

**Michael Hitchcock, *Islam and Identity in Eastern Indonesia*. Hull: The University of Hull Press, 1996. xiv + 208 pages.**

Sumit Mandal

Michael Hitchcock's work is an articulation of the social and cultural identity of the Bimanese through an examination of material culture. It is a useful contribution to Indonesian and Southeast Asian studies on at least two counts. First, the study of the substance and aesthetics of material culture is the kind of scholarship yet to be fully explored for the archipelago. Second, the choice of Sumbawa as the field of study further develops attention to areas in Indonesia that have been frequently neglected as a result of the strong Java focus of scholarly work.

The book's genesis is illuminating. The author states that his "first intention was not to make a study of Islam in Indonesia, but as my research in Bima progressed, I became intrigued by the marked difference between the material culture of Muslim Sumbawa and the non-Muslim islands to the East." (p. 19) While the folk arts in Eastern Indonesia as a whole are well known, especially in the form of fabric design and statuary, Bimanese designs, colors, and artwork stand out. Amongst the Bimanese one finds "kris, brocaded fabrics, gilded jewellery, jewel encrusted regalia, and tombs emblazoned with Muslim calligraphy," while its nobility, "sharply attired in gold, scarlet and vermillion, contrast markedly with counterparts dressed in the more subdued hues of the islands to the east." (p. 2) The images of cultural difference invoked in the introductory pages nicely convey the justification for doing the study and the scholarly approach to it as much as it gives an indication of the cultural identity that the author wishes to flesh out.

Bima has occupied a border place in terms of scholarly work on the region (especially as organized by Dutch Orientalists and philologists). There is enough evidence pointing toward its position as a point of transition in the spread of peoples, languages, and religions throughout the archipelago. By establishing the Field of Anthropological Study (FAS), Dutch colonial scholars set out to map the cultures and languages of the archipelago under the assumption that there was a broad cultural unity within this expansive region. FAS scholars hence tended to avoid Bima because of its transitional character. (p. 170) Hitchcock, on the other hand, is drawn by precisely that quality. He believes that the region is a particularly interesting site for studying "the use of material culture in boundary definition and maintenance" because of its location "within the sphere of both Indic and Islamic influence" while possessing linguistic affinity with the rest of eastern Indonesia. (pp. 19-20)

In nine chapters that form the substance of the book, the author covers the ground from the geographical, historical, and cultural background of the region to the character of court society as he develops the ethnographic descriptions of artwork in general. Specifically, he turns to the kris, symbolic cloth, and then architecture. And what does he learn from the material culture? What does the visual appearance, aesthetics and human production of symbols reveal about Bimanese identity? Hitchcock argues that Bima's Indic heritage was marginal and acquired mainly through the secondary process of the Javanization of the court culture. Islam on the other hand played a profound role. Lodged between the Hindu Balinese to the east and the animists to the west, Muslim Bima's ties grew with Makassar to the north. The author

claims that more than three centuries of Islamization in Bima have “extensively modified the underlying culture, all but obscuring its eastern Indonesian roots.” (p. 170) Nevertheless, he believes that forms of eastern Indonesian socio-political organization have persisted.

Had the author’s ethnography of the material culture been the primary point of departure for articulating Bimanese identity, his work would have been far stronger. Instead, the author reveals a strong tendency to reify Islam as well as to idealize particular forms of social, political, and cultural paradigms deemed to be Islamic. Bimanese Muslims and the material culture they have produced are attributed to a vague Islamic cultural framework. This connection is untenable and actually contradicted by the author’s very own ethnographic evidence.

Two of the most interesting things revealed by the ethnographic evidence are the distinctiveness of the aesthetic sensibilities of the Bimanese and the degree to which these were formed through these islanders’ strong connection with the maritime Muslim trading cultures of the archipelago—the Malays and the Makasarese in particular. This connection explains the cultivation of vivid colors in the attire of the court that stands so sharply in contrast with the subdued hues of Bima’s neighbors. Bima’s colors and fabrics (like the *patola*) have been linked with the sensibilities of the Indian ocean trading world through the intermediary role of Malay Muslims. So much of the artistic production, the formal political organization, the kinds of migrant populations present (Arab, Chinese, and so on) as well as other indicators point to cultural affinities with historical Malay Muslim port cultures.

