

BOOK REVIEWS

BENEDICT ANDERSON, *The face of rural hell: asceticism and desire in Buddhist Thailand*, London etc.: Seagull Books 2012, viii, 99 pp.

At once repulsive and enticing, powerfully insightful and painfully incomplete, Benedict Anderson's latest volume might best be described as a piece of ethno-historical curiosity literature. It tells the story of Wat Phai Rong Wua – a truly massive Thai Buddhist temple-complex near the town of Suphanburi about a hundred kilometres northwest of Bangkok – and of the charismatic monk whose ambition and skill at fundraising resulted in its construction: Luang Phor Khom.

The complex, which Anderson likens to 'a kind of religious Disneyland' (Anderson 2012, 4), once boasted the largest Buddha statue in the world, a fact which attracted a visit from King Rama IX, now the world's longest-ruling monarch, in 1969 (p. 51). As if this were not enough, Wat Phai Rong Wua contains scores of Buddha statues from various traditions, a life-sized Hindu temple, replicas of cities and other important scenes from the life of the Buddha, a secondary school, halls for traditional Thai dance performances, replicas of Confucian, Taoist, Christian, and Islamic religious architecture, dormitories, prayer halls, and a hundred-pinnacle pagoda – projects that, by the mid-1980s, had cost nearly 100 million baht (pp. 52-6).

None of the above, however, seems to fascinate Anderson as much as the *wat*'s peculiar *narokphum* (or 'hell garden'), consisting of more than a hundred statues of male and female *pared* (hungry ghosts),¹ all ostentatiously naked, branded with captions labelling their sins and suffering all manner of graphic tortures at the hands of underworld demons or *phayayom*.

After briefly setting the scene, Anderson's first chapter tasks itself with exploring the puzzle of this undoubtedly bizarre example of religious material culture. The sins for which *pared* are punished seem to be of a largely rural, and often trivial, sort – torturing animals, drunkenness, laziness, having sex on temple grounds – while other sins that one might expect to encounter, such as homosexuality, prostitution, *lèse majesté*, or political dissidence, are nowhere to be found (p. 28). The level of punishment is in itself extreme given that, in Thai Buddhism, the hungry ghost realm is usually reserved for those whose sins were comparatively minor. There is, furthermore, a conspicuous absence of any hierarchy of punishment, such that 'The wife who forces her husband to cook rice... is tortured just as horribly as the murderer' (p. 32). Stranger still, Anderson argues, is the fact that the often swollen and over-emphasised genitals of the sinners are always left intact, never subjected to any kind of torture or disfigurement.

Anderson's initial notion – given that the hell garden's chief clientele are 'mostly parents and school teachers bringing youngsters to see what will happen to them if they turn bad' (p. 10) – was that the statues were commissioned by rural patrons who hoped to scare members of the community into avoiding certain kinds of locally relevant transgressions. He abandoned this theory, however, when he learned that all of the *narokphum*'s statues were commissioned by Luang Phor Khom himself.

¹ *Pared* seems to be Anderson's own transliteration of a Thai word usually rendered as *pret*.

Attempting to understand the motives of the monk, Anderson devotes his second chapter to a truly engaging history of Luang Phor Khom and his times. Born in 1902, Luang Phor Khom was a ‘delicate, sickly child’ who demonstrated such a talent for religious scholarship that a local patron had him sent to study at a national school in a Bangkok *wat* (p. 6). In 1936, Phor Khom returned home to become abbot of the rural monastery that would later become Wat Phai Rong Wua. Anderson explains how the monk’s nationalized education fuelled an ambition to create monumental projects at a time when state intervention in traditional religious hierarchies was sweeping away ‘the old order’ and creating ‘new opportunities for the talented’ (p. 40).

Even in its initial stages, the *wat* enjoyed a level of financial support ‘unlikely to have come from the poor farmers of his village and its neighbours’ (p. 42). This income was soon heavily supplemented by the sale of amulets – which some believed had the power to stop bullets – and eventually, Anderson speculates, by connections to elites of various state regimes that shared a vested interest in increasing the country’s prestige through monumental religious projects (pp. 45-7). After the completion of his record-breaking Buddha statue, the monk commissioned hundreds of construction projects which continued until just before his death in 1990, at which point financial constraints would transform the *wat* into ‘a sort of monument, freezing what Luang Phor Khom had created...with no more major additions made to the complex’ (p. 57).

At this point in the book – especially given Anderson’s renowned work on nationalism (1983) – the reader cannot be blamed for expecting any number of tantalizing theoretical revelations about the tensions between rural, national, and global levels of culture and community. Unfortunately, any such expectations would be misplaced. Anderson does assert that, while ‘the concept of an underworld for sinners may be universal...its internal architecture is always constructed by local aesthetics.... [making] the idea of hell profoundly anti-global’ (Choksey 2013). He also goes on to question how hell can ‘survive if the local is continuously eroded by a standardising global’ (ibid.). These reflections, however, are nowhere to be found in the volume itself. Instead, one must rely on a short article published on Seagull Books’ tumblr account summarizing a lecture given by Anderson about the publication shortly after its release.

The final chapters of the book itself, by contrast, are ‘almost exclusively focussed on the [the park’s] relation to the motivations and sensibilities of its creators’ (White 2012: 8). In them, Anderson insinuates that Luang Phor Khom was, in fact, a closet homosexual and that the hell garden’s ‘anarchic, semi-sadistic eroticism’ (p. 60) served as a kind of outlet for the monk’s frustrated desires. While this might be true, the absence of an interview with the monk himself and a dearth of supporting evidence in Anderson’s sources give such claims a speculative character.

