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# THE MATERIALITY AND LOCALITY OF EVERYDAY LIVES

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**Janet Hoskins. *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*. New York and London: Routledge, 1998. x + 213 pp.**

Successive visions of the Indonesian nation, the scale of its post-colonial state, the adventures of globalism, the press of history and—now more than ever—the incitements of the immediate, have troubled the claims that “the local” once had for anthropologists. Take, as a glaring instance, the island of Sumba. Although geographically situated at the very midway point of the Indonesian archipelago, half-way between Bali and Timor, it has remained at the edges in almost every other respect. Overlooked by Hinduism and Islam, only dubiously included in Majapahit, quietly tucked into the Dutch colony as a geo-strategic afterthought just thirty years before the empire’s demise, offering few products to attract commercial exploitation aside (once) from slaves, an anachronistic enclave of rajas and the “*belum beragama*” (those who do not yet have religion), it is now increasingly Christian, and many Sumbanese look back wistfully to the years when they were ruled by the Dutch, whom they now value as co-religionists. As anthropology increasingly eschews its nostalgia for the untouched and the original, what is it to do with the rural backcountry that was supposed to be their special locus? Amidst all those Indonesian places that aren’t “where the action’s at,” Sumba is merely an extreme instance, a land of subsistence agriculturalists, few of whom have, until recently, been tempted to seek schools, employment, or adventure elsewhere. Dutch administrators in the 1930s complacently reported a lack of interest in political movements (“religious” disturbances were another matter). I found in the 1980s that even after forty years of encouragement, few people had managed to come up with stories about the great days of revolution and independence. Their memories were far more concerned with the peculiar habits of missionaries (one of whom was a devotee of the Fletcher Method of chewing food,

giving rise to amused ethnographic generalities about the West) and the Japanese occupation. Only the latter, it would seem, discerned Sumba's latent centrality on the historical stage, for it was from this island that they planned to launch their invasion of Australia. I was told that the planes and tanks remain in hidden caves, awaiting the return of their masters. Sumba remained relatively quiet during the massacres of 1965-66. Even the tremors from Soeharto's fall were felt there largely in the apparently familiar form of feuds fought with spears and arson. In short, most of what one encounters in Sumba appears to run counter to the master narratives of both Indonesian nationalism and, it would seem, Indonesian studies.

How, then, is one to write of Sumba (or Nias, or Seram, or Halmahera, or central Sulawesi, or Alor, or west Timor) in the context of "Indonesia"? There was a time when the ethnographer might treat places like Sumba as outliers of the Pacific or traces of a presumptive proto-Austronesian world. From that long perspective, "Indonesia" is a colonial invention, probably ephemeral, and certainly misleading. Today, as anthropology anxiously discovers itself in a world of migrants, mass media, and changeable, often violent, nation-states, the presence of "Indonesia" is unavoidably real. What has fallen into doubt is the meaning of the "local" and the value of ethnographic detail. In this light, it has become common, under the rubric of "marginality," to justify and define certain kinds of fieldwork with reference to the conventionally recognized centers of power.

Certainly "marginality" captures something crucial to both local experiences and the outsider's more distant gaze. Under the New Order's "development president" many Sumbanese expressed the feeling that "we are not yet developed" or spoke of their exclusion from the sources of wealth and power, sometimes in the traditional narrative logic of orphanhood. But the visitor to Sumba late in this century is also likely to encounter people of exuberant self-confidence, not easily persuaded of their own lack of importance. Some are absorbed in the arduous maneuvers of exchange, alliance, and wealth, others in the vicissitudes of love, health, family, fortune and misfortune. If they, like everyone else, are subject to global forces beyond their control, most still act as if, following the American politician Tip O'Neill, all politics were local. In this they may not be so unusual.

To be sure, if we have learned anything from post-colonial critique, it is suspicion of the historical and geographical parochialism encouraged by the confinements of fieldwork. But whose frame are we accepting when we reject "the native point of view"? Those Sumbanese with an elite education and cosmopolitan outlook, for instance, may prefer to situate themselves with reference to a something far *greater* than the nation, such as the global Christian church. From that perspective, "history" can take on a far different look than it does to either the state or most of its critics, and Sumba may turn out to be no more "marginal" than anywhere else. Misrecognition, perhaps, but whose notions of history should we privilege? Have the New Order, Old Order, and even New World Order been so thoroughly successful in imposing a single set of terms on possible accounts of things? To treat places like Sumba as merely not-yet Indonesia, as incomplete or as the negative space left when Indonesia is removed—or to even define them as nodes of resistance to Indonesia—is to reinforce both the teleology favored by state and multi-national narratives and the anthropological

nostalgia for remnants and relics. It is, moreover, to assume it is already established what Indonesia could be.

