

**Geertz, Clifford**

**Book review**

on: Ellen, Roy Frank: "*Nuaulu settlement and ecology: an approach to the environmental relations of an eastern Indonesian community*", Den-Haag/NED 1978: Martinus Nijhoff (= Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, no. 83).

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Manila group—does it still exist? To the scepticism of American and Western Social Science Concepts—which comes through occasionally in this book—has been added a scepticism about social reform efforts (curriculum innovations, community school movement, etc.). In fact, the overall effect that the book had upon me was to suggest that the “loss of nerve” so evident in much of the social sciences in the United States evidently also exists in the Philippines. This is not so much anything Manalang says as the evident inability of social science research methods to provide insights about the rural school that are more profound than could have been gained by the skilled journalist or novelist. Fortunately, this book reads at least as well as most journalistic accounts and as well as some novels. Consequently, although you will not be enlightened by many profound “findings”, you will enjoy the effort.

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**Nuaulu Settlement and Ecology: An Approach to the Environmental Relations of an Eastern Indonesian Community.** By ROY F. ELLEN. *Verhandelingen van Het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 83. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978. Pp. xi, 265. Preface, Tables, Figures, Maps, Glossary, Bibliography, Index.

In a field, cultural ecology, in which claims and promises often far outrun facts and performances, Ellen's sober little study of land use and settlement pattern in a Seramese community is altogether exemplary. Modest, direct, balanced, informed, lucid, and circumstantial, it is a model of what such work, given the present state of the art should be, and it adds to our knowledge of an understudied part of Indonesia in an exact and substantial way.

Ellen's approach to ecology is what he calls “generative”, that is, he is concerned not simply to describe and analyse forms — of settlement, landownership, cultivation, or whatever — or to compare them one to the next in typological fashion, but he wishes to uncover “the socio-ecological processes and the decision making sequences” that bring those forms into being and, to a greater degree or less, stabilize them. Culture and environment are not to be treated as gross variables to be externally related in a vaguely correlational way but are to be integrated into single, limited scope but clearly demarcated systems whose working can account from the production of the relations between men and their physical setting we actually find. “Only by the discovery and description of the processes which generate form can one ultimately *explain* form itself.”

The Nuaulu are Alifuru-speaking, pagan swidden cultivators — some 500 of them — living in south central Seram. Originally an inland group, settled in the highlands which run the length of the island, they have moved, or been moved, since Dutch pacification in 1910, to the south coast, an area predominantly occupied by Muslim “coastal Malays”. Organized into exogamous and totemic patrilines, they form five

settlements, and in addition to shifting cultivation are intensively engaged in the gathering of wild vegetable foods, mainly sago, and in hunting (wild pig, deer, cassowary) and stream fishing. In their forest plots, mostly within three or four kilometres of their settlements, they grow a very wide range of foodstuffs, especially taro, plantains, and manioc, but including as well rice, coconuts, peanuts, and various sorts of vegetables, tubers, and fruits. Although slightly more than half of Nuaulu food producing effort goes into the exploitation of wild resources and only slightly less than half into swidden cultivation, it is the latter that Ellen sees as central to their adaptation and to which he devotes the bulk of his attention. "[The] great contradiction in Nuaulu bio-energetic and environmental relations [is] that gardens are not ultimately of overriding importance in nutritional terms, and yet the actual operation of gardening ... has enormous implications [for] the pattern of settlement and [the] management of man-environment relationships."

So far as settlement pattern is concerned, Ellen shows in fine detail how environmental determinants, social considerations, and what he calls "ideological factors" (the resistance of British anthropologists to the word "culture" has grown by now to proportions almost comic) interact in such a way that neither geographical determinism, nor sociological formalism, nor high, binary-mind structuralism provide workable approaches to explanation. The environmental factors — topography, water sources, and the like — work together with the apparently still strong patrician system reinforced by a developed marriage exchange pattern and with various orders of symbolic dualism — mountain/sea, male/female, left/right, cooked/raw — to produce village layouts which are compromises between opposing demands. "There is an inherent conflict between the symmetry imposed by ideological factors and the asymmetric demands of ... kinship ... interpersonal relationships and ... physical location", and actual settlements are resolutions of that conflict.

