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Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

I first undertook fieldwork among the Nuaulu of south central Seram between 1969 and 1971. During this research, with its ecological orientation [Ellen, 1978b], it became increasingly evident that in order to analyse adequately how this eastern Indonesian people interacted with their environment, it was necessary to pay attention to the way in which it was apprehended and classified [Ellen, 1982]. The point, of course, had been made much earlier by Conklin [Conklin, 1957], and had been implicit in much of his subsequent work, as well as in that of others who owe him an intellectual debt. At the same time I was already intrigued and impressed by new ethnobiological reports then appearing, particularly the work of Berlin and his various associates in Mexico, and that of Bulmer and his associates working in Papua New Guinea.

Specifically, my interests were motivated on the one hand by a recognition that ethnobiology was a neglected (though fundamental) part of social anthropology, with implications for the study of subsistence behaviour, ecology, categorisation and belief; and on the other by a fascination with and an admiration for the rigorous techniques employed, and the detailed data obtained, by a handful of dedicated ethnographic enthusiasts. I judged it of some interest to attempt to replicate and evaluate these methods and results in a region – eastern Indonesia – for which they were at that time unknown. More generally, it seemed to me then – as it still does – that ethnobiology constituted a domain of enquiry where the articulation of collective representations with cognitive process, of belief with thought, was at its most accessible. It was methodologically nodal, linking socio-linguistic positivism with interpretative post-

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modernism, and could provide an instructive arena in which to explore the unresolved procedural contradictions inherent in these approaches. In other words, the subject could in no sense be regarded as a peripheral frippery but was rather at the heart of that problematic which is properly labelled 'anthropology'. Much water has passed underneath the bridge since then: the literature on the subject has grown exponentially, and some of the problems which engaged me have been attended to by others.

From 1970 onwards I have spent an increasing proportion of my Nuaulu fieldwork assembling ethnobiological data. All told, this has been spread over three main research periods: 18 months between December 1969 and June 1971, three months in 1973 and a further three months in 1975, plus a short two-week visit in January 1981, ten days in June 1986 and three weeks in February–March 1990.[1] The 1975 season was a particularly decisive one since part of my time was spent working with James Menzies, an academic zoologist, who had already cooperated extensively with Ralph Bulmer [e.g. Bulmer and Menzies, 1972–3; Bulmer *et al.*, 1975]. By June 1971 it was already clear to me that I should concentrate on an examination of Nuaulu knowledge, uses and classification of animals. The decision was made for essentially practical reasons: the corpus had to be limited in some way in order to permit as full and detailed a study as possible, and it seemed to me at that stage that I was in a better position to provide complete and accurate identifications and information on animals than on plants. Throughout, the programme of research into Nuaulu ethnozoology has attempted:

(a) to collect systematically and in detail empirical data on indigenous zoological knowledge;
(b) to check the validity, in the Nuaulu case, of some of the generalisations made by other researchers concerning the character of folk classifications of animals; and
(c) to assess the significance of different animal species in ecological and social relations, and to document their utilisation and general cultural significance.

As this work proceeded it became progressively clear that the notion of taxonomic relations, so central a device for those working in the Conklin–Berlin tradition, was an inadequate characterisation of the way in which the Nuaulu ordered and manipulated their animal categories, and that insufficient attention had been paid in earlier work to the implications of the uneven distribution of knowledge within a population, and the flexi-

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bility with which particular individuals and groups employed that knowledge. I have tried in my own work to map and measure the dimensions of such variation. My own intellectual socialisation within the British tradition of social anthropology had brought with it an empirical and sociological bias which militated against an approach which seemed to me to reduce 'mundane' classifications to narrow intellectual conundrums to be solved through the application of formal mathematical, logical and linguistic procedures, or which relegated their analysis to comparative and evolutionary speculation about general mental principles of classification or cognition. Some of these doubts have been articulated in the introduction to *Classifications in their social context* [Ellen, 1979a]. Without denying the importance of these matters, my main theoretical concern has been with classifications as situationally adapted and dynamic devices of practical importance to their users, reflecting an interaction – though in a by no means self-evident way – between culture, psychology and discontinuities in the concrete world; a lexical and semantic field firmly embedded in a wider context of beliefs and social practices. This concern with the relationship between order in the mundane world and that of the social world is of particular interest in the context of eastern Indonesia, since the pre-Islamic societies of this arc of islands were among the first to be explicitly analysed as if they were structured systems of social classification based on a series of underlying principles of representation [Fox, 1980; Wouden, van, 1968]. I shall have more to say about this in chapter 6.

