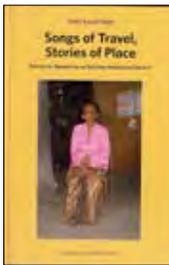


## Indonesia

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**Timo Kaartinen, *Songs of Travel, Stories of Place: Poetics of Absence in an Eastern Indonesian Society***

Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2010. 207 pages. Paper, €25.00. ISBN 978-951-41-1052-8.

THIS BOOK examines the songs and narratives of a little-known diasporic society: the descendents of the Bandanese, most of whom now live in the Kei Islands in Maluku, the famous “spice islands” archipelago which covers much of the vast seascape of Eastern Indonesia. After an introductory chapter outlining the book’s structure and key arguments, an excellent historical chapter (Chapter 2) outlines the history of the Bandanese. The Banda islands were famous for their production of nutmeg, but they were conquered in 1621 by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) who massacred and displaced the vast majority of the local population. Some of the surviving Bandanese based themselves in other islands, such as Great Kei Island in the Kei archipelago, which was chosen because of its mountains. This reminded the exiles of the three mountains in the Banda Islands, and certain place names which were the same. Songs sung by their descendents contain many references to the similar topography of Banda and Kei. To this day, throughout Maluku the Kei-based Bandanese are universally recognised as descendents of the original Bandanese.

One welcome aspect of the historical chapter is Kaartinen’s willingness to provide not only an overview of the colonial and pre-colonial context of the Kei-based Bandanese, but also a discussion of the unique historical period in which the author’s fieldwork research was conducted, in the mid-1990s. Given the late New Order context, it is easy to agree with Kaartinen’s observation that, like many ethnographies conducted in this period, “it was hard to avoid looking at any concern with local, cultural life either as a response to the reifying machinations of the state or a sign of feeble resistance to them” (53). It would have been tempting, like so many other studies focusing on Java and Bali, for instance, to view culture not

as an aesthetic sphere but rather as a site of sociopolitical contestation, either as an expression of the New Order's totalizing affirmation of cultural heritage on the one hand, or as a gesture of local cultural resistance on the other. In contrast, it appears that the Bandanese of the Kei Islands (and other societies of Maluku) did not respond to the New Order's drive towards national modernity through the twin prism of subjection or resistance but rather by embracing "entanglement," defined as "a confounding of the us/them-divisions and cultural boundaries" (53).

In reality, however, *Songs of Travel, Stories of Place* is much more about the "us" (that is, the five thousand diasporic speakers of Bandanese, an ethnic and linguistic minority) than the "them." Thus we hear little of the broader machinations of the New Order bureaucrats and even less of the much larger community of indigenous inhabitants of the Kei Islands, speakers of Keiese, who number over one hundred thousand (66). Similarly, we learn little about the postcolonial inhabitants of contemporary Banda, most of them settlers from elsewhere in Maluku and the wider Indonesian archipelago. These are minor disappointments, however, and perhaps unimportant given the deliberately localized focus of the book. Instead, the richness of the culturally distinct Bandanese oral traditions are explained, explored, and analyzed in depth, back-dropped by the larger-scale political and economic systems.

Chapters are devoted to various genres of songs sung by the exiles of Banda, who in a demonstration of collective mobility, are spread out in a new urban diaspora spreading across Maluku. This historical liminality of the Bandanese, of course, is a key aspect of their ancestral songs and narratives, which in a sense can be regarded as a cultural strategy to "turn the tables" on their marginality. This ancestral tradition, at times, is treated as a truth-revealing "message" relayed across a vast maritime world; at other times it is performed as a means of sustaining an ongoing communication between the presently living audience and their Bandanese ancestors, as well as distant travelers and presently interacting parties, "extending the awareness of social existence far beyond the here-and-now of actual performance" (112). This idiom, then, recognizes the past as a heritage, "a sequence of events which can be repeated in new forms" (21).

More commonly, the sung narratives are used as a means of reflecting on one of the most fundamental aspects of the Bandanese diaspora's symbolic marginality—long-distance travel, especially maritime travel. In the folk poetry Kaartinen discusses, sea travel is the core expression of ancestral heroics and collective agency. But this poetry also highlights the fact that travel abroad is also a confusing, alienating experience for the travelers. Yet these songs are also utilized as a means of those left behind historicizing what is going on in their lives. This may include remembering an absent or "missing" family member who might have travelled elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago for work purposes, or lamenting the death of a grandchild. Just as with an old photograph, "songs of travel commemorate persons in foreign surroundings and unfamiliar times" (78).

Kaartinen's book is particularly impressive in the way that it ranges from discussing the pragmatic details of a particular poetry performance (such as who was there, whose house it was performed in, and why) to analyzing the poetics of the

songs themselves. Characteristics common to many of the oral literary traditions of the Indonesian archipelago are detailed, including parallelism, entextualization, repetition, and a combination of languages (including, in this case, Bandanese, Keiese, and Malay). Misspellings and other typographic errors were a distraction, on occasion, but perhaps this can be forgiven given the large number of non-English terms and phrases peppered throughout each page of the book. All in all, this is an excellent study of a little known form of cultural expression in one of the most marginal archipelagic regions of Indonesia, a region which was once, paradoxically, at the very center of the global “spice trade.”

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