

**Tom Therik. *Wehali—The Female Land: Traditions of a Timorese Ritual Centre*. Canberra: Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, in association with Pandanus Books, 2004. 332 pages.**

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Startling diversity defines the dry, mountainous island of Timor in eastern Indonesia—in topography, languages, cultural forms, foreign influences, and local histories. *Wehali—The Female Land: Traditions of a Timorese Ritual Centre*, by Tom Therik, offers a meticulous, informative study of cultural concepts and categories of the unique, matrilineal Tetun people of the Wehali region of south-central Timor. Once a wide-ranging polity across Timor Island, Wehali now sits as a tiny domain centered around the hamlet of Laran. In Therik's account, however, people of Wehali yet maintain their identity as a superior group through the oral tradition of ritual speech. He translates and interprets this "unwritten culture" through his book.

A lowland, alluvial plain bordering the Timor Sea, Wehali is a "female land" because of uxori-local marriages, where daughters remain in their natal homes and sons marry out (in contrast to other regions of the island). According to Therik, women were the first beings in origin myths and reign at the center of certain household spaces. Yet men assume central ritual powers as symbolically female lords. A supreme authority, Maromak Oan, asserts superiority through passivity (eating and drinking while reclining) and assigns his subordinate leaders as spokesmen. Thus, a male deity assumes a conventionally female posture. An interesting historical account (Chapter 3) relates how the symbolically ambiguous nature of Maromak Oan's authority confounded Europeans who anticipated a fully masculine, coercive ruler in Timor.

Therik shows how, through the ancient tradition of ritual speech, Wehali preserves past knowledge in present times. As in other eastern Indonesian societies, such elevated speech embodies conceptual systems of dual symbolic classifications. Complementary principles, such as male/female, hot/cool, inside/outside, and center/periphery maintain social relations among people, following Therik's study. Thus, didactic ritual language, spoken metaphorically, constantly reinforces tenets defining Wehali life. A wealth of ritual speech studies pertains to eastern Indonesia. Poetic couplets became a research focus for scholars such as Marie Jeanne Adams, Clark Cunningham, Gregory Forth, James Fox, David Hicks, Janet Hoskins, Webb Keane, Joel Kuipers, Elizabeth Traube, Andrew McWilliam,<sup>1</sup> and others. Therik also

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief survey of such studies, see Marie Jeanne Adams, *System and Meaning in East Sumba Textile Design: A Study in Traditional Indonesian Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Cultural Report 16, 1969); Clark Cunningham, "Order and Change in an Atoni Diarchy," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 21 (1965): 359–382; Gregory Forth, *Under the Volcano: Religion, Cosmology, and Spirit Classification among the Nage of Eastern Timor* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998); James J. Fox, ed., *To Speak in Pairs: Essays on the Ritual Language of Eastern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); David Hicks, "Tetum Narratives: An Indigenous Taxonomy," *Ethnos* 38 (1973): 93–100; Janet Hoskins, *The Play of Time: Kodi Perspectives on Calendars, History, and Exchange* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Webb Keane, *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Elizabeth Traube, *Cosmology and Social Life: Ritual Exchange among the Mambai of East Timor* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Joel C. Kuipers, *Language, Identity, and Marginality in Indonesia: The*

conveys a crucial concept of “precedence”<sup>2</sup> through his book, claiming that this secures centrality and supremacy from a Wehali perspective regarding their society in relation to others. Ritual speech reiterates precedence through its telling of history.

Notably, Therik (of Rotinese origins) grew up in central Timor, sixty miles from his research area. Familiarity with his region of study, Tetun social systems, cultural forms, and language provide an account filled with wide-ranging facts and descriptions. He also relates how he learned the sacred language of ritual speech from Wehali specialists. One can read of the significance of types and parts of houses, genealogies, and marriage/alliance systems, as well as learn about the meaning of agricultural rites, foods, women’s diets and rituals after childbirth, the construction of male and female wall mats, and the metaphysically auspicious sections of a pig liver useful in divination. Indeed, detailed definitions of rituals for all occasions fill this book. Therik gives us comprehensive data in this encyclopedic volume that cannot be absorbed (even partially) in one reading. Generously endowed with maps, clearly organized tables, charts of all sorts, glossaries, drawings, historical references, varied and voluminous translations of ritual speeches, meticulous lists of categories and terms, myriad myths, and nicely reproduced color photographs, Therik’s book will interest anyone seeking information about this area of Timor. Moreover, scholars of linguistics or ritualized speech will appreciate Therik’s prodigious translations. This is a widely useful reference book, especially regarding linguistic, mythical, symbolic, and ritualistic material. *Wehali’s* greatest contribution is its translated origin myths, providing much new knowledge. In the Appendix, such sacred language appears at length, conveying beautiful expression imaginably of great value to Wehali people.

