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Nils Bubandt

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Interview with an ancestor
Spirits as informants and the politics of possession in North Maluku

Nils Bubandt
University of Aarhus, Denmark

ABSTRACT
This article explores the relationship between spirit possession, politics and subjectivity. Based on an account of two possession ceremonies on the island of Ternate in eastern Indonesia, I show that as spirits are being conjured up for political reasons, they partake in a spiritual politics in which they are both instruments and actors. Methodologically, I use these accounts to suggest the need to treat spirits as informants. From this I develop a critique of the continuing link between the anthropological concept of the informant and conventional ideas about bounded subjectivity, a link that remains unquestioned despite much contemporary anthropological research into the complexity of lived subjectivity. Analytically, I argue that treating spirits as informants reveals how possession rituals construct and make intelligible a particular relationship between politics, experience and emerging democracy in Indonesia. Treating spirits as ‘methodologically real’ therefore has important analytical consequences for how we understand their political efficacy.

KEY WORDS spiritual politics, subjectivity, critique of the informant, democracy, Indonesia
A spirit session in Ternate

One afternoon in June 2003 I was sat in the small front office of the sultanate of Ternate. The office, a small rectangular room, had become a favourite hang-out of mine. Set in the tranquil courtyard of the sultanate palace with a great view of the sea and the surrounding islands of Halmahera and Tidore, it functioned as a quiet retreat from the hustle and bustle of Ternate, the capital and trading hub of the province of North Maluku. The office doubled as a gathering place and a guard house for a shifting set of volunteer guards recruited from the villages of northern Ternate and a constant flow of sultanate staff members, mainly city officials who had received ceremonial posts in the sultanate hierarchy as part of the effort to revitalize the political power of the sultanate in the region after the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. It was a relaxing place where people gossiped and dozed. Nevertheless, an unmistakable anxiety also pervaded the apparent tranquility of the office. Memory of the mob attack on the sultanate palace in the lead-up to the violent conflict that had been wreaked on North Maluku between 1999 and 2001 was still vivid, and the sultanate did not want to take any chances of a repeat surprise attack. The office was therefore always manned, a perfect place for an anthropologist who wanted to chat about politics and the role of the sultanate in it.

I was watching a group of sultanate officials playing chess, when a small public taxi (bemo) swung into the palace courtyard. The taxi had been hired by Abdullah Harianto, a man who not long before had been selected as the next Sultan of Jailolo. Abdullah and a small entourage were going off to seek the advice of the spirits on when and how to perform the forthcoming coronation ceremony and invited me to come along.

Abdullah, a retired police man from Java, had never imagined that it would be his fate to become sultan, but one night a few months earlier a gathering of people had come to his house led by Mudaffar Syah, the Sultan of Ternate. The Sultan of Ternate had had a vision. In his dream he had seen a bright light that pointed out the house of Abdullah. Conferral with the ancestors had confirmed that Abdullah should indeed become the new Sultan of Jailolo, a post that had not been filled for more than 400 years. The palace of Jailolo had been sacked by Portuguese forces in the 16th century, effectively ending the rule of the sultanate of Jailolo. This destruction had severed the political rule of the four sultanates of North Maluku who formed a cosmological unity of ‘four mountains’ (kie raha) that ensured the well-being and prosperity of the entire realm (Andaya, 1993). The destruction of the Jailolo sultanate had in local understanding presaged the historical marginalization of the region that followed. Famed in Europe since the Renaissance as the Spice Islands, after the 16th century the domain of the four sultanates had indeed been subjected to a string of colonial
overlords, beginning with the Portuguese and Spanish and culminating in almost 300 years of Dutch colonial overrule after the early 17th century. Ignored for the last century of colonial overrule, the region had continued its descent, becoming an economic backwater on the rural margins of the Indonesian nation-state.

The reestablishment of the fourth sultanate in North Maluku in the first years of the 21st century after a 400-year hiatus was in local understanding a momentous event, particularly amongst the supporters of the Sultan of Ternate on Ternate and North Halmahera. For them it would mean that political and cosmological unity was about to be restored to the ‘Domain of the Four Mountains’ (*Maluku Kie Raha*). Many people felt this was a first step in reasserting the region’s place in world history. These efforts were made possible both by the auspicious intervention of spirits and by the favourable political winds that had begun to blow for local rulers in Indonesia after the fall of President Suharto in 1998. It was therefore important to keep the spirits on side if this project of political regional reconstruction was to succeed.

We drove for half an hour, to the far side of the tiny island of Ternate. It was already dark when we arrived at a village near the historical site of Fora Madidi. According to local mythology, Fora Madidi is where Islam was first introduced to the region, when an Arab traveller, Jafar Sadek, fell in love with and married a spirit princess from heaven. The couple sired four sons who went on to found the four sultanates of North Maluku. We stopped at the house of Pak Ikhsan, who was known to be a medium (*gomate*) who was often employed by the spirits as a ‘boat’ (*oti*). Around 15 people had already found a seat in his front room and had been served tea and betel nut. Talk drifted across several innocuous themes, as politeness required, when Pak Ikhsan was suddenly and quite unceremoniously possessed by Jou Kalem, the spirit of a leading imam of the religious council of the Ternatan Sultanate (*bobato akherat*) who had died over 600 years ago. Through the interpretation of Pak Musa, a local ritual official, Jou Kalem asked how he might help and then went on to give instructions on how to perform the coronation ceremony in the most auspicious manner. In mid-sentence, the spirit suddenly interrupted himself, saying: ‘He is here’. At this, Ibu Noni, a school teacher who had accompanied us in the car, was possessed by the spirit of Tabuna, one of the 13th-century rulers of Ternate. The old sultan was very upset and for a long time refused to speak despite the best and most deferential entreaties by Pak Musa.

