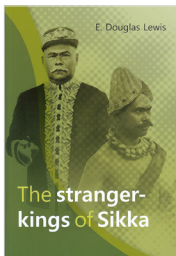


Indonesia



E. Douglas Lewis. *The stranger-kings of Sikka*

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THIS STORY concerning manuscripts from Flores, Indonesia, brings out some of the fundamental aspects of anthropological research, containing key ingredients of serendipity, hard work, and slowly accumulating the trust of local research collaborators (otherwise referred to as informants). E. Douglas Lewis tells us how he came into contact with the texts, beginning with rumors he heard in 1977 about manuscripts written by two men, Dominicus Dionitius Pareira Kondi and Alexius BoEr, which contained, among other things, recordings of ritual language, about which Lewis was interested. His attempts to trace these texts came to no

avail, and he considered them “lost” until he came across them in 1994 under circumstances that would have been rejected for being too contrived if they appeared in a work of ethnographic fiction. Late in the night, just hours before Lewis was set to depart from a stint of fieldwork, the son of Lewis’s collaborator on an Indonesian-Sikkanese dictionary, summoned Lewis to his house where he was shown a cupboard full of old documents. These were the “lost” manuscripts.

These texts—of which there are over a hundred in number, including two long works—turned out to be recordings of the myth, history, and culture of Sikkanese society in the period of the last half century of the Rajadom of Sikka, ending in the 1950s. According to those to whom Lewis spoke, Kondi and BoEr’s history of Sikka, a region of Flores, was written at the behest of the Raja Don Thomas Ximenes da Silva, although Lewis notes other evidence that suggests it may have been written in view of directions given by a Dutch controleur who was based in the town of Maumere (in Sikka) between 1932 and 1935. In any case, what are left are artifacts of immense cultural value and scholarly interest.

Fortunately, Lewis was able to return to Maumere (and the cupboard) in order to duplicate the texts, first in 1997 with a photocopier, and later with an electronic color scanner in 2001. In that latter venture, I was the research assistant responsible for doing the scanning in between bouts of fever. Lewis’s resultant book is a careful translation of Kondi and BoEr’s manuscripts, which constitute Part 2 of the *The stranger-kings of Sikka*, situated by Part 1, which is a necessary historical and ethnographic contextualization, informed by Lewis’s three decades of research on Flores.

Lewis divides the periods described by the texts into three, dealing first with a description of the “newcomers,” that is, the strangers who came to Flores and later became kings (hence the book’s title). Then follows the second period of “the middle rajas,” and finally the third period, which deals with the “rajadom in the early twentieth century.” The translated text of Kondi and BoEr is clear and engaging, although as those who have had to translate well know, the exercise of translation is far from straightforward, and Lewis describes how he and Oscar Mandalangi (Lewis’s collaborator in this research and with whose father Lewis collaborated in the above-mentioned dictionary) were able to derive literal and interpretive meanings from text, thus giving the reader useful insights into the translation process.

In addition to situating and translating BoEr and Kondi’s text, Lewis draws from them several substantial questions. Important among these are questions surrounding the mechanisms by which newcomers or strangers were able to become rulers. In the preface, Lewis asks “how, and by appeal to what right or principle, could strangers establish and legitimate, by a myth of foreign origin, a sovereignty never claimed by the autochthonous peoples of Sikka themselves, over whom the strangers came to rule?” (xxi). Similarly engaging is Lewis’s observation that the texts mark a time when the society in question was transitioning from orality to literacy. Perhaps part of the motivation of Kondi and BoEr was that, in addition to perhaps being directed to write by the raja, they were concerned about traditions at risk owing to social changes they were observing, including the arrival of literacy, and they “understood that literacy would itself be a factor contributing to those traditions’ demise” (xx).

Lewis's considered observations with respect to the former question are difficult to summarize, except to say that xenarchy (a word Lewis coins to refer to rule by strangers or outsiders) and the myths of stranger-kings resonate with deeply encoded aspects of the region's cosmology. With respect to the latter concerns about transitions from orality to literacy, among Lewis's observations are that literary conventions that separate myth from history are not clearly distinguished in Kondi and BoEr's writings, perhaps because such distinctions were not present in what texts they might have encountered previously. Their own writing describes founding myths and contemporary events, and they bring "both orders into a single framework, a literary text" (384).

In my view, Lewis succeeds in allowing us to appreciate both the value and the content of the texts, and to realize the happenstances that lead to such important doors—both metaphorical and those of the cupboard—being opened or remaining undiscovered. This is, I am sure, like too many other valuable manuscripts, the significance of which are not always initially appreciated by everyone. In the case of the Sikkinese texts, they were partly destroyed when some of Kondi's work was used to wrap peanuts by relatives unwitting of the paper's value.

While adjusting for any bias that I may have about this book owing to my (very limited) involvement in the research that enabled it, it strikes me that *The stranger-kings of Sikka* is a text essential for anyone seeking a better understanding of the region of Sikka, and may also serve as a model for the ethnographically-informed discussion and contextualization of artifacts.

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