[*JSRNC* 13.2 (2019) 236-239] JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
http://doi.org.10.1558/jsrnc.36106 JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Book Review

Bas Verschuuren and Naoya Furuta (eds.), *Asian Sacred Natural Sites: Philosophy and Practice in Protected Areas and Conservation* (London: Routledge, 2016), xxii + 318 pp., £43.99 (pbk), ISBN: 9781138936317.

Asian Sacred Natural Sites is one of those volumes that is much larger on the inside than it is on the outside. This book covers a remarkable range of places and approaches across 24 chapters and 330-odd pages. Of course, in such a varied collection there will be some chapters that are more insightful or that offer greater theoretical contributions to the field. However, even if we only consider it as a reference guide to the sheer variety of sacred natural sites across Asia, the number of universities and NGOs that now study these sites and collaborate with their stewards, and the range of disciplinary approaches, this is a tremendously valuable book. Even better, almost every chapter has an extensive and useful bibliography. Although it is only briefly mentioned in the book, the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative website is also a very helpful complement to the book as it contextualizes the Asian material globally and offers links to related projects. In what follows I cannot hope to cover each chapter, but I will try to convey some sense of the organization and scope of the book, pick out certain sections to indicate important themes and theoretical positions, and close with some general reflections.

The editors, Bas Verschuuren and Naoya Furuta, position this book as one of three complementary collections within the growing literature on sacred natural sites. While this book deals with Asia, Sarmiento and Hitchner (2017) look at the Americas and Heinämäki and Herrman (2017) look at the global Arctic (p. 1). The authors carefully locate this work in terms of prior projects and publications that have come out over the last fifteen years from the loose network of activist-scholars associated with the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative (SNSI), The Delos Initiative, the Indigenous and Community Conserved Conservation Areas consortium (ICCA), and the World Conservation Union's working group on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (IUCN CSVPA).

The editors have divided the book into six sections: 'themes and perspectives', 'national perspectives and strategies', 'legal approaches and governance', 'conservation and development', 'the role of custodians and religious leaders', and 'spirits and sciences'. Each section has a short introduction and the book as a whole has an introduction, conclusion, and an appendix giving the 'Darvi Declaration of sacred sites guardians and traditional cultural practitioners of the Pamir, Tien Shan and Altai Sayan mountain biocultural systems'. While some of these divisions hold together well—such as the section on legal approaches and governance—there are a number of themes that cut across these divisions, which the editors acknowledge. The book does

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indeed cover the whole of Asia, with chapters from Oman and Iran in the west to Japan in the east, and the Altai mountains in the north to Bali in the south.

For want of space, it is not possible to review every chapter here. However, the literature on 'sacred natural sites' (SNS) is well on its way to becoming a genre with recognizable features, and this book shows both the strength and the weakness of SNS as a descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive category. Its two key terms 'sacred' and 'natural' are highly contentious terms that have become doorways to distinct critical projects in postcolonial thought. Brosius cautions us: 'It bears considering whether deployment of the concept of *the sacred* may work counter to the interests of those in whose interest it is deployed' (Brosius 2001: 126). The concept of *nature* has, in its turn, been relativized firmly in the late industrial West ever since William Cronon's seminal *Uncommon Ground* (1995). The problem may be, then, not that Brandis (1875) sounds modern but that SNS literature has not yet fully acknowledged its colonial roots. Moreover, the study of sacred natural sites inherits unfortunate incoherences from at least two of its parent disciplines, conservation biology and the anthropology of religion. Conservation biology is a crisis discipline which has never taken the time to interrogate its own theory; the social scientific study of religion has, since Talad Asad, divided into empirical and normative approaches that have little in common.

While conservation biology begins from the claim that it is a scientific discipline (biology) applied to a practical crisis (the multiple drivers of extinction), it draws its authority as a science from the Eurocentric norms, including human exceptionalism, that underpin all cosmopolitan science. If, as SNS specialists tell us, indigenous or local peoples embody and transmit a qualitatively different but equally objective relationship to non-human life that, in some cases, is better for conservationists to work with, this directly challenges the authority of conservation biology as a science. There has been some work towards reconciling plural epistemologies and the requirement, in science, for objectivity (Harding 2015), but it has not become part of the conversation within conservation biology despite the work of anthropologists such as Brosius (1997). For SNS studies, the implicit clash between conservation biology's grounding in scientific objectivity and the pluralist model of objectivity is avoided through a dodge into the domain of the sacred.