After a long period of pleading, the spirit of the old sultan seemed to soften and broke into tears with Pak Musa, as the spirit rejoiced in finally seeing one of his ‘grand children’ ascend the throne of Jailolo. As unexpectedly as he had started crying, however, the mood of the old sultan changed again. He suddenly began beating Pak Musa, accusing him of having on
several occasions misspoken ritual incantations and scolding him for not observing the Islamic prayers consistently. Other people were similarly accused of various ritual and moral offences and a young woman was sternly ordered outside to find star jasmine (*gambir*), the flowers of which are said to placate the spirits. The old sultan then proceeded to sullenly chew the flowers in copious amounts in what seemed a deliberate attempt to calm himself. In the meantime, Pak Ikhsan had disappeared into the kitchen from where he now emerged dressed in a tall white head-dress, already possessed by the guardian spirit (*doku*) of the village of Gapi, the first capital of Ternate. The two spirits now began to quarrel. Gapi, like Jou Kalem, wanted the coronation ceremony to proceed as planned, whereas Tabuna, the glowing sultan spirit, was vehemently against it. The argument between the two spirits was heating up, when another woman in the group, Ibu Lan, was suddenly possessed, not by one but by no fewer than 12 spirits. The spirit collective was introduced by Ibu Lan as consisting of eight sultans (*kolano*) and four pre-islamic rulers (*momole*), before they began weighing in on the discussion.

‘We, the *kolano* and the *momole*, all accept the Sultan of Jailolo, as do all the *moro*,’ the spirit collective solemnly announced. This mention of *moro*, a class of spirits that are human-like figures who lead lives that are the inverse of humans deep in the forests or at the bottom of lakes, caused Tabuna’s anger to mount even more. ‘Do not speak about devil spirits (*setan*)! It is not proper and I don’t like it,’ Tabuna admonished.

The argument between the spirits – an argument that was about the proper management of the proposed ritual but also instantiated the opposition between Islamic faith and the power of spirits that teetered uncomfortably on its margins – continued for some time. In the end the side of the dead sultans that had been joined by other spirits held out over the more orthodox Tabuna. Through their combined efforts, the 13 spirits, acting through the bodies of two mediums, eventually managed to subdue the angry spirit of Tabuna. The coronation of the Sultan of Jailolo was approved and the procedure of the ceremony detailed. Some time passed as other guests approached the spirit of the old sultan deferentially in order to state their own personal concerns or problems on which they needed spirit advice. At one point, however, Gapi announced in a loud voice: ‘Go home now, everyone,’ and the spirits left the bodies of the three mediums as suddenly and unceremoniously as they had entered them.

The séance was a complex and emotional event, simultaneously unpredictable and structured, full of respect and mockery, joy and aggression. It was a performance of some of the central concerns associated with the return of the Sultan of Jailolo: the importance of making the coronation an auspicious event after 400 years of waiting, the issue of whether Abdullah Harianto, a man of non-Ternatan origin, was acceptable as the
new sultan, and the tensions within local Islam about the role of the spirits in general and some spirits, like the *moro*, in particular. The séance spoke directly to national politics in Indonesia because the resurrection of the Jailolo sultanate was part of a broader political trend to use traditional means to secure political seats and influence in the 2004 elections. But it was also an entirely local affair, as the spirits were approached by people in the room with their own concerns and questions. In all of these various concerns the spirits came to act as political advisors. What was thus, for me at least, the most striking feature of the séance was the way it provided a stage for debate, discussion and even fighting about intensely political matters between spirits, whose presence cut across the bodily boundaries of the assembled mediums.

**Spirits as informants**

The serial possession by two spirits of Pak Ikhsan and the co-presence of 12 spirits in the body of Ibu Lan suggest that spirit possession produces a form of multiple subjectivity. As Masquelier has demonstrated on the basis of case material from Niger, possession is a learned technique in which the medium learns to handle the demands of ‘competing subjectivities’ (Masquelier, 2002: 55). Masquelier describes the evolving, two-way relationship between the medium, Zenaibou, and the strict and disciplinarian spirit, Rankasso to whom she is the bodily host. In this relationship, Rankasso’s virulent critique of Zeinabou’s life style ends up having an impact on the host’s decision to marry, at the same time that Zeinabou finds a way to bend Rankasso’s initial, moral inflexibility into a successful mediumship with a large clientele (p. 56). In the possession I witnessed that afternoon in Ternate, the competition was as much between the spirit subjects as between the subjectivity of the spirits and the medium. The possession was in this sense a ritual but also a contradictory redistribution of multiple subjectivities across bodily boundaries. The ancestors were engaged by people as sources of information on their personal future as well as on specific political issues because they were vital to both personal and political success.

It makes sense, I suggest, to treat spirits anthropologically as informants because that is how people in Ternate treat them. I had on this afternoon in 2003 essentially participated in a political consultation, in which the proper contours of a ritual with both local and regional political ramifications were being planned in dialogue with the spirits of dead sultans, and where people also asked for personal political advice regarding events in their daily lives. The spirits were called upon with the purpose of acting as informants about the seen and the unseen world, the past, present and future.
Even the visiting anthropologist was explicitly encouraged to treat them as such. Thus during an intermission in the overall proceedings I was asked if I had any questions for Tabuna. I had been taken aback by the anger of the spirit and was not eager to draw his attention, but people would have none of it: surely there was something about my future I needed advice about? There had to be something that I wanted to know? After considerable pressure, I asked Tabuna how my wife was doing back home. Tabuna answered that she was fine. He could sense I had a ‘clear heart’ and my motives for coming to Ternate were pure. I would lead a happy life and eventually have three children. On the bemo ride to the village I had previously discussed my family background with Ibu Noni, whose body hosted Tabuna in the ritual, and had told her that my wife and I had tried to have children for some time. At the time she had expressed sympathy for the endeavour and pity that someone so old was still without offspring. Now possessed by Tabuna, Ibu Noni’s knowledge of my background may have played a role in Tabuna’s insight, but that is less important here than the fact that spirits are generally used to get advice and omens for one’s personal and political affairs. I argue that spirits, when observed and engaged during possession rituals, are key informants who can be engaged, interviewed and analysed very much like the conventional key informant technique suggests (Tremblay, 1957). And as with all informants, the interest of the anthropologist is more productively oriented towards relating what they say to their social context than to judging whether what they say is objectively true.

