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Reviews

Roots of Power: The Political Ecology of Boundary Plants. By Michael Sheridan. 2023. Routledge, New York. 275 pp.

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Michael Sheridan's *Roots of Power: The Political Ecology of Boundary Plants* examines the concept of a boundary plant across five case-studies. The book uses a multi-sited ethnographic approach to explore the role of the *Dracaena* species amongst the Chagga people in Tanzania and the Oku of the Cameroon grassfields; and the *Cordyline* species in Papua New Guinea, French Polynesia, and St. Vincent. By drawing together the common thread—the agency of plants in human lives—Sheridan is able to foreground the complexities of engaging with other-than-human beings.

In each of the cultures studied, the values, meanings, and usage attached to these plants, while similar, are discrete and complex. Amongst the Chagga, for example, *Dracaena* plants clearly mark ownership; an individual may leave a knotted *Dracaena* leaf on an unattended resource, such as a log in the forest, to imply that it has already been claimed. In Papua New Guinea, however, *Cordyline* leaves, depending on context, tribe, and the type of leaf, may signify, among other meanings, that a household is prepared to hospitably receive guests, the birth and sex of a newborn, or gesture towards funerary practice. In St. Vincent, a Caribbean island nation with a history of plantations worked by enslaved people, the "Red Dragon" variety of *Cordyline* gestures towards a fraught and painful history, but also indicates that enslaved people asserted their right to assign heirs to the garden plots that they worked. In the "Plantationocene", as Sheridan calls it, Red Dragon became a "guide" which directed the population towards actions of mutual benefit. It also defines modern Vincentians' landholding process: the first step to owning land, for many smallholding farmers, is the "informal but socially legitimate" (p. 197) practice of marking off land with *Cordyline* and then seeking formal approval from the State.

The salient commonality, Sheridan argues, is that these plants are all used to mark boundaries, whether physical—as in differentiating agricultural fields within a terrain—or metaphysical and social, creating spheres of male or female influence, for example, or investing spaces or occasions with political and ethical value. Drawing from the work of Frederik Barth (1969), Sheridan suggests that "culture" is best treated as a verb: anthropological studies benefit from understanding culture as a *process,* one which is most apparent not at a societal center, but rather at the edges, or boundaries, of a cultural unit. From this standpoint, boundary plants' importance is magnified: they underpin communities' understanding and narratives of themselves. In conjunction with field data and socio-ecological histories, Sheridan extrapolates this to show that boundary plants have been used by communities to navigate change, stability, and personal and communal identity.

Central to this argument, however, is the way in which *Dracaena* and *Cordyline* are understood. Following the work of Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold (Latour 1998) and subsequent post-humanist scholarship (Hitchings 2003, Gershon 2010), *Roots of Power* treats these plants as "actants". They are, thus, not docile beings invested with meaning by human societies. Rather, they are beings with agency and subjectivity arising from their relationships, and

Sheridan attempts to define and locate their agency by paying attention to the "loose assemblages, networks, and tangles" (p. 33) of relationships they are a part of. Consequently, meaning-making becomes a relational process, which takes cognizance of the consequences of human and other-than-human encounters. *Cordyline* and *Dracaena*, here, are "privileged actants". Not only do they engage in such meaning-making, but their material bodies emphasize particular kinds of agency, which, in turn, human communities "elaborate...into institutions and symbols" (p. 32) with definite effects on their social and environmental relationships.

As privileged actants, Sheridan argues that these plants have been instrumental in defining how human communities have navigated sociological change. Colonialism, followed by a socialist turn post-Independence in Tanzania, for example, caused ruptures in Chagga social structure; Socialist policies, called *Ujamaa*, under Julius Nyerere forced the Chagga to move to "modernist Ujamaa villages…[that]… often led to ecological, economic, and social crises rather than sustainable development" (p. 51). Coffee, a cash crop, replaced the traditional banana horticulture-based *Kihamba* system, even as, in the twenty-first century, many Chagga migrated away from the farms to cities in search of economic activities. In this case, *Dracaena* plants are used by the Chagga to "bear witness" (p. 53) to the redrawing of borders and restructuring of families and villages. Similarly, in French Polynesia and Papua New Guinea, the introduction of Christianity is navigated by using *Cordyline* to "make people…ask"; (p. 129) that is, as a cultural marker that signifies a sometimes-unclear meaning, it forces communication and encourages stability and cohesion.

Perhaps most importantly, *Roots of Power* draws attention, simultaneously, to two interlinked ethnobiological problems. Firstly, it documents the ways in which ethnobotanical knowledge and ways of understanding are endangered. In Cameroon, as well as Tanzania, *Dracaena* is rapidly becoming subsidiary, rather than parallel, to more formal ways of delineating land-rights, such as legal contracts and wills. Combined with people's migration away from farmlands, this results in the varied and intertwined associations of *Dracaena* being whittled away, so that it is thought of less as an actant, with biopolitical power, and increasingly as a being loaded with the singular value of defining physical boundaries. While the state sometimes ossifies and at other times opposes the ways in which *Dracaena* maps land, communities themselves may, Sheridan suggests, be eschewing the complexity of meanings attached to the plants.

In Papua New Guinea, linguistic concerns underscore a similar situation. For many younger Papuans, the extensive vocabulary surrounding *Cordyline* plants in various tribal languages is being lost. All varieties of the plant are referred to simply as "Tanget", the name in Tok Pisin, the *lingua franca* of the island. Epistemic loss along these lines is also a phenomenon in French Polynesia and St. Vincent, and Sheridan suggests that this, and its corollary, the reduced importance and understanding of the plants themselves, could adversely impact the robustness of tropical horticultural and agricultural systems.

Secondly, the book explores the fact that "older" forms of communal organization, in which these boundary plants play a major role, are also almost invariably hierarchical, traditionalist, and perhaps conservative. In communities in Cameroon and French Polynesia, *Dracaena* and *Cordyline,* respectively, are participants in a deeply hierarchical system which values traditional chieftains and the nobility over the rest of the community. In the Tanzanian case study, the traditional patriarchal family unit, where each member exists on a sliding scale of importance and daughters cannot inherit the *Kihamba*, is reified by practices involving *Dracaena.* Similarly, *Cordyline* strengthens patriarchal concerns in Papua New Guinea, creating sharply defined male spaces where women are forbidden from moving or even touching the plant.

Taken as a whole, the book represents a definitive turn within the disciplines of anthropology and political ecology; however, some areas warrant further attention. The gendered nature of the ways in which these plants are used, and the hierarchies they are seen to validate, are left under-explored. Little attention is directed towards what Arun Agrawal (2005) calls environmentality: the ways in which the state creates environmental subjects whose agency is practiced through their relationships with other-than-human beings. However, the multi-sited ethnography, in conjunction with historical data and an exploration of power, demonstrates a model of meaning-making which sits at the intersection of anthropology, ecology, and history.

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