

BOOK REVIEW

“There is no place like home” Migration and cultural identity of the Sonsorolese, Micronesia (Walda-Mandel, S., 2016)

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For her monograph ‘There is no place like home’, Stephanie Walda-Mandel followed people from Sonsorol, one of four coral islands in the West of the Palauan archipelago, to Echang (Palau), Saipan and Guam (in the Mariana Islands) as well as to Portland and Salem in Oregon, US. Today, only a minority number of Sonsorolese still live on the islands while the Sonsorolese population is highly mobile and migrant communities are ever growing. The author describes how the Sonsorolese construct their identity and how they use elements of their ‘cultural identity’ in places with varying (physical, cultural and temporal) distance from their home island and thus in the context of, as Walda-Mandel claims, increasing external influences. Over the course of almost two years of conversing and living with Sonsorolese in their various communities, she collected an impressive amount of material revealing how Sonsorolese deal with multiple strings of identity, managing external conditions related to home-making practices in their new places of residence, and how time spent away from their island bears on them upon return. This study, which builds on the author’s PhD thesis, is an ethnography of a rather ‘typical’ case of Pacific Islands mobility, with themes, however, that might become ever more pressing with increasing out-migration rates –

be they due to economic, personal, (climate-changed induced) environmental, or other motifs.

The book is divided into ten thematic chapters; chapter eleven represents a list of her interlocutors. The introduction is followed by an outline of Walda-Mandel’s research motivation, leading questions, and study design (chapter one). Chapter two provides a detailed ethnographic description of the island of Sonsorol and its people and history and closes with a reflection on the author’s methodology and her role as anthropologist in the community. Chapter three sheds light on the paths and patterns of migrating Sonsorolese. In typical fashion to Micronesia, these are a combination of step- and chain-migration – people often start at close-by places such as municipal centres within the state, before venturing out to other island states with which (colonial) historic ties exist or to other overseas-places, where they usually take advantage of a broad network of previously migrated family. Chapters four and five expand on the theoretical background on identity construction in migration. While the former focuses on cultural, collective and ethnic identity, the latter expands on major concepts in migration scholarship (transnationalism, diaspora, nation), complemented by notions of home and belonging. The following chapters focus on the

analysis of her empirical research. Chapter six lists a plenitude of (traditional) identity markers that the Sonsorolese carry along in the daily life to places they migrated to. Walda-Mandel reveals how Sonsorolese inhabit these new places and how church, sports and food become identity-defining dimensions that are activated in home-making processes without breaking up relationships with the home islands (chapter seven). While this allows for lively diasporic Sonsorolese communities, chapter eight puts a focus on education and language as challenges to ‘typical’ Sonsorolese identity, and sheds light on Sonsorolese’ anxieties associated regarding the loss of ‘culture’. Chapter nine draws on the two previous two chapters and discusses people’s self-perception and their positioning in the residence societies. Walda-Mandel concludes her book by summarizing how “a new form of Sonsorolese culture” (p. 290) develops, one in which family, however, continues to form the anchor that balances frictions and amalgamated elements that the Sonsorolese encounter in the diaspora (p. 291) (chapter ten).

‘There is no place like home’ is a good testimony of the anthropological quest to ponder how local identities materialize in times where even the remotest islands expand into global life-worlds. Unfortunately, Walda-Mandel focuses



Source: Stephanie Walda-Mandel.

Figure 1: Children on Sonsorol waiting for the boat to arrive (photo from publication).

almost exclusively on ‘classic’ theoretical concepts in migration studies and thus potentially risks overemphasizing ‘Western’ views on migration. Her monograph would have certainly benefitted from an engagement with local Pacific ideas of mobility and place-making in (and beyond) Oceania in the chapters outlining the theoretical framework to the study. While she cites Pacific authors such as Lola Quan Bautista, Vilsoni Hereniko or Brij Lal as well as many others with decades worth of Pacific experience, relevant works remain mostly juxta-posed to the voices she collected. This makes it at times difficult for the reader to distinguish and put into relation (older or newer) academic discourses and local narratives. By comparing her wealth of ethnographic data with already existing works and the growing body of indigenous literature on the topic, Walda-Mandel could have attempted to develop alternative theoretical approaches to what it means to be Sonsorolese in the 21st century.

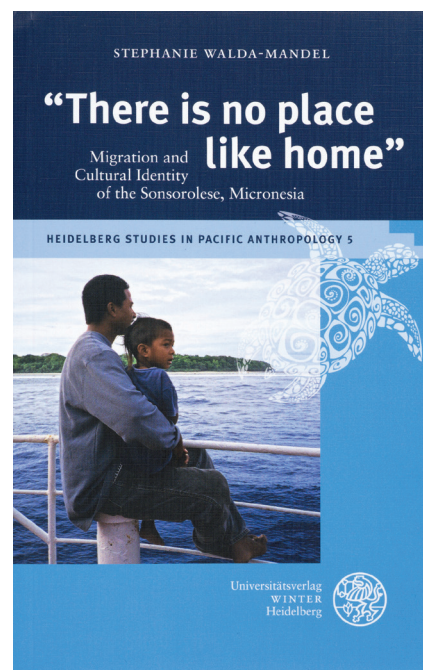
For example, the author states that for her informants, ‘questions about their identity and their sense of home often were hard to answer’ (p. 189). At a later point she resumes that this insecurity is

driving them into a ‘limbo state’ (p. 254), coming to bear especially when people return home as outlined in the book’s conclusion by one of her interlocutors: ‘I am not the person I used to be when I was on the island’ (p. 286). Yet, at the same time, Walda-Mandel reasons that Sonsorolese ‘have their island on them at all times: An internalized home away from home’ (p. 286). I wonder whether we – as Western educated scholars and despite our well-intended efforts to do otherwise – still adhere too much to our epistemology, fogging indigenous ways of navigating ‘staying’, ‘moving’ or ‘returning’ not as rivalling but as complementary dynamics.

In summary, the book’s clear structure and delineated subchapters guide the reader through the complexities of Sonsorolese identity-making in the context of migration. With its wealth of original ethnographic material, enriched with local voices that are heard throughout the book by way of the many citations from Sonsorolese and other Palauan islanders, it is an excellent introduction to Pacific Studies as well as a convincing example of the appropriateness of multi-sited ethnography.

Bibliographic information:

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Source: Universitätsverlag Winter.

Figure 2: Cover sheet of the book publication

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