The heart of Ellen's study, however, is his investigation of land use, which is as subtle and sophisticated, and as substantial, as any we have for Southeast Asian swiddenists. Conceptually, the axial distinction is between *wesie*, unclaimed forest, *wasi*, claimed forest, "land that is or has once been cultivated and in which certain rights are vested", and *nisi*, forest actually in cultivation, of which there are in turn three sorts — recently cleared garden plots, those more than a year old but still fairly intensively cultivated, and those still producing but dominated by secondary growth of various kinds. (*Niane*, "village area", completes the system.)

From the point of view of the Nuaulu, what Ellen calls their "cognitive system" but means no more than their style of thought, these distinctions are basically vegetational. *Wesie* is land covered with primary or advanced secondary forest, the various sorts of *nisi* are gardens with different, highly diverse crop mixtures running from taro dominance in newly cleared plots, to manioc dominance in older ones, to tree crop dominance — coconuts, etc. — in yet older ones. Ellen traces the working of this essentially cyclical system with care and precision, and with as much quantitative measurement as is practical, concluding that although the system is presently (1969–71) well adapted (succession to *Imperata* is virtually absent, fallow periods are adequate for soil maintenance, and population is well below carrying capacity) recent changes attendant upon culture contact promise to make it "inflexible, much more formalized and jural than ... at present".

The theme of increasing rigidification and maladaptation as the Nuaulu get drawn into the modern world — or at least into subordinate connection with its local repre-

sentatives, the coastal Malays — haunts Ellen's book throughout: a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. One senses, amid all this description of cycles, crops, and settlements, the formation of dependency at virtually its initial stages, and the acts to come in the drama seem all too familiar, all too depressing. Ellen's flattened, academic prose makes the Nuaulu predicament, the arrival of their future, unmasked and unwanted, all that more poignant:

Here is a situation in which there are obviously very substantial ecological changes taking place, in which the indigenous categories of the domesticated environment are being radically re-arranged, broadly characterized as a transition between impermanence and permanence of cultivated areas. Apart from changes brought about as a direct function of population increase and progressive technological competence associated increased attention to the creation of coconut groves [as permanent cash crop plantations for the copra market].... Formerly only a small percentage of land cut would have been cultivated after three years — now the percentage is considerably higher.... In sociological terms [this] will almost certainly mean a greater emphasis on individual claims, an appreciation that cash crops represent one of their most important assets (together with the land they are planted on) and the monetary values being associated with such property holdings.... The situation is [becoming] effectively one of continuous plant tenure, and the transition from this to the idea of atomized "ownership" of the land which supports it is not difficult, particularly in the presence of a new and potent ideology which sustains it.

Ellen's book is of course not without its faults. When more than half of Nuaulu nutritional needs are filled from non-domesticated resources, one is not satisfied to be told that their place in the overall ecosystem will be treated in another work. The concluding theoretical chapter is rather generalized and uses terms "operational", "interpretive", and so on — in rather special ways. But it is not the few faults it has that matter, but the many virtues that it has. *Nuaulu Settlement and Ecology* takes its place, and not the least, in that extraordinary series of fine field studies of the ecology of Southeast Asian swidden regimes running from Izikowitz and Pelzer through Spencer and Freeman to Conklin and Rappoport. It is a comment on something or other that a similar series does not exist for what is after all the region's primary adaptive system: wet rice growing.

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**Borobudur.** By JACQUES DUMARÇAY. Edited and translated by MICHAEL SMITHIES. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978. Pp. xi, 72. Preface, Maps and Plans, Plates, Bibliography, Chronological Table, Index. Paperback M\$10.

Jacques Dumarçay is consultant architect to the Borobudur restoration project, and his short book is not intended to do more than give a summary of the history,