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Ignition Stories: Indigenous Fire Ecology in the Indo-Australian Monsoon Zone

CYNTHIA FOWLER
CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS RITUAL
STUDIES MONOGRAPH SERIES,
DURHAM, NC, 2013
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REVIEWED BY MICHAEL R. COUGHLAN

The use and control of fire is one of the defining characteristics of being human. Yet, fire remains remarkably understudied from a social science perspective. As a book-length ethnographic monograph, Cynthia Fowler's *Ignition Stories* is the first of its kind to focus almost entirely on the subject of fire and its use by a specific people. *Ignition Stories* sets out to enlighten us on how fire is intricately tied to the primordial concerns of "identity, kinship, marriage, gender, exchange, religion, and politics," while at the same time contributing to scientific understandings of fire ecology and environmental change (p. 8). Although this may seem like a logical and straightforward path for the narrative to take, addressing these dual concerns is an ambitious undertaking. It requires the narrative to simultaneously focus on the cultural importance of fire to a people (the ethnography of fire) and the ecological importance of people to fire (the "indigenous" fire ecology). *Ignition Stories* has trouble delivering on its promise to overlay these foci.

Through a compassionate and humanistic narrative, *Ignition Stories* describes how fire and fire practice are imbricated in the social and psychological fabric of the *Kodi* people of Sumba, Eastern Indonesia. Fowler draws heavily on the anthropological writing styles of Clifford Geertz and Tim Ingold to create a work she herself calls a "textual analysis of fire stories" and "creative nonfic-

tion" (p. 8). The author clearly excels at creative and interpretive ethnographic writing. The ethnographic vignettes are well crafted and interesting. The use of fire metaphors in chapter titles and in the narrative more generally, are on par with those of Stephen Pyne (1982), though some readers may tire of this rhetorical device.

Fowler also represents *Ignition Stories* as a work of environmental anthropology, with an objective of illuminating the too often ignored "indigenous" perspective. The narrative clearly embraces environmental anthropology's liberal application of "ecological" (in both term and concept) and its claims to policy relevance. Throughout the narrative, the promise of a policy-relevant indigenous fire ecology is hinted at and outlined as a major contribution of the book to fire studies. However, the analyses lack rigor and the resulting portrait of indigenous fire ecology remains vague. This is notably problematic with Fowler's description of the *Kodi*'s fire regimes (p. 131-134) which she outlines "for the purpose of describing a key mechanism of the region's disturbance ecology" (p.131). Fowler defines the fire regime concept as "the frequency, intensity, severity, and/or seasonality of fire together with fuel consumption, fire spread, and the size and distribution of burned patches" (p.131), yet fails to provide more than a general qualitative summary of the monsoon-driven fire seasonality for her field site. The reader is left to wonder what percent of a village landscape burns in a given year or season. What are the actual sizes and distributions of the different types of fires she documented? How much land does a single household burn and how frequently do they burn it? If ENSO climate events are significant for the fire regime, how exactly do "*Kodi* work within and capitalize upon the climatic patterns that produce the Island's fire-adapted landscapes" (p. 144)? These are the temporal and spatial parameters that ethnographers can contribute to inform evidence-based fire policy.

As an introductory chapter, Chapter 1 reflects the holistic viewpoint imparted throughout the book. In addition to some basic background information, the chapter touches on a wide breadth of theoretical

topics including issues of scale, cosmology, kinship, the tenets of interpretive anthropology, and emergent properties in ecological systems. The methods section introduced here is thin. While it sufficiently places the research in the realm of standard “qualitative” methods, it comes up short in its description of the research rationale. The reader is left wondering if systematic methods were employed or if data collection was haphazard and opportunistic. This oversight is particularly problematic with regards to the assessments of fire effects and fire behavior for which fire ecologists have established methodologies and standards of data collection. It is unclear why the author includes GPS “mapping,” of ecosystems as a method as the results never materialize in the text.

Chapter 2 reviews the environmental history of fire in Sumba, including a summary of the colonial and post-colonial politics of fire and fire management. Chapters 3-6 and 9-11 provide the reader with the indigenous perspective through the ignition stories from which the book gains its title. Fowler’s interest in ethnobiology clearly shines in these chapters and she is adept at weaving her botanical knowledge into the narrative. Chapter 3 presents Kodi myths as the indigenous history of fire and fire use. Chapter 4, “Fire Mapping,” metaphorically maps the “movement of fire through the landscape,” (p. 71) as the narrative follows people through space and time. However, the chapter lacks any actual maps or drawings to help orient the reader in space. Chapter 5 details the sociality of fire setting while Chapter 6 describes how Kodi conceive of and communicate about fire and its causes.