Writing in 1990, 18 years since first embarking on this project, it is clear that much of what I have to say of a general nature has now been said (more elegantly and persuasively no doubt) by other independent observers.[2] Inevitably, a manuscript so long in preparation (and repeatedly put aside to attend to more urgent matters) has been overtaken by events. I have tried to acknowledge fully the importance of other contributions in the pages which follow.[3] But more than anything else, this study has taken its shape and impulse from the seminal work of the few anthropologists who first inspired it: Brent Berlin, Ralph Bulmer, Harold Conklin and – perhaps less obviously – Mary Douglas and Rodney Needham.

1.2 Nuaulu culture and society

A full description of Nuaulu social organisation remains to be written, although a short account has been attempted elsewhere [Ellen, 1978b]. The Nuaulu are a people of south central Seram in the modern Indonesian

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Figure 1.1 The Moluccan islands in relation to Sulawesi and Irian Jaya, showing (A) Wallace's line of faunal balance, (B) Weber's line and (C) the western boundary of the Australian biogeographic region. Wallacea is the area between lines *A* and *C*. The modern Indonesian province of Maluku includes all islands between lines *B* and *C*, plus the Aru archipelago to the southeast, Sula to the west and Wetar to the southwest. *Note:* Unless otherwise stated, the orientation of all maps is identical to figure 1.1.

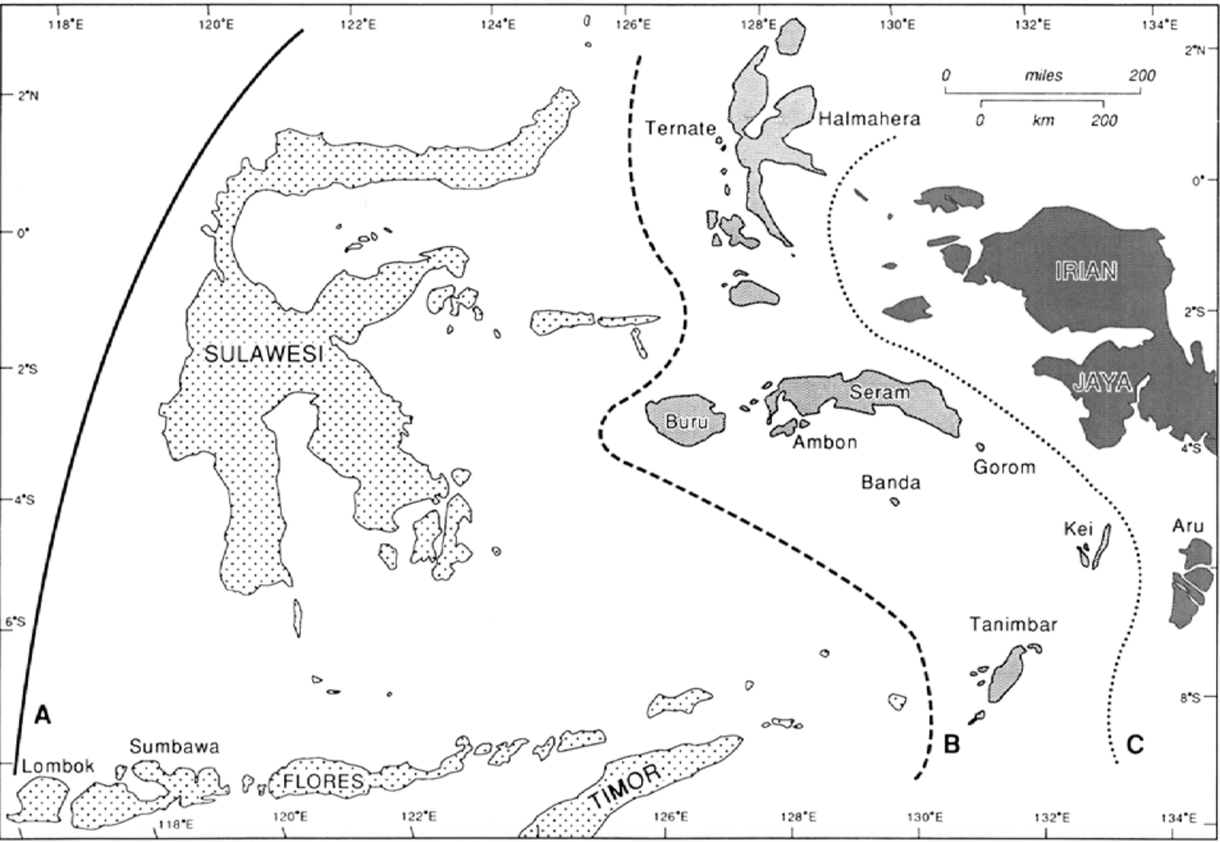

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Figure 1.2 The island of Seram and adjacent areas, showing population distribution and principal environmental zones. Elpaputih Bay lies W of Amahai, Teluti Bay SE of Piliana and Seleman Bay half way along the north coast. Adapted from Topographische Dienst 1921, *Eiland Seran en omliggende eilanden* (Scale 1: 5000 000), The Netherlands. The approximate location of Nuaulu clans prior to their movement to the coast, and as elicited from informants, has been superimposed (e.g. MATOKE). Square brackets indicate the bottom corners of the area enlarged in figure 1.3.