**Spirits, multiple subjectivities and the problem of ‘the informant’**

Regarding the spirits of that afternoon as informants does present a challenge, however. The multiplicity of the spirit appearances would appear to confound the traditional concept of the informant with its implicit (but, as far as I have been able to ascertain, also unquestioned) association with individual (and living) subjects. The idea of the coherent and singular informant inhabiting one body is thus challenged by the 12 spirits who possessed Ibu Lan and who each in their own right were historical persons that could be treated as positioned informants. I argue that the idea of treating these spirits as informants is only counterintuitive because the category of the ‘informant’ remains linked to conventional, philosophical idea(l)s about the bounded self. This vestige of individualism that continues to inform the concept of the informant is odd. The individualism sits awkwardly with recent attempts in anthropology and elsewhere to rethink the notion of the subject and the self. The goal of this trend has been exactly to move beyond implicit assumptions about universal individualism by highlighting the complexity and multiplicity of personhood, selfhood and subjectivity.
Ewing, 1997; Mageo, 2000; Mahmood, 2004; Moore, 2007; Sökefeld, 1999). The one-body-one-person-one-mind model of the self that clings to the category of the informant also clashes, I believe, with the lived experience of doing fieldwork with spirits. I certainly felt that I encountered more people and more potential informants than there were physical bodies present in the room that afternoon in 2003. My very discomfort with the unpredictability of the actions of Tabuna or the spirit collective that possessed the body of Ibu Lan suggests the presence of multiple informants and social actors.

I am not arguing that this case is necessarily methodologically unique. Indeed, it is not only in spirit possessions that the methodological convention of one-body-one-informant is unsettled. Fieldwork among people with several roles, identities or personages would entail a similar challenge to the classical idea of ‘the informant’. Examples of these kinds of multiple informants would include people with dissociative identity disorder, voice-hearers, actors, soothsayers or channellers. These kinds of multiple informants are gaining a more central role in anthropology as the discipline has begun to investigate ‘emergent forms of life’ in late modernity (Fischer, 1999). The need to pluralize the informant category may be most pressing when we deal with such ‘unusual’ informants. But the notion of the one-body-one-informant is problematic on a general level as well. We all arguably live intersubjective lives in a reality of multiple orders, in which we have shifting expressions of self (Schutz, 1974). In that sense, we inhabit bodies that contain potentially many ‘informants’ at different times – a notion also foreshadowed by critical ethnography’s attempt to come to grips with the hybridity of contemporary life (Denzin, 1997).

As Ewing has suggested, even during normal dialogue people routinely make rapid shifts among multiple expressions of self (Ewing, 1990). Although these multiple self-representations are held together by an overarching experience of wholeness, they are often inconsistent and even conflicting (1990: 274). The point, Ewing suggests, is not to force a choice in the false opposition between a relativist and multiple form of self on the one hand and a universalist, bounded idea of the self on the other. Both positions are equally problematic. Instead of repeating an orientalist dichotomy between a bounded Western self and multiple forms of self among ‘the rest’, one should instead investigate, Ewing suggests, how multiple and conflicting projections of self may coexist within an overarching sense of self that people around the world struggle to maintain against the exigencies of life. Ewing therefore proposes attending to how such ‘multiple self-representations are organized, contextualized, and negotiated in dialogue’ (p. 274). The way to do this, she argues, is to relate the conflicts and inconsistencies in the multiple forms of self representations that emerge during dialogue to a larger social and political context.
I will follow this line of enquiry and argue that spirit possession in North Maluku provides a clear but also complex example of the political organization of multiple expressions of the self. During these possessions, spirits readily make themselves available as informants, because they have much the same intentionality and ambition as the living. In possession rituals, spirits incarnate themselves in individual hosts as they assert themselves as political subjects and informants. They do so because they are historical figures who act politically in this world (Boddy, 1994; Lambek, 1993b; Sharp, 1993). Following Ewing, I will therefore suggest that attending to the conflicts and inconsistencies of the selves produced by spirit possessions is a way of studying the conflicts and inconsistencies of a larger political context. As spirits assert themselves as political actors, and humans allow themselves to be turned into their ‘boats’ (oti), several, even many, subjectivities compete for room in the body of the medium in both a regulated and unpredictable manner. For people in Ternate, the anger, wrangling and mutual in-fighting of spirits are central forms of testimony to their political will to be heard and indeed evidence of their humanity. In other words, the body of the medium during possession contains potentially many informants who can be interviewed and whose personal narratives and political agency can be traced.

The methodological reality of spirits

I am not proposing that we need to treat spirits as ‘ontologically real’ as some have suggested (Turner, 1993). Instead, I am suggesting that spirits are ‘methodologically real’ and should be treated as informants. I think the advantage of this is that it gets on with the business of studying the social and political reality of spirits and recognizes that the invocation of spirits does make a difference in the field (to both the anthropologist and to the people we study) without opening oneself to accusations of political naivety or cultural solipsism (Budden, 2003; Halperin, 1996). In fact, I suggest that it is only by treating spirits as methodologically real that a critical and detailed political analysis is possible.

There are clearly limits to what spirits can do as informants. Spirits tend to observe particular scripts; they are socially invoked to perform certain roles; they may be difficult to access; their answers may be limited to certain contexts; and there are ethical boundaries to how hard an anthropologist can push or question them without disturbing the social situation in which they appear. Yet, I would argue that this would hold for any other kind of human informant, as indeed the many entries in methodology text books about ‘roles’, ‘gate-keeping’, ‘access’ and ‘ethics’ illustrate (for example, Bernard, 1994). Furthermore, as much recent literature on spirits has made
apparent, spirits are often counter-hegemonic, challenge the scripts set for them, are unpredictable, and appear in contexts that are awkward, problematic or dangerous (Boddy, 1989; Crapanzano, 1980; Jackson, 1989; Lambek, 1981; Masquelier, 2001; Stoller, 1989). Again, I would suggest, spirits in this sense behave very much like other human informants.

Taking spirits methodologically seriously as informants therefore implies the same kind of methodological caution, ethical circumspection and critical distance as engagement with other informants in the field. I suggest it is advantageous, even necessary, to approach spirits as informants if one wants to explore the social fact that spirits are politically real to many of the people we study. The methodological question of how to handle the ‘reality’ of spirits is therefore, I suggest, closely related to an analysis of politics. In fact, if as a recent overview of the literature on possession argues, the intersection between the politics and subjectivity of spirit encounters is becoming a dominant and fruitful field of investigation (Boddy, 1994: 427), we need the help of spirits as informants to properly conceptualize the kinds of ‘politics’ and ‘subjectivities’ involved in these encounters. This is so, one might say, because spirits and politics belong to the same space between the real and the really made-up (Taussig, 1993). In other words, taking the social and political reality of spirits methodologically seriously amongst the people we study also necessitates a different kind of political analysis. This is because politics is conducted, imagined and discussed in particular ways when possession is a political technology that gives not only corporeal existence but also political voice to the ancestors.

