

Book Review

Folwer, Cynthia. 2013. *Ignition stories: indigenous fire ecology in the Indo-Australian monsoon zone*. Durham, USA: Carolina Academic Press. 302pp. ISBN 978-1-61163-115-9; paper US\$38.00.

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Fire is enigmatic and ambiguous, yet fire is here and hot. It comes from a cigarette lighter or a hot coal or a lightning bolt seen as a thinking, moralizing ancestor. It burns under a kitchen pot, in a pile of garden slash, across an orchard, into the savannah. Fire is both commonplace and extraordinary, but it is never far from human emotions, relationships, and experiences.

In this ethnography, Cynthia Fowler tells a number of 'ignition stories', thick descriptions of actual and mythical fire events she witnessed or was told about while living with the Kodi of Sumba, Indonesia. They are interspersed with ethnographic observations about rituals, descriptions of social relations, analyses of land tenure, and assessments of ecological and historical sources. Her phenomenological approach is deeply felt and sensitive to the lives and meanings of her informants and friends, with special attention to women, children, and elders.

Ignition Stories is unique in the field of fire studies: a pyrocentric ethnography. The richness and nuance of meanings of fire in the lives of a community have never before, I believe, been described like this. Yet anyone living or working in rural communities engaging with fire will recognize the kinds of stories, myths, conflicts, and daily fire practices described so empathetically by Dr. Fowler. This is certainly the case for my own work in Madagascar; in fact, it leaves me wondering how much I missed.

Dr. Fowler patiently explains each story, adding context, reminding the reader who is related to whom. She tells great stories, with deep empathy for her informants' point of view of both the ordinary and extraordinary events in their lives. Her narrative style is chatty, discursive, and colorful. Yet the book also frustrates. It bounces from topic to topic like a conversation, dabbling between stories and bits of anthropology, mythology, biology, paleoecology, not always to great effect. It is not always clear what holds particular chapters together. For a reader with more literal tendencies, these topical transgressions tire.

Dr. Fowler excels at descriptions, tempts the reader with nuggets of wisdom, yet does not develop them further. The book abounds with short sentences given to clear, simple, potentially profound, but often baffling summations. They straddle the line between cutting-edge theoretical insights and strained academic literary devices, one is not quite sure which. For instance: "trading fire is analogous to trading women" (59), or "if mapping is defined as experiences people have while moving through space, then fire has a human-like experience when people carry fire people transfer social qualities to fire and fire transfers its qualities to people when they move around landscapes together" (91), or "indigenous fire ecologies are magical because they facilitate the ethnographer's magic" (178).

The first chapter opens with introductory tastes of a "fusion of disciplines" around "the sociality of fire", introducing Kodi society and environment and dipping into descriptions of kinship, cosmology, community. Fowler finishes the chapter by asking a series of questions that best illustrate the strengths of the book – the kinds of questions that have not been asked before this study: "This ethnography interprets human experiences with fire. How do people feel when they handle fire? What is the psychology of fire? What emotions are associated with fire? What are the dynamics of interpersonal relationships among people who are together when fires burn? What aesthetic preferences guide the application of fire to landscapes?" (19).

This is followed by two chapters on fire history. Chapter 2 recounts a more traditional summary of palaeoecological, archaeological, and colonial archival data about fire in the Sunda Islands, followed by descriptions of more recent conservation assessments. It then compares different non-local opinions about fire, comparing with situations in Australia and North America. Chapter 3, in contrast, reflects on several mythical and personal fire history stories from an emic Kodi standpoint: "When Kodi look back into deep mythical time and back in their own more recent biographies, the history of fire is a chronicle of individuals composing interpersonal and spiritual relationships" (43).

From a political ecology perspective, Chapters 4, 12, and 13 are probably the most relevant and familiar, though at times unsatisfying. The first of these chapters, titled "Fire mapping" is – at one level – about the anthropologic description of settlement patterns, movements between coastal and inland settlements, and tenure arrangements, or the ways in which trees and fire play a role in asserting or contesting property relationships. One another level it tells fascinating life stories, such as that of Romboh Rangga, a woman who "handles fire as a matter of routine" (82), but her detailed family situation that we learn about seem only vaguely related to her burning of organic wastes in her garden, and these details require a stretch

to link to the heuristic theme of the chapter on "mapping and wayfinding". Fowler draws on the work of Tim Ingold in theoretically defining 'mapping' as the "engagement of the mobile actor-perceiver with his or her environment" (71), but what sounds so profound turns out just to be different walks to gardens due to different residence locations.

