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Irregular Migrants and the Sea at the Borders of Sabah, Malaysia: Pelagic Alliance. By Vilashini Somiah. London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2021. 174 pp.

The humanities and humanistic social sciences are astir with studies of archipelagos and questions of the “archipelagic”. Animated by long-standing theoretical concerns in Caribbean studies, a veritable archipelago of archipelagically focused scholarship currently sprawls across anthropology, American studies, Asian American studies, Asian studies, history, geography and comparative literature. Across this burgeoning body of scholarship, the “archipelagic” figures not as a term referring to geographical or geological island formations per se, but as a trope for characterizing relations of process and multiplicity, many-ness in one-ness, or what the Indonesian national government would simply call “Unity in Diversity”. For those of us working in and on Southeast Asia’s sprawling Malay-speaking archipelago or “nusantara”, the Anglophone academy’s relatively recent concern with all things “archipelagic” may smack of yet another search for the latest transdisciplinary theoretical *mode du jour*.

In this book, Sabahan anthropologist Vilashini Somiah’s concern lies not so much with the “archipelagic” or its faddish theoretical formulations. Rather, her book’s eponymous object of concern is what she aptly and originally calls a “pelagic alliance”—a rapport obtaining between so-called irregular migrants and the sea in the East Malaysian state of Sabah. Treating the sea as an active agent that shapes the ebb and flow of life among irregular migrants along Sabah’s east coast, Somiah spotlights multiple ecologies of belonging that take form in this understudied and oft-ignored maritime Southeast Asian periphery. Ethnographic richness and an ethic of advocacy are true strengths of this singular work, one that sheds sociological light on the intimacies of everyday life among members of one of Sabah’s most vulnerable, marginalized and policed populations. Somiah brings her readers across roadblocks, immigration raids, urban markets, and *rumah merah* or temporary detention centres, and into

contact with migrants whose stories of displacement, dispossession, hope and home suffuse and enliven the pages of her important book.

In a series of six expository sketches, the author explores the complex relations that emerge between the sea, the Malaysian state and the lived realities of irregular migration in Sabah, a state that sits at the notoriously porous tri-border of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Throughout, particular attention is paid to the experiences of migrants hailing from the southern Philippines' Sulu Sea. The book's chapters may be read in sequence but are cohesive enough to be read individually or assigned as stand-alone readings in graduate or undergraduate teaching modules. Recalling philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers' notion of an "ecology of practices", the book's introduction—"An Ecology of Irregularity"—introduces readers to the historical, geographical, sociocultural and political backdrop of irregular migration across east Sabah's watery borders. Chapter 2, "*Kami Urang 'Sini'* [We are from 'Here']" offers a detailed account of how the town of Sandakan's irregular migrants live, as Somiah poetically puts it, in a state of "fluid permanence" (p. 31). After providing a rigorous account of the hustle and bustle of workaday life in Sandakan's markets, Somiah presents her readers with a typological overview of the surveillance modalities used by state forces to police irregular migrants: (1) roadblocks, (2) immigration raids, (3) detention centres, and (4) *usir* or deportation. Throughout this chapter, recourse is made to the ways migrants recurrently deploy the deictic or indexical expression *sini*—"here"—to articulate their senses of belonging. Of a kind with locative expressions *situ* (medial "there") and *sana* (distal "there"), *sini* is typically used to characterize a region's proximal relation relative to a speaker (or "origo" or zero-point). Interestingly, among Somiah's interlocutors, *sini* is used not merely to refer to the proximal or nearby, but to characterize "the whole place" (p. 37) of the maritime region that they call their home. Although beyond the scope of this chapter and book, in future research the author might inquire further into the linguistic-pragmatic aspects of *sini*'s semiotics and its relation to migrants' senses of spatial orientation and belonging.

Chapter 3 touches on issues of affect, intimacy and gender ideology in the context of *tinggalan* women or women “left behind” (p. 68) by their repatriated male partners. Chapter 4 details the *jalan* or “paths” taken by migrants who anxiously return to Sabah from Mindanao, while exploring their attunements to the tempestuous and “temperamental geography” (p. 106) of the sea. Chapter 5 centres on a dialectic of haunting and hope among the Sabah-born children of irregular migrants, drawing readers into the worlds that youths weave together along the shores of Sandakan. Channelling the work of historian Jennifer Gaynor and others, the book’s conclusion offers a final socio-ecological portrait of this littoral community’s “inter-tidal home” (p. 151).

One issue is raised in the book’s opening pages and, indeed, in its very title. “Irregular migration” (p. 10) is increasingly characterized as a more accurate descriptor for migrant movement than potentially pejorative and empirically inaccurate alternatives (i.e., “undocumented”, “illegal”, “illicit” and “clandestine” migration). And yet, one of the true accomplishments of Somiah’s ethnography of this inter-tidal domain is the manner in which she puts on full display the sheer sociological regularity of migrant movement, hinging as it does on the temperamental yet predictable rhythm of the seas (or, for that matter, of the Malaysian state). This begs the question: does the notion of “irregularity” truly fit the social phenomena under observation?

This minor point aside, Vilashini Somiah has written an empathically driven, ethnographically rich and theoretically provocative book that will become a landmark reference not only in the anthropological study of Sabah, but also in Southeast Asia studies’ border-crossing literature. Written in clear and accessible prose, the book will make a welcome addition to course syllabi at the undergraduate and graduate levels and is poised to inspire new avenues of research in the “land below the wind”.

Andrew M. Carruthers

Department of Anthropology, University Museum Room 426, University of Pennsylvania, 3260 South St, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104, USA; email: acarru@sas.upenn.edu.