

Gregory Forth, ed. *Guardians of the Land: Louis Fontijne's Study of a Colonial District in Eastern Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004. 266 pages.

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A student in my department, completing a doctoral dissertation on Slovenian contemporary art, spent much of her first year in Ljubljana trying to get her research subjects to show up for interviews. In good reflexive fashion, she turned this problem into an opportunity: in pondering why the artists refused to talk to her, she learned something important about the ideas concerning authenticity and similitude that inspired their work. Anthropologists who have languished in the field, snubbed by potential informants, have reason to envy Louis Fontijne, the author and protagonist of this strange and fascinating book. In less than two months, this colonial official-cum-amateur ethnographer managed to learn enough to produce what Gregory Forth, who is as much the book's co-author as editor, describes as a remarkably detailed and accurate monograph on Kelimado, a region in the Nage district of Flores. What's more, Fontijne exhibited a remarkable sensitivity to the political conditions that contributed to this outcome. The fact that people are eager to talk to an ethnographer is just as significant a datum as the fact that they just as often are not.

Forth is in a good position to judge the merits of Fontijne's study. Forth has conducted extensive research in the Nage region of Flores, some of it among descendants of the people Fontijne consulted. (For instance, when Forth arrived in Nage in 1984, Fontijne's research assistant, Frans Dapa Gu, offered Forth his services. A photograph of Dapa's younger brother, taken by Forth, adorns the book.) But Forth's reasons for seeking publication of Fontijne's manuscript extend beyond his professional and personal commitments to the parties involved. The book is really two books: while Fontijne implicitly reflects on his informants' interests in telling him what they did, Gregory Forth explores why Fontijne took an interest in what they had to say. On the basis of careful research into Fontijne's life, Forth sets the study in the context of the author's career as an ambitious colonial official during an era when the future of the colonial project was increasingly in doubt.

Born in Rotterdam in 1902 and educated at the colonial civil service training program in Leiden, Fontijne arrived in the Indies in 1926 and accepted a series of postings from Sumatra to Bali. Following a home leave in 1939, which was cut short by the German invasion of the Netherlands, Fontijne assumed office in Kupang in 1940 as a *controleur eerste klasse*, at the disposal of the Resident of Timor. Sometime during the first six months of this year, he conducted his research in Kelimado. Fontijne may have hoped to use this research as the basis for a master's thesis or *doctoraal*. A new regulation required that aspiring officials complete a *doctoraal*, and Fontijne had reason to fear having to supervise subordinates who were better educated than he was. He may also have thrown himself into the research out of disillusionment and grief. Not only did the German invasion throw Fontijne's future into question, on the way back to the Indies he lost his nine-month-old son. In the end, Fontijne never received an advanced degree, whatever comfort he may have derived from trying.

With his family in exile in Australia, Fontijne spent the Japanese Occupation in an internment camp in Makassar. After the Allies retook eastern Indonesia, Fontijne reentered the colonial service, now as an assistant-resident, and he remained in the Indies until Indonesia gained independence. Somehow, Fontijne's manuscript survived all this and made it back to the Netherlands where, in 1953, Fontijne revised and expanded it for reasons that remain obscure.¹ Fontijne wrote too late to contribute to the colonial discipline of Indology and too early for "Non-Western Sociology," the department at Leiden into which Indology later morphed. By the time he finished the final round of revisions, the bureaucracy that commissioned the research had dissolved.

Not that this bureaucracy would have welcomed Fontijne's verdict on it: "The establishment and operation of Dutch authority has had a disastrous influence on the structure of traditional society" (p. 183). Dutch authority arrived in the region of Kelimado in 1907, during a period when the Indies government was abandoning a longstanding policy of refraining from direct involvement in seemingly unprofitable corners of the Indies. Other areas of Flores had a history of colonial intervention; but Nage, which began just eight miles west of the administrative center at Ende, had remained relatively untouched. This is not to say that local people did not have a sense of what was coming. Captain H. Christoffel, who led the military invasion of Nage, stopped first in Kelimado in the village of Bo'a Wae, which people in Ende had told him was the region's traditional center. After a skirmish that cost twenty-five lives, the detachment advanced through the region pacifying other communities. It didn't take much effort; having heard of the violence, most of these communities sent representatives to submit to the new rulers. It was difficult, though, to find someone to serve as "king" or *raja*, the highest ranking native position in the residency's system of indirect rule. At Bo'a Wae, Christoffel had gained the assistance of a nobleman named Sige To, whose fluency in Malay and general renown made him the perfect candidate. But Sige To refused Christoffel's offer, either because he didn't feel qualified or didn't want to commit to obeying the Dutch. He sent Christoffel to see Seke Liu in Wudu, a community whose leaders were traditionally wife-takers (i.e., in-laws) of part of the Kelimado nobility. Seke Liu in turn refused, sending the Dutch to see his own wife-taker, his sister's son, 'Oga Ngole, who lived in another village further west, which was confusingly, or significantly, also known as Bo'a Wae, a fact that Forth interprets in a number of ways. The Dutch may have renamed the village to accord with their understanding of Nage tradition; then again, there really may have been two villages named Bo'a Wae, and the Dutch had reached the "wrong" one first by mistake. In any event, 'Oga Ngole accepted the job and became Nage's first *raja*.