Chapter 5, "Pyrospheres" argues that fire is linked to social relationships, both good and bad. Fire is an intimate moment shared between families or work parties, but also lends physical character and meaning to jealousy and conflict, within families or in the broader community. Fire experientially accompanies the social lives of the Kodi, both as a matter of routine and as an exceptional event. The chapter contains a lovely story of an 11 year-old girl lighting a garden fire with her little brothers, as well as descriptions of cooperative labor groups, fire in a mahogany forest, and a rat hunting party. Yet at times the analysis is stretched, for instance in juxtaposing kinship and marriage stories as "intersubjective fire sociality" or "relational ecologies" (107). The following bit, Chapter 6, lumps together material on the spiritual dimensions of fire, on how it is seen as having human, natural and supernatural causalities: "In the Kodi worldview, lightning bolts are like people and like the ancestors: lightning thinks, has emotions, morals, ethics and rules" (129).

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 investigate the ecological effects and management of fire. The first of these chapters, "Mosaics", includes a poorly structured description of different fire regimes and disturbance ecologies on the island. Aside from some plant lists and descriptions of forest types, there is little 'data', and there are lengthy diversions to a comparison with northern Australia and to a poorly relevant case study of *Schleichera*, a pyrophytic savanna tree. The next chapter, "Effects of fire", contrasts a successful field clearing burn with an unsuccessful one that burnt down a cashew orchard. After a tangential description of the cashew development project, it makes the good observation – based on the contrasting fires – that each fire is different, that one cannot apply the same plan to all. Fowler also uses the cashew case study to comment on inappropriate development (why introduce the fire-sensitive cashew into this landscape?) and the need for mental health services to cope with loss (as in the case of the loss of the cashew orchard). The third chapter in this series, "Fire sticks", includes a fun story of children at a waterhole and their multipurpose fire, followed by a more detailed investigation of field clearance fire and its relationship to woody and grassy plants. It is unclear what holds the chapter together.

Chapter 10 describes – in an ethnographic vein, and with comparison to the Malinowski's work in the Trobriand Islands – the taboos, ritual, magic, rites of the Kodi. While writing of the "metaphorics of fire in a volatile political landscape" (178) the material in this chapter has only a tenuous link to fire. The next chapter describes everyday opportunistic burning, the casual fires lit when walking the landscape. It also tells of the ritual repairs necessary when fires escape control and cause destructive damage (to crops, to houses). Under the theme of 'rituals', it also describes a story at a sacred rock pool.

Chapters 12 and 13, as noted above, are more relevant again to political ecology. The first of these two, "Fire's tensions", is both a call for an environmental justice interpretation of fire, as well as an interpretation of Kodi fires in terms of the big political transitions and changes in Indonesia. It is a post-colonial interpretation of fire politics, linking the fire politics in Kodi to the 1997-1998 smoke event and the 1998 fall of Suharto. The centralized, distant banning of fires is shown to cause stress, self-doubt, and subjugation. Fowler also tells stories of the use of fire in traditional justice (through a mythical telling) and in avenging harm in contemporary justice. The second of these two chapters, "Governance of forests and fires", starts off about Indonesia's decentralization since 1998, then tells four stories about encounters with field and forest burners (some illegal). It also weaves in a description of major religious changes on the island (conversions to Christianity) then returns to the theme of decentralization and proposals for REDD programs. The chapter argues for the importance of context, and for the recognition of the social justice of people's use of fire in their livelihoods. But messily, roundabout, shoddily so.

The final chapter, "Kindling", tries to tie the book together with generalizations about fire and meanings, experiences, symbols, biophysical change, landscapes, policies, organizations. It restates the book's main critique of how centralized, rigid, top-down fire policies take the complex social and ecological phenomenon of fire out of context, and then fizzles to an end.

In writing this review, I am conscious of at times taking a more realist or literal approach to this study, as opposed to absorbing the phenomenological or emic perspective at which Fowler excels. Yet when her narrative turns to the specifics of fire ecology, of the local socio-economic system, or of fire policy, then I become disappointed at the lack of 'data' – maps, strict categories, numbers, or a sharper (more traditional) organization to the narrative. I was disappointed to read the whole book and not discover a single map – where in the large Indonesian archipelago is this island anyway? What is its geography, beyond being "shaped like a horse's head" (8) and having a coastal zone and interior hills?

In sum, this is a challenging book and a welcome addition to the literature. It is groundbreaking in some ways, and maddeningly frustrating in others. The title is a bit grand in its geographic pretensions

(Indo-Australian monsoon zone) for a book centered on one island with occasional literature-based glimpses of northern Australia. But as a compilation of fire stories, from myths to daily chores to meaningful moments, the book is on fire.

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