While packed with factual data, *Wehali* largely fulfills prescribed analytical categories rather than introducing variant views or revealing the dynamism of language, metaphors, and life. Thus, some readers will yearn for more provocative questions and analysis. As one anthropologist noted of the formality of ritual events, “To create a frame often implies something about what is outside the frame as well.”<sup>3</sup> Therik seldom takes the reader outside. Contesting ideas or bits of enlightenment would not have detracted from his book’s factuality. Social practice rarely surfaces here, much less agency. Consequently, *Wehali* affords few human glimpses of how “dramatic changes” (mentioned in the book’s description) might come about.

Nevertheless, *Wehali* complements established themes in Indonesian studies. Descriptions of the concepts “trunk” and “tip” (used throughout eastern Indonesian societies) parallel the model of “center” and “periphery” long applied in Southeast Asian scholarship in typifying political potency, polities, and influence. The author explains how Wehali people justify an ongoing belief in their social centrality and

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*Changing Nature of Ritual Speech on the Island of Sumba* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Andrew McWilliam, *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life: A Study of Place and Precedence in Southwest Timor* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002). These productive studies offer windows to histories, social relations and priorities, poetics, and times of change.

<sup>2</sup> See James J. Fox and Clifford Sather, eds., *Origins, Ancestry, and Alliance: Explorations of Austronesian Ethnography* (Canberra: The Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 1996) for discussions of “precedence” and “founder ideologies” in societies of the Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>3</sup> Webb Keane, *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 17.

superiority by contending that their land was the “first to dry;” the original landmass to rise from the waters in primordial times. This motif of primacy reiterates Fox’s ideas on the language of precedence as a fundamental factor in eastern Indonesian ideas of social validity and authority—connoting priorities in time, position, rank, and status.<sup>4</sup> Further, Therik notes how the artistry of elevated, ritual language contains a moral component. This virtue parallels aesthetic ideals through the archipelago, exemplifying the right ordering of the social world and cosmology. Terms for “beauty” in Bahasa Indonesia and some regional languages also denote goodness and moral righteousness. He also discusses (particularly in relation to ancestors) visible and invisible worlds, relevant to other Indonesian studies. And *Wehali* epitomizes a “house society”<sup>5</sup>—a type of social organization marking various eastern Indonesian groups.

James Fox’s comments in the book’s “Forward” appropriately laud Therik’s efforts: “Given the levels of political, social, and ritual complexity that a study of Wehali poses, this book...is revelatory. The research on which it is based represents a stunning achievement” (p. xvii). Yet Fox’s blessing unwittingly portends the book’s investigative and analytical limitations. *Wehali* grows out of the author’s doctoral dissertation at The Australian National University, under Fox’s mentorship. Fox is a longstanding, prolific, and immensely influential figure in eastern Indonesian anthropology. Nonetheless, as a mature and deeply experienced scholar of Timor Island himself, Therik might have come far more into his own by pushing beyond the established models of his institutional milieu. In the acknowledgment section of his volume, the author credits Fox as “the source of my knowledge.” This reads as an obligatory tribute from a devotee while shortchanging Therik, whose source of knowledge should credit his own rich background and inquisitive skills—all the more so as an Indonesian scholar. Throughout his text the author quotes Fox (and others) as theoretical bases or summaries for his data, precisely at stages when his own ideas should come to the fore.

Immensely rich in information, *Wehali* indeed reveals an “insider’s” level of engagement with the people among whom Therik lived. That he mainly abides by a “timeless,” structuralist approach constricts his inquiry and reasoning, and leaches some of the humanity from his book. While structural anthropology contributed tremendously to knowledge, retains productive merit, and remains essential reading, the time has long passed to expand upon it or employ alternate approaches. One reads between the lines of *Wehali* evidence of a highly gifted scholar falling short of more profound achievements. In preparing this publication, Therik seemingly deferred to certain timeworn academic paradigms and writing styles. Accurate, ethnographic reporting on life around him—with more independence of mind and attention to change—might have better explained the dynamics and meanings of cultural traditions.

Therik’s writing opens up as he relates unexpected fieldwork observations. He reports briefly on a cholera epidemic that broke out when he was in Wehali, claiming many lives. Yet such important information often remains undeveloped in footnotes, leaving the reader wanting more. Instead, Therik attends to the sorts of occurrences and categories established by his predecessors in researching and theorizing his work.

<sup>4</sup> James J. Fox, “Introduction,” in *Origins, Ancestry, and Alliance*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> A category developed by Claude Levi-Strauss. See *The Way of the Masks* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994), pp. 163–187.

*Wehali* reads as though its author dismisses most concurrent social phenomena around him (indeed, the everyday serendipity revealing the stuff of life) because he does not feel it “fits” into the structuralist frame that binds him too tightly. This is a pity, because an underlying sense one gets from this book is that its author’s command of language and his participation in social life accorded him the rare ability to delve deeply into the substance and excitement of human experiences.