The connection to Muslim Southeast Asia can be more strongly argued, and is substantially revealed in the ethnography itself, than the connection to “Islam” that seems to have been overlaid on the analysis of the book as a whole. Indications of this overlay are many; just three are cited here. The author states as follows in the first instance: “In accordance with Muslim tradition, the Sultans of Bima tried to establish a haven of peace, in which the traders and seafarers of different ethnic origin could conduct their business in safety under the green banner of Islam.” (p. 2) Putting aside the misleading assumptions contained in the use of the classically Orientalist term of reference “the green banner of Islam,” the political culture invoked has been quite convincingly argued as distinctively archipelagic by Milner and not necessarily Islamic.<sup>1</sup>

In the second instance, the author quite rightly contends with the FAS school’s highlighting of the indigenous as opposed to “foreign,” and that school’s denial of the important influence of Islam. Nevertheless, the author’s description of Islam as “pervasive and all-embracing” reifies the religion whose presence and substance has been truly dynamic, resulting in Muslim cultures that have lived as close as possible to the textually defined ideal as well as those that have fully indigenized the religion. (p. 92) In this regard, William Roff has done much work towards the historicizing of the real and the ideal in his work on the Muslim social and cultural worlds of Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> One essay delves into the problem of reification in the study of “peripheral” Islam. See William Roff, “Islam Obscured? Some Reflections on Studies of Islam and Society in Southeast Asia,” *Archipel, L’Islam en Indonésie* 1,29 (1985): 7-34.

The third instance is an attribution of an Islamic quality to the kris for which little evidence is provided, while what is furnished tends to contradict the claim. The author suggests that "because the majority of indigenous courts were converted to Islam, the kris eventually became closely connected to Islamic identity." (p. 106)

Hitchcock's ethnography is in itself instructive and fascinating as it nicely renders the visual imagery of the distinctiveness of the Bimanese, including what it is that is seen to be Islamic about them. Take, for instance, his discussion of color symbolism where he notes how a shade of red came to be prized in the form a woven checked fabric called *seri keta*. He notes: "Red yarns, the colour of *sirih* (*seri*, betel), were combined with vermilion, *keta*, to make a gaudy check that was fashionable in the capital." This observation is then used to draw an evocative picture of both the history of fabric production and the social meaning of colors. Hitchcock suggests that the colorful *seri keta* design "served as a symbol of urban sophistication at a time when countryfolk had neither the skills nor resources to dye cotton bright red." (p. 128) He conveys Bimanese Muslim visual identity succinctly when he adds that "bright and colorful garments are also associated with Islamic peoples, more sombre clothes being the lot of the non-Muslim hill folk."

The author's narrative suggests that an important reason for the character of Bimanese identity is the strong historical connection with Malay and Makasar Muslims as opposed to some generalized sense of Islam. At various moments in the text, the author's ethnographic details clearly show a strong social, political, and cultural affinity to the Malay and Makasar Muslims. Such influence is noted in the peopling of Sumbawa itself, the material culture, the economy, the character of the Islam embraced, and the court culture, to cite but some examples. (See Chapter Three especially.) Indeed, the author notes in his concluding chapter: "So pervasive is the Makasar influence, coupled with that of Islam, that the modern visitor could be forgiven for thinking that s-he [sic] had arrived in southern Sulawesi by mistake[.]" (p. 173)

Hitchcock's work is strongest in its ethnography and history. His argument is waylaid by giving more weight to the discourse of an Islamic influence than the ethnographic details themselves warrant. Like Robyn Maxwell's work on textiles, Hitchcock's work conveys a strong sense of cultural identity by bringing to life the imagery of the forms and colors that do indeed make a people distinctive from others.<sup>3</sup> In this manner, he succeeds in his task of elaborating Bimanese identity through the study of material culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Robyn Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia: Tradition, Trade, and Transformation* (Melbourne, Oxford, Auckland, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