And yet, "it is still the case that no one lives in the world [or, one might add, even Indonesia] in general. Everybody, even the exiled, the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it."<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it is also the case that these stretches do not necessarily provide their inhabitants with *locality* if that is, in Appadurai's words, "an inherently fragile social achievement."<sup>2</sup> But here's a hint of paradox, since anthropology has tended to define "the social," in part, with reference to locality; think of how many familiar ethnonyms (the Balinese, Javanese, Acehnese) are in fact toponyms (including the so-called "Kodi" of the book under review here). If locality is not given, of what is it constructed? Amidst the apparent givens of place, one might consider that it is not immaterial that this stretch of the world is constituted of material things, and it is to things that the book under review looks to make sense of local lives.

Janet Hoskins has been studying the district of Kodi, at the western tip of Sumba, for some twenty years.<sup>3</sup> A committed fieldworker with a vast knowledge of this place, she has produced an impressive string of publications that, taken together, form a detailed account of Kodi in the best tradition of the classic ethnographies.<sup>4</sup> Her most recent book, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*, goes back over some of her earlier materials with new questions. If her earlier work tended to portray the normative core of Kodinese culture, emphasizing ceremonial events and male speakers, this book turns to everyday lives and particular persons of both sexes. If her earlier work reflected little on the position of the ethnographic observer, now she locates herself as both instigator of and protagonist within Kodinese narratives. All ethnography is part autobiography, she writes, because "there was a time when the fieldworker shared time and space with the people who spoke to her, and she shared in their lives" (p. 5); more than most fieldworkers, Hoskins has shared a long stretch of those lives. In this book she takes stock of herself and her ties to the individuals who were most important to her research over many years. But lives are not simply waiting to announce themselves, and Hoskins seeks a specifically Kodi way of organizing experience. She contends (and my conversations elsewhere in Sumba concur with this) that these men and women, the former of whom, at least, she portrays as flamboyant

<sup>1</sup>. Clifford Geertz, Afterword. In *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), p. 262.

<sup>2</sup> Arjun Appadurai, The Production of Locality. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> The Sumbanese languages are all closely related, but as in much of eastern Indonesia, they differ in detail almost from village to village. In attempting to organize this complexity, the Dutch divided Sumba into some dozen *landschappen*, usually called "domains" in English-language writings, which in turn underlie the present system of *kecamatan*. These domains were supposed to reflect traditional territories distinguished by language and custom, although there is little evidence that so bounded and solidary a sense of collective identity pre-existed the Dutch. "The Kodi," of whom Hoskins writes could as well be denoted "Kodinese" or "people of Kodi."

<sup>4</sup> Much of this work is brought together in another volume, *The Play of Time: Kodi Perspectives on Calendars, History, and Exchange* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

individualists, are nonetheless not in the habit of talking about their lives. Moreover, they are likely to take direct questioning as either rude or simply ignorant: if you've got to ask, you'll never know.

If people in Sumba do not talk about themselves in ways we might recognize, Hoskins observes, they certainly do talk about material possessions. Kodinese (and more generally, Sumbanese) life at its most public and competitive centers on material objects, which are closely tied to social identities in a variety of ways. Marriages are made and children legitimated with the exchange of cattle, cloth, and other goods. As in many parts of the world, this apparent conflation of people with property has been a scandal to conservative missionaries and liberal humanists alike. Death, peace-making, house-building instigate massive flows of goods between allies and kin. Spirits are embodied in small valuables hidden in the innermost recesses of the house. In the areas of Sumba I know best, certain villages hold "lightning stones," polished stone implements whose numbers are said to fluctuate according the population of the clan. Men may name themselves after their horses (whom they themselves, of course, have named), and dandies of both sexes strive for distinctive ways of dressing. Families boast of singular house ornaments or possessions; in one of my first encounters with Sumbanese braggadocio, as my host invited me to chew betel, he insisted that I acknowledge that no other household but his owned a lime-container with a lid carved in the shape of a human head.

Much of the interest of this book lies in its turn to the less public parts of life. In what she calls "biographical objects" Hoskins claims to have found the distinctively Kodinese way of narrating experience. Biographical objects are personal possessions that serve as metaphors around which tellers organize their stories about the self. They may even be considered surrogates for the self. Against the post-modern privileging of fragmented selves, the author asserts that objects in Kodinese narratives provide closure and completeness. Objects are biographical, she says, because they help organize personal identity, giving it some of their unity and coherence.