On the whole, the book exhibits numerous gaps. The first chapter, while painting a vivid picture of the hell garden, fails to convey any sense of the overall layout and structure of the *wat*. No attempt is made to interview visitors to the park, nor is any ethnographic account given of the area surrounding Suphanburi or of the nature of religious practice among local communities. Such omissions make it difficult to construct a picture of how Wat Phai Rong Wua might be situated in the wider context that surrounds it.²

² It is also difficult to imagine what kind of impression the complex as a whole might convey to visitors without some kind of map showing the position of the buildings and offering a sense of the possible trajectories a visitor might take

The second chapter, while undoubtedly thorough, provides evidence that challenges the rural character Anderson ascribes to the monk and his *narokphum*. First and foremost, one might consider his sources of funding. The amulet trade, for example, can be seen as part of a wider process of commercialization, in Erik Cohen's sense of the term (Cohen 2000), in Thai religious material culture as it is adapted to the economic changes brought about by rapid modernization (see Phongpaichit and Baker 1998). By the same token, the character of Luang Phor Khom's education and the considerable financial support he likely received from Bangkok elites further underscores the point that, while his sensibilities *might* have been local, his sociological position as a charismatic leader was almost certainly contingent upon nationalizing economic and political forces.

It is quite possible that the *wat's narokphum* was a place where 'Homosexuality [was] given its own...interpretation by being...translated into a local aesthetic, and [thus] permitted to exist' (Choksey 2012). It is equally likely, however, that Luang Phor Khom's projects were representative of a growing global trend of religious 'theming' (Lukas, 2007),³ which has seen expression in contexts as varied as Florida, Vietnam, Tunisia, and Taiwan.⁴ While Anderson briefly addresses the growing proliferation of East Asian 'hell parks' in his epilogue, his brief, impressionistic description writes the site off as tacky, suggesting that future hells would be likely to follow a similar pattern (p. 99).

Notwithstanding the somewhat frustrating conclusion of the book, it contains the seeds of significant contributions to the understanding of the relationships between religious material culture, commercialization, and nationalism. Anderson's failure to develop these insights might be attributable to a wider gap in his approach to religion. As Peter van der Veer (1994) points out, a shortcoming of both Anderson's and Gellner's work on nationalism – arguably the two definitive volumes on the subject – is their insistence that its advent overtakes and replaces religion as a dominant social force. The BJP's rise to power in India during the 1990s is only one of many examples that call such assertions into question (van der Veer, 1994).

In other words, Anderson's fascination with the outlandish spectacle of Luang Phor Khom's rural hell⁵ risks becoming a detour, allowing him to circumvent a discussion of how the monk might well have been more significant as a religious nationalist than he was as a rural homosexual. This interpretation, however, is probably too extreme. Instead, Anderson's reaction to Wat Phai Rong Wua was probably similar to that which his book inspires in its readers: puzzlement, revulsion, and an irresistible fascination. Through his compelling description of a truly surreal environment, it can be hoped that Anderson has opened a door on to a much larger discussion concerning global transformations in religious material culture and practice that academia has barely taken the first steps in attempting to understand.

through the space.

³ Lukas develops the notion of 'theming' in his book *The Themed Space* (2007). The concept of 'religious theming' is my own adaptation of Lukas' term and, as far as I am aware, is a phenomenon that has not been researched to date.

⁴ 'The Holy Land Experience' – a religious theme-park that boasts a daily mock crucifixion – is described in Lukas 2007. Suoi Tien water park, near Saigon, features massive waterfalls in the shape of Buddhist gods and a roller-coaster ride through an anamnetronic underworld (see: http://www.vietnamhost.com/suoitien_park/main.html). Chak Wak Park in Tozeur, Tunisia, provides visitors with vivid pictures of the risks associated with straying from the path of the Abrahamic prophets (see Segnoe 2012). Finally, India's Sagar Arts Company has been planning a massive Ramayan-themed attraction outside Navi Mumbai since 2006 (ibid.).

⁵ The hundred-page volume contains thirty-eight full-colour photographs, of which all but eleven depict nudity and/or torture.

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KARL SEGNOE

MAGNUS MARSDEN (ed.), *Islam and society in Pakistan: anthropological perspectives*, Karachi: Oxford University Press 2010, xxxvi, 462 pp.

Magnus Marsden's edited volume, *Islam and Society in Pakistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, contributes rich studies of Islam as it is practised and experienced by diverse groups across the country. The selections expand the study of Islam beyond religion and examine its significance in relation to society, politics, gender, class, and ethnicity. The authors' wide interpretations of what constitutes Islam in Pakistani society reflect the profusion of religious interpretations among practitioners themselves.

Marsden articulates two major aims: to represent the diversity of Muslim life, and to contribute to anthropological discussions on religious ideology and practice in Pakistan. The selections deal mainly with interactions between Islam and the state, sectarian violence, local forms of Islamic practice, and Islam among Pakistan's diaspora. They examine forms of Islam beyond their ideologies and analyse the relevance of religion in domestic and public space, politics, business, education, and many other spheres of social life.

Marsden's insightful introduction problematizes the categories that so often reduce or misrepresent the complexity of practiced Islam. As Islam in Pakistan has become the focus of increased scholarly and popular attention, many accounts tend to distinguish between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims.' 'Good Muslims'

practise benign forms of Sufi Islam and espouse virtues of acceptance and cooperation. Muslims who practice reformist or ‘radicalized’ Islam are associated with violence, intolerance, anti-Western sentiment, and irrationality. Even the more academic analyses of Islam in Pakistan have tended to focus on perceived religious rifts, such as that between local, ‘syncretic’ forms of Islam and reformism. These accounts pose Pakistani Islam as a collection of discrete, competing ideologies that breed sectarian violence. Besides their simplistic essentialisms, these portrayals also neglect more subtle forms of religious self-understanding and practice in daily life. Many of the chapters conceptualize a complex Muslim selfhood, examining how the state, community and individuality shape Muslim experience. These ethnographic studies demonstrate the multiple ways in which Pakistani Muslims incorporate apparently contradictory belief systems in their practice of Islam and so defy categorization.