Having gathered massive data, Therik indeed developed insights into the people of Wehali. This fully emerges in places, as in the chapter, “Life-Giving Rituals,” where the author’s prose becomes most interesting. Here he writes with engagement on his own terms, as in sections conveying myths. At such points, Therik’s knowledge, interpretive agility, and intellectual mettle shine as he relates material in direct and vivid terms. Yet much of his book reads as beholden to his academic superiors and, accordingly, he over-references their works. Ironically, an undercurrent of academic subordination evokes a premise of his book, whereby Wehali people feel superior to others and within their society deploy hegemony over those of lower standing.

An uneasy acceptance of social systems such as slavery (following ideas of cultural relativism) long has been anthropology’s norm. But simplifying or idealizing relations of inequality sidesteps important realities. As on neighboring islands of Flores and Sumba, Wehali elites historically often kept people born into hereditary servitude. Superiors euphemized subordinates’ positions using terms like “children of the house” (in Sumba) or, in Wehali, as “servants.” Therik claims, “The terms go beyond our English word ‘servant’ to indicate a relationship of confidence. People are proud to be *feto ra* [female servant] and *klosan* [male servant] of their masters” (p. 99, n. 12). This is an expedient structural gloss; an ethnographic veneer meriting deeper reflection.

People at the lowest levels of such societies do not routinely accept their fates with “pride” or profess “confidence” in their masters. In fact, many suffer abuse and run away. I do not assume a position of advocacy here, but readers deserve fuller pictures of these relationships. Janet Hoskins, while not specifically referring to slavery, describes the miserable fate of a young women in West Sumba virtually sold by her family (against her will) into marriage to a man of higher social-economic standing.<sup>6</sup> Therik could at least have acknowledged the human complexities of a stratified system. Again, depictions of social relations and phenomena become factitious through dogged adherence to all-too-neat structures. Moreover, Wehali contains many Catholic converts, yet this eludes analysis. Surely Catholicism affected something of the traditions and life of this ritual center. And while the author denotes Wehali as “the female land,” he provides few insights into female life (or the ambiguity of gender implied by the deity Maromak Oan). Further, aspects of oral traditions beyond male ritual speech and phenomena outside of the center-periphery model remain invisible.

The idea that tradition is not frozen no longer presents a revelation in anthropology. While *Wehali* focuses upon traditions of a Timorese ritual center, many of these could have been brought to life by attention to flux—that is, going beyond demonstrating how traditions reinforce established categories or invoke the past.

<sup>6</sup> Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People’s Lives* (New York & London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 124–127.

Locating his work within the (thus far) relatively scant literature about the Wehali area, the author cites valuable works by Gérard Francillon, David Hicks, Elizabeth Traube, B. Vroklage, James Fox, and others. He addresses the studies of Evans Pritchard and Rodney Needham on systems of dual classification—which importantly distinguish patterns in eastern Indonesian thought, practice, and material culture. He also discusses critical contributions of Dutch scholars who established eastern Indonesia as a field for ethnographic study<sup>7</sup> and researched regional social structures.<sup>8</sup>

Still, numerous germane ethnographic and theoretical approaches could have strengthened Therik's book, while engaging with a broader intellectual framework. I am thinking of Marshall Sahlins's analysis of cultural-historical transformations merging myths and events, Anna Tsing's account of creatively constructing identities in "marginal" places, Janet Hoskins's probing analyses of life's connections with ritual phenomena, Webb Keane's exploration of the complexities of ritual language practices, and Margaret Wiener's discussions of visible and invisible realms.<sup>9</sup> The fact that there is no mention of Benedict Anderson's ideas regarding imagined communities is puzzling, given Wehali's identity in contemporary Indonesia. Further, the book's bibliography mostly lists works twenty or more years old, which certainly does not reduce their value, but recent publications cited mostly issue from ANU. This will make *Wehali* appear parochial, indeed partisan, to a wide academic audience.

Indifferent editing bears responsibility for otherwise avoidable weaknesses of *Wehali*. Passive language and tedious repetition of words and information encumber the text. An alert copy editor would have improved this book immeasurably by sharpening its prose and condensing it into a tighter, more vibrant read. Therik, whose first language is not English, has made a remarkable contribution to knowledge through his bountiful data, yet his editors did him insufficient service.

This said, the impressive array of information in this book holds great value. Therik's extensive translations and interpretations of Wehali ritual speech, general terminology, rituals, symbols, and myths are a major contribution to the scholarly literature about eastern Indonesia and will serve well for comparative studies. I learned from *Wehali* and will use it for reference. It belongs in any library of Southeast Asian Studies or anthropology. As I also study eastern Indonesia, I appreciated its comprehensive information and the capabilities of its author. I look forward to Therik's future publications and hope that he will break out to become a wholly revelatory scholar of Indonesia—unfettered by the conservatism of institutional conventions.

<sup>7</sup> P. E. Josselin de Jong, *Structural Anthropology in the Netherlands* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> F. A. E. van Wouden, *Types of Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia*, trans. Rodney Needham (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> These listed works are examples that came to mind and certainly are not exclusively or necessarily indispensable to enriching this book. My point is that *Wehali* could have expanded its audience by incorporating a broader scope of relevant work.