, ou la possession contestée chez les Laujé du Sulawesi**

### *Résumé*

Le rite de possession a souvent été compris comme une réponse compensatoire au manque de pouvoir. S'il est vrai que les médiums utilisent les esprits comme les émissaires de leurs désirs frustrés, il serait erroné de vouloir analyser toute forme de possession de la sorte. La signification des esprits invoqués par les médiums est une question hautement contestée parmi les Laujé d'Indonésie. Les médiums laujé, le plus souvent des femmes, sont persuadés que la possession reflète le modèle d'une vie exemplaire soumise aux forces spirituelles. Les interprètes et guérisseurs (dans leur grande majorité des hommes) chargés de traduire ce que disent les esprits ont la certitude qu'un certain nombre de médiums font semblant d'être possédés. C'est pour cela qu'ils affirment être les seuls capables de pouvoir identifier les esprits véritables. Eux seuls peuvent obtenir des bons esprits qu'ils guérissent les malades. S'appuyant sur la nature contestée des notions laujé d'esprit et de force agissante, l'auteur met en question les présuppositions anthropologiques les plus communes se rapportant à la signification des phénomènes de possession.

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