As well as noting common problems with existing scholarship, Marsden also comments on the themes and debates that emerge in his selected chapters. Many of the authors look at forms of Sufism in Pakistan, which is commonly seen as both more genuine and less politically and globally significant than other forms of Islam. They challenge these assumptions by exploring the complexity and continued relevance of Sufi practices. Several of the chapters study Islamization at the state level as experienced by the segment of the population that perhaps is most impacted by institutionalized religion: women. Many of the authors who focus on Muslim women in Pakistan question the notion of a ‘collective’ female experience and the relevance of the Western concept of ‘agency’ to describe the attitudes and voices of Muslim women across the country. Finally, many of the selections look at configurations of social space and religious identity through examinations of sectarian tensions. Many find that sectarian conflicts are born from a constellation of ethnic, economic, political, and social interests, not out of irreconcilable religious difference. Some suggest that sectarian violence is instrumentalized to further nationalist or political objectives, but reject the notion that religious heterogeneity in Pakistan is inherently fraught with conflict.

Marsden’s compelling introduction anticipates themes that often do not come through clearly in the articles themselves. While engaging individually, the pieces lack coherence as a whole. Although Marsden guides the reader towards common trends in the chapters, they do not seem to be ordered with these commonalities in mind. The casual organization is at first disorienting for the reader, who expects thematic sections after Marsden’s clear explanation of his selective process. Nonetheless, several chapters stand out for their contributions towards Marsden’s editorial aims.

Naveeda Khan’s piece, ‘Of Children and Jinns,’ explores the complexity of religious ideology and practice among a single family in Lahore. The family is renowned in the community for its piety and adherence to the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam, but unproblematically acknowledges the supernatural influence of jinns in the household. One of the family’s young daughters acts as a conduit to the family jinn, a being in the form of a tall, solemn man whose appearance and deportment emulates that of the Prophet Muhammad. Khan demonstrates that, while jinns and the humans that commune with them (*amil*) are more commonly associated with Barelvi or Sufi Islam, these practices are unproblematically adopted in the Deobandi household. She argues that, although interpretations of Islam such as Barelvi, Deoband, and Ahl-i-Hadith may profess doctrinal differences, they are often incorporated in household settings. Such varied

beliefs should not be interpreted as hypocrisy, but as the conscious acknowledgement of religious difference as a means to a deeper and more expressive piety.

Kathrine Pratt Ewing's chapter, 'The Modern Businessman and the Pakistani Saint,' similarly confronts stereotypes about certain 'types' of Muslims and their expected modes of religious practice. She examines the relationship between Sufi saints, or *pirs*, and their middle-class businessman devotees. Ewing rejects the modernist assumption that Pakistani professionals are less religious or more prone to scepticism of Sufi ideology and activities. She finds that many well-educated, well-travelled professionals are drawn to the moral authority of a Sufi *pir*. Businessmen who are dissatisfied with office politics or disenchanted with the bureaucracy and corruption they face in their professional lives are drawn to the alternative social experience provided by a spiritual relationship with a *pir*. In several instances, Ewing demonstrates how businessmen pose their *pirs* in contrast to other forms of authority in their lives or evoke the *pir* when making independent decisions. Rather than dismissing religious authority, many Pakistani professionals find it continually relevant when facing modern challenges and insecurities.

The contribution of Pnina Werbner, 'Langar: Pilgrimage, Sacred Exchange, and Perpetual Sacrifice in a Sufi Saint's Lodge', examines the altruistic practices that constitute Sufi devotion, as well as their transnational reach. While Werbner focuses on the lodge of the Sufi Saint Zindapir, her analysis is most original for its study of the multiple communities united by the *pir's* cult. This community, which she calls a 'global regional cult', is united in a Turnerian sense by pilgrimage to Mecca, or to the *pir's* regional shrine in Pakistan. Connection to the divine is achieved through the community's shared ordeal of sacrifice, whether at the annual shrine's *urs* ritual or in the form of an offering to Zindapir himself. The *langar* referred to in Werbner's title is a large collection of food collected by devotees at Zindapir's lodge for redistribution to the poor. Even high-caste, wealthy devotees unused to hard manual labour and food preparation work long hours to build ovens, cook, and wash the offerings in the *langar*. Werbner argues that the *langar* provides a means for meritorious giving while simultaneously emphasizing shared experience within the Muslim community. The practice works to unite the cult across continents, as all devotees participate in the same routine of voluntary labour and sacrifice. The saint and his supplicants are connected through a 'calculus of exchange' as material goods are reciprocated with religious merit. Beyond this exchange, however, the sacrificial rituals surrounding the *urs* allow supplicants to imagine their connections with the saint himself and the ordeals which imbued him with divine blessing. As in all of Werbner's work on Zindapir's cult in Pakistan and abroad, she demonstrates the vitality and relevance of a Sufi tradition that is too often thought to be on the decline. She poses this Sufi cult as a powerful player in contemporary Islam that perhaps rivals reformist Islamic ideology in terms of its global reach.

