Catherine Allerton


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 metaphorical 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