



the one hand, as Handman and McDougall convincingly argue, Niebuhr suggests a reason why studying Christian politics or any Christian social life is especially problematic. From Niebuhr's theological point of view, true Christian belief, embodied in the renunciation of the sect, always resists the political. On the other hand, many readers will probably balk at the idea of importing a normative theory of religion to supplement a social explanation of what people actually do.

Many of the chapters, however, anticipate this concern by giving evidence that a dualistic ideology akin to Niebuhr's also informs much of the Christian discourse and practice of local communities in the Pacific. In his chapter, Robbins calls this diarchy of church and public politics. Robbins makes clear however that this separation of spheres is not inherent in being Christian, but that the local Christian ideology of the Urapmin people he studied produces this contradiction. Starting from the classical theological distinction between churches aligned with dominant social values and sects which reject these values, Robbins argues that Urapmin of PNG have become a 'sect as big as society' (p. 205). This is a crucial although very subtle distinction. In employing the categories of church and sect to describe Urapmin Pentecostals as a 'sect-like church' (p. 206), Robbins is not saying that Urapmin are members of a sect in an objective sense. He argues that Urapmin invest their church with the values of the sect, specifically quietism and world-renunciation, which he sees as culturally and historically specific values of Pentecostal Christianity globally.

Robbins also makes the further point that Urapmin theological framing of politics is a kind of political praxis. The Urapmin insist that as Christians they must collectively define themselves in opposition to the the secular world, and thus they become a public by rejecting the liberal public sphere which the PNG state has since colonial conquest attempted to incorporate them into. His point that the Christian ideology of ascetic individualism, when practiced as a collective world-renouncing, is not a disavowal of the political or the social. Rather as a praxis it produces a kind of politics, one that rejects the

grounds on which the state authorises certain kinds of actors to speak. In his wide-ranging and thought-provoking afterword, Webb Keane makes a similar point drawing upon Michael Warner's concept of a counterpublic.

Overall, this is a fine edited collection of ethnographic analyses of several Melanesian societies' religious forms. It contributes a great deal to the ethnographic study of Christianity. It will be discussed widely by scholars and students for years to come. I can't help but note that, at a moment where Pacific Islanders and many other communities globally are finding new ways to critique and contest state power, in particular the power to define people, it feels like a very timely book too. It speaks to a growing need to document and understand social movements in Pacific societies, and their prospects for bottom-up change in a postcolonial world.

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People on Country: Vital Landscapes, Indigenous Futures

J. Altman, S. Kerins (eds.)

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xxii + 250 pp., appendices, index.

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This edited volume by Jon Altman and Séan Kerins, both with a wealth of experience in Indigenous natural resource management, is the culmination of a five-year collaborative direct action research project called *People on Country, Healthy Landscapes and Indigenous Economic Futures*. It contains the contributions of no less than twenty seven authors, divided into two related parts: the perspectives of the Australian National University (ANU) researchers in part one, and the Indigenous partner perspectives by seven community based ranger groups in the Northern Territory and New South Wales in part two. Altman effectively introduces the policy context and synthesises the diverse contributions

with pertinent observations about Indigenous occupation of, and rights to, land, the ecological significance of the 'Indigenous estate' (covering 20% of Australia and increasing), and the importance of Indigenous environmental work for Indigenous communities and the nation more broadly. The two-part structure reflects one of the key messages of the book: that policies and research with Indigenous people are enriched by a 'two-way' or 'two-toolbox' approach—western scientific and Indigenous—based on 'equality born of a dialectical interdependence' (p. xix). I will return to this approach further below.

The book is, fundamentally, an important political statement. It is about 'the pragmatics of hope' (p. 6) despite, and at least implicitly also to counterbalance, the dominant focus in broader societal debates on aspects of social and economic crisis, suffering and dysfunction in Indigenous communities. In particular, the contributors hope that 'it might be possible to find space within existing dominant neoliberal arrangements and ideologies to underwrite a different notion of development based on conservation' (p. 6). The authors—researchers and Indigenous rangers alike—are well aware of the challenges this position entails. The chapters by the Indigenous rangers, recounting local histories and life in their homelands, their future visions and the often challenging but rewarding aspects of their work, are particularly powerful in this regard.

As a matter of national and international concern, the ecological integrity and high biodiversity values of the Indigenous estate in Australia are severely threatened by a combination of invasive weeds, feral animals and uncontrolled destructive bushfires. The book argues convincingly that Indigenous people are essential in combating these threats. Highly destructive fires erupt, for example, when country is 'orphaned' and left unmanaged. In remote regions, Indigenous residents can also be the eyes and ears, as well as the major labour source, of conservation and natural resource management efforts.

The question is whether environmental programs and their extensions can indeed bring alternate forms of development and significant

economic activity to regions severely challenged in terms of geography, human capacity and state dependencies, particularly amid the powerful political voices of today which call for the opening up of land to extractive industries, and an embrace of the so-called 'real economy'. As the title *People on Country: Vital Landscapes, Indigenous Futures* suggests, the contributors argue that they can. The case studies highlight how organisational professionalisation has led to promising initiatives ranging from a carbon abatement contract with energy giant ConocoPhillips in Darwin, marine debris surveys and removal, biosecurity projects with the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service, Customs, and the Water Police, successful invasive species eradication programs, environmental rehabilitation and burning programs, nursery and plant enterprises, as well as educational programs.