In late May 2004 I attended a second ritual possession. The spirit in attendance that night was the last, sovereign Sultan of Ternate, Sultan Muhammad Haji Usman, who died in 1941. As with the ritual I had attended the year earlier, this one was organized in order to ask for political advice, and like Tabuna, Sultan Usman was an angry spirit, unhappy with the way his descendants behaved, and only placated with some difficulty. But instead of a series of long-deceased spirits, Sultan Usman was a more contemporary spirit, who took a strong interest in the details of present politics. And while the ritual invocation of Tabuna ended in ritual appeasement with an expected result, the encounter with the spirit of Sultan Usman was to have a series of unexpected political consequences. The two ritual possessions therefore illustrate the variety of spirit politics, a variety that includes both scripts and unpredictability; confirmation of and challenge to the status quo. By taking the spirit of Sultan Usman seriously as an informant, he reveals himself as an influential political actor. Taking spirits seriously as informants and actors does not prevent critical political analysis; rather, as I will show, it facilitates it.
A night in Kalumpang

When I arrived at the house of Ibu Nur on this Thursday night in 2004, it was not immediately apparent that a divination ceremony was under way. Ibu Nur’s house was a square cement building very much like all the other houses in the densely populated town section of Kalumpang, a part of Ternate town populated mainly by middle-class government employees.

Ibu Nur, a portly woman of about 30, who during the day worked as a government official, sat at the small coffee table that most North Malukan houses have in their front rooms to accommodate visitors. She was dressed rather casually, looking almost as if she had just been exercising, aerobics being the latest craze among government employees in Indonesia. She wore a purple, oversize T-shirt with a large imprint of the 1970s heavy metal band, Kiss, the signature tongue of the lead singer mockingly protruding from his mouth. The T-shirt draped over a very close-fitting pair of cotton tights.

Ibu Nur was engaging a young man who sat across from her in what seemed to be polite if also intimate conversation. The man, Pak Abdul, who was in his mid-thirties, had been served a large mug of coffee, and sat slightly bent over to better hear what was being said. I had met Pak Abdul earlier that same day. He was one of 12 children of the ruling Sultan of Ternate and had been very enthusiastic when I told him I had done research about witchcraft for over ten years in Halmahera, an island that loomed on the eastern horizon of Ternate. He had told me that he wanted me to meet an old man who knew lots about witchcraft cures and who had himself been attacked by a witch. He had therefore arranged for me to come to his house that same evening. However, when I arrived, accompanied by Ati, a Ternatan friend who worked for an international NGO in town, Pak Abdul was not at home. After we had been served tea and water melon by his wife, Pak Abdul called me from his mobile phone to say that his wife would take us in his SUV to the nearby town section of Kalumpang.

After a ten-minute ride in the car that was almost too big for the narrow streets that crawled up the slopes of the volcano, Gammalama, that towers above the city, we arrived at Ibu Nur’s house. Pak Abdul apologized, saying that he had forgotten that it was Thursday when he arranged for us to meet. On Thursday nights, which like Monday nights are propitious for obtaining contact with ancestors and other spirits, he often visited Ibu Nur, who acted as his medium. Pak Abdul then introduced us to the person in the Kiss T-shirt across the coffee table. It turned out it was Sultan Usman, Abdul’s deceased great-grandfather, who momentarily used the body of Ibu Nur as a ‘boat’.

Sultan Usman, in the body of Ibu Nur, greeted Ati, the wife of Abdul, and myself solemnly, emphasizing how interesting it was for him to have a
Western visitor, and instructing us to address him as ‘Totu’, an honorific title of address, if we wanted to speak to him. Sultan Usman, it turned out, regularly possessed Ibu Nur and was by far her most employed spirit, appearing in several incarnations at varying ages. Unlike most other media, Ibu Nur did not need copious amounts of betel nut to be possessed, nor did the possession require elaborate ceremony. Usman could possess her at a moment’s notice and she also maintained a close relationship to the spirit of Usman when she was not possessed, regularly burning incense in his honour at a small altar in her bedroom. As a consequence of Ibu Nur’s ‘routine’ relationship to the sultan spirit, the conversation between Usman and his great-grandson, Abdul, had more the air of a quiet talk between intimate friends than of a possession ritual.

Aside from being a medium, Ibu Nur cured various forms of sorcery and magical attack (dotti). In fact, I had heard about Ibu Nur the day before because a month earlier she had cured a regional bureaucrat from the Department of Social Affairs who had been sorcerized by a co-worker. The sorcery had locked his jaws, making it impossible for him to eat. During the ritual massage to cure the sorcery by stroking him gently with a feather, the patient, so the story went, had screamed so much in pain that the walls of the house in the normally tranquil part of town had trembled. On this Thursday night, the same walls sported a conspicuous reminder of the link that Ibu Nur maintained between the current sultan’s family and the deceased Sultan Usman. Above where Ibu Nur was seated was an old black and white photograph, the only wall decoration in the room. The photograph showed Jabir Syah, the 47th Sultan of Ternate, Usman’s son and the father of the current sultan, Muddafar Syah.

The spirit of Sultan Usman that had possessed Ibu Nur this evening spoke with a stilted Javanese accent that Ibu Nur later insisted she herself had not mastered. The accent was in part historically founded. Sultan Usman had been appointed Sultan of Ternate in 1902 at the death of his brother. His reign had lasted for only 13 years. In 1915 the conservatively inclined Sultan Usman was arrested and exiled to Java by the Dutch colonial government for his alleged involvement in a tax rebellion during which a Dutch colonial officer had been killed (Fraassen, 1987: 60). Although Usman was allowed to return to Ternate in 1932, his banishment in 1915 marked the effective end of sultanate rule in North Maluku. After this the Dutch colonial government – in line with a general political shift of colonial government in the Dutch East Indies – decided to end the strategy of ruling through local regents and instead pursue a more direct form of colonial rule (Ricklefs, 1981: 143). The sultanates were formally abolished and continued an attenuated existence for the rest of the colonial period and during the first 50 years of Independence. The first two modernist leaders of Indonesia, Sukarno (1949–66) and Suharto (1966–98), both regarded the sultanates
throughout Indonesia with suspicion, seeing in them survivals of a feudal and out-dated form of rule that threatened to undermine the high-modernist and centralist policies of Jakarta.