The six central chapters of the book are organized around the lives of three men and three women. Each chapter is keyed to an object: the betel bag of an elder guardian of ritual knowledge, the domestic animals that appear in traditional tales told by the elder's wives, cloth woven in a python pattern associated with the origin myth of a former ruler, a spindle that figures in a story told by a young woman, a ritual singer's drum, and the image of a broken bottle in a keening song for a dead girl. The author reflects on these individuals by turn, and on their relationships with her.

How, then, do objects speak of lives? For the most part, Hoskins reads these objects through the interpretive conventions provided by everyday stereotypes, ritual practices, visual iconography, and verbal metaphors. These approaches can be exemplified by the betel bag discussed in chapter two, which she characterizes as being for some individuals a "sack for souls and stories," for others an icon of neglect and sexual frustration. As everyday stereotype, it is considered a markedly personal possession, which each adult man and woman ought always to have on hand, at least in public. Thus, by virtue of this association with the individual and the body, these bags are apt tokens of the person in certain rituals, such as those which summon back the soul of the victim of a bad death. According to the author's iconographic analysis, betel bags refer both to the house and the gendered complementarity that characterizes

Kodi's larger ritual order. Finally, the bags appear in the conventional metaphors of ritual speech, as when a son expresses his obedience with the couplet "Let me be the betel pouch tucked in the armpit/and the chicken's nest carried about" (p. 48).

Not all these analytic strategies are equally at play in each case. Chapter three focuses on words to argue that women project their feelings of neglect and abuse onto animals, to express their most compelling concerns, which are the problems of polygyny, their relegation to the domain of domestic animals, and exclusion from sacrifice. According to Hoskins, this can be seen by the way buffalo, cats, and hens figure in the folktales and songs women gave her. By this interpretation, the characters are metaphorical expressions of women's identification with animals as objects of the exchanges mastered by men.

Objects, then, are linked to the cultural construction of *personhood* in Mauss's sense of *personae*. But how are these objects specifically *biographical*? In one sense, simply by virtue of the ways in which lives in Kodi tend to take their course much as lives usually do, in the absence of catastrophe, along familiar paths, making use of publically available materials. The betel bag figures in a ritual practitioner's life because as a man he carries one and as a ritualist, he uses and speaks of them in rites. But Hoskins wants to go beyond cultural convention to show the personal significance of possessions (p. 135), which turns out to be more difficult. She tells us that this particular ritual practitioner's bag is undecorated, which she takes to be a rebuke to critics who claim he over-reached himself. Likewise, her singer's drum, which in iconographic terms serves as his female counterpart, allows him to vaunt his masculinity; and a certain young woman sends a man a spindle as a token of broken love and lost self-determination. And yet in few instances do we see objects giving unity to people's lives in any strong sense. Even as means of expression, they do not seem to be play a critical role in the author's own understanding of these individuals. She has indeed managed to learn a great deal about these lives, but mostly by the familiar process of being told about them in words.

These last two points suggest a number of questions. One concerns what we might mean by "the personal" in the first place, a second concerns the role of objects in lives. As to the first, the examples here may prompt one to ask whether the individual is necessarily the proper and natural locus of biography. Here the gender differences may be illuminating. Successful men in Kodi boast of careers that come ultimately to be memorialized in great stone tombs and village plazas—and now, perhaps, educational credentials and civil service ranks. But one may argue that their very greatness lies in the ways they transcend the apparently individual and approach a personhood that displays itself as both collective and conventional. Women may not play these particular games, but neither do they produce selves that stand alone and apart: this book portrays unmarried women seeking themselves in romances inspired by national pop culture and mothers identifying themselves as promulgators of moral values to the young. Which may lead one to ask in turn whether "the personal" must be understood, as it often is in current ethnographies of experience, only as deviation from or resistance to the public or the normative. Might not the stories here actually exemplify the extent to which lives are embedded in and constructed out of material that makes them recognizable in "public," for a world of other people?

In fact, when we turn to material things, there is something of a gap between the theoretical claims Hoskins makes for this book and the actual instances she presents. Objects here tend to appear only momentarily or tangentially, often taking only verbal form in metaphors extracted from amidst the numerous images in ritual speech (as the betel bag in the couplet quoted above is paired with the hen's nest). Hoskins's analyses tend to treat the self as already given and clearly distinct from things. This is implicit in her assertion that the object "is either the surrogate or double, a direct substitute for the self, or the idealized companion" (p. 127); in the event, she tends to depict these objects as serving the self as vehicles of communication. They seem more supplements to an existing self than means that help selves become what they are.

