

INDONESIA

BOWEN, JOHN A. *Sumatran Politics and Poetics: Gayo History, 1900–1989*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991. Figures, maps, photographs, appendices, bibliography, index of texts, general index. Cloth US\$27.50 (US\$9.95 for cassette); ISBN 0–300–04708–8 (ISBN 0–300–05018–6 for cassette).

When the culture-historical school in the German-speaking area came to an end during the first half of our century, it was French sociology, British social anthropology, and American cultural anthropology that took over, led sometimes by an ahistorical or even an antihistorical approach. This approach, however, was not so much part of an academic ideology as it was an attempt to put at a distance some of the speculative excesses of the culture-historians; American anthropology has now been historically based for at least two decades. John Bowen's outstanding monograph is within this historical tradition.

By deciding to work with the Gayo people, Bowen risked seeing his research overshadowed by work on the better-known Aceh (Aceh besar) and Batak peoples. The Gayo and Alas were (and to some extent still are) considered "minor" societies in spite of earlier research on them, notably by Snouck Hurgronje. Because of Bowen's work this view is changing, at least among anthropologists. Two years of fieldwork and a thorough command of Gayo enabled the author to present a vivid picture of a society in which, as in many Indonesian societies, the capacity to play with language is held in high esteem, and where many social problems are resolved by ritual speech. The Gayo, under pressure by various forces, have reshaped their attitudes through the medium of poetry. Thus a historical anthropology of the Gayo must be in the form of a poetic history.

Following a brief introduction to the community of Isak, where fieldwork was carried out, Bowen delineates major phases in Gayo political life and history, based on interviews with Gayo people and other internal and external sources. The chapter "Political Structure and Historical Narratives in 1900" is followed by chapters on early colonialism, the Islamic renewal (on the lines of the Muhammadiyah and the al-Irshad school), the Japanese occupation, and independent Indonesia. The structural changes undergone in Gayo society in the course of this historical process (changes in which the Dutch-imposed hierarchical and territorial political system has been of lasting influence) are reflected in the reorganizations that have occurred not only in Gayo poetics but also in several poetic genres, notably ritual speaking, sung poetic duels, and historical narratives.

The second part of the book takes up the history of poetics, starting with a consideration of the role of the authoritative maxims (*kata edët*) once used in ritual speech. These were spoken by two people in turns, thus producing the complete set in a way commensurate with the egalitarian norms of the Gayo. In modern Gayo these maxims, which concerned rules of general conduct, have given way to speeches by one person that are usually presented in Indonesian.

The *didong* genre is a kind of counterpart to the maxim in that it may share some of the maxim's content but is sung (often in the form of duels), is full of humor and criticism, and often draws upon everyday events. This character has enabled it to survive and even undergo a modern revival in the form of social competitions at *didong* clubs, where it addresses contemporary society and its problems.

In chapter 10 Bowen traces different origin stories of the important Gayo place of

Lingē, showing how different motifs are combined to express pride in Gayo originality and Gayo relationships with faraway lands. Not only are opposites (like the well-known pairs of land and sea, male and female, ruler and realm) brought together, they are often fused into a single entity. It is within the framework of these origin stories that the political world of the Gayo is explained.

The Gayo's ideas about their history were reformulated under the influence of Islam in recent years. The Aceh people who went to teach in Gayo saw the Gayos as descending from the Aceh and regarded Gayo history as part of Aceh history. This was a severe challenge to Gayo society, which countermovements have started to rectify.

Bowen has convincingly demonstrated the dialectics of politics and poetic genres in a north Sumatran society, and thereby widened the field of anthropological insight. Gayo people appear much more "real" now than they did before. Bowen's interpretation allows us to witness the highly complex, controversial, and often turbulent intellectual life of an Indonesian society.

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INDIA

DONIGER, WENDY, editor. *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993. xii+331 pages. Tables, bibliography, index. Hardcover US\$59.50; ISBN 0-7914-1381-0. Paper US\$19.95; ISBN 0-7914-1382-9.

The essays in this volume were originally presented at a conference on the Purāṇas held at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in August 1985. The authors offer insightful and informative commentaries on some of the basic themes of Indian mythology. Especially important are two long pieces on the Jaina Purāṇas, a genre which shows many interesting differences from the Hindu tradition and with which even many Indologists are unfamiliar.

Though the text contains much transliterated Sanskrit, even readers unfamiliar with this language can profit from the book. Other technical language and discussion is minimal, and folklore specialists will enjoy the excellent summaries of Indian myths and folktales. Indeed, one of the major themes of the book is the effect of local traditions on the formal Sanskrit texts. Particularly relevant here is A. K. Ramanujan's "On Folk Mythologies and Folk Purāṇas," which focuses on literature from Karnataka state, and David Shulman's comparative study of the rescue of Gajendra in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and its Telegu counterpart.

Editor Wendy Doniger explains that it was Robert Redfield who first convinced scholars of the importance of local myth: "The little wheel of faith stand[s] for the so-called Great Tradition of India . . . [that] self-consciously traces its lineage back to the Veda and the Epics. The big wheel of the grace of God (*bhakti*) stand[s] for the . . . Little Tradition of India, the village tradition of localized, vernacular, basically oral culture" (vii). Redfield taught us to put aside earlier prejudices that saw the vernacular myths as (in Max Müller's words) "late and low" or "silly, senseless, and savage." In other words, it is the big wheel of local devotion that really drives the