After more than 80 years of relative marginalization, however, the fall of the New Order in 1998 and the subsequent implementation of a series of laws supporting political and economic decentralization brought the sultanates into the political open again (Klinken, 2007). No longer forced to pursue anonymous bureaucratic careers, members of the sultanate families could now begin to pursue political careers by openly basing them on their traditional authority. With this political revival of tradition the spirits began to play an important role in Indonesian local politics.

The spiritual politics of tradition

For most of the 120,000 people who live on Ternate the spirits inhabit a crowded social space that links the living with Allah. The ancestral spirits (wonge) are the most important occupants of this space, especially the named royal ancestors, who act as mentors and guardians in both everyday and political life. But it is also populated by a multitude of other spirits, including the guardian spirits of villages (doku), strong guardian spirits (delike), forest spirits (jin) and the invisible human-like spirits called moro. The spirits may abduct or seduce humans. They may make them ill, either out of anger or as a sign of love that often leads to a protective relationship. Spirits are also known to lie and act deceptively in order to manipulate or control their human counterparts. In other words, humans and spirits establish complex relationships with each other in a variety of ways. These relationships are not unlike those that humans establish with each other, and are based on both attraction and deceit, protection and control. The most important relationship occurs when possession (kemasukan) by named royal ancestors is induced in order to ask for political advice or benediction.

It is well established that Sufism has been a dominant medium for the spread of Islam throughout Indonesia (Sears, 1996; Woodward, 1989). Ternate is no exception to this. Indeed, despite the onslaught of reformist and conservative Islam since the late 1980s, Sufism is today experiencing a general revival in Indonesia (Bruinessen and Howell, 2007; Howell, 2001). Although the newer history of Sufism in Indonesia has been one of a formal organization and bureaucratization into schools (tarekat) and committees (Bruinessen, 2007), the main impact of Sufism in North Maluku is the continuing importance of spirits rather than formal organization. Thus, the Sufi emphasis on achieving blessing through pilgrimages to saintly graves is amalgamated to local Malukan animism in which central points in the landscape (in Ternatan called limau) are imbued with special power. The
named royal ancestors are associated with particular graves (*jere*), of which there are at least 45 on the island of Ternate (Fraassen, 1987: 312), each controlled by a ritual guardian (*sowohi*). The graves (and the spirits associated with them) contain a magical power or blessing (*jere mabarakt*), which is sought by the living through ritual visits to the graves (*ziarah*) as well as during possession rituals.

The blessing (*barakat*) that issues from these named ancestors is related to their genealogy. Royal ancestors have at least in principle a traceable genealogical link to Jafar Sadek, the bringer of Islam (*wali*) to North Maluku and the mythical founder of the four sultanates of North Maluku. Jafar Sadek, whose grave is on the summit of Gammalama, the volcano of Ternate island, is a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Blessing (*barakat*) from the ancestral spirits hinges on this chain of transmission (called *isnad* in Arab) from the Prophet via Jafar Sadak to his descendants, and it is through this ancestral lineage that the living may gain a direct link to Allah.

The social space of the spirits is available neither to the senses nor to the intellect (*akal*). It is nevertheless of paramount importance. For this space and the spirits that dwell within it mediate between the outer world (*lahir*) and the inner world (*batin*), between God and Man. Mochtar, a Ternatan man in his late 50s, described the everyday importance of the ‘imaginal world’ (Corbin, 1998) of the unseen as follows: ‘We know that one day we will leave this earth. Therefore we devote 40 percent of our attention to this side, and 60 percent to the other side (*ke sana*).’

The Sultan of Ternate, Mudaffar Syah, who has a degree in philosophy from the University of Indonesia and who is a prolific writer on what he calls the ‘everyday philosophy’ of North Maluku, refers to this world on ‘the other side’ by the English word ‘supersensible’ (Syah, 2001: 86).

The supersensible world exists outside the time and space of the universe available to the senses. Just as importantly, however, the ‘other side’ also existed before the establishment of time and space in objective reality. The supersensible world is in this sense a realm that contains the secret of existence itself, a secret that can only be gleaned momentarily and partially and only through communication with the spirits as laid down by tradition. Tradition is therefore dual. Its outward manifestations such as ceremonies, dress and behaviour form part of the public world that can be perceived by the senses (and which is available to outsiders). Tradition, however, also contains the key to real existence itself, a key that is only available to the select few. Tradition in this sense precedes the present world with all that exists in it, including religion and politics. With proper access to this primordial world through proper tradition, it is in turn possible to live a proper religious life and to control the contemporary world of politics. Herein lies the importance of the spirits for anyone with political ambition.
According to sultanate traditionalists it is only by a return to the values of tradition, called Jou se Ngofangare or the ‘philosophy of You and I’, that a proper approach to politics and to religion can exist. Muddafar Syah sees the philosophy of Jou se Ngofangare as an authentic, local forerunner to the central Islamic declaration of faith (syahadat) that pronounces Allah to be the one true God and Muhammad to be his prophet (Syah, 2001: 87).

In recent years the Sultan of Ternate has begun to turn this general mystical ontology into a political manifesto. Sectarian violence in North Maluku between 1999 and 2001 had seriously damaged the political position of the sultan, who was accused of being one of the political instigators behind some of the violence (Bubandt, 2008b; Duncan, 2005). In an attempt to regain the political ground that had been lost, the sultan had begun a vociferous promotion of Ternatan tradition as a kind of political philosophy and as a clear political alternative to the dominant, nationalist ideology of Pancasila. For the sultan, tradition with its respect for the ancestral ways, adat se atorang, was the direct route not only to religious insight and moral righteousness but also to political justice.

