

The book ends on a note of hope, which reminds us that the forms of gathering and assembly that draw together state power through its violent enforcers are also available to the general populace, who might gather for no stated reason other than to have some fun (p. 236). The Indonesian word for this is *iseng*—a word that expresses a spontaneity and exuberance that is completely organic (p. 34). Barker’s emphasis on fun as sociopolitical potential transcends the Indonesian example and reminds us of contemporary phenomena in which the crowd does not need an organized setting to appear, but rather composes itself organically, like with like, the milieux to the territory. That fun piggybacks on fear and security tells us something about how power remains extremely localized and potentially disrupted, even as the official narratives tell us otherwise.

Doreen Lee

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Northeastern University, United States; email: do.lee@northeastern.edu.

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The Camphor Tree and the Elephant: Religion and Ecological Change in Maritime Southeast Asia. By Faizah Zakaria. University of Washington Press, 2023. xv+254 pp.

Faizah Zakaria’s *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant* is a remarkable intervention in the environmental history and religious anthropology of North Sumatra’s uplands. It brings into focus the spiritual, ecological and colonial entanglements that reshaped the region from the late nineteenth century to the postcolonial present. Zakaria’s central contribution lies in tracing the processes of *disenchantment*—a Weberian term describing the “loss of wonder” (her definition, p. 156), which produces a world where “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” (Weber 1946, p. 139). Disenchantment in this book is portrayed by the reduction of the spiritual and relational embeddedness of humans with non-human entities and landscapes through the intersecting forces of missionary

activity, colonial governance, capitalist extraction and textualized religiosity.

Drawing from archival sources, missionary records and historical ethnographies, Zakaria shows how camphor trees (*Dryobalanops aromatica*) and elephants were not simply resources, but relational beings embedded in spiritual and ecological lifeworlds. Her concept of “charismatic retreat” (pp. 123–54) is evocative: as forests were cleared, scriptures supplanted rituals, and animals became objects of bureaucratic regulations, the charisma of these beings—their capacity to evoke reverence, caution and moral accountability—receded. In this regard, the book does not merely chart ecological loss; it theorizes a broader ontological transformation in how Southeast Asian highland societies related to their environments.

Zakaria situates her analysis within a broad historical canvas, tracing Islamic and Christian missionary projects, colonial infrastructural encroachments and the eventual commodification of sacred landscapes. At the same time, she resists romanticizing indigenous spiritualities in ecological preservation, noting that “linking indigenous claims to pristine forests and timeless ecological wisdom is flawed” (p. 154). The book’s middle chapters vividly capture the material effects of this transformation. In chapter 4, for instance, she shows how colonial interventions—draining wetlands, straightening rivers, extending railways—not only disrupted existing cosmologies but also produced new ecological instabilities: drought, erosion, disease. These are more than symptoms of degradation; they are what Zakaria aptly calls “derangement” (pp. 98, 112, 120), echoing Amitav Ghosh’s vision of the Anthropocene as the physical counterpart to spiritual disembedding.

As a political anthropologist familiar with Batak cultural politics, I find the book deeply engaging. Zakaria attends closely to ritual specialists, forest dwellers and upland communities navigating the intertwined pressures of colonial rule and monotheistic conversion. Yet indigenous agency is at times understated, overshadowed by these external forces. While she frames Christianity as asserting human supremacy over the non-human, one may question whether

conversion fully enacted the “displacement of local spirits” (p. 14). The continued use of Batak language and the incorporation of *adat* (customary) rituals into church practice complicate any simple narrative of Christianization as cultural disembedding.

Relatedly, while Zakaria’s engagement with Batak *adat* is thoughtful, there are moments where her representations appear imprecise. An example is the treatment of *daliha na tolu* (the “three hearthstones”), symbolizing the foundational triadic principle that structures kinship and political relations among the Toba Batak. The prohibition against marrying within one’s own clan is not merely a matter of avoiding incest, as she notes (p. 31), nor about preventing “the pot” from tipping “too heavily toward one’s own patriclan” (p. 31); rather, it reflects the structural necessity of maintaining the *daliha na tolu* system, which requires that the three relational positions—*dongan tubu* (one’s own clan), *hula-hula* (wife-giver clan), and *boru* (wife-receiver clan)—each be fulfilled by separate clans. Disrupting this triad would undermine the very balance upon which Batak social and ritual life depends.