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province of Maluku (the Moluccas). They inhabited, during the period of my research, five settlements along the narrow coastal strip, in the vicinity of the old Muslim kerajaan of Sepa (figures 1.1–1.3). This is approximately where longitude 129°5' East meets the south coast of the island, in the Amahai kecamatan (administrative sub-district), between the bays of Elpaputih and Teluti. In 1971 they numbered some 500 individuals, and formed approximately half of the speakers of the 'Nuaulu' language group; the remainder living in and around the villages of Oping and Rumaolat on the north coast at Seleman Bay. The population has almost doubled in the two decades since then.

Before the middle of the nineteenth century Nuaulu clans occupied separate hamlets in the highlands around the drainage system of the rivers Ruatan and Nua (figure 1.3). At this time there had been relations between coastal Muslim settlements for at least two hundred years, and the Nuaulu were clearly engaged in intermittent relations of enmity (head-hunting and warfare), alliance, and probably trade.[4] In this respect the situation must have been similar to that of other highland peoples on Seram at that time. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Nuaulu began to occupy sites near to Sepa, apparently under pressure from the Dutch and the coastal rajas. This movement is significant for the subject-matter of this book since it provides us with a shift in environmental and economic conditions which might be hypothesised to have had radical implications for their knowledge, classification and use of local fauna. At the present time, Nuaulu ecological and economic relations remain, significantly, oriented to the mountainous interior of the island, rather than to the coast. The most important starch staple is *Metroxylon* sago. This is largely extracted from forest palms, though it is sometimes planted. The forest is also the source of most animal protein, much vegetable food, and materials for manufacturing and other technical purposes. Swiddens are cut each year within a four-kilometer radius of the village, are energy intensive, but contribute a disproportionately small amount of the total diet [Ellen, 1988a]. Garden crops are varied, but with manioc, taro, sweet potatoes, yams, bananas and plantains predominating. Prior to the 1939–45 war most cash was obtained by the Nuaulu through the collection and trade of forest products, such as dammar resin (*Agathis dammara*), but since Indonesian independence Nuaulu have become increasingly involved in the growing of clove and coconut palms for copra. Animal domestication for food is virtually nonexistent except for fowl, though dogs are kept for hunting.

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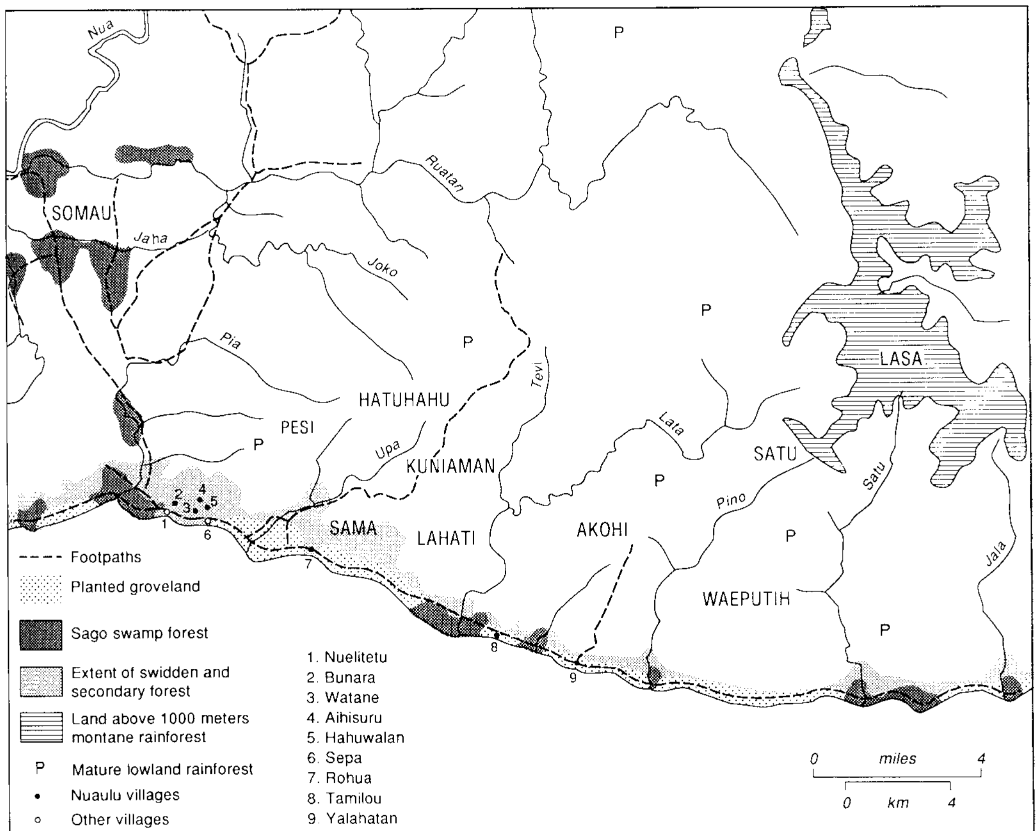
Figure 1.3 Location of villages and approximate distribution of major terrestrial biotopes in the Nuaulu extractive area, as of 1971. Names in upper-case lettering indicate specific areas of forest distinguished and used by the Rohua Nuaulu. Nuaulu villages are indicated by solid circles (●), other villages by empty circles (○). It should be noted that commercial lumbering activities and government resettlement schemes from 1975 onwards have now considerably modified the pattern of land use. Adopted from Topographische Inrichting 1919, *Schetskaart van Ceram* (Scale 1: 100 000), Batavia; modified on the basis of field cartographic data and notes.