This reinterpretation of traditional philosophy as a moral basis for political rule did not go unopposed. The rival sultanates of Tidore and Bacan had their own competing forms of traditional-cum-mystical philosophy, while some Christian groups of North Maluku also took a sceptical stance toward the sultanate’s claims to political, moral and social authority. Many educated and modernist people in North Maluku meanwhile voiced their concern that the mystical, political philosophy was a thinly veiled attempt to legitimize a return to local, authoritarian rule. The strongest critics of the political philosophy of the Sultan of Ternate were, however, reformist Muslims who rejected the spiritual politics as heretical (munafik).

The opposition between the traditionalist philosophy of the sultan and its reformist critics reflects to a large extent the general fragmented landscape of Islam in post-Suharto Indonesia (Hefner, 1998: 91). Challenged by technocrats and secular democrats within the government, traditionalist politicians throughout Indonesia are thus viewed with suspicion, even hatred by both modernist Muslim groups and conservative Wahabis (Hefner, 2002; Howell, 2001; Lucas and Jong, 2000). In spite of this opposition, the traditionalist position has gained some political ground in recent years. Part of the reason for this is the importance of the spirits to most people in North Maluku, whether they are critical of the Sultan of Ternate or not. It is well-established that spirits and politics have always gone hand-in-hand in Indonesia (Chambert-Loir and Reid, 2002; Willford and George, 2005). In North Maluku this is certainly the case. Even the harshest political critics of the Sultan of Ternate will seek their own advice from the spirits or at least the protection from the spiritual influence of others (Bubandt, 2006).
As decentralization and regional autonomy after the fall of Suharto in 1998 have opened up new avenues for political campaigning throughout Indonesia where ‘tradition’ has become a potent political weapon (Acciaioli, 2001; Aspinall and Fealey, 2003; Bubandt, 2004; Davidson and Henley, 2007; Li, 2000), the spirits have assumed a more influential political voice. The spirits in Ternate arguably have a larger influence on political decision-making processes today than at any time since 1915 when Sultan Usman, the last sovereign Sultan of Ternate, was banished from the island. The fact that it was this very same Sultan Usman that now cultivated close spiritual ties to Ibu Nur in order to act as a political advisor for his descendants was therefore significant.

The political reality of spirits

The reason why Abdul needed to confer with his great-grandfather, Sultan Usman, on this Thursday night in May 2004 was related to the new political importance of sultanate authority. Abdul was having trouble with Mariam, a new member of the sultan family, who, he felt, had gained an undue influence over the sultanate. Not only had Mariam begun several business ventures that Pak Abdul felt used the symbolic authority of the sultanate tradition unduly; she had also launched a political campaign that threatened the political aspirations of Abdul and several other children of the sultanate household. The national elections that had taken place less than two months earlier – described by some as ‘an important step in a process of “normalization” of politics’ in Indonesia (Aspinall, 2005: 117) – were also characterized by the return into political life of traditionalism (Schulte Nordholt, 2003). Traditional leaders often ran successful political campaigns in what was only the second democratic election after the fall of President Suharto in 1998. The 2004 referendum thus elected the Sultan of Tidore, the Sultan of Ternate and his wife as well as the Sultan of Jailolo to political office within either the provincial or the national parliament.

Political intrigue within the North Maluku sultanate families has a long history, and in these feuds personal grudges always tended to fuse politics with magic (Andaya, 1993). This fusion was also evident in the new landscape of democratic politics. Family conflict had turned into political conflict when Abdul had taken Mariam to court for allegedly conducting a fraudulent political campaign – an allegation that was frequently levelled at politicians by the media in the lead-up to the 2004 elections and which squared with popular suspicion that all politicians were corrupt (Rasyid, 2003: 66). Abdul’s conversation with the spirit of his great-grandfather on this Thursday night came as the votes of the election were being counted.
and it was becoming apparent that the political aspirations of Abdul and his siblings would not be fulfilled. Abdul felt that the political failure of the children of the sultan and the rising political clout of Mariam could all be explained by the mystical powers of Mariam. This was where the need for advice from the ancestral spirit of his great-grandfather was needed.

Through the medium, Abdul had received a magical formula (dikir) that he should recite inwardly whenever in the presence of Mariam to avoid falling under her spell. Mariam, who hailed from Java, was in Abdul’s eyes a ‘gold-digger’ who had come to Ternate merely to get rich quick. ‘She only seeks those things that come easily and without effort,’ Abdul complained to me as much as to his great-grandfather. ‘This kind of attitude is the beginning of witchcraft,’ he continued, employing the North Malukan Malay word suanggi, which denotes a cannibalistic kind of witch that consumes the livers of its victims out of greed (Bubandt, 2008a). This statement set the ancestral spirit of Sultan Usman into a long tirade that seemed to me to be even more virulent in its condemnation of Mariam than Abdul had been. ‘She is a devil,’ Usman pronounced through the mouth of his medium, ‘We spirits all hate her. Don’t trust her and don’t fall for her charms. I tell you, you will have to protect yourself. Speak the silent prayer (dikir) I gave you to protect yourself and to avoid believing in her schemes.’ As the old sultan warmed to his theme he denounced Mariam and all her doings for a long period, listing the many reasons to be wary of her.

The spirit of the deceased sultan appeared to be able to articulate the emotional misgivings of his audience, without the possible moral reproach that a living person might incur for such an outburst. Articulating these emotions was important to the decision-making process of the clients of Ibu Nur and in effect made the dead sultan an essential political advisor and actor. This point follows that of Lambek and others, who have noted that the particular authority and appeal of spirit voices derive from the critical distance they gain from the language games and emotional norms of ordinary speech (Lambek, 1993a; Masquelier, 2002). In Ternate, the spirits play with and bend the rules of normal affective sociality.

The limits of spirits as informants

In an interlude to Abdul’s séance with his great-grandfather and before all talk turned to the evils of Mariam, Abdul repeatedly asked me to address Sultan Usman myself. ‘Isn’t there anything you want to know?’ Abdul asked, gesturing for me to direct my questions at the possessed medium. After the experience with Tabuna the year earlier, I decided to inquire about the past of the spirit rather than about my future. ‘Totu, why did you leave Ternate and how did you get your Javanese accent?’ He answered that he
felt Ternate was too quiet (sunyi) to stay in Java. A large and important island, Java was after all better suited to him as a sultan.