In 'Al-Huda: Of Allah and Power Point,' Sadaf Ahmed writes about an educational institution which she terms a 'social movement' for its enthusiastic following and fresh ideology. The Al-Huda school and its approach to Quranic study uniquely appeals to middle- and upper-class Pakistani women. While Al-Huda's ideology emphasizes a literalist interpretation of the Quran, its Western-educated charismatic female leader and cohort of young teachers makes it especially popular among young women. While many analyses of Muslim societies portray women as either disinterested in intensive Islamic study or as the passive subjects

of a male-dominated religion, Ahmed's account explores the passion and piety of these elite, educated women. The Al-Huda method encourages its pupils to engage in critical conversations about Islamic ideals and their relevance in daily life. Ahmed argues that this process creates and maintains 'ethical subjects' who internalize this doctrine and live by its tenets even outside the classroom. Al-Huda has made inroads among the young Pakistani elite because of its emphasis on modern educational methods and scientific reasoning. Many pupils are inclined towards Al-Huda's approach to Islam because it is not burdened with the 'backwardness' or parochialism sometimes associated with the strict clerics. Ahmed's sensitive analysis demonstrates the variety of experiences of both students and teachers under the Al-Huda system, arguing that no relationship with its ideology is similar. Her chapter highlights the popularity of Al-Huda among young women, while acknowledging the self-aware, critical approach many of the students bring to its doctrine.

The sheer diversity of the contributions to this volume satisfies one of Marsden's stated aims: to illustrate the complexity and diversity of Islam in Pakistan. Pakistan, Marsden argues, has too long been relegated in anthropological scholarship to the position of India's problematic neighbour. These selections deviate from that paradigm by appreciating the cultural and religious depth of Pakistani society through the lens of Islamic practice. Through this varied selection of ethnographic work, Marsden shows that Islam in Pakistan cannot be reduced to any single interpretation or set of practices.

MEREDITH McLAUGHLIN

KATHERINE SWANCUTT, *Fortune and the Cursed: The Sliding Scale of Time in Mongolian Divination. Epistemologies of Healing*, Vol. 11, 2012. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. Hardcover, 263 pp., Index, References, Glossary, 5 tables, and 22 figures.

This exceptionally detailed ethnography focuses on two Buryat communities in Mongolia and China. From 1999 to 2004, Swancutt engaged in 16 months of intensive fieldwork primarily in Bayandun District, Dornod Province, Mongolia, with comparative research undertaken in Shinekhen Baruun Sum District, China. It is a testimony to her acceptance by these communities that she was often asked by local shamans to join in the almost daily collective divination sessions. In part due to this intimacy, she is forced to use pseudonyms for her extensive 'cast of characters' (p. xiii-xiv) because of the necessary secrecy inherent in divination and the counteracting of curses. As well, it would seem that the political sensitivity of such research, especially in such harsh economic times, is a factor. It would have been useful to have been given some more information on recent and current economic and political realities of these parts of Mongolia and China. While previous religious repression is briefly alluded to, the 86% unemployment rate (p. xvii) surely affects daily life as well.

There are a number of helpful tables and figures. The latter include numerous contextual photographs, as well as drawings of spirits by members of the community. The Glossary is extensive, with extended ethnographic descriptions augmenting the definitions.

At the heart of this work are the constant worrisome concerns that generate Buryat divination rather than divination per se. Chapters One–Four set out the basic ontological principles of Mongolian, Buddhist, and Buryat religions: (1) ‘A Race Against Time: Mongolian Fortune and the Anthropology of Magic’; (2) ‘Buryat Cosmology and the Timescales of Religious Practice’; (3) ‘Fortune, the Soul and Spiralling Returns’; and (4) ‘Curses, Khel Am and the Omnipresence of Witchcraft.’ Key issues here are the Buryat peoples’ concepts of Time, Fortune, Luck, and Curses, especially how one responds to these phenomena in daily life.

Chapter 5, ‘Divination and the Inextensive Distance to Cursing Rivals’, focuses on divination with an extended case study and discussion of divinatory implements, especially use of the familiar 54 card deck. Other chapters have small sections on different divination techniques, such as a general introduction in Ch. 1, mirror divination in Ch. 2, and astrological calendars in Ch. 3. Chapter 6, ‘An Unconventional Timescale: The Immediate Rise of Fortune,’ serves as a conclusion for the book.

While the title alerts us to the theme of divination, this work is really more about the dynamics of Buryat daily life and the psychology of coping in a world fraught with spirits, curses, ebbing fortune, unpredictable luck, ‘vampiric imps’, and so on. While reading this study, one begins to wonder at the energy of these people whose lives are lived on constant high alert, yet they seem to fully engage with life in a generally positive manner. Intriguingly, while the Buryat devote close attention to all aspects of their personal well-being and discover some impinging spirit, curse, or ‘vampiric imp’ almost daily, one never senses a tone of paranoid. This is simply the way of human life, and it can be dealt with successfully with a bit of effort and right knowledge revealed through divination.

Divination techniques, primarily using the familiar 54 card deck, are but means to reveal these usually troubling matters. One of the intriguing topics which the author weaves into her ethnography is the varying perceptions of time reflected in aspects of Buryat belief; hence the reference to ‘The Sliding Scale of Time’ in her title. While Fortune evolves rather slowly and deliberately, luck is much more immediate and ephemeral; therefore, people respond in different ways to the varying durations of those conditions. Swancutt does not discuss the way in which divination can bring forth a corrective review of past events as do many divination systems, as among African peoples, for example. Nevertheless, there is brief comment on how predestination and reincarnation can influence a contemporary condition, but, if I understand correctly, capable of being modified by right living and fortune.