By the time Fontijne arrived in Kelimado in 1940, 'Oga Ngole's son, J. Juwa Dobe, known by the missionaries as a "harsh ruler and unruly and reckless man," had acceded to the post (p. 31). But disputes had arisen in the meantime as to who the rightful *raja* should be, with Sige To starting a rebellion to claim the honor, and Seke Liu making quiet protestations as well. No doubt the spoils available to colonially anointed leaders contributed to these positions' new appeal. The often haphazardly

¹ Forth suggests that Professor G. W. Locher, the director of the National Museum of Ethnology and a professor of anthropology in Leiden, who did his research on Flores, may have encouraged Fontijne to revisit his data.

selected individuals who managed to be named *kepala mere*, or “district headman,” found they had the right to sell or lease communal land to a European entrepreneur who briefly considered opening a cotton plantation in the region. The context in which Fontijne began his study of “land guardianship” was a highly contentious one: a “battleground,” as Fontijne remarks.

Fontijne’s access to this battleground came by way of someone affiliated with the key combatants: the above-mentioned Frans Dapa Gu, who was the son of the nobleman Jo Dou Wea, the *kepala mere* of Kelimado, and the sister’s son and adopted child of J. Juwa Dobe, the Nage *raja*. Fontijne took up residence with Frans Dapa and gathered information from within his circle, including from his elderly great uncle, Dou Oe, the first district headman’s younger brother, who played the ritual role of *moi tana* in part of Kelimado and was well-versed in religious matters. Fontijne does not offer these details in his text—instead, Forth has reconstructed them for us with help from Frans Dapa and his family—but Forth does indicate an awareness of the fraught nature of his findings. In the preface, Fontijne writes, “One might expect to find in this report a factual description of the observations, followed by a discussion and conclusion and a survey coordinating the insights of the study. Yet such a procedure could not be followed” (p. 65). Rather than facts, Fontijne offers us an account of “tactics” deployed to justify current claims. The most crafty contestants in this contest, “fighting in ways that strained both truth and justice,” turned out to be the people with whom Fontijne talked and lived.

This disclaimer enables us to make sense of how Fontijne begins his report: with a chapter consisting of portraits of a series of material objects that Fontijne calls “silent witnesses:”

- The male and female *peo* of Wolo Wea, two forked tree trunks erected in the central plaza where buffalo were sacrificed;
- The *nabe*, or altar stones, at their base;
- The *ia* of Bo’a Wae, consisting of a cannon barrel raised perpendicularly in the air, much like the tree trunks, with an odd-shaped brass object buried in the ground; and
- The *sa’o waja*, ancestral houses in Wolo Wea and elsewhere that also served as a setting for sacrificial rites.

Although Fontijne sets these objects in the context of others with similar forms, functions, or names, he never loses sight of the singular histories of these things. In the following chapters, Fontijne recounts myths and historical accounts that various individuals related to him to explain and lay claim to these objects. Fontijne also uses his own knowledge of local politics to construct alternative explanations of his own. The *peo*, *nabe*, *ia*, and *sa’o waja* played a key role in relations between the three main groups that resided in the Kelimado region. These included the Soa, the first immigrant settlers, who peacefully found a home in the village of Wolo Wea; the Doa, from the neighboring region of Ndora, who subsequently joined them in Wolo Wea; and, finally, the Bamo, relative latecomers who claimed to originate from faraway Minangkabau.