Although this squared well with the contemporary, modernist sensibilities of most educated people in Ternate, the answer was at odds with a strict historical account. Sultan Usman’s stay in Java between 1915 and 1932 was not a voluntary flight from a dreary village existence; it was a colonial punishment for sedition. I tried in several other questions to get the sultan to speak about his presence in Java or his relations to the Dutch, but these questions were never answered directly and conversation soon drifted back to the issue at hand, namely Abdul’s problems with Mariam.

Rather than constituting proof that the possession was ‘fake’, the answers provide an opportunity to probe the spirit as an informant. The royal spirit, it seemed, made a conscious effort to cultivate a colonial amnesia. Not only did Sultan Usman disregard colonialism as a significant factor in his own being, he also made no attempt to provide a comment on or critique of colonialism in their orations. This obviation of colonialism – which appears to contradict the conclusion of a number of recent analyses that spirit possession and shamanism are counter-hegemonic commentaries on or performative forms of mimesis of colonial power (Boddy, 1989; Lan, 1985; Stoller, 1995; Taussig, 1987) – is, I believe, not coincidental. It is an effect of the political context of the consultations. While there are clearly limits to how much one can push spirits as informants beyond what they are constructed/willing/able to say, it is exactly by taking spirits seriously as informants and by probing those limits as much as ethnographic ethics and local exigencies allow that an analysis of the politics of spirits becomes possible. The gap between informant self-representation and historical action is conventionally the beginning of anthropological analysis (Holy and Stuchlik, 1983). This holds true when spirits are informants as much as it does for other kinds of informants.

The politics of spirit self-representation

Decentralization and democratization after the fall of Suharto in 1998 had provided the sultanates of North Maluku with a receptive political audience for their claims that the sultanates as culturally legitimate forms of political organization were politically compatible with, even essential to, Indonesian democracy. This also entailed an explicit break with the view that the sultanates were ‘feudal’ and ‘backward’, a view which had dominated politically since Independence in 1950. In the sultanates’ current attempt to politically reinvent themselves as ‘authentic’ and culturally legitimate forms of governance, sultanate discourse either eclipsed colonialism altogether or (as in the burgeoning local literature on sultanate history) represented the
sultanates as fiercely anti-colonial. While the latter was particularly suitable for discourse directed at an outside national audience, the ritual consultations were restricted to members of the sultanate families themselves. It is this internal character of the spirit discourse that makes it special. The spirits were called to solve present problems and not to give historical accounts. They were ‘presentist’ rather than ‘historicist’ political beings.

Abdul’s spiritual consultation was also evidence that any engagement with the spirits through divination and possession in North Maluku is a way of dealing with politics generally. The consultation was thus part of his struggle to step into the political shoes of his father, the Sultan of Ternate. The title of sultan, as many people in Ternate proudly point out, is not inherited through primogeniture. Rather, the successor to the crown is chosen by a traditional council (*deuan adat*). The council is divided into two sub-councils, the worldly council (*bobato dunia*) that deals with political affairs, and the spiritual council (*bobato akhirat*) that deals with matters of religion and ancestors. Their choice of successor among the descendants of the deceased sultan is no doubt predicated on pragmatic expedience, but the choice has to be preceded and validated by mystical trials. The likely successor must show himself to possess magical powers that reveal him as the legitimate title-holder. The current sultan, who in his youth was regarded as a lay-about and a gambler, had to provide continual evidence of his magical ability, evidence that he had the blessing (*barakat*) of the ancestors. If Abdul had any ambitions of succeeding his father, he would have to cultivate the same signs of spiritual favour, and be seen to do so. The Thursday nights at Ibu Nur’s house were thus more than ceremonies of seeking personal advice. They were ways of cultivating a political career in Ternate.

Just as the spirit possession tied into local conceptions and practices of politics in North Maluku, it also reflected national-level, even global, politics. Quite a number of studies have focused on how spirits as real, social actors provide mimetic insight into contemporary political changes (Figal, 1999; Geschiere, 1998; Kendall, 2003; McIntosh, 2004; Morris, 2000; Nickerson, 2001; Snodgrass, 2002; Stoller, 1995). In line with these studies, one could well argue as I have done above that democratization, decentralization, and neo-liberal reform under the auspices of IMF and the World Bank have in North Maluku provided the grounds for a return of the spirits to politics. Neo-liberal political reforms have meant the fermentation of a spiritual politics, where the engagement of the spirits in rational policies, pragmatic agendas and political scheming has become legitimate and problematic in new ways.

There is no doubt some truth to this interpretation. However, whenever I tried it out on people in Ternate, I was turned down flat. ‘You do not understand,’ one man, loyal to the Sultan of Ternate, told me:
It is not democracy that makes these things possible. The time has just come for all of this to happen. The return of the fourth sultanate, the new recognition of the sultans of ‘the four mountains’, the election, hopefully, of the Sultan of Ternate as the new governor, all of this is just meant to happen.

For this man, it was not democratic politics that made the spirits more important; it was the spirits in the realm of the unseen ‘60 percent’ of the world who wanted democracy. Democracy did not enable the spirits; the spirits enabled democracy! In this view, sultanate politics had always been democratic. Now it was time to recover this heritage after decades of being labelled ‘feudal’. It was no coincidence that Abdul should turn to the spirit of Sultan Usman for political advice. After all, it was Usman’s banishment from Ternate by the Dutch in 1915 that ended sultanate rule in the region. Sixty years after his death, the advice of the old sultan was important in order to play the new-and-old political games of democracy. The challenge for an analysis of this kind of politics is to have an eye for the way that democratic politics enables the spirits while also recognizing that politics, in North Maluku at least, is being conducted by people convinced that democratic politics is only truly made possible by the spirits.

Politics by different means

Abdul was one of these people. He had a bachelor’s degree in political science from a university in Jakarta and had travelled to both Europe and the United States. He was a skilled political operator and used the pragmatic political means available to him in his political career. In addition to lodging a (failed) complaint against Mariam with the national election committee, accusing her of election fraud, he had also sent off her DNA to a private laboratory in Singapore, paying 13,000 Singapore dollars to get an answer as to whether Mariam was who she said she was. This tactic had also met with failure as the results had come back inconclusive. For Abdul, however, these political and scientific attempts to reveal Mariam as a fraud overlapped easily with the sense that she was a spiritually malevolent being from whom he needed to protect himself magically if his political ambitions were to be successful. Indeed, just as Abdul was convinced it was magic and witchcraft that drove Mariam’s political gluttony, so his own political actions were extensively directed by his spiritual communication with his ancestors who provided advice, sympathy and protection for his political career.