Prior to resettlement, the Nuaulu clan (**ipan**; alt. **ipa**, **ipane**) was an autonomous patrilineal and exogamous descent group occupying a single hamlet. The **ipan** still retains considerable independence in ritual, political and economic matters, but except for the village of Hahuwalan all contemporary villages consist of five or more clans. The Nuaulu first became incorporated within the administrative structure of Sepa, as a separate 'soa', for a period under their own raja, and around 1882 became

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part of the 'Onderafdeeling' of Amahai. By the time of Indonesian independence there were three Nuaulu administrative units, though five physically distinct hamlets. Each of the administrative villages of Bunara, Niamonae (in Malay, 'Nuaulu Lama', containing the separate hamlets of Watane, Hahuwalan and Aihisuru) and Rohua,[5] were accorded a permanent government head ('kepala pemerintah') in a state-imposed scheme.

Each **ipan** is divided into two **numa**, descent groups focussed on a ritual house and headed by either an **ia onate ipan** or **kapitane**. The **numa** of each clan are in ritual opposition to each other [Ellen, 1986: 7–8]. Marriage is ideally between bilateral cross-cousins, and therefore functionally consistent with relationships between pairs of clans which may endure over many generations. However, any one clan is likely to have relations of marital alliance with many others, while marriage with actual classificatory cross-cousins is rare. Clans are theoretically equal in their status, an arrangement which matches an ideology of prescriptive bilateral cousin marriage, traditional clan autonomy and the absence of an overarching indigenous political authority. The clan Matoke, nevertheless, is a ritual *primus inter pares*, providing as its headman what in Ambonese Malay is known as the 'tuan tanah', or Lord of the land.

1.3 The environmental context

The island of Seram lies in the central Moluccas (figure 1.1) and is therefore part of the biogeographic region of Wallacea, a term used in this monograph to designate conveniently those islands lying between the Sunda and Sahul continental shelves [Darlington, 1957: 462–73; Ellen, 1978a; White, 1973: 175]. In biogeographic terms, it marks a zone of transition between the oriental biota of southeast Asia and that of Melanesia, Australia and beyond. Its western boundary is marked by Wallace's faunal line, its eastern boundary by Lydekker's line. Because it is a transitional zone of small islands the fauna is, for many land-based groups, a relatively depauperate one.

The larger islands of the Moluccas (Seram, Halmahera, Buru) are still dominated by tropical rainforest, although most of the small islands are now denuded and extensively planted with clove, nutmeg, coconut palms and other useful trees, and subjected to forms of dryfield cultivation, especially along level coastal land.

Seram itself (figure 1.2) can be usefully divided into about ten terrestrial biotopes [see also Ellen, 1984: 177–9]:

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1. montane forest
2. mature lowland rainforest (plate 1.1)
3. mixed secondary forest
4. bamboo brush (plate 1.2)
5. sago swamp forest (plate 1.3)
6. swidden and dryfield cultivated areas (plate 1.4)
7. planted groveland
8. freshwater rivers, streams and pools (plate 1.5)
9. grassland
10. settlement sites (plate 1.6)

To this we can add a further four coastal and two marine biotopes:

11. the littoral
12. rocky shores
13. sandy shores
14. muddy shores, mangrove swamps and estuaries
15. coral reefs, banks and atolls
16. deep sea waters

Plate 1.1 Mature lowland rain forest and secondary regrowth above Piliana, central Seram: 20 July 1975. The altitude is approximately 1000 meters.

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Plate 1.2 Typical bamboo secondary regrowth on Matoke land adjacent to the Awau river: 9 August 1973.

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