Swancutt makes frequent references to a select number of scholars whose works have greatly influenced her, such as Roy Wagner and Jeanne Favret-Saada, as well as recent scholarship on very different topics, such as ‘chaos theory.’ Her work also reveals a solid familiarity with current research in Mongolia. In the end, I am not totally convinced that ‘chaos theory’ and some of the other theoretical perspectives that Swancutt introduces are necessary to explain Buryat divination as practiced. The author is quite right not to portray divination as only a rigid enforcer of tradition, but I am not sure we need these other paradigms, interesting though they are, to clarify that point. I have always understood divination, with its fundamental review process developed within a divinatory contingent of family and friends with vigorous debate (as Swancutt wonderfully documents for the Buryat), to be a means to provide new perspectives, as yet

unconsidered ways of understanding the present and past in order to permit effective plans of action for the future in an ever-changing world. That Buryat diviners/shamans individually develop innovative and evolving responses to a world of constant curses, ‘vampiric imps’ and unpredictable fortune is to be expected.

Not only does Swancutt’s ethnography reflect the details of the divination sessions and the complex discussions which the divinatory answers and ‘perspectives of shamanic spirits’ reveal, she also presents an extraordinarily complex cosmology consisting of literally hundreds of spiritual entities and locations. Of immense value in this work is Swancutt’s exceptional ethnography. While the cast of characters may occasionally bewilder the reader, one comes to fully appreciate the daily life of a people seemingly far removed from our own lives. Although Geertz is not cited, this work is an exemplary example of his ‘thick description’. The detailed and vivid descriptions of the shamans and family members, augmented by extensive quotations, make this a very rewarding study. In fact, speech, good and bad, the power of words, is so important that Swancutt’s study is in large part an excellent ethnography of speaking. Not only are curses a frequent cause for action, but the dangers of accumulative gossip are also recognized. The repelling of other’s bad speech and the frequently necessary secrecy are of constant concern. Non-verbal behaviour is also closely monitored by Buryat shamans.

In conclusion, there is no question that this exceptionally thorough and sensitive ethnography adds significantly to the comparative literature on divination systems in general and to Mongolian Studies in particular.

PHILIP M. PEEK

NATALIE UNDERBERG and ELAYNE ZORN, *Digital ethnography: anthropology, narrative, and new media*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013, x, 117 pp.

While digital media attract increasing attention in anthropology (see Miller and Horst’s recent volume, *Digital Anthropology*), few writings examine in detail how digital media can offer helpful methodological tools in anthropological research. Underberg and Zorn’s *Digital Ethnography* contributes to this endeavour, with a focus on ‘designing the layout and navigation of new media forms like websites and computer games to embed both cultural context and interpretation into the user experience’ (10). The book contains six short chapters, divided into three sections, each dealing with a different methodological question. Chapters 1-2 explore how digital media can be used in ‘representing culture’; chapters 3-4 explore how digital media can improve anthropological analysis; and, finally, chapters 5-6 explore how digital game-design can enable ‘heritage-based education’ (86).

Chapters 1-2 situate the book in a very broad theoretical legacy, including visual anthropology, literary anthropology and multisensory ethnography. Underberg and Zorn engage with a common question within this legacy: that is, in what way and to what extent can anthropologists represent the cultures they study?

According to the authors, digital media provide yet another means of cultural representation – distinct from ethnographic writing, photography, or film – while improving community participation in anthropological knowledge-making. In this view, digital representations are created in collaboration among anthropologists, computer technicians and community members, as exemplified by several heritage-based website projects presented in the book. One such project, led by Underberg and Zorn, is an interactive website called PeruDigital, whose aim is to ‘present and interpret Peruvian festivals and folklore through the medium of the Internet’ (33). The project, which engaged students, artists and community members in its design, purports to illustrate an innovative, immersive, interactive and ethically responsible way of engaging with ‘Andean culture’, based on archival and ethnographic data.

Chapters 3-4 argue for the increased use of digital media in anthropological analysis. The authors seem fascinated by digital media’s ability to store, search, retrieve and distribute ethnographic data. In particular, Chapter 4 (co-written with Rudy McDaniel) advances a forceful argument in favour of Extensible Markup Language (XML), a meta-data coding tool, which is said to improve the presentation and analysis of ethnographic data in digital form. Three online projects are given as examples, showing how XML can improve the reading of digitized folktales, how it can assist in data searches for digital humanities scholars and even how it can create an accessible database, shared among anthropologists and community members, where one can learn about aspects of Puerto Rican identity in Florida. Chapters 5-6, finally, argue for using online video-games for ‘cultural learning’. The argument, briefly, is that video-games offer an innovative way to represent cultural narratives for whoever wants to learn about them, since they permit (virtual) spatial exploration, thereby creating an embodied, interactive sensation of a given culture.

The book contains a good number of examples (not all well detailed, unfortunately) of existing websites or video-games representing a given community or ‘culture’. And indeed, the reader is encouraged to visit these online locations, whose URL addresses are included in appendix. Given its very short length (only 89 pages of text), however, it is unfortunately plagued with analytical shortcomings, which a slightly larger volume might have addressed. The most obvious shortcoming is contained in the book’s very title. ‘Digital ethnography’ is defined, in the introduction, as ‘a method for representing real-life cultures’ by combining ‘digital media with the elements of story’ (10). There is, throughout the book, a systematic conflation of narrative and digital technologies. Though clearly influenced by a tradition of literary anthropology emerging from Clifford and Marcus’s *Writing Culture* (1986), the conflation remains astonishingly impervious to the difference between writing techniques, associated with textual forms of narrative, and digital technologies, whose ‘immersive’, ‘interactive’ or ‘multivocal’ qualities are far from being inherently related to narrative, as the authors highlight themselves (18-19). In fact, the first step in a book considering the viability of digital ethnography as a way of representing ‘culture’ should have been precisely to question the very possibility of a digital *ethnography*, understood as a ‘writing-about-culture’, since digital means are neither inherently nor obviously related to written, narrative representation.