The possession of Ibu Nur’s body by Sultan Usman thus produced a different political consciousness for Abdul. When Abdul approached Mariam after this evening he would, as he uttered the dikir in his head over and over, perform an act of subjectivization through which his actions were
at once his own and those of the spirit of his great-grandfather. His actions and perception of who he is and how he is best protected in social interaction have changed as a result of the spirit advice. By providing Abdul with the magical means of protection, his great-grandfather (through the medium) enabled in Abdul a particular kind of political practice.

Abdul was not the only one whose political agency was changed by the possession. For Ati, the Ternatan employee in an international NGO who had accompanied me to the house of Ibu Nur, the moral judgement of Sultan Usman on Mariam had a large impact as well. Ati had had some contact with Mariam as part of her work and had initially been very enthusiastic about the energy that Mariam brought to the sultanate court. They had developed a friendship of sorts, and Ati felt she had been drawn into the confidence of Mariam. They had even discussed various possibilities of NGO assistance to the sultanate court in its effort to establish a cultural museum. Ati had heard the criticisms of Mariam before but had hitherto been scathing about Mariam’s detractors, claiming they were merely envious of her political drive. Witnessing the possession and hearing the sharp critique of Sultan Usman, however, changed Ati’s perspective completely. She suddenly remembered several occasions when Mariam had seemingly attempted to gain access to her thoughts through magical means. Mariam’s objective, Ati now realized, was to usurp the guardian spirit (penjaga) of Ati’s family. Mariam’s desire to do so had been roused when she learnt that her own guardian spirit from Java, the Princess of the South Seas (Ratu Kidul), had apparently had a mythical love affair with the guardian spirit of Ati, whose father also hailed from Java. After a frightening incident in which a delegate of Mariam’s had sought out Ati in her NGO office and become possessed by what appeared to Ati to be a witch or suanggi apparition and proceeded to terrorize several of the Indonesian staff members at the office, Ati realized she might be in personal danger from the witchcraft of Mariam. A few nights after the event in Ibu Nur’s house, Ati’s mother became possessed by the family guardian spirit. The spirit advised Ati to break all contact with both Mariam and Abdul, advice Ati readily followed. In this way the possession ritual ended up having repercussions for the future of international NGO cooperation with the sultanate and the sultanate’s attempt to secure international funding in its endeavour to establish itself as a cultural centre.

The political power of spirits

Spirits in Ternate, I have argued, are political actors because they have power in a very concrete political sense. In his classical work on power, Steven Lukes argues that there are three faces or dimensions to power. The
first dimension of power entails an ability to influence decisions in particular debates; the second is constituted by an ability to disallow some debates or issues; while the third dimension describes the capacity to influence the very wants and wishes of others (Lukes, 1974). In Ternate, spirits are involved in the circulation of all three kinds of power. The spirit of Sultan Usman exercised power of the first kind when he prevailed in the resolution of a series of key issues for Abdul and Ati. Spirits similarly have power of the other two kinds discussed by Lukes. The emotive force of the spirits during possessions puts strong focus on some issues over others, and spirits are central to a general political landscape in which political desires are shaped and acted upon.

The spirits are clearly not alone in the making of this landscape, nor are they the only social actors who have such transformative capabilities. Those who act as media for spirits, such as Pak Ikhsan, Ibu Lan and Ibu Nur, play their own micro-political games in the cognitive space between possession and dis-possession. In a similar fashion, clients like Abdul and Abdullah are heavily invested in the politics of securing the spoils of democracy through a cultivation of spiritual authority. This speaks of course to the well-known analytical point that people may manipulate spirits to their own advantage, and anthropological monographs have provided numerous examples of how possession has been employed in political struggles or as forms of social control. However, as Michael Lambek notes, a single-minded focus on these ‘instrumentalist’ politics of possessions is too narrow, since it risks:

ignoring the paradoxical, unsettling aspects of possession – that one can be simultaneously present and absent, speak and not speak, want and not want. It also risks ignoring the compelling qualities of possession, the attraction and repulsion of powerful, strange and ostensibly amoral beings, at once fearful and comical, desirous and disinterested, capable of the most childish antics and the wisest and most generous acts of nurture. (Lambek, 1993b: 312)

In other words possession entails a simultaneous dis-possession that renders standard philosophical assumptions about subjectivity, intentionality, individuality and power problematic. As a consequence, such a focus also risks misunderstanding politics. The main problem of treating spirits merely as political tools is that it operates on a universalized and naturalized understanding of what ‘politics’ is. An approach that assumes that politics is merely about human rationality and making spirits human instruments of power risks ignoring the entanglement of the spiritual and the political – certainly in Indonesia, but I suspect also elsewhere.
A body and voice of their own

This article has sought to answer the following question: what might an anthropological theory of politics look like that begins not from the ‘common-sensical’ notion that spirits are instruments of manipulation and power but from the fieldwork experience that spirits in possession have a body and a voice of their own? I have attempted to show that as spirits are being conjured up for political reasons, they partake in a spiritual politics in which they are both instruments and actors.

Engaging spirits for political reasons can only work and be socially effective within an ontological order in which spirits are socially real subjects and actors (Gell, 1998). I have argued that when political power is worked out through a constant engagement with the spirits this has important consequences for the ontology of conducting (and the language-games for talking about) politics and political agency. The spirits are not merely incidental to or products of politics in such a political ontology. Rather, the spirits are constitutive actors within this kind of spiritual politics. I have suggested we can access spiritual politics anthropologically through the methodological recognition of spirits as positioned informants and the analytical recognition of spirits as political actors. I think that such a ‘methodologically realist’ approach to spirits allows one to treat them as informants, on par with but not necessarily identical to other kinds of informants. This, in turn, makes possible an analysis of the relationship between spirits and politics without having to enter a fruitless debate about whether spirits are ‘ontologically real’ or merely cognitive or cultural projections with symbolic efficacy.

Note

1 I have used pseudonyms for most informants to protect their anonymity. I have, however, retained the real names of people who hold public office, such as sultans, whether they are living title holders or the spirits of former title holders.

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