

IGNITION STORIES

*Indigenous Fire Ecology
in the Indo-Australian Monsoon Zone*

Cynthia Fowler

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*I dedicate this book to my father,
Donald Lionel Fowler, Sr.,
a refined gentleman with a generous heart,
true roots, and long wings.*

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

FIRE, ANCESTORS, AND THE LAND

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart**

Fire is a dramatic phenomenon everywhere, with its dual capacities to create and destroy conditions of life. Little wonder that it figures strongly in many mythological repertoires. Agni is the god of fire in Vedic traditions (Sayers 2012: 5); Prometheus is said to have brought down fire from Mt. Olympus, hidden in a fennel-stalk, as a gift to humans (Graves 1960: 144); and in folk narratives from parts of Papua New Guinea the domesticated dog is named as the benefactor of humans for having brought fire to people, enabling them to cook their food and keep warm (Vicedom 1977: 40-41; cf. Valeri 2000: 195). Claude Lévi-Strauss used the raw / cooked distinction as an important tool for understanding mythological themes from Amazonia (Lévi-Strauss 1969) and Richard Wrangham has stressed the significance of fire and cooking in the cultural evolution of humans (Wrangham 2009).

For all that, ethnographies that take fire as their central analytical topic, from which to reach out into the contours of culture and inner practices of society, are not so common. Cynthia Fowler provides us here with just such a work, based on her field investigations among the Kodi, an Austronesian-language speaking people who live on the island of Sumba in Eastern Indonesia and have been studied by Janet Hoskins (e.g. Hoskins 1997, 1998). We find fire here in many of its manifestations throughout this book, but the focus is perhaps less on familiar domestic uses and more on the ecologically connected acts of burning in forest and vegetation sites, leading to Fowler's reliance on "ignition" as a leitmotiv of her ethnography. The whole account is made more poignant because of rules instituted by the Indonesian government against some types of forest fires, which are blamed for environmental pollution and

clouds of smoke migrating out from the areas where these fires are started. Fowler's ethnography sets "ignition" into a much broader practical, cultural, and cosmological context, discussing the purposes behind burnings and their management in a forest ecosystem of plants, animals, land, and people. She provides her readers with some striking analytical terms in pursuit of her topics, such as "pyrospheres", "the intersubjectivity of fire", and "ignition stories", the narratives the Kodi and she herself provides of particular acts of burning, who was involved, and why, and what the outcomes were. In her 1998 ethnographic discussion Janet Hoskins deployed the term "biographical objects"; to this we can now, through Cynthia Fowler's work, add "biographical fires".

Aside from its poetic and cosmic meanings, fire is very much a part of ecological management among the Kodi, as it is in many agroforestry economies, or in foraging economies. Like flood, it can also wreak great damage on occasion. This potentially hazardous aspect of it (as in the adage "don't play with fire" or in the use of it as an image of passion, including both hatred and love) is both well known to people such as the Kodi and becomes an object of discussion among ecological analysts. Andrew Vayda, for example, critically discusses causal explanations of Indonesian forest fires in his chapter "Both ends of the firestick" of his recent book on human action and environmental changes (Vayda 2009: 49-77). The chapter is based partly on fieldwork carried out in East Kalimantan province of Indonesia, funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (p. 49). Vayda eschews direct discussion of the causes of the smoke-haze problems of 1997-8, but addresses himself to