beautiful example in that regard is the author's account of the birth and growth of the rubber cultivation and smuggle in the Sarawak kingdom. After a deferred start of the rubber economy in the Sarawak colony in the 1920s, Malay planters saw their prospective profits almost immediately truncated by a very restrictive quota scheme installed under the International Rubber Regulation Agreement of 1934. Ishikawa approaches this event in a very refreshing fashion, linking the economic history of the rubber cultivation in Southeast Asia with the local memories of Malay border villagers who vividly recounted the mushrooming of Chinese smuggler shops in the pre-*Konfrontasi* period. Other examples include the story of Ahmad Zaidi's flee to Indonesia in 1963 and its relatedness with local village politics in Telok Melano, or the "osmotic" pressure of the weak Indonesian currency that fuelled illicit cross-border trade for years.

"Between Frontiers" is not written as a comprehensive history of the Borneo borderland. Certain milestones such as the Japanese military occupation or the late-colonial British period have only been briefly touched upon. The theoretical point of this book is solid, however, and deserves wider attention. The study of Sarawak and its borders has clearly shown that nation-state making is far from a homogenizing process only; it also implies processes of fragmentation, peripheralization, and social dislocation. While in Sarawak a range of plantation schemes, labor policies, and modern family law had to prompt the mobilization of people and goods; a sizeable register of restrictive measures were needed to halt cross-border swidden cultivation, run-away-coolies, and contraband smuggling from undercutting the national space. Ishikawa has shown in great detail that the genesis of the nation-state and transnationalism are not mutually exclusive processes. In the Borneo borderland, the creation of the Malay national space austerely coincided with the parochial transnationalism in the Telok Melano village. "Between Frontiers" reminds us of the deep entanglement between nationalism, international politics, and transnationalism, and how people experience it "under their feet." "Between Frontiers" is highly recommended to academics, students, or anyone else who is interested in the history of borderlands, nationalism, and transnationalism in a Southeast Asian context.

Nel Vandekerckhove

Jackson, Michael: Life Within Limits: Well-Being in a World of Want. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 230 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4915-0. Price. £ 15.99

At the centre of Michael Jackson's most recent book is his return to Firawa in Sierra Leone, where he conducted his first ethnographic fieldwork almost forty years ago (1969/70). In Sierra Leone – which has frequently been labelled one of the world's "least liveable" countries and is almost exclusively described in terms of its poverty, despair, and violent conflict – Jackson intends to understand what constitutes human well-being and how it relates to our belief that, regardless of the given circumstances, life has more in store for us than what it is revealing at a given time in the present.

Jackson was not travelling alone but in the company of his seventeen-year-old son Joshua who was travelling to Sierra Leone for the first time and whose impressions and reactions reminded his father of his own first experiences in Sierra Leone. The other companion was Sewa, a young Sierra Leonean friend who has lived in London for several years and was visiting home, being increasingly "stressed … by all the pressures and demands", and, not being able to satisfy them all, encountered "not admiration but suspicion, envy, and resentment." For Sewa, who had emphasized the solidarity, mutual respect, and togetherness among people in his village back home while in London, upon his return to Sierra Leone finds these diasporic idealizations frustrated. His experiences reveal some of the (bitter) ambivalences that are likely to occur in the process of achieving material well-being abroad while losing connection to one's origins at home, or, as Jackson puts it with regard to Sewa: "He had gained a future at the expense of his past."

According to Jackson, the most significant thing in life for the Kuranko is to endure the burdens of life in a dignified manner. Well-being is conceptualized as the outcome of having learnt how to live within the limits set for oneself by the given circumstances and, ultimately, by God. The complex and often contradictory dimensions of well-being – and of the potential to share well-being – becomes particularly clear in Jackson's (and the reader's) encounter with Sira. One night Jackson is sitting in the compound with Sewa, when a group of girls joins them to sing them a few songs, which prove to be rather poetic and insightful and which have all been composed by one of the singers, Sira, who is eleven years of age and also turns out to be able to divine. She tells Jackson that she is regularly visited by djinns who have taught her how to prepare herbal medicines. Jackson visits her home and finds Sira and her mother living in severe poverty in a house that was burned down during the war and is still in a state of ruins. Sira had to quit school after her father had left the family. Despite these obvious deprivations, Jackson convincingly shows that Sira's main worry at this stage of her life is not the lack of financial means and material security, but the lack of love, recognition, and opportunity that she is experiencing.

Jackson explains that in Firawa social harmony has traditionally been of greater importance than material affluence and that – at least during Jackson's first travels to Sierra Leone – poverty was accepted by people as being natural. By contrast, people today believe that poverty must be blamed on those in power who have become wealthy at the expense of others. However, it is not so much the lack of financial means and the restricted access to material resources as such, but the lack of choice and opportunities that make young people in particular want to leave Firawa and Sierra Leone to find a better place to live – a better place not being imagined as the land of milk and honey but as a place where opportunities exist and where choices can be made. In the words of Morowa, an old informant of Jackson: "You have to have money to send your child to school. To buy what they need. Nowadays, the kids insist on going to school. That is why they

https://doi.org/10.5771/0257-9774-2012-1-268
Generiert durch IP '3.138.69.146', am 06.05.2024, 22:16:39.
Das Erstellen und Weitergeben von Kopien dieses PDFs ist nicht zulässig.

are against the idea of kinship marriages and arranged marriages. They want more choice in the direction of their lives." It is the unavailability of opportunities and the restriction of choice caused by financial misery and traditional restrictions and obligations that cause a lack of well-being and the desire to be somewhere else. Hence, dealing with the obstacles of life consists not merely of escapist dreams and fantasies but also a sense of being in a position to make one's actions and abilities matter and change one's life and one's family's and community's life for the better.

