Book Reviews

Catherine Allerton

Potent Landscapes. Place and Mobility in Eastern Indonesia. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013, xi + 221 pp. [Southeast Asia, Politics Meaning and Memory]. ISBN: 9780824838003. Price: USD 25.00 (paperback).

Potent Landscapes purports to be an ethnography of movement through the Manggarai landscape in West Flores (Indonesia). Critical of the Leiden School approach to Eastern Indonesia with its rigid portrayal of traditional rules and laws of kinship and structural cosmologies, the author follows a more recent phenomenological approach, working with authors such as Ingold on emplacement and experiential ways of being, and Janet Carsten on house and kinship, to provide a more relational and sensuous account of everyday Manggarai social-life and movement. The monograph is about one village Wae Rebo and its alter 'monkey-hut' garden settlement Kombo. Her starting concept is the Manggarai apologetic expression 'this is the shape of our land' and her monograph explores the metaphoric meaning of this 'shape', in relation to the people she is describing, concluding that the apology of how the land is, is also an identity statement, as it is through their engaged relationship with this 'shape', via their movements and activities and life experiences, that make the Manggarai villagers who they are.

Allerton starts her exploration of Manggarai movements with the house which she sees as a lived-in 'node' in a matrix of connecting pathways to other 'nodes' and not a mere building in which people live. They are permeable and connected via pathways, movement, and marriage alliances, as well as the conviviality of sounds and smells, as its inhabitants carry on with their everyday sensuous activities. Starting with the inner rooms of the house (an ethnography of rooms as she calls it), the author takes us on a journey outwards 'through concentric circles' of movement and place making. She reminds us that houses are highly permeable and sensorial places, which are entangled with the human life-cycle. These houses are thus connected via path-

ways through which marriage alliances are contracted between villages. For everyone, particularly women, the paths of marriage alliances leading to other houses and villages are actual, as women move from one 'node' to another reinvigorating old alliances and forging new ones. Such movements and their pathways are paths of lived memory and emotion as well. She provides an example of an important wedding rite called 'blood on feet' in which the in-coming wife who has taken the path from her natal house to her spouse's family house is introduced to the patrilocal ancestral spirits as well as to a personified inner-room of the house. The contraction of this path of marriage and the bride's movement along the connecting pathways is an autobiographically emotional experience through the land's shape. Utilizing the theoretical works of some recent authors on animism and moving out of the domestic realm of the house, Allerton discusses the animate landscape in what is, to my mind, the weakest chapter of the book. Although the Manggarai are now Catholic, they still ambivalently perform agricultural rituals to converse with and placate spirits in what she calls 'conversations with the environment' and she provides some examples of how the environment is spoken of as animated. Here she introduces an interesting term: 'agricultural animism'. This concept is introduced as a type of animism akin to and yet different from the animism described by recent authors, which is mainly drawn from hunter and gather studies as well as from studies on shifting-cultivators. What she takes from these studies is the relational concept that humans have with the unseen reality. She refers to these relationships as 'conversations with spirits'. Unfortunately, she does not fully develop the concept of 'agricultural animism' or Manngarai animic thought and experience of the environment in any profound way. Ethnographically, this chapter is too flimsy and leaves us desiring more in depth information.

After this short discussion on potent landscapes and 'agricultural animism', the book goes back to discuss kinship and marriage in relation to the ritual Drum houses, followed by government resettlement schemes and culturalization and finally peoples out-migrations to urban centres. It is at this point that one gets the impression that the author is more interested in these themes rather than developing the ethnography in relation to 'potent landscapes', and one begins to wonder whether Allerton has chosen the correct title for her book.

This monograph exhorts us to take a more sensorial approach to village life and make the mundane explicit. Although it touches on many interesting facets of Manggarai life, it does not go in depth into any one of them. The similarities with village life in other regions of Indonesia gives the monograph a sense that it is only half a picture and much of what she describes for the Manngarai would be familiar to other modern Indonesian villagers throughout the country. One

question is the degree to which the author is describing ordinary modern Indonesian village life versus a way of life that makes the Manggarai people culturally and socially unique? For example, the apologetic expression 'this is the shape of our land' has its equivalent among Malayan speakers such as the Orang Sakai of Sumatra, who say '*ini lah hidup kami/Orang Sakai*' (this is our/Sakai life). Such an expression is usually said apologetically to an outsider, to someone like Allerton, to whom one feels that the local way of life might not be suitable for the visitor but is the only one that can be offered.

Despite its ethnographic flimsiness, the seeming familiarity of Indonesian village life in the monograph is also its strength, as it offers to us ways to reconfigure our ethnographies in relation to the varied themes it focuses on: movement, memory, sensoriality, and the mundane every day act of living. The ethnography provides ideas for further research and is very easy to work with comparatively. For example, Allerton's suggestion that the concept of paths, and movement along paths, should be a central ethnographic concept is one that is not only interesting but should be explored further. For example, she boldly (and, I think, correctly) suggests that the well known concept of the Flow of Life that has come to characterize Eastern Indonesian ethnography could just as well be referred to as 'the path of life' through which marriage alliances between households are renewed and new ones are established along actual pathways leading to different houses. Further, when translated into Malay/Indonesian, her concept of paths, and mobility along paths, is the everyday notion of *jalan* (although she does not use the Malay/Indonesian word). Her conceptual model does allow us to reconceptualize our understanding of people's everyday lives through *jalan* and associated concepts; a village ethnography of *jalan*. In so doing, the book provides us with new connecting pathways of comparison between Western and Eastern Indonesian cultural village life. Notwithstanding some of its weaknesses, this book is a pleasure to read and would be of interest to Indonesian Studies, village community studies in South-east Asia, and general anthropology with its sub-disciplinary fields of kinship, household and environment studies. It is also a book that I would recommend for educational purposes to students who are in their early formative anthropological years and are grappling with ethnography.

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