Book review: Kathleen M. Adams. Art as Politics: Re-crafting Identities, Tourism, and Power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia

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Changing Toraja ‘art’iculations of identity

This sophisticated ethnography is the result of two decades of research in the Sa’dan Toraja highlands of the Indonesian island Sulawesi by cultural anthropologist Kathleen Adams. The volume explores “how art is entwined with what some have termed ‘identity politics’” (9). Adams is concerned with images of identity in both the figurative and material sense. The celebrated Toraja people are an excellent choice for this type of study because popular images of their material culture created by traders, travelers, and explorers have been circulating for over a century. Although the spectacular Toraja art can evoke compelling imagery of ethnic and even pan-Pacific islander identity, the author convincingly argues that it is more than a passive ethnic marker. It is better to think of Toraja art forms as “sites for the assertion, articulation, and renegotiation of a variety of identities and relationships” (191).

Adams identifies three enduring themes in contemporary Toraja identity: (1) Toraja traditions, ritual, descent, and rank, which generally center on the ancestral home or _tongkonan_; (2) Christianity, the Toraja being a minority group in the world’s most populous Muslim country; and (3) a growing orientation towards the national (Indonesia) and international world. Throughout the book, she presents a collage of Toraja identities, highlighting some of the ways in which ideas about heritage, religion, _tongkonans_ and place are fraught with politics. Central is the idea of ‘identity negotiation’, which is defined as “the social processes whereby various identities are articulated, asserted, challenged, suppressed, realigned, and co-opted” (25). The chapter on the _tau-taus_, the Toraja effigies of the dead, for example, nicely illustrates how missionization, nationalism, tourism, the international art market, and the Indonesian economic crisis of the late 1990s have, in different ways, transformed Toraja perceptions of their mortuary material culture.

The author uses her rich ethnographic data from Sulawesi to develop “a more vibrant vision of the arts as a particularly fruitful mode for recrafting local identities in times of change” (209). Inspired by Robert Plant Armstrong, she argues that arts and cultural displays, as an “affecting presence” imbued with emotional force, provide a complex arena for articulating, reframing, and challenging unequal ethnic and regional relations. The ability of artistic displays to carry multiple meanings and maintain ambiguity
concerning identity and hierarchies of authority and power lends them the potential to covertly effect changes in inter-group perceptions. Outsider perceptions from tourists, art collectors, members of rival ethnic groups, or government officials have all entered the discourse concerning the relationship of material objects to various dimensions of the Toraja self. The theoretical framework of political scientist James Scott is used to show how a number of Toraja carvings and art objects can be conceptualized as “hidden transcripts”, slyly critiquing established ethnic, colonial, or political hierarchies and operating as “weapons of the weak”.

Adams notes how she gradually came to re-envision ‘the field’ of her research as translocal, and “to develop an interest in the outcroppings of Toraja imagery not only at the local, but also at the regional, national, and transnational levels” (33). In the current context of growing interethnic, interreligious, and economic turmoil, Torajas are indeed struggling to protect their identity and viewpoints beyond the local onto the national and global stages. In these tumultuous times, “material culture can serve as a resource for imagining ways to harmoniously engage with other groups” (210). Creative Torajas have sought new ways to work globalization to their advantage by, among other things, embracing new art forms (e.g. Toraja carved paintings) and using the Internet to assert themselves. “Through global recognition of their arts and culture, Toraja highlanders stand to gain, at the very least, acceptance for their ‘traditional ways’. And at best, they gain expanded options and possibilities for their life trajectories” (167). Global dynamics become clear when we read about how Toraja international travelers, both actual tourists and those who surf the Web, draw inspiration for new tourist art forms from visits to foreign tourist destinations and exotic Web pages; the entrepreneurs among them reinterpret and ‘localize’ these foreign products, crafting indigenized versions of the trinkets they have seen.

One of the central threads throughout the book is an analysis of the ways in which tourism and tourist arts are entwined with cultural identity and with the crafting of new sensibilities about a local community’s place in the world. The Toraja struggle for self-assertion and symbolic superiority has to do not only with a desire for respect and glory, but also with fears that, as tourism becomes jeopardized in an era of uncertainty, so do the livelihoods of those people whose lives are touched by or entwined with tourism. Adams seeks “to advance a more nuanced understanding of the interrelations between tourism and local agency” (210). For example, she analyzes how tourism facilitated the symbolic transformations of the carved _tongkonan_ from an elite symbol into an ethnic icon. In these carvings and other art forms, Torajas draw on touristic imagery (e.g. the invented image of themselves as “heavenly kings”) to enhance their ethnic prestige vis-à-vis their lowland rivals. Of course, the extensive socioeconomic changes in Tana Toraja over the past twenty-five years also helped propel the efflorescence of the _tongkonan_ motifs.

In achieving touristic preeminence, however, Toraja art has become increasingly vulnerable to appropriation and manipulation by other groups. Interesting is the chapter that traces the ways in which reproduced images of Toraja identity have been used by other groups for their own economic enrichment. By exploring a variety of newer arenas
in which Toraja cultural identities and memories are creatively invoked and enshrined, the author illustrates how tensions between local, regional, and national concepts of identity and history are embodied, negotiated, and occasionally exploded. Prompted by touristic interest in Toraja, not only are Chinese, Bugis (celebrated seafarers from South Sulawesi), European, and American entrepreneurs using Toraja imagery for their own aims, but so is the Indonesian government. While Toraja cultural displays play a role in national memory-making projects, Adams shows how local-level displays and ceremonial practices can transform a local geography into a valorized and sacred terrain, and illustrates the rhetorical practices and institutional strategies whereby Torajas attempt to inscribe local heroes onto the national map.

While international tourists, along with print and electronic media, are often “the conduits of artistic/trinket hybridity” (185), also the images anthropologists craft have the potential to communicate and reverberate in perplexing and unanticipated ways. It is not uncommon for intellectual Torajas to cite anthropologists’ writings in order to promote respect for their cultural traditions. Introspectively, the author notes that “our images and the stereotypes surrounding our professional concerns are invariably consumed, digested, reworked, and at times rejected by those whose lives we strive to understand” (20). For contemporary Toraja, not only their culture, but the anthropologists and tourists they attract all serve as political symbols that can be drawn upon to enhance their position vis-à-vis their local adversaries. As this book demonstrates, “no longer can anthropologists and tourists imagine themselves as peripheral to local constructions of identity, community, and power” (211).

Adams’ long familiarity with Sa’dan Toraja culture allows her to depict it as complex and highly diverse. While the book provides us with a comprehensible ‘thick description’ of Toraja social dynamics of the 1980s and 1990s, it remains rather thin on life in the highlands in the new millennium. I visited Tana Toraja (including the hamlet of Ke’te Kesu’ where Adams did most of her field work) in May 2006 and noticed how the collapse of the tourism industry after the Bali bombings, the increased interreligious tensions in Sulawesi, the new democratic Indonesian government, and increased global dependencies are all changing Toraja in ways that make some of the portrayals in the book almost unrecognizable. Despite this shortcoming, the long-term ethnographic perspective makes this insightful work an excellent read for those interested in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, ethnic relations, art, and Asian studies.