Furthermore, the idea that ‘through interactivity and immersion (...) digital media can enable anthropologists and folklorists to tell innovative cultural stories (...) for a diverse audience’ (10) seems to conceal a number of underlying assumptions. There is, as indicated earlier, the assumption that digital

technologies are inherently commensurable with narrative; but there is also the idea that the intended audience is inherently more likely to engage with so-called ‘experience-based, affectively interactive, immersive’ digital forms (68). The book is often unclear about the target audience that is envisaged for digital representations: students, community members, researchers, general audiences? This is not to say that the authors ought to have identified specific target audiences in all the examples they give. Rather, the absence of any reflection about audiences witnessing cultural representations leads to a *de facto* deterministic view whereby, apparently, anyone would love to engage with ‘culture’ online instead of opening a book.

A few last words: in this book digital media are systematically elevated on to an ideal plane where collaboration among academics, computer technicians and communities is suddenly made more vibrant – when, as such, digital media do not necessarily, nor especially, favor such collaboration. This is arguably tied to an implicit claim about the anthropologist’s continuing relevance in ‘representing culture’, even after the communities s/he studies have appropriated digital means for self-representation. The anthropologist, no longer an expert in cultural representation, now becomes an expert in assessing ‘the potential and risk of new technology’ (23-24) – which is, at face value, a doubtful statement, one symptomatic of the book’s general inability to address fundamental analytical issues. The book’s usefulness, if any, lies in its list of concrete examples of what might be, of whatever is, ‘digital ethnography’ – a method of representing live communities in digital form, albeit a method not expounded here in sufficient analytical detail.

CHIHAB EL KHACHAB

MICHAEL A. UZENDOSKI and **EDITH FELICIA CALAPUCH-TAPUY**, *The ecology of the spoken word: Amazonian storytelling and shamanism among the Napo Runa*, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

There is an undeniable kinship between mythology and music. Lévi-Strauss recognised this when he dedicated *The raw and the cooked*, the first volume of his gargantuan *Mythologiques*, ‘to music’. His book is itself structured as if it were a musical score, with an overture, sonata, cantata, fugue, and so on. Myth and music, he argued, share the characteristic of both being languages which transcend articulate expression (1970: 15). They are isomorphic in that they operate via a different form of expressiveness, one which is defined by its *untranslatability*. The inherent untranslatability of myth can also be considered a founding principle of *The ecology of the spoken word*, a new contribution to the field of Amazonian ethnography by Michael Uzendoski and Edith Calapuch-Tapuy. The book is an exposition of mythology—or storytelling, as the authors prefer to term it—among the Quichua-speaking Napo Runa people of Amazonian Ecuador. Although rooted in anthropology, the volume will be of interest to scholars from a diversity of disciplines, including linguistics, folkloristics and ethnomusicology. The book’s well-researched ethnographic component is based not just on extensive fieldwork, but also on genuine membership of the culture at hand—Uzendoski, an American linguistic anthropologist, and Calapuch-Tapuy, a native of Napo Runa and expert in

Quichua storytelling, live at least part of the time among the Runa in lowland Ecuador.

The book is first and foremost about storytelling. For the authors, storytelling is a form of communication that radiates out much farther than the purely linguistic: it constitutes a multi-sensory experiential form of aesthetic expression. Storytelling is not just verbal, but rather forms ‘a complex aesthetic and social whole that is constituted through experience, the senses, imagery, music, and implicit social and ecological knowledge, as well as words’ (2). Taking their theoretical cue from ethnopoetics, the authors develop the central concept of *somatic poetry* through which to analyse the aesthetic nature of storytelling. They contend that all forms of Runa expressiveness, exemplified by storytelling, can be considered as somatic poetry. That is, they are forms of poesis that are embodied and that work through the body experientially. This corporeality is multimodal, incorporating ideophones, gestures, bodily kinesthetics, visual imagery, musicality, ecological perceptions, and so on. There is, therefore, a fundamental phenomenological aspect to embodied communication. Upon this premise, the authors proceed to analyse a wide range of Napo Runa mythology and music.

The ecology of the spoken word engages with recent theories concerning ontology emanating from Amazonian ethnography. The authors argue that Napo Runa culture is defined by a perspectival ontology in the vein of Viveiros de Castro’s theory of Amerindian perspectivism (1998). That is, in contrast to the naturalist perspective typical of ‘the West’, the Runa conceptualise the inter-subjective relationships between different kinds of beings very differently. In Amerindian perspectivism, the body is conceptualised not as a Cartesian mind-body unit, but rather as a fluid aggregation of capacities and dispositions constituting the seat of the perspective of the actor. Furthermore, bodies are considered capable of transformation, due to the cross-species universality of a shared soul substance, or perspective (see Descola 1996). This ontologically different conception of the body is critical for understanding the embodied and experiential nature of Amazonian storytelling. For the Napo Runa, it is argued, communication occurs between a wide range of subjectivities in the cosmos, including humans, animals, plants, spirits, and aspects of the landscape. ‘The communicative field, in other words, is much wider and more diverse than just the human domain’ (2). As the authors artfully convey, this realisation has radical implications for a study of inter-subjective communication.

Perhaps the most interesting and innovative aspect of this publication is its companion website, which aims to reflect the multimodal essence of Napo Runa storytelling through digital media. Video, audio and photographic media are presented to accompany the translations of stories in the text. Runa communication, we are told, is not confined to the formal book-based textuality common to ‘the West’, but rather is experiential and somatic in its orientation: textuality is poetically expressed via subjective bodies—human, plant, animal, spirit—as well as being inscribed in aspects of the landscape. In this sense, the multimedia interface provides an aptly multifaceted representation of the phenomenological reality of Runa storytelling. However, the authors acknowledge that this is only partial, since, like Lévi-Strauss, they contend that the full beauty and complexity of somatic poetry is ultimately untranslatable. Nevertheless, the digital media presented on the companion website are incredibly enlightening for the reader, adding a range of new dimensions to the printed book. This, one feels, is the direction that ethnography as a genre should be

moving in.