Similarly, Zakaria’s discussion of women and inheritance (p. 32) could have benefited from greater nuance. While Batak society is broadly patriarchal, the centrality of the *hula-hula* in *daliha na tolu* qualifies this to some extent. More importantly, women are not excluded from inheritance. The practice of *ulos na so buruk*—“the cloth that does not wear out”—a ritual gift of durable property, such as wet-rice fields, to daughters, speaks not only to women’s central role in rice cultivation, but also to their embeddedness in the spiritual ecology at the heart of Batak enchantment and its transformations. The inclusion of this overlooked dimension could have deepened the book’s central arguments about the gendered dynamics of ecological change. A slight imprecision also concerns the treatment of Batak terminology. The book uses a generic Batak term—*marserak* (p. 26)—as a catch-all term for “migration”, flattening a lexicon that differentiates several distinct forms of mobility, including *manombang* (pioneering new agricultural land),

which is directly relevant to the book's theme. These distinctions are not merely semantic; they signal a rich repertoire of mobility embedded in adat categories and ecological practice.

That said, Zakaria's analysis of religious change is nuanced and illuminating. She avoids reductive binaries between Islam and Christianity, instead focusing on the shared logic of scripturalization, literacy and text-based moral reform of both traditions. In doing so, she highlights how religious conversion became entangled with ecological disembedding: forests, rivers and animals once animated by spirits and kinship ties were reclassified as mute resources, their management delegated to human institutions. This is particularly well-articulated in chapter 5, where the spiritual significance of camphor harvesting gives way to commodified extraction. By the time we reach chapter 6, the elephant—once a co-inhabitant of enchanted terrain—is reduced to a bureaucratic object, regulated by permits and state managers.

Zakaria's prose is clear, measured and at times lyrical. Ultimately, the book is not only a history of ecological and religious change, but also a meditation on the loss of relational worlds. It invites us to consider how enchantment operates as a mode of environmental ethics, and what is lost when that enchantment is stripped away. For readers in anthropology, environmental history and Southeast Asian studies, this is essential reading. For those of us working closely with highland communities today, it also offers a powerful lens to reimagine how older cosmologies might still inform contemporary struggles over land, forests and more-than-human relations.

In sum, Zakaria has given us a book of great scholarly and emotional weight. Its limitations, where they exist, invite further inquiry, collaboration and reflection. It is a work to sit with, argue with and carry forward.

Deasy Simandjuntak

Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Freiburg, Germany; email: deasy.simandjuntak@ethno.uni-freiburg.de.

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Countering Dispossession, Reclaiming Land: A Social Movement Ethnography. By David E. Gilbert. Oakland: University of California Press, 2024. xiv +275 pp.

How likely is the reclaiming of land to succeed if it is done by small-scale farmers against large corporations? If such reclaiming goes against legal permits, national legislation and elite business interests, the short answer to this question is: not very likely at all. Yet, in Indonesia, where Cusiavera, the subject of this book, is located, an increasing number of case studies on land conflict show that the outcomes of such claims are rarely so definite: a grey area exists in which location, (lack of) investment, activism, customary rights and "boots on the ground" can give considerable nuance and variation to the actual outcomes of seemingly similar situations. Such variation exists among the reclaimers as well. As explained in the book, regional or national non-governmental organizations may seek ways to move beyond the capitalist industrialization of the countryside that impinges on smallholder life and production, change national policies and solicit international support for fellow dispossessed elsewhere, while local villagers may strive for repossession of estate lands to ensure that they can farm to meet daily needs. I believe that such differences in purpose among reclaimers should not be ignored or underestimated.

This book shows that complexity. Starting with an introduction that outlines the location, background, the issues at hand and the link to global reclaiming efforts, we learn that the village of Cusiavera claims collective lands along the slopes of the Aren volcano in West Sumatra. Control over these lands had been taken away by consecutive state regimes, which the community disputes.