Breaking away momentarily from these emic perspectives, Chapter 7, “Mosaics,” describes some qualitative parameters of the fire regime and compares aspects of the regime with that of Northern Australia. This chapter provides the most comprehensive biophysical description of the environment. However, the description is regional, and remains vague at the level of the household or village territory, i.e. the scale of human interaction with the landscape. Chapter 8 contrasts the good and bad

effects of fire through two “ignition stories” and touches on emotional health. The chapter closes with a suggestion for the reduction of poverty through development of mental health services specifically aimed at providing emotional support to the victims of prescribed fire accidents. Chapter 9, “Fire Sticks” provides additional ignition stories, but lacks coherent organization. Chapters 10 and 11 describe aspects of Kodi symbolic ecology, touching on fire taboos, rites and ceremonies that celebrate and make use of fire, and ritual activities related to burning.

In an odd turn, Chapters 12 through 14 begin to articulate elements of a post-structural political ecology perspective on Kodi fire use. In Chapter 12, for example, the ignition stories are intended to show how extra-local political forces help shape the “rules of conduct” (p. 214). This represents a shift from earlier stories intended to illustrate the Kodi as an “emergent fire adapted society,” where culture is “an adaptive mechanism” and institutions “speak to and about fire” (p. 20). Fire shifts from its role as a symbol and a technology of ecological adaptation to “a symbol and a ‘technology’ of governmentality” which produces “narratives, dialogue, anxiety, dissent, authoritativeness, legitimacy, models of socio-political organization, and indigenous cosmology at the local scale” (p. 214). Chapter 13 provides stories that illustrate the governance of fire at the local level. These stories are couched within a discussion of post-colonial political history and the policy implications of political decentralization. Chapter 14 serves as a conclusion. The introductory paragraph of Chapter 14 highlights three important postulates that this book illustrates well: (1) telling stories about fire, “constructs meaning”, (2) “burning frames experiences”, and (3) as a cultural practice, “fire circulates symbols” (p. 237). A fourth postulate worth noting, “fire generates biophysical change,” (p. 237) is certainly a truism, but the book does little to show us how Indigenous fire practices actually affect change in the landscape. The rest of the chapter is concerned with a latent development of what might be called a “political fire ecology” informed by post-structural theory (e.g. Agrawal, 2005; Tsing, 2011).

Unfortunately, the narrative does not move beyond what is merely interesting about the importance of fire to the Kodi people. Where *Ignition Stories* does not lose the reader in the details of the everyday lives of individuals, its perspective is too synoptic and deals with ground already well-traveled. In this sense, the book fails to provide theoretical context for and methodological relevance to those interested primarily in the more tangible aspects of human–fire–environment interactions. This is an unfortunate omission too often characteristic of an interpretive approach to anthropology (e.g. Geertz 1973; Shankman, et al. 1984), which assumes that concepts such as cultural relativity and social justice easily explain or justify the importance of the research to those who work in other fields. If the objective of this book is to fuse disciplines (p. 4) and create policy relevant understandings of fire ecology, this approach fails us. As others have observed, a purely interpretive anthropology bereft of systematic data collection or analyses, has little to offer environmental science or policy (Charnley and Durham 2010; Gragson 2012). Indeed, with respect to scientific understandings, the book contributes little to theory in ecological anthropology or fire ecology.

Fowler should be commended for attempting to fill a long empty literary void in environmental anthropology. The writing style is easily accessible to laymen and undergraduates since the author guides the reader through the text, often explaining in detail what she intends each story and chapter section to exemplify. These explanations can be tiresome and redundant, but nonetheless retain some pedagogical value. The narrative excels at relating the importance and meaning of fire and its use to the Kodi people. In this sense, *Ignition Stories* is much more an ethnography of fire than an exposition of indigenous fire ecology. The book will certainly appeal to readers interested in stories about fire and fire use among non-Western peoples. Readers interested in “indigenous fire ecology” and its effects on landscapes will come away disappointed.

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