The real ethnographic value of the book is to be found in the central chapters, the bulk of which are dedicated to translating a myriad of Napo Runa stories. Combined with the resources on the website, the presentation of the myths provides a fascinating window into Napo Runa culture. Chapter 1 develops the key concept of somatic poetry in relation to a selection of examples. These include a medicinal healing rite, a poem about manioc cultivation and a shamanic song. The authors successfully demonstrate how a large proportion of this performative communication is non- or extra-verbal, including the use of gestures and ideophones. In Chapter 2, the authors transcribe a number of stories relating to the great flood, an eschatological event in Napo Runa mythology. We are exposed to storytelling via a number of different mediums, including an illuminating portrayal of the use of the Amazonian violin in Runa music. In Chapter 3, the authors discuss two origin myths about the celestial world and its principle constituents, the sun and moon. These include a fascinating analysis of the myth of *iluku*, the great potoo bird, a central character in Napo Runa cosmology. Here, the reader begins to glimpse how the Runa cosmos is structured and the role that myth has to play in its composition. Chapter 4 constitutes a discussion of the complex relationships between gender, sexuality and shamanism in Runa culture. Here the authors artfully illustrate how Napo Runa women exercise embodied sexualised power over men through shamanic songs and music. ‘Women’s songs’ are shown to be important sources of gendered, sexualised power.

Chapters 5 to 7 deal with a core set of stories in Napo Runa mythology: those relating to the culture heroes, the *Cuillurguna*, or twins. These epic stories centre around the relationships between proto-people and predatory animals, a key trope in Napo Runa relational cosmology. The stories form a sort of centrepiece for the whole book. Using the ‘verse-analysis method’, a linguistic methodology commonly employed in the field of ethnopoetics, the authors perform a detailed technical analysis of the *Cuillurguna* myths. In the penultimate chapter, they introduce the concept of ‘cosmological *communitas*’ in relation to a contemporary form of Quichua music, *Runa Paju*. Like more traditional forms of storytelling, Runa Paju is defined by communality. Loosely borrowing from Victor Turner (1969), the authors describe cosmological *communitas* as an experiential process by which meaning is condensed into the myriad signs and symbols that constitute Napo Runa cosmology.

The ecology of the spoken word also has a political orientation: the preface and conclusion are dedicated to critically opposing the ‘philosophies of life’ of Amazonian peoples and those of ‘the West’. Here, the West is condemned as the destructive enforcer of ‘machine driven naturalism’, whereas Amazonia is portrayed as the arbiter of ecological sensitivity and ‘aesthetic appreciation of the interconnectedness of all things’ (x). The emotional force behind this political dichotomy as presented by Uzendoski and Calapuch-Tapuy is certainly palpable, but their dualistic explication seems far too generalized, serving only to translate two infinitely diverse and complex regions of the world—or more accurately historical ‘cultural structures’—into essentialised caricatures. In beginning the book with a slightly naïve presentation of reified cultural stereotypes, the authors risk alienating readers before they arrive at the volume’s most valuable contribution: the stories themselves.

By and large, the central argument of the book is cohesive and clearly presented. At times, however, the

authors veer towards fetishising key terms such as ‘poetry’ and ‘aesthetics’ through their overuse. Their repetitious attempts to hammer the point home threaten to detract from the internal richness of the mythological material. One may feel that the central propositions could have been communicated more elegantly with a subtler, more nuanced presentation of the central argument. That said, the authors admirably allow the myths to do most of the talking. The uninitiated reader may also mourn the absence of an introductory ethnographic chapter that describes the Napo Runa cultural context holistically before the discussion on storytelling commences. Instead, for this the reader must refer to Uzendoski’s previous ethnography (2005). Furthermore, one may feel that certain theoretical connections could have been more fully realised. For instance, the linguistic nature of the subject matter may have allowed for a deeper engagement with recent work on ecological semiotics in Amazonia. The authors do not address the implicit question of whether there is one single overlapping form of communication, or whether there are many partially discontinuous forms, such as those defined by their use of sign, index and symbol, as highlighted by Eduardo Kohn (2007). The same applies to the potentially fruitful concept of cosmological *communitas*, which could have been more expansively developed with a discussion of Turner’s work on the power of symbols (1969). The authors neglect to describe the complex place of the concept of *communitas* in the history of social anthropology. However, these are minor complaints that should not dissuade potential readers from engaging with this rich and comprehensive text.

On balance, then, the authors must be congratulated for producing a progressive multi-media publication of rare depth that as an academic text goes a long way to mirroring their central argument that storytelling in Amazonia is a living, dynamic form of aesthetic communication. In short, *The ecology of the spoken word* is one of the most successful attempts to communicate the beauty and untranslatability of mythology to emerge from Amazonian ethnography in recent years.

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LEWIS DALY

KNUT S. VIKØR, *The Maghreb since 1800: a short history*. London: Hurst & Company 2012, vi, 163 pp. *The Maghreb since 1800* is a concise historical survey of the Maghreb's diverse political landscape. It is an uncomplicated introductory text for students and general readers seeking a specialist overview of the region, including in the context of the Arab Spring.

The first chapter introduces the important distinction between the notion of the Maghreb and the geographically ambiguous terms of the Middle East and North Africa. The term 'the Middle East' is rooted in British colonial history and its control of the technically North African country of Egypt, whereas French dominance further west became attributed to the term 'North Africa'. In Arabic the terms *mashriq* (east) and *maghrib* (west) establish a further linguistic and historical distinction, the author defining the Maghreb as Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, as well as Mauritania and Western Sahara, as relevant from the post-colonial period.

With such problems of geographical definition and distinction clarified, Vikør re-situates the Arab Spring back to the Maghreb and Tunisia, where it began. The book proceeds to illuminate how the Maghreb's unique historical and socio-political characteristics have shaped the part it has played in the Arab Spring. The first chapter charts the growth of the Muslim Maghreb from the arrival of Islam in the seventh century and the emergence of an Arab identity to the formation of dynastic states followed by Ottoman rule between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the French colonial period, beginning from 1830. Vikør points out that, while it is convenient for historians to summarise the Maghreb as a single unit prior to this date, he considers it important to examine the post-1830 landscape as four separate stories. The remainder of this chapter begins to illuminate the overlapping yet distinct colonial policies and practices of the French in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia and of Italy in Libya (pp. 37-8). This flows into a deeper examination in Chapters 4 and 5 of early national consciousness and armed resistance through the decolonisation and post-colonial periods. Chapter 4 describes Morocco's and Tunisia's gradual transitions from old to new politics, compared to the rise of stronger reform-oriented elements from modernised middle classes in Algeria and Libya that were capable of mobilising armed resistance against colonial patron-client relations, covered in Chapter 5. As Vikør summarises the contrast between the two groups of countries after independence: 'Morocco and Tunisia have enjoyed largely stable, albeit undemocratic, rule, while Algeria and Libya have been through dramatic and extremely violent convolutions' (p. 78). In Chapter 6 the author then examines modernisation and authority in the period of independence for the Moroccan monarchy and the Tunisian monarchic republic respectively, both of which emerged as autocracies marked by draconian authoritarianism. Although the transition to independence for Morocco and Tunisia was marked by the continuity of French-inspired middle and upper classes, Chapter 7 returns to Algeria and Libya to find very different social and political revolutions having to construct new societies that rejected continued colonial patriarchy. Vikør identifies these as Algerian socialism and Islamism, and for Libya, oil wealth and Qadhāfi's Arab nationalism. The final chapter summarises both the different historical paths taken by these four countries and the similarities which nonetheless evolved into two distinct directions in international politics and domestic politics. Tunisia and Morocco, having been generally 'moderate' and close to Western powers, promoted liberal capitalism to a certain extent. Libya and

Algeria were 'radical' regimes with closer ties with the Soviet Union, and they both sponsored Arab socialism with a strong state sector.

As a doctoral researcher of North Africa, Sahara and Sahel, I had hoped this publication would include comparative arguments dealing with the region's involvement in the Arab Spring. However, it is only in the very short first and last chapters that these popular uprisings are briefly brought to the fore. Although Vikør does introduce this book as a translation of *Maghreb: Nordafrika etter 1800* (Oslo 2007, 2011), later expanded to incorporate the Arab Spring, the brevity of the latter promise will leave non-Maghrebi specialists struggling to connect the links between historical and recent events. Nonetheless, Vikør has succinctly drawn attention to the significance of both the Maghreb's own fascinating history as independent of 'the Middle East', and the part that the socio-political landscape of its four discrete countries have played in the Arab Spring.

KONSTANTINA ISIDOROS

RICHARD VOKES (ed.), 2012. *Photography in Africa: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Woodbridge: James Currey.

This is an important contribution to a fast developing field. It contains some excellent individual contributions, but also has a wider significance as a collection. Vokes has brought together topics which are not usually published together, and the volume as a whole benefits from this. In the first section are a set of papers discussing how anthropologists have taken photographs and used photography. Here I particularly liked Chris Wingfield's exploration of the role of photographic documentation in Gluckman's ethnographic records, which led to the publication of the classic *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand* papers (originally published in 1940). Wingfield argues that Gluckman's field photographs helped him develop the analysis after the event, enabling him to re-examine his own documentation so as to make the play of inter-racial groups the focus, rather than leaving it as part of the unexamined wider context.

In Part Two we are presented with some very different explorations of how photography worked under late colonial and post-colonial administrations. Haney considers how little of Ghana's photographic history has entered the national archives. Bajorek considers the pulse of popular photography in Senegal around the time of independence when the photo magazine *Bingo!* was being published in Dakar and circulated throughout West Africa (publishing, among others, requests for correspondents from Cameroonian photographers such as Toussele Jacques, with whom I have worked).

This chapter prompts a small note on production values. Overall the book is well produced and the quality of the reproductions is good, but Bajorek mentions an intriguing form of hand colouring 'vaccinostyl' using hypodermic needles which sadly is illustrated in black and white (Fig. 7.10 on p. 156). If ever we needed a colour plate, this surely was it.

McKeown pioneers a new topic – examining how wildlife parks are marketed, the role of photography and the relationships between state and wildlife service implicit in publicity aimed at international tourists.

Book reviews

The final section explores the social life of photographs, the things that the owners of prints do with them. Among these chapters, Behrend explores changing attitudes to the photography of women at Muslim weddings in East Africa over a forty-year period and shows how the conspicuous display of new clothing has a longer history than photography at these elaborate social events. Vokes's own contribution examines the vernacular uses (often the re-use and re-appropriation of photographs taken for ID cards) such as the swapping of pairs of prints between friends. Corrine Kratz presents a methodologically exemplary exploration of how changes in Okiiek lifestyles can be approached and understood through the changing forms of photographic display.

Overall, Vokes has put together a collection in which the contrasts between the chapters serve to provoke new and different questions which would not arise if they had been left in the definitional silos of more conventional subject headings.

DAVID ZEITLYN