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Book Reviews



Roy Ellen, *The Nuaulu World of Plants: Ethnobotanical Cognition, Knowledge and Practice Among a People of Seram, Eastern Indonesia*, 2020, Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing [The RAI Series 3], xiv–287 pp. ISBN: 9781912385256, price: USD 150.00 (hardcover).

This latest work of the renowned scholar Roy Ellen draws from his decades of experience working together with the Nuaulu people in Seram, Eastern Indonesia. It adds to his already extensive list of works by focusing on botany, and the book revolves around the epistemological challenges ethnobotanists face in their fieldwork and academic research. In this book, Roy Ellen steers towards a more bottom-up practice in order to facilitate the disjuncture between folk classification and scientific nomenclature. From this perspective, this book is not only an interesting read for (ethno)botanists, but a useful exploration of practice and theory for any scholar working with ethnic groups, classification, and the nature-culture divide.

At the foundation of the nature-culture divide is the so-called ‘nature-deficit’ syndrome, which concerns the historical erosion of detailed (social) knowledge of nature in favor of abstract (scientific) knowledge (p. 111; Ellen 2009). The issue with “so-called ‘natural’ classification” as proposed by Berlin (1978) and Atran (1990), is that these methods focus on the end result—creating a scheme of permanent cultural knowledge. However, Roy Ellen attests that botanical classification is in a constant state of flux in order to accommodate genetic changes in biodiversity as well as the folk-classification that may alter alongside the society that produces it.

Ellen’s study of the relationship between the Nuaulu people and their environment explores this ever-changing folk-classification. He writes, “Nuaulu classification does not take place in a cognitive vacuum” (p. 46); instead, their identification of plants is informed by their environmental, social, and sensorial context. As such, a mere visual representation of a decontextualized plant is not sufficient for determination, but the place and physical materiality of the

plant plays a major role in naming the plant. Therefore, plants should be considered as material objects that are perceived, organized, and used by humans; through this interaction they essentially exist in the “cultural domain” of cognitive, semantic, and linguistic criteria (p. 160).

The human interaction and meaning-making are essential to the act of classification. As Ellen notes, “[...] the ‘art of describing plants’ [...] evolves organically and pragmatically as people interact with the plant types individually, and not through the simple application of a stock set of terms” (p. 26). In this way, the strict scientific nomenclature and binary thinking rooted in the nature-culture divide conflicts with the reality of folk classification, especially since groupings are contextual rather than objective. To illustrate this, Ellen mentions the example of the *cassowary* (p. 144). Depending on the context, this animal can be classified as either bird, large terrestrial animal, forest animal, food, or a member of the category *peni*, a ritual grouping that also includes deer and pig. As such, the *cassowary* is an example of what Ellen terms “classificatory fallacy” (Ellen 2006) which also applies to plant classification.

A main determining element for plant identification for the Nuaulu people is place, which is a more meaningful classifying factor than perceptual features (p. 147). Therefore, “[w]e cannot understand folk plant classification in the abstract, only in the contexts in which it is produced” (p. 148). Despite Roy Ellen’s own trepidations on using graphics to objectify and illustrate realities on the ground, he included a few illustrations of his plot surveys from his fieldwork in 1996. The interesting aspect is that, even though there is a square border delineating the size of the figure and plot, the plants listed and marked are sometimes located outside this square frame. Thus, this figure shows how landscapes are borderless, that plants and nature do not adhere to the demarcated frameworks we academics tend to cast on the landscape.

These visualizations are an act of interpretation, and therefore essential information about the meaning and value of these plants in their surroundings is lost through this translation from a real living landscape to a static graphic image. Nevertheless, working outside of the delineated borders and including proximity to other plants and the larger environment does open up possibilities to envision a more inclusive perception of folk plant classification. However, it does not yet allow for a more sensorial description of the plants, and the voucher labels that Ellen used in his fieldwork show how the act of collecting is still very much based upon the natural classification that he aims to deconstruct. Even though the voucher label offers room to list multiple names for a given plant, it does not provide space to record sensorial aspects beyond the visual. In a way, Ellen confirms his own perception that descriptions of ethnobotanists are partial; reflecting questions aimed to acquire their data and

therefore exemplifying the scientific ontology they operate in which prefers the visual above other sensorial features (p. 168).

However, the aim of this book is not to give a practical guide on how to conduct ethnobotanic fieldwork, but rather to deconstruct the theoretical framework in which this field still operates (p. 167). And for that purpose, this book is highly recommended. It not only discusses the roots of ethnobiology, scientific terminology, and categorization systems, but it successfully illustrates how these are incompatible with the realities of folk classification, which is more fluid in nature. It certainly lays a great foundation for new work to arise from, new approaches that are aimed to capture the sensorial, contextual, and social perception of plants. As a critical deconstruction of the issues underlying this field, this theoretical exploration based on decades of fieldwork and experience is a fundamental work. My hope is that it will contribute to more inclusive research on the world of plants, human interaction with plants, and how their meaning is formed and sustained.

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