One could find much more to say about the everyday practices by which people incorporate objects into their lives and come to know themselves through their objects, about the trajectories (or, for that matter, "biographies")<sup>5</sup> by which objects pass through different hands, are held onto or lost, shifting in their statuses as, for instance, products, commodities, implements, relics, clutter, mementos, gifts, and so forth. In doing so, one might find that the power of objects as signs is due in part to their *difference* from the kinds of symbolic expressions favored by iconography and symbolic analysis. This difference lies both in their ambiguous *silence* and in the ways they are embedded in economies of production, circulation, consumption, retention, and loss—not just conceptually but *causally*. For instance, Hoskins tells us that the "raja" of Kodi was influenced by Dutch and Javanese ideas about authority and royal power, which led him to collect gold as an expression of *kesaktian* (p. 101). But that gold was not simply the outer expression of an inner idea, it had to come from somewhere, by some means, using resources diverted from other ends, and requiring new means of keeping it safe and out of sight. That is, the logic of gold's meaning is inseparable from (but not reducible to) the ways it is articulated with other goods, and their owners, in a political economy. Again, barkcloth is not simply an expression of traditional values. It also provokes memories of how it came back into use due to the scarcity of cloth during the Japanese occupation, a painful reminder of the possibility of devolution, and, under official disapproval today, it is an affront to the elite's memory of Dutch propriety. And the raja's prize photo of his school days (p. 93) is not just a vehicle for a meaning that lies elsewhere, a trace of his having attended a particular school, for instance. As a photograph, it is the quintessential product of modernity and its ways of conjuring with absence. Displayed in his home, it presupposes his access to someone's camera, acceptance of himself as the object and subject of the photographic act, his partaking in the aesthetic of framing and "freezing" a moment, his comfort with certain ways of looking at things and showing them to others, even his capacity simply to have held onto the photograph itself for so long against the hazards of fire, rain, and the intense social pressures for circulation. Even betel bags are meaningful in part because the everyday sociality of betel chewing requires one to share a tiny bit of excess over mere bodily sustenance, demanding a daily, intuitive husbanding of limited resources and unlimited generosity. All of which is to suggest that objects are indeed dynamically part of people's lives, but not just as coded messages.

<sup>5</sup>..This influential concept was introduced in Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

If one were to take on objects in this way, one might find that subjects and objects are mutually constitutive. Moreover, crucial to this dialectic is the materiality of objects, their scarcity, tangibility, persistence, weight, motion, location, potential utility—and vulnerability. In this respect, Hoskins has engaged only lightly with the growing literature on possessions, commodities, and “fetishism,” which is producing a healthy conversation between “classic” and “contemporary” fieldsites.<sup>6</sup> No longer does the concept of the fetish demarcate the otherness of Others or the illusions that alienate us from ourselves. It now points toward the ways in which subjects and objects constitute and disturb one another all over the map, but always in historically specific ways.<sup>7</sup>

But this criticism is, in a sense, not entirely germane to what Hoskins has actually written, because, its title and programmatic statements notwithstanding, objects are not what most interest this book. This is especially evident in chapter seven, a heartbreaking story about the accidental death of a young woman who was close to the author. The chapter is both the most movingly and directly written, and the least convincingly about “objects.” As this chapter shows, the book’s heart really lies in the vicissitudes of personal experience, and the ethnographer’s relationships with certain individuals. In this respect, the book properly takes its place among other recent works that center on the particularities of experience. Here the author’s long fieldwork in Kodi serves her well. The question of whether the accounts she provides in this book suffice to show how *things* tell the stories of people’s lives is perhaps less important than the question of what they *do* show, that is, what central problems interest the tellers and influence the ways in which stories come out.

These points are not trivial. We cannot assume that others will find interesting or compelling the things we expect them to. If we have learned anything from the fieldwork tradition, it is that a good listener suspends her own assumptions about what matters. She may be forced to hear less about the concerns defined by a topical research agenda than about sex, marriage, children, spirits, the Bible, disease, death, status, cattle, or money. Moreover, she will appreciate that talk about experience is, in the first place, talk. Some of the best moments in this book are those that show women speaking up after a more authoritative—or simply loquacious—man has left the scene (pp. 60-1). Here we have glimpses of the variousness not just of topics and speakers, but even of possible selves being projected through words. In telling us of the circumstances under which stories emerge, this book points to something with which the current anthropological interest in experience does not always fully grapple. Any account of experience that would listen to people talk without paying attention to the others with whom they are talking, to when and how they talk and in response to what provocations and with what silences, is not listening well. Indeed, when people do speak to us, we might consider being surprised by the very fact that they are talking about “experience” at all.

<sup>6</sup>. See for example Timothy Burk, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>. William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish” *Res* 9 (1985): 5-17, Patricia Spyer, ed., *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Places* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988).

Will this change our view of where the action's at or help us rethink "the local"? One problem with the idea of marginality is that it invites us to take the "center's" problems—as understood in a certain way—to be the exclusive measure of everyone's concerns, at least those we would take seriously. But the alternative cannot be simply a return to "the local" as a self-contained or inertial universe, for whom "the outside" can only appear in terms of invasion or evasion. Nor should the alternative be to treat the "local" as peculiarly the domain of the "personal," as opposed to the "public." Take sex, death, and marriage. A recurrent theme in the early literature of nationalism across Indonesia and elsewhere in the late colonial era was the advent of modernity in the form of the love match and its challenge to the authority of parents and village elders.<sup>8</sup> Death too, cannot escape history. One of the most biting sarcastic remarks I heard in Sumba was an ancestral ritualist's accusation that Christian converts were foolish enough to think they would never die. The most ordinary local conversations about love or authority or death would reflect historical circumstances, not just as "broader context," but as one source of what makes things worth talking about at all.

And how might objects help situate a place like Sumba in a larger world? Here one might return to the question of biography. It is, at the very least, a representation of the self, and as representation, it is addressed to another. Moreover, one might surmise that it does not address that other in a disinterested way, but involves some sort of a claim for recognition. To follow through the textual figure, a legible biography should make one recognizable to a reader, and thus should present the self in forms that reader already knows in some way. But that entails a certain region of shared possibilities about who one might be—and one might call that region "a locality." One of the problems of the nation, of course, is that it presents one with ineluctable and powerful others whose terms of recognition may remain, for any given set of persons, obscure, in doubt, unacceptable, or unattainable.

Objects offer one means for becoming recognizable. But they do so not simply as expressive signs fully under the command of individuals. Their very materiality, for one thing, leaves interpretation, utility, even location underdetermined. Moreover, as material objects that endure and circulate, things can link different contexts, but not necessarily in expressive terms. Most obviously, otherwise unknown localities often impose on one another through causal links of scarcity and abundance. For example, Sumbinese sandalwood used for sacred carving has almost disappeared due to consumer demand in China. Materiality plays a role even in conceptual terms. As things circulate across contexts, one may receive them from elsewhere, take them up in new ways, yet still identify them as "the same" objects. Much, of course, depends on what it means to "take them up," for it is in the ways that persons assimilate objects into their lives that objects enter into the constitution of subjects. Ethnographically, this has been discussed most often with reference to the self-recognition or misrecognition afforded by commodification and consumerism. In Kodi, however, we might understand the betel bag or drum to be objects that permit self-recognition as well. They do so, in part, because they allow one to do the things a ritualist or

<sup>8</sup>. See, for instance James T. Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).



drummer must do. Their meaning for selves involves not just symbolic expressions and their interpretation, but the very forms of *action* they do or do not make possible and recognizable, in and for a world of other people.

Finally, consider the example of a teen-aged girl who attends a Christian boarding school and encounters the national adolescent pop culture (see pp. 123-128). She begins to write love letters to a boy. In the practices of writing, sending, and receiving love letters she seems to recognize herself in the media's figure of the Indonesian teenager. But like every other teenager in the country, she does so in a specific place, with specific interlocutors, and with specific material possibilities. In this moment of *practical* self-recognition, she is embedding something of the national context in her everyday and local situation. Learning to read and write, acquiring bahasa Indonesia, obtaining paper, pen, and stamps, doing so with money, writing love letters to someone at a distance, waiting for an answer, knowing how to have the feelings denoted by words on paper, obtaining those words from cassettes and magazines which someone had to purchase (with the peculiar legal and economic persons implied by those kinds of transaction and ownership), and so forth, are all part of the concrete forms by which the national becomes a possible way a particular person can live in a particular place and under particular constraints. And, one might argue, such possibilities for and constraints on local terms of recognition are necessary conditions for, and sources of the power of, the full-fledged nation. In the process, these practices become part of the ongoing creation and re-creation of the local, as a way of living in recognizable terms with the people "around here"—that is, the ones who matter most, at least much of the time.