

*The Poetic Power of Place: Comparative Perspectives on Austronesian Ideas of Locality.* Edited by James J. Fox. Canberra: Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1997. 204 pp.

This is the fourth edited volume to have emerged from the Comparative Austronesian Project co-ordinated by James Fox at the Australian National University. The interested reader has to address all four publications to establish the main directions of Fox's and his colleagues' thinking, and two of the earlier volumes have been reviewed in this journal (*SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 11, no. 2 [October 1996] and vol. 12, no. 2 [October 1997]). The general volume on *The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (1995) surveys the main cultural, linguistic, and historical elements in the origins, definition, transformation, and differentiation of the Austronesian-speaking populations of Asia, the Pacific, and eastern Africa. The first collection published, *Inside Austronesian Houses* (1993), focuses on the organization and domestication of space, and *Origins, Ancestry and Alliance* (1996), as the title suggests, examines Austronesian concepts of origins, precedence, and hierarchy and their relationship with social practice. *The Poetic Power of Place* touches on various of the themes explored in previous volumes and develops certain of these further, though the book on the symbolism and functions of the house is especially closely related to this present offering. Fox's editorial introduction outlines succinctly the purposes of this volume which are to examine the ways in which "social knowledge is framed and vested in particular landscapes" and how that knowledge is sustained, retained, and transformed (p. 1). Unfortunately, as the editor notes in his "Acknowledgements", there have been delays in bringing this book to press so that the four core chapters were originally presented as conference papers as long ago as 1992. These comprise the contributions by Richard Eves on "seating the place" among the Lelet Plateau people of New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea; James Fox's "genealogy and topogeny" in Roti; Andrew McWilliams' "cultural topographies" in West Timor; and Sandra Pannell's "poetics of place and politics of space" on Damer, Maluku Tenggara.

One of the central organizing ideas of the volume, that place and space are infused with cultural meaning and significance and are used to express, maintain, and transform social relations and cultural identities, is a long-established one in anthropology. However, the several contributors, in their ethnographic narratives and analyses, demonstrate the ways in which landscapes are conceptualized, particularly in terms of bodily and botanic imagery, how place and space are deployed to legitimize cultural identity and difference, and the importance of topogeny (“the recitation of an ordered sequence of place names”), often in relationship with genealogical reckoning, in depicting and defining origins, pathways, precedence, and terminations. Although “place” and “locality” are given a privileged position in the title of the book, other overlapping terms and concepts are also discussed: landscape, territory, space, country, domain, land, abode, topography, and area. An important conceptual distinction that runs through several chapters is that between “place” (with reference to specific locations and cartographic display) and “space” (which refers to itineraries, the activation of place, and its movement and use).

The chapters, which were presumably commissioned later to complement and strengthen the comparative dimensions of the four core papers, comprise Philip Thomas’ discussion of “place and ritual imagination” among the Temanambondro of southeast Madagascar; Minako Sakai on “origins, original points and rituals, and ancestral names” among the Gumai of South Sumatra; Roxana Waterson’s examination of “contested landscapes” in Tana Toraja; Barbara Dix Grimes’ analysis of the “representation of relations of precedence and origin” on Buru; and Nils Bubandt’s “spatial poesis and localised identity” in Buli. While the core papers keep within a relatively circumscribed territory (namely, eastern Indonesia: Roti, Maluku, Timor) with a further eastern extension to an Austronesian-speaking Papua New Guinean outlier, the subsequent gathering together of additional papers provides the editor with the opportunity both to spread his comparative net to Sulawesi and westwards to Sumatra and Madagascar, and also add weight to the eastern Indonesian ethnography by including Buru and southern Halmahera. Even so, the chapters in this volume, unlike the previous collections, are almost entirely focused on the Indonesian archipelago

to the neglect of the Pacific islanders.

The volume sets a high standard in ethnographic description and analysis and is a worthy addition to the comparative series. Although it is difficult to choose, I found the chapters by Waterson, Bubandt, Fox, and Pannell particularly instructive and illuminating: Waterson for the importance which she attaches to the Torajan discourse of disputation about identity, status, and precedence; Bubandt, despite the dense prose, for his skilful examination of the relations between language, space, selfhood, and cultural identity; Fox for his terse exposition of the role and significance of topogeny and the metaphor of the journey in Roti; and Pannell for her brief and lucid discussion of the distinction between place and space.

The Comparative Austronesian Project has succeeded in making a valuable contribution to our store of ethnographic knowledge and understanding of Austronesian culture, society, and history. It has demonstrated the advantages and pitfalls of closely controlled comparative investigations within a defined ethnolinguistic category, and shown how we might begin to develop a comparative discourse within which we can attempt to specify the significant characteristics, boundaries, and internal variations of a given population. Nevertheless, the problems of constructing categories for comparative experimentation are substantial, given the permeable quality of cultural boundaries and the processes of cultural exchange, interaction, and assimilation. The issues of human universals and whether or not particularly prominent cultural characteristics can be discerned across several populations also complicate the work of Fox's team. These matters are hinted at in this volume (for example, pp. 12–17, 35, 38) as they have been in previous volumes. They too require much more detailed investigation, though this should not detract from our appreciation of the excellent ethnographic case material, intriguing findings, and the boldness of the comparative vision which the Canberra project has provided us.

Victor T. KING

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Victor T. King is Professor of South-East Asian Studies in the Department of Politics and Asian Studies at the University of Hull, and is currently Chair of the British Academy's Committee for South-East Asian Studies.