A lot of what Jackson states about the relationship between well-being and longing reminds me of findings in (cross-cultural) research on happiness, a major one being that happiness comes with successful expectation management and engaging in the latter – or, in less economic terms, having options to work towards achievable goals. Facing unrealistic expectations and having unattainable goals and – what is worse – having no option to achieve anything one wishes for, is likely to make people feel unhappy. The (preliminary) results found in the "Continuous register of scientific research on subjective appreciation of life", stated in the "World Database of Happiness" see Sierra Leone at the bottom of the list in terms of overall happiness (http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/). Given the lack of opportunities and choice for the majority of Sierra Leoneans, I am not surprised this is so, despite the "ebullience, laughter, and energy generated in face-to-face relations with others" that, in Jackson's eyes, "compensated people for the lack of work, the lack of money, even the lack of food on one's table." I am sceptical that this kind of compensation really works and also Jackson ends his deliberations by stating "But who was I to romanticize a life world that so many saw as an obstacle to their self-realization?"

Some critical remarks: Despite Jackson's repeated elaborations on the rationalities of change that has occurred over the past decades, a touch of nostalgia concerning a presumably better past emerges occasionally as well as a tendency of casting a relatively blind eye towards the complexity and contestedness of (traditional) values, attitudes, and practices among Africans (and Sierra Leoneans) themselves. I will demonstrate what I mean by taking just one example, namely the issue of Female Genital Cutting (FGC).

Jackson assumes that "a monopoly on the truth of well-being" among "Euro-American feminists" is responsible for the criticism of "clitoridectomy as a barbaric practice that causes needless pain and medical complications while depriving young women of pleasure and thereby robbing them of the capacity to find complete fulfilment in life". While I agree that one should try to avoid judgemental assumptions concerning social practices and try to understand their respective social and cultural context and meaning instead, I see no good reason for a kind of cultural(ist) relativism by means of which serious bodily harm which, besides being experienced as an important path to female adulthood by many Sierra Leonean women, verifiably causes many deaths, serious health problems, and emotional distress is justified by way of pointing at cultural specificities. Neither do I see a good reason, why anthropologists should act as advocates for the most conservative and traditionally minded sections of any of the societies they study. FGC is a very controversial issue throughout contemporary Africa and Africans speaking out against it are no less authentic than those in favour of FGC. Yes, FGC is being misunderstood more than understood by outsiders, but no, this is no reason to defend its practice. I find it problematic to downplay the harmfulness of FCG by saying – in a footnote – that "only [sic] 10 per cent of sexual dysfunctionality and medical complications among circumcised women could be attributed to female genital cutting and [that] there is no evidence that FGC impairs or destroys sexual sensitivity, since the 'female penis' is so deeply embedded and the sexually sensitive parts of the body so extensive that clitoridectomy alone cannot reduce sexual pleasure."

What Jackson seems to ignore is that FGC is not a matter of choice. Retaining her "female penis" implies a serious damage of a woman's social reputation particularly in traditional society and (thereby) restricts further her already limited opportunities in life. Opting against FGC also implies that a woman cannot become a member of the powerful female secret society (Bundu/Sande), which the large majority of Sierra Leonean women belong to and which for many is the key institution they can turn to for support and solidarity. FGC is often enforced on women who try to resist it and being successful in resisting FGC usually implies serious disadvantages at all levels of a woman's life, at least in traditional environments. The same holds true for many other traditional obligations and restrictions that are heavily contested in Sierra Leone especially among young people who – rightfully – feel that they are being disadvantaged by them. Patrimonialism, gerontocracy, and gender inequalities are regarded as root causes of the civil war by many and as a result have come under severe attack. Traditions tend to be approved – and to stay alive – if they are adapted to contemporary needs and help people face challenges in constructive and innovative ways. They tend to be objected – and, in the long term, to be abandoned – when they obstruct people's desires and restrict people's options to change their lives for (what they consider) the better.

Despite an often implicit, in-between-the-lines tendency to favour traditional ways of achieving well-being over modern ones, Jackson succeeds in showing that there is more to well-being than monetary and material security in "Western" terms. He refers to theory in close connection to his empirical observations and he does so as a participant in the field who interacts with and closely relates to those he studies. Rather than imposing ideas and models on the people he studies, he aims at describing their everyday lives, their ways of seeing, and understanding things by engaging with them in their lives and struggles. He, thereby, also points at what unifies people irrespective of their differences in terms of origin, beliefs, and ways of life. He succeeds in that we "at the end of the day … no longer see the other as alien and a threat but as oneself under other circumstances, struggling with similar existential issues …."

Jacqueline Knörr

https://doi.org/10.5771/0257-9774-2012-1-268
Generiert durch IP '3.138.69.146', am 06.05.2024, 22:16:39.
Das Erstellen und Weitergeben von Kopien dieses PDFs ist nicht zulässig.