At the time of Fontijne's research, the Bamo, the group to which Fontijne's research assistant and main informants belonged, dominated the region. Notwithstanding the other groups' earlier arrival, the Bamo asserted priority over the Soa and Doa in religious and political matters by virtue of their triumph in a legendary series of wars. Fontijne recounts how the Bamo strategically adopted local customs—buffalo sacrifice and other fertility rites—to legitimate their influence. A particularly striking example was the Bamo's erection of the female *peo* at Wolo Wea, where a Bamo minority had remained following military conquests that resulted in the formation of Bo'a Wae and other Bamo settlements to the west and the spread of Doa people to the east and north. Whereas the resettled Doa continued to join with the Soa in sacrificing buffalo at Wolo Wea's original, male *peo*, the Bamo built a taller sacrificial post of their own for the yearly rites, which were held in conjunction with the rituals around the Soa post. This strategy enabled the Bamo to signal their unity with the relatively more autochthonous Soa, while laying claim to a parallel, yet distinct, identity, thus preventing the Bamo still living in Wolo Wea from dissolving into the Soa group. In these passages, Fontijne follows Durkheim in approaching the *peo* as a sort of totem, at once representing and constituting a distinct collectivity. But Fontijne shows a remarkable sensitivity to dynamics highlighted by more recent scholars who stress the materiality of the media through which people assume social identities. Fontijne's focus on the role of co-residence in constituting group membership anticipates recent literature on "house societies," while his emphasis on the multiple interpretations to which ritual objects and practices submit themselves gives us a picture of a form of politics not unlike that described by Webb Keane. In Fontijne's Kelimado, as in Anakalang, on the neighboring island of Sumba, one's position in a social hierarchy is continually up for grabs, through the risky deployment of material things.

In a lengthy afterward, Forth lays out what he sees as the major contributions of Fontijne's study. Fontijne sheds light on the religious nature of relations to land in the region, anticipating themes from Forth's own research. Most importantly, the very language Fontijne uses to discuss political leadership serves as a "silent witness" in its own right to the fruitfulness of comparative models that take "precedence" as a key principle within a wider Austronesian world. Like James Fox and other prominent eastern Indonesianists, Fontijne stresses the value and authority attributed to individuals and entities that appear as the temporal origin or source from which other objects, persons, and social groups derive. What Forth doesn't stress is an older ethnological theme: the role of alliance in the region's politics. Surely the fact that the original candidates for *raja* kept recommending the appointment of their wife-takers is worth reflecting upon, given the widespread tendency to associate the affinal and the foreign. In attending to this dimension of Fontijne's observations, one can't help but take issue with Fontijne's bald claim that "in social affairs, women do not play a role" (p. 161). A wife-taker is, after all, someone to whom a man relates through his sister, and there are notable sisters scattered throughout Fontijne's report. A sister and her thwarted romance with someone maximally foreign—a sea spirit/crocodile—plays a key role in the Bamo's central myth. Then there is the second *raja*'s "similarly licentious" older sister, the wife of the *raja*'s deputy, who was blamed by local missionaries for the king's dissipated state (p. 31).

At the same time, Forth downplays the subtle ways Fontijne's experience in the colonial service may have shaped his findings. It is tempting to draw a parallel

between the contentious nature of claims to authority among the Bamo, Soa, and Doa and the contest for influence among the various European actors in the region. The colonial government and the Catholic mission often worked at cross-purposes by Fontijne's account, their projects further complicated by the fickle schemes of European entrepreneurs. Forth himself hints at a parallel between the colonial policy of indirect rule and the Bamo policy of adopting local rites: both are ways that "militarily superior latecomers" can give their authority valid grounds (p. 215). In drawing these analogies I do not mean to accuse Fontijne (or Forth) of cooking the data. As a colonial official, Fontijne would have brought with him preoccupations and preconceptions that enabled certain aspects of local politics to jump to his attention during his brief stay in the field.

It seems no accident that Forth and Fontijne's book should see the light of day in the post-Suharto period, when the central government has relinquished to local communities at least some of its control over the use of minerals, forests, and land. Whatever we make of Forth and Fontijne's conclusions on the "very political" individuals who served as Fontijne's guides, this book demonstrates the importance of taking seriously the inherently contestable nature of political claims. These include the claims of colonial and anti-colonial actors, who privilege their own principle of precedence in their battles over who was "here" first. By refusing to take for granted why people might want to tell certain stories to certain audiences, Forth and Fontijne teach us something new about a part of Indonesia that has all too often provided fodder for modes of analyses that muffle the hubbub of colonial politics. This achievement becomes all the more remarkable when we recall that the founding works of Dutch structuralism, awash in ahistorical abstractions, were born of research undertaken in settings very similar to Fontijne's own.² In the twilight years of Dutch colonialism, Fontijne's "silent witnesses" gave rise to noisy disputations—far noisier than the most famous depictions of eastern Indonesia would lead us to expect.

² See, for example, F. A. E. van Wouden, *Sociale structuurtypen in de Groot Oost* (Leiden: Ginsberg, 1935).