Yet that is not a safe haven. As Asad showed, studies of religion as a human universal—whether by overt theologians or by comparativists of various disciplines—both presuppose and reinforce a Eurocentric norm ('religion') which is part of a larger Enlightenment bundle. The cosmopolitan and exceptional human has been exposed as a colonial export, underpinning claims to the universal validity of economic, psychological, political, and legal frameworks (e.g., Rose 1998). The parallel use of religion or spirituality as a strategy to defend that colonial universalism has in turn been called out (Fitzgerald 1997; McCutcheon 2004). The 'sacred', just like 'faith', 'spirituality', and so many other shifting analogues, is one in a long series of stubborn ghosts of the European Enlightenment. Viewed in this way, the claim that is often made within SNS (and other) circles that 'the sacred is one, experienced in different ways' stands out as a blunt power grab—and a caution to those who work at the interface between global interest in SNS and the globalizing commodification of indigenous or local communities and sacred natural sites that sometimes travels with it.

On the other hand, those that abjure the powerful unifying magic of human exceptionalism but then proceed from a historical-critical footing to explore the particularities of located social processes such as possession, healing, ritual forests,

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pilgrimage, witchcraft, non-human kinship, and so forth—that would once have been called 'religion'—have to negotiate hybrid theories, styles, and methods with every fresh collaboration and publication. The confidence needed to supply crisp policy directives to working protected area managers confronted with a threatened ritual forest is hard to come by. As Brosius notes above, for such scholars (and I count myself in that guild), the very word 'sacred' is a worrying sign of Eurocentric norms.

Compounding the confusion are further challenges that come from combining ecological and social disciplinary approaches. On the one hand, theories that try to resolve the social and ecological under a frame that is compliant to ecosystem management, such as biocultural diversity or social-ecological resilience, re-inscribe the very division between nature and culture that local or indigenous societies are supposed to resist or reject. Neither framework allows for trees, dogs, or crows to be knowing agents producing culture along with humans, let alone doing conservation science. Yet this is exactly what conservation scientists from many indigenous or local communities call for (e.g. Kimmerer 2011). Verschuuren hints at this problem (p. 302) but still wants to bracket traditional or indigenous ecological knowledge. On the other hand, environmental management regimes that use social science methods to document or manage populations for the sake of preserving biodiversity are oppressive but mask their own sources and exercises of power—what Agrawal has called environmentalities (2005).

Will all those concerns firmly in mind, it becomes clear why trying to buttress an understanding of sacred natural sites —where both key terms, 'sacred' and 'natural', are deeply suspect—through a recourse to Asian philosophies is a much more serious challenge than perhaps it first appears. Donna Haraway (2003, 2016) and Helen Verran (2002, 2009) both have moved to address the potentially transcendent features of 'naturecultures' without an appeal to Asian sources. Personally, I think that drawing on Asian philosophy to understand Asian sacred sites is the right approach—but it needs to be undertaken thoroughly and, indeed, uncomfortably.

It is that tension, between the urge to write broad and optimistic framing essays that endorse the value of SNS as a resource for the stewardship of diversity at a time of crisis, and the moral imperative toward properly critical study and writing about particular situated postcolonial encounters that may resist easy comparison, which makes this book such a variable and valuable collection. As I have suggested, real progress in the field will have to come from collaborations among deeply grounded local experts drawing on a range of high traditions and local lore for theory and method. While this volume may suffer somewhat from the gap between outdated framing narratives and excellent local studies, it is clear evidence that the topic is developing and it is a valuable resource in itself. Taken as part of an ongoing project involving workshops, other volumes, and an excellent website this book suggests exactly the sort of messy, joyful diversity that characterises sacred natural sites themselves.

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