

REVIEW

Leontine E. Visser. 1989. *My rice field is my child: Social and territorial aspects of swidden cultivation in Sahu, Eastern Indonesia*. Translated by Rita DeCoursey. Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, no. 136. Dordrecht-Holland: Foris Publications. xvii + 217 pp., photographs, maps, figures, appendices, bibliography.

PATRICIA SPYER
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Within the lives of the Sahu people of North Halmahera, numerous practices that we would call ritual activities have in the eyes of the Sahu themselves an economic purpose (p. 2). This insight motivates Visser's approach in her highly detailed exploration of the historical and cultural significance of dry rice cultivation in Sahu everyday life. In Visser's book, the characteristic Western classification of society into disparate economic, social, and political domains gives way to a more integrated view of social life. Her analysis convincingly demonstrates how economic activity is thoroughly informed by the ideas and understandings that participants have of their world and their place within it. This realization is especially significant for Visser who carried out her fieldwork (June 1979–January 1981) in the context of an interdisciplinary research project on the Halmahera–Raja Empat region, directed by Dr. E. K. M. Masinambow, and conducted under the auspices of the National Institute for Economic and Social Research in Jakarta (LEKNAS/LIPI). One of the goals of this ongoing project based on the collaboration of Indonesian and Dutch scholars, is to provide historical, cultural, and socioeconomic information that will facilitate the economic development of the North Moluccas. Visser views her own study as a baseline for development in Sahu, specifically for a program that would rest upon a culturally informed view of the Sahuese and take into account the privileged place of swidden rice cultivation in their lives.

Beyond the aim of providing ethnographic knowledge of use to the national government and development policymakers, Visser locates her work within an ongoing discussion involving a number of anthropologists in the Netherlands and France concerned with the resemblances and differences among Eastern Indonesian societies as "expressed in terms of general classificatory principles, such as the complementary opposition between elder and younger and the social and ritual positions of persons and groups in terms of the resulting hierarchy" (p. 3). A concern with comparison also informs another related theme of Visser's book, namely, Sahu's ethnographic place in Indonesia understood—following Dr. P. E. de Josselin de Jong's definition—as a field of anthropological study (FAS).

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter falls neatly into two parts that deal respectively with the "internal structure" of Sahu society—settlement patterns and the mythological definition of territorial organization—and with "external influences" or the "impacts" on Sahu of the Ternatan Sultanate and Dutch colonial rule as well as the place of this region within the current Indonesian nation-state. The second and by far the longest chapter is titled "The Food We Eat." In extensive detail, the chapter describes the swidden cultivation of rice and addresses the unusual prominence of this food crop in a wider region where sago is the staple of most Moluccan peoples. We learn in this chapter how the practice of swidden rice cultivation was introduced to Sahu from Ternate around 1700, and how this form of agriculture assumed increasing importance as Sahu became the main supplier of rice—even the "granary"—of the Ternatan Sultanate. Visser documents the Sahu representation of their historical relation to Ternate: "we people of Sahu were forced to plant rice so 'our shield has turned into a hearth and our weapon has turned into a hoe'" (p. 40). This self-representation involves the Sahu view of themselves as the 'women' of Halmahera, a view which, significantly, marks a gendered distinction between themselves and their more warlike neighbors such as the Tobelo and the Tobaru.

In addition to history, the second chapter includes a long and detailed discussion of rice cultivation, the organization of the work teams that labor in the rice fields, and the concomitant ritual management of the fields. A central focus of the chapter is the "metaphoric" relationship between the growth of the 'female' rice plants and the transformation of the rice spirit 'Fatima the Seed' from female child to adult woman. Of importance for Visser in this relationship is not, however, that the name Mo'i Fatima for rice-as-daughter derives from Islam (Fatima is, of course, Fatimah the daughter of Mohammed and his first wife Khadijah). Rather, her exclusive concern is the more abstract relationship between mother and child

(daughter) that serves as a model for the relationship between the Sahu and their rice.

Beyond this metaphoric relationship, Visser also details the shifting relations to the land over time of different categories of persons within the swidden cycle, especially men and women. Planted only in the first year of the swidden cycle, rice is the ultimate responsibility of men. By contrast, the crops of maize, groundnuts, cassava, plantains, and vegetables that form the second year garden are tended by women. At least a portion of this garden produce is sold by women at the market in the subdistrict capital of Jailolo and represents their main source of cash. Due to the appeal of another major source of cash for Sahu—the copra trade—land used for swidden rice cultivation has within the last decade increasingly been planted with coconut seedlings, despite the negative consequences of the presence of palms on land used for rice cultivation.

The third chapter of Visser's book deals with social organization. Again, here, the complex interrelations between persons, social groups, co-residence, and land figure first and foremost in her analysis. Visser demonstrates nicely how kinship and the social groupings which make up Sahu social organization are established not simply on the basis of "flesh and blood" ties but more importantly through the shared control and working of the same land inheritance. In the words of Visser's informants: "kinship is eating together from the same inheritance" (p. 101). The importance of practices constitutive of kin ties that ensure or enhance the landholdings of particular social groups follows from this concept of relatedness. Visser provides ample evidence in her discussion of the four forms of Sahu marriage and in her analysis of the high frequency of adoption in the area, of the extent to which matters of social organization are linked or even subordinated to territorial concerns. The fourth chapter treats in greater depth the linkage between social relations and land tenure. It gives an overview of the nine categories of land relationships distinguished by Sahuese, as well as the rights and possibilities entailed within them. Chapter five deals with the annual harvest ritual centered upon the large ceremonial house (*sasa 'du*) of Awer village where Visser resided and carried out the bulk of her fieldwork. She notes that the Awer ceremonial house is the last of such houses to be found in North Halmahera.

Visser devotes the greater part of this penultimate chapter to a description and analysis of the *jāwa* circle dance that takes place immediately outside of the ceremonial house. In the solemn dance men from both the host and guest villages—the latter stand individually in relation to their hosts as either wifegivers or wifetakers—encircle one or more beautifully arrayed young women who represent the image of a mythical princess. In principle, there is one 'princess' drawn from each clan attendant

at the harvest ceremony. Outside the circle, strange masked figures appear who try to break into the ring of dancers but are repulsed by the men. Visser explicates the meaning of the circle dance in the context of a complex mythology that turns upon the opposition between immigrants and autochthonous peoples of the land, and upon the figure of Raja Baikole, a sort of "stranger-king" whose daughter is the lovely mythical princess (Sahlins 1985). The significance of the dance for Visser lies in its relation to marriage and more generally, fertility. Specifically, the mythical princess—splendidly imaged and protected by the circle of men—"is the woman who must be married off [to immigrantlike outsiders] in order to provide descendants. The ideal is that she not go far away, and that she provide successors to a line within her own village cluster. It is, after all, not only the men from her own village, but also affines from other villages in the village cluster [the largest endogamous social and territorial unit], who dance around Moa ma Jum [the princess] and close the circle against such intruders as the caka'iba figure [the masked strangers who would disrupt the circle]. The fertility of the people, like the fertile land, should be shared within the village cluster" (p. 165).

Following Visser's interpretation, the opposition between immigrant and indigenous is further articulated in the exchange of foods between guests and hosts in the context of the harvest ceremony. While the host village supplies palmwine and rice, produce of the land referred to as the 'right hand' in this context, the guests 'bring along the left hand', or fish, as produce of the sea. Visser argues that the exchange of land for sea foods emphasizes the opposition between older indigenous lords of the earth and their symbolically younger 'immigrant' guests. However, she fails to recognize that these foods are not so much exchanged as integrated within a meal that is consumed by hosts and guests alike. The oppositions emphasized by Visser—those between land and sea, indigenous and immigrant, senior and junior—are transformed and, at least momentarily, overcome in the communal consumption by members of the village cluster of the harvest meal. In the same way, the "princesses" enclosed by the *jiawa* circle dance of the men—if we recall ideally one from each clan represented at the harvest feast—represent a common pool from which the individual men who make up the circle potentially select a wife.

Visser's tendency to focus upon abstract oppositions that situate her work within the comparativist project envisioned by anthropologists in Leiden and Paris, obscures the ways in which such distinctions are not simply given once and for all within a static classificatory order but are rather aspects of dynamic social processes. The limitations of an exclusive focus on classification are most evident in the sixth chapter of the book on Sahu political organization. In this final chapter, Visser investigates the

significance of the symbolic modeling of the Sahu ceremonial house after the great war proas of Ternate:

not only in the general layout of the building, but also in the names of the various important parts of the ceremonial house, one can see associations with the Ternatan proa. The seats assigned to the spokesman of the rera [a social grouping intermediate between the clan and the patrilineage] are called aota after the Ternatan word ao for rowing seat; the ridgepoles than angle up from both ends of the ridge of the roof are called kalulu, the term for the prow and stern of the proa. Also the tassels of sugar palm fibers, which hang from the ridgepoles, are called by the Ternatan name mafana. Finally, the various flags and garlands—the dayalo, faturu, and paji-paji—are comparable to the ornamentation of a proa ... Together with the clothing worn during the *jiawa* dance, all these borrowings are called by the Sahu a "gift from the Sultan of Ternate" (p. 177).

