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Art as Politics: re-crafting identities, tourism, and power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia by Kathleen M. Adams

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Art as Politics: re-crafting identities, tourism, and power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia.

Kathleen M. Adams. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. 286 pp.

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Adding to the increasingly rich ethnographic literature on art-making, tourism, and identity politics in Indonesia, Kathleen Adams examines these processes among the Sa'dan Torajans in highland Sulawesi. Centering her analysis on the spectacular carved *tongkonan* (elite ancestral homes) and *tau-tau* (wooden funerary effigies) Adams theorizes these objects as sites of cultural, political, and economic struggles to define Torajan "identity" and "ethnicity."

Lengthy fieldwork stays and six repeat visits from 1984 to 1998 afford Adams an expansive perspective on self-making and place-making. For the Torajans, "identity" emerges in multiple dimensions: as individual subjectivity, as reflexive responses to tourists and anthropologists, as rank within a hierarchy of nobles and non-nobles, in the regional politics of position between the highland Torajans and the neighboring Bugis and Makassarese, and as place within the nation-state. Looking at changes in the production and interpretations of *tongkonan* and *tau-tau*, Adams documents the ongoing negotiation of the relationship of *aluk to dolo* ("the way of the ancestors") to Christian practices and imagery, as the Church becomes known as the "big *tongkonan*." The Indonesian government reproduces *tongkonan* imagery on currency and stamps, aestheticizing local culture to serve a national imaginary. Widening Muslim/Christian violence in the region engenders the carving of new imagery that projects a Torajan ethical perspective, encouraging peace over violence. Finally, the increasingly available Internet stimulates the circulation of images and ideas that create a virtual Toraja. The reader accompanies Adams as she visits friends, carvers, informants, and church and government officials to see how Torajans themselves conceptualize their place in these various social worlds.

Adams' methodology in pursuing these issues foregrounds the agency of social actors and of objects themselves. She borrows Robert Plant Armstrong's attribution of "affecting presences" to art objects, to account for their emotive force operating on both maker and viewer. While she attends to the changes in the formal properties of Torajan carvings over time, she concerns herself more with the role of such objects in motivating social action. For the nobles who own them, spectacularly carved *tongkonan* (ancestral home) and rice barns project both kin membership and spiritual identity onto the landscape, but non-noble tour guides offer alternative readings, instead emphasizing fertility or a generalized eco-consciousness—evidence that *tongkonan* possess a "polysemic" quality that generates different interpretations by differently-positioned social actors and a kind of resistance. Narration in the carvings on the *tongkonan* record shifts in the political and social landscape of Toraja – from references to Dutch colonialism to the inclusion of specifically Christian imagery to contemporary politics via symbols of Indonesian political parties. Similarly the *tau-tau* funerary effigies animate debates about their embodying the "pagan" past of Torajans. Carvers make them more realistic stylistically and less spiritually potent, thus more acceptable to Christians, more collectable and commoditized within the global tourist arts market. This theoretical orientation towards the agency of objects and their participation in a nexus of social relations parallels recent theorizing in the anthropology of art, most notably regarding art and agency developed by Alfred Gell (1998).

Adams documents the reflexivity stimulated by a tourism boom in the 1980s and 1990s, but also her own presence in a long history of Torajan encounters with anthropologists. We see Torajans strategizing to promote their interests via the positions that various outsiders hold, as when Adams' host family assigns her to the Funeral Documentation Committee and the VIP Guest Reception Committee at the funeral of the family patriarch. Adams becomes a mediator and explicator of Toraja funerary custom to powerful guests, as one who could actively and authoritatively challenge any popularly-held views that Torajan funerals were wasteful and pagan in nature. The clarity and color of Adams' writing conveys a you-are-there quality; the reader sits next to her, drinking coffee, learning the latest news of family, major happenings since she last visited, and carefully-crafted interpretations of customs and beliefs. She relegates her meticulous ethnographic explication and theoretical references to footnotes, keeping the narrative lively. This experience-near writing strategy renders the fieldwork process seemingly transparent, offering up the challenges and deep pleasures of "doing" anthropology in a local place with multiple strands of translocal connections. Scholars and students at all levels will find Adams' work engaging, a major contribution to our understanding of Southeast Asia, the anthropology of art, ethnicity and identity, tourism, and the politics of place in the contemporary world.

References

- Armstrong, Robert Plant. 1971. *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.