As the title of the book suggests, the central problem that Dirk Teljeur confronts in his work is "whether, among the Gimán, a totality of features can be found which can be defined as a symbolic system" (7). In order to determine this, he investigates the symbolic properties of the two villages, Puliló and Pulikin, in which the Gimán live (chapter 2), house construction and its rituals (chapter 3), agricultural rituals (chapter 4), the spirit world (chapter 5), and Gimán social organization and the regional system within which it is embedded (chapter 6). The introductory and concluding chapters provide an overview of his theoretical perspective on the nature of symbolism and its particular realization among the Gimán.

Teljeur makes an effort to reconstruct an image of an indigenous symbolic order—particularly in his analysis of house cosmology, agricultural rituals, the spirit world, and social organization. This is necessary, he claims, because much has changed over the last centuries to obscure the indigenous worldview from sight: Islam was introduced in the 19th century, the population was forced into larger village settlements around 1917, an “original” system of endogamy has disappeared, and the regional system created by the rule of Ternate has ultimately been replaced by the regional system of the Indonesian nation-state.

Teljeur’s analysis focuses upon a set of symbolic oppositions that are familiar to students of eastern Indonesia. The most prominent oppositions include: seaside/landside, above/below, outside/inside, cool/hot, red/white, male/female, elder/younger, and rootstock/summit; but he also considers a number of other symbolic elements, oppositions, and patterns.

In his analysis of the symbolic relation between the two Gimán villages, for instance, Teljeur paints a picture in which the two villages, Pulikin and Puliló, are related to each other as the living room and the kitchen of a single dwelling. Symbolic associations are built up by noting that the living room (in traditional dwellings and in the relation between the two villages) is conceptualized as seaside, male, and outside; while the kitchen is conceptualized as landside, female, and inside.

On the one hand each village is an enclosed whole, so that all the places in Pulikin as well as Puliló are referred to as ‘in the village’.... On the other hand, the two villages form a whole, so that it is said only in Puliló that one is going outside ... if one is leaving the village in the direction of Pulikin.... This ‘going outside’ is comparable to going from the kitchen to the living room. It implies that one is in this sense ‘inside’ only if one is in Puliló. (46)

The sangaji, the head of the Five Regions of South Halmahera, had his seat on the inside, in Puliló, whereas the outside village of Pulikin guarded the path to Puliló against enemy attack. Indeed, those who live in Pulikin (as the outside guards of Puliló) are characterized as being “virile, warrior-like, brave,” while those on the inside, in Puliló, are seen as “womanlike” (46). In this way, here and in other contexts, Teljeur carefully builds up a set of symbolic associations that comprise what he calls a “symbolic construction.”

In his analysis of the symbolic system of the Gimán, Teljeur proceeds not from the whole to the parts, as Lévi-Strauss (1967) or Dumont (1980, 1982) would have it. Rather, he moves from the parts to the whole. He begins by stating that

the elements of a symbolic system are taken from the world in which people live. They already possess an intrinsic, primary significance, to which an extra, symbolic significance is added. (6)

His insistence on “intrinsic significance” is baffling: he seems to assume that cultural “elements” have an inherent significance that can be determined apart from their place in a larger system of relationships. Yet when he asks what the intrinsic significance of these elements is (168), he immediately speaks of them in relational terms—in terms of oppositions, whether explicit or implied (168–170).
For Teljeur, elements are arranged in pairs of oppositions, which may be further combined into "associations of oppositions" such as "seaside: landside :: male : female," and so on. In addition to associations of oppositions, Teljeur also considers the significance of what he calls "patterns," by which he means, primarily, the numerical patterns well-known throughout Maluku—including 1/2, 1/4, 1/4/4 (cf. Jansen 1977). Bringing these all together, he suggests that

the Gimán combine oppositions by means of patterns into a certain whole, which I shall call a symbolic construction. A symbolic construction can be described as [sic] totality of oppositions either explicit or implied, which, in association with each other, are ordered on the basis of certain patterns. (178)

The symbolic constructions he investigates include various "types": the house, miracle graves, rivers, tribal halves, the regional order, the two villages, the marble game, the five regions, the feast table, the seal of Suleman, and divination (179–183).

In his consideration of symbolic oppositions, associations, patterns, and constructions, it is surprising that Teljeur does not consider, in any systematic way, the relations of hierarchy that give value to these forms (Barnes, de Coppet, and Parkin 1985; Dumont 1980, 1982). In his discussion of oppositions, he does briefly explore the difference between what he calls asymmetrical and symmetrical oppositions. In the former, the one element of the opposition "is ranked higher than the other," while in the latter the two elements "are of equal rank, or in any case not asymmetrical" (175). Yet, it seems clear that the elements of at least some of the oppositions he lists as symmetrical—for example, outside/inside—are differentially valued whether or not they are "associated with asymmetrical oppositions" (175). Teljeur's inability to appreciate the full implications of hierarchy and value is particularly problematic in his discussion of the opposition rootstock/summit, which (especially in connection with the numerical patterns and other oppositions such as inside/outside) could have become a more central and dynamic organizing metaphor for understanding the Gimán symbolic system (cf. Traube 1986) than the static "cosmic" oppositions—above/below, landside/seaside—that he does suggest lend cohesion to the system (82, 177).

When he turns to associations of oppositions, he does not at all confront the issue of reversals of value. For instance, in one context, seaside/landside is associated with male/female where the former is clearly given superior value. In another context, however, seaside/landside is associated with younger/elder, where the latter is given superior value (145, 175). Nowhere does Teljeur consider the significance of such reversals and contextual variations.

In his discussion of numerical patterns—1/2, 1/4, 1/4/4 (71–72, 83, 145, 178–81)—his analysis would have been considerably more powerful if he had a more sophisticated conception of hierarchy—of the relations of value that differentiate between the encompassed parts and that which represents the whole (Barnes, de Coppet, and Parkin 1985; Dumont 1980, 1982). One place where he does successfully make such an analysis is in his description of the symbolic order of the Five Regions (145).

Teljeur's avoidance of any systematic analysis of relative value in his description of the symbolic system of the Gimán is only exacerbated when he considers the various "symbolic constructions" listed above. We are, in the end, given a list of symbolic constructions, in which there is no consideration of their differential value in the organization of Gimán society: the symbolic order of marble games is given the same value as that of the Five Regions, or the house, or the two villages. Each is seen simply as a different "type," and no analysis of the significance of their relative value is offered.

Teljeur has a specific understanding of the place of the symbolic within culture. Surprisingly, he begins with Tylor's definition of culture (5), as if nothing had been written about the concept of culture in the last one hundred years or more. With Tylor as a starting point, symbolism becomes just another aspect, or "angle" of culture, similar to other "angles" such as the social, the economic, or the religious (6). For Teljeur, these aspects of culture are not so much organized, at their very core, by the symbolic, as they exist a priori and "an extra symbolic significance is added on" (6). Indeed he describes the symbolic in an odd, disembodied way: the Gimán "use" symbolism (186) and "introduce" symbolism into ritual or other aspects of culture (188), again, as if it were something that was consciously manipulated and "added on" instead of something integral to the Gimán worldview and social action.

Although Teljeur does, in several places, acknowledge a cognitive/normative aspect of the Gimán symbolic system (81–82, 189), his primary interpretation of symbolic forms is in terms of an "instrumental function" and a "symbolic wish" (70, 81–82, 92–93, 186). He asks, for instance:
Why is a symbolic construction of the house necessary? ... The primary motive among the Giman for symbolism is practical: it promotes health, prosperity, fertility, averting misfortune. Actions that go beyond what is necessary simply to build a house—the symbolic actions—are expressions of wishes or prayers for the well-being of the inhabitants of the house. (81)

One can hardly deny the intentionality of symbolic action. Nevertheless, here, symbolic action is again added on to practical activity, rather than practical activity being integrally shaped by the symbolic order (Sahlins 1976). Here, the symbolic order constitutes a “wish” and a “prayer,” rather than the very shape of meaningful action and an ordered life that is itself a precondition for health, prosperity, and fertility.

Such a perspective precipitates the note of despondency with which Teljeur ends the book. Despite the extent to which the symbolic system integrates various aspects of Giman culture, the connection must have been even stronger in the past. Later, this function of the symbolic system was increasingly replaced by the Muslim/Ternatan complex, which also combined religious and political aspects. This too is a thing of the past, but it is still a dominant concept in the thought patterns of the local inhabitants. Recent decades have been marked by the introduction of a pragmatic political organization, secular education, orthodox Islamic concepts, and a new identity for the people as citizens of Indonesia. As a result of these developments, the symbolic system will gradually but inexorably become less important in the thoughts and actions of the Giman. (191)

This despondency appears to derive from the conviction, hardly supportable, that the pragmatic, secular political order of the nation-state is not itself symbolically organized. More importantly, perhaps, it does not accord the Giman the prospect of actively creating—through the force and integrity of their own symbolic order and process—yet another synthesis of the old and the new. Around 1917, the Giman were ordered by the Dutch to form new village settlements, yet these settlements were shaped in accordance with a symbolic understanding of the world that was hardly entirely Dutch. One suspects the dictates of the Indonesian nation-state will be subjected to the same innovative force (Wagner 1981) that is, in any case, the heartbeat that keeps culture alive, vibrant, and ever-changing.

REFERENCES