Critical to Visser's understanding of the convergence between ceremonial house, village center, and boat is the curious orientation of the proa realized in the seating arrangement of the rituo-political officials who man the boat. Rather than being turned towards the sea, the ceremonial house as proa is oriented away from it, with the person who represents the pilot facing landwards. In her attempt to interpret the political significance of the ceremonial house as proa, Visser's quest for a static classificatory order is enabled by her Sahu informants who insist that their 'proa' is not an image of a war proa at sea, or even a sailing boat, but rather a proa pulled up on land and lying still. Such an insistence on the part of her own informants upon the stability of this 'political' representation allows Visser to take the image of an immobile boat at face value. Nor is it probably arbitrary that Visser's main informant in Awer "who accepted me as his pupil" (p. viii), and who appears with Visser in a photograph on the page facing the book's preface, himself plays a pivotal role in the proa representation of Sahu political organization.

Yet, as McKinnon shows for the Tanimbarese stone boat platforms that formerly graced the centers of many villages in these Southeast Moluccan islands, such boat centers deserve closer scrutiny (McKinnon 1988). However unchanging and dauntingly petrified its appearance may otherwise be, as in the case of Tanimbar, mobility is inevitably entailed in the image of a boat. The next step is of course to disclose the politics entailed in such boat representations. This means recognizing that even when beached, as it were, at the center of village space, the boat is, above all else, a vehicle of mobility and travel. It is importantly this recognition that also reveals the potential

for transformation inherent in the sociopolitical order that the proa's curious stasis would represent as so unquestioningly stable.

According to Visser, the ceremonial house as proa and the Raja Baikole myth reflect the immigrant ideology of the Sahu people. From this perspective, the corpus of Raja Baikole myths explore the theme of the legitimacy of the non-Sahu immigrant who comes from overseas, and also foreground two problems that repeatedly trouble political relations in Sahu: first, how to ensure the transfer of land rights within one's own patrilineage and second, the necessity, when a male successor is lacking, to take in immigrants from elsewhere through marriage with one's daughter.

While intriguing and persuasive, Visser's characterization of Sahu in terms of an immigrant ideology raises more questions than it answers. The most important among these turns upon the consequences for contemporary Sahu sociocultural life of the historical relation between Sahu and Ternate, the potential relevance of which Visser so readily dismisses in the opening chapter of her book. Following Visser, the ceremonial house as proa turned inland means that the men who represent the younger, immigrant dimension of the immigrant/lord of the earth opposition find themselves seated on the land, female, and older side of the house. In her view, this seating arrangement suggests that these immigrants have already assumed the position of insider, just as the mythic Raja Baikole once did when he arrived in Sahu and usurped the place of the original land ruler. But if, in the order represented by the seating arrangement of the harvest ceremony, the immigrant has succeeded the indigenous lord of the earth, he also importantly has been domesticated in the same process—a point which escapes Visser. Who then, in effect, conquers or domesticates whom?

Significantly, a similar ambiguity appears to underlie Sahu understandings of their historical relation to the Ternatan Sultanate. When Sahu claim that their shield has turned into a hearth as a consequence of their role as granary to the Sultanate, and that "we Sahu are the women of Halmahera, we look down on the posture of a warrior and we are not revengeful," they also proclaim their own domestication by Ternate (albeit with some pride in the cultural difference that distinguishes them from their historically more belligerent neighbors). Inversely, the ceremonial house as Ternatan war proa, still and at rest at the center of village space, suggests something else, namely, how Ternate and its warring ambitions have themselves been domesticated by Sahuese. Given the importance in Visser's analysis of the immigrant ideology of the Sahu, an ideology which by its very nature turns upon the distinction between internal and external, it is unfortunate that the history between 'internal' Sahu and 'external' Ternate—to which, after all, the swidden cultivation of rice in Sahu owes its origins—is so readily excluded from her account.

There is, nevertheless, much of interest in this book. Its value centers upon the often subtle analysis of the interrelation between territorial and social forms of organization which constitutes the main focus of Visser's work. That it largely ignores what appears even in her own book as a convincing case for the importance of the historical relation of Sahu and Ternate for contemporary Sahu sociocultural forms and processes will deprive some readers of a further level of understanding. This, however, does not detract from the richness or importance of the descriptive material on swidden agriculture and the analysis of its implications for social life. For this reason, the book would serve as an excellent introduction for students to the complexities of socioeconomic life, particularly in conjunction with the film on the Harvest festival in Sahu on which Visser collaborated with the filmmaker Jouwersma. The Sahu book and film might also be fruitfully compared with the book on the Tobelo by Visser's colleague, Jos Platenkamp, and with the film on Tobelo Marriage that this Leiden anthropologist produced with the filmmaker, D. Nijland.

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