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*The Empty Seashell: Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island.*  
By Nils Bubandt. Singapore and Ithaca: NUS Press and Cornell University Press, 2015. xix+293 pp.

This is the kind of book that gives the ethnographic monograph a good name. Nils Bubandt has brought to his study mature craftsmanship, interpolating the narrative with evocative soundscapes and philosophical excursions. While theoretically concentrated, his account is clear and not overbearing. It draws on selected ideas without slavishly subscribing to any one overarching paradigm.

For the people of Buli on the eastern Indonesian island of Halmahera, *gua* (cannibal witches) have haunted local lives from time immemorial. Despite a succession of historical opportunities that initially brought hope that they might rid themselves of these demons, the demons have always reappeared, in new guises, and they continue to be experienced as a threat. These opportunities have included entanglement in a millennial movement linked to the regional and colonial politics of north Maluku in the nineteenth century; mass conversion to Christianity, which was bitterly resented by the 1930s; loyalty to the authoritarian developmentalist policies of Indonesia's New Order in the 1980s; and the enthusiastic adoption of modern technologies in a context of vibrant, bustling and devolved modernity after the fall of Soeharto in 1998. None of these things has brought either an end to witchcraft or the expected return of the ancestors. The modern state, it seems, has no answer. The law insists on dealing with witchcraft by epistemically denying it. There is perpetual embarrassment about it amongst officials, while police who are unable to establish proof of its existence are nevertheless afraid of it. As "only witchcraft itself can truly prove the reality of witchcraft" (p. 164), the inhabitants of Buli are caught in a nightmarish loop in which horror repeats itself, but not necessarily under conditions of their own making. This book documents this existential struggle.

Along the way, Bubandt provocatively engages with the classic literature on witchcraft and finds it wanting. We are provided with a critical reappraisal of Evans-Pritchard's benchmark study of its "rationality", the analytical distinction between sorcery (a learned technique) and witchcraft (an uncontrollable inner force) is revived; while previous writers on the region have found it difficult to make consistent use of that distinction. More than anything, Bubandt seeks to persuade us that, rather than part of a system of ritual and belief, witchcraft is really all about doubt. He draws upon recent work on contexts outside of Southeast Asia that emphasizes the uncertainty and ambivalence of witchcraft, and rejects the idea that modernity should have a monopoly on doubt. To bolster this view he draws on Jacques Derrida's notion of "aporia", and on the idea that "the reality of witchcraft can never be stabilized into belief" (p. xv). Witchcraft in Buli is neither an answer to a problem, nor a social strain gauge, but rather a perplexing interminable experience that has to be constantly managed. All this takes us away from "belief, meaning and function" (p. 238), and instead invites us to take seriously Meno's paradox — "the impossibility of knowledge about the unknowable" (p. 246).

While this is a brilliant example of ethnography as "thick description", there are questions left unanswered, and a few claims that need to be re-examined. While witchcraft is clearly ever-present in the lives of Buli people, both driving and repeatedly sabotaging their future, the reader is left wondering whether an alternative narrative might not be possible, one in which witchcraft was less prominent. Moreover, despite the book's convincing critique of the classic canon of writing on the subject, the powerful hypotheses that this canon has generated are difficult to eliminate entirely. Thus, the observation that "one avoids becoming the victim" (p. 183) echoes those who interpret witchcraft as part of a system of social control, while in seeing in witchcraft a source of long-term intelligibility, what Bubandt describes as a "terrible sense" (p. 158) begins to resemble an old-fashioned "logic of witchcraft" in which there is a link between rapid social change and a resort to accusations. More than anything, the intensity of witchcraft discourse in Buli reinforces

the issue of why Buli should be a witchcraft hotspot. True, there are other places where people attribute to witches powers similar to those that Bulinese attribute to *gua*, such as Bati in eastern Seram. Yet, five hundred miles due south of Buli, among Nuaulu people in central Seram, who have largely resisted religious conversion and have seen their population triple over a fifty-year period, sorcery is certainly part of everyday life, but when it comes to making sense of misfortune, ancestral spirits rather than cannibal witches are the suspects.

Measuring the significance of witchcraft — as Bubandt’s attempts to gather a statistically meaningful corpus of case material suggest — is hardly an exact science. And given that *gua* have the capacity constantly to reinvent themselves in successive conditions of modernity, under what conditions might they eventually disappear? This may not be a question that can be answered within a Bulinese ontological framework, but it is a matter of historical record that witchcraft and sorcery have diminished and been transformed to the point of extinction in some parts of the world. And it would be interesting to know what prospect there is for this development in Buli.

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*Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos.* By Simon Creak. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015. xiv+327 pp.

A well-known salutation in the Lao language reads “*khaeng haeng di bo?*”, equivalent to the English “How are you?”, though — with the words *khaeng* and *haeng* having connotations such as strength, power and energy — literally asking if one is in strong health. This explicit reference to physicality in everyday language might come as a surprise to those familiar with the colonial stereotype of the idle Lao, which contrasted them with the allegedly more “industrious”