Nevertheless, a significant part of the important environmental services delivered by Aboriginal people remains worryingly dependent on government funding. As a result, there is a tension, which is fully acknowledged by the authors, between the multitude of beneficial opportunities of working on country, and the potential costs of remaining dependent on state funding cycles which, despite the calls from the contributors, may well remain subject to relatively short-term political priorities. Grounded in debates about social and environmental justice, Altman argues that the long-term funding of ranger programs ought to be committed to also as a form of compensation in light of the severe damage inflicted upon land and waters since colonisation.

In terms of employment, Kerins reports significant growth so that by April 2012 the *Working on Country* program employed 660 Indigenous rangers across 80 sites in Australia (p. 41). In April 2013, the federal government committed \$320 million over the next five years to provide 'job certainty' for those already employed and to increase the amount of ranger positions to 730 by 2015. However, with a total Indigenous population in Australia of approximately 670,000 in 2011, the employed rangers appear to remain the 'lucky few' indeed (p. 17). While this is not a

reason for pessimism, the numbers confirm that a large-scale and long-term societal commitment is required to make these activities viable livelihood options for significant numbers of Aboriginal people across the country in the foreseeable future.

In terms of cooperation, the ecologist Emilie Ens demonstrates that scientific surveys of, and interventions in, particular environments may be embraced by Aboriginal landowners and yield important results. But they are also shown to be subject to difficulties associated with 'differing perceptions of what work is and how it should be conducted' (p. 62). There is, despite differences in priorities and motivation, a danger that forms of advocacy based on the 'two-way' model may replicate dichotomies based on the valorisation of western and indigenous knowledge (see on this topic, for example, some of the work by Arun Agrawal, Lesley J. F. Green and Thomas Yarrow). There are big epistemological questions at play here: exactly how is indigenous knowledge distinguishable from western or scientific knowledge; how are these features relevant to development options and policies; and, how are these concepts negotiated among the diverse categories of persons concerned? Are there not significant levels of heterogeneity, as well as temporal and spatial interactions that may make this binary problematic?

The book leaves such conceptual matters largely unaddressed, and questions may be raised by some about the relationships between, for example, Indigenous knowledge and contemporary aerial burns conducted from helicopters. What forms of knowledge specifically indigenous are drawn upon in *Working on Country* projects? While the book poignantly demonstrates the ontological importance of Country to Aboriginal people as an important motivation for the environmental work that is undertaken—often unpaid as well—the two-way approach to resource management is less convincingly argued with regard to epistemological debates that might go beyond the practical implementation of capacity building and respect for Indigenous experience and cultural practice. With such a strong practical focus then, more attention could

have been paid to the ways in which the future vision expressed by the Yirralpa Rangers might be achieved: 'we see not only Yolngu rangers but Yolngu ecologists, biologists and, why not, geographic information system specialists' (p. 141).

Another area of research that deserves note is the field of nutrition and health. While some research about health and wildlife harvesting is referenced, a more thorough engagement with indigenous health, nutrition and customary bush foods, particularly in the quantitative sense, may strengthen the arguments about the continued relevance of customary harvest and economy in remote regions as advanced by the authors (see, for example, some of classic work on the use of mongongo fruits and nuts among the !Kung San by Richard B. Lee in the late 1960s, studies of nutritional transitions among Indigenous people generally, and more recent work in Australia such as that by Jon Altman and Kerin O'Dea). Despite the difficulties which may be associated with such research in Aboriginal communities as reported elsewhere by Amanda Lee and others, the adequate longitudinal quantification of bush food nutritional content and intake at diverse local scales (e.g. at outstations as well as larger communities in sample regions across Australia) appears a particularly important task yet to be undertaken comprehensively.

Having said all that, the project and advocacy background of the book, as well as the large numbers of contributors, make it difficult to engage significantly with theoretical debates, and it would be unfair to demand that it does so at the cost of the lively and at times poetic stories now contained within it. The book is a powerful and timely statement by experienced researchers and their Indigenous partners that policy makers should wake up to the fact that many Aboriginal people continue to hold their country dear despite the difficulties, and that their gritty insistence to stay involved with it entails, among a variety of beneficial aspects, a service with important social, ecological *and* economic potential.

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People on Country book. Read reviews from world's largest community for readers. Seeks to reposition Indigenous people and their caring for country activities. Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "People on Country: Vital Landscapes Indigenous Futures" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving list | Want to Read. Australian approaches for managing "country" using Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge. Emilie J. Ens, Max Finlayson, Karissa Preuss, Sue Jackson, Sarah Holcombe. Ecological Management and Restoration 13, 100-107, 2012. "People on country, vital landscapes, Indigenous futures, 2012. 19. 2012. Indigenous cultural and natural resource management futures. J Altman, S Kerins, E Ens, K May, S Russell, W Fogarty, J Hunt. Canberra, ACT: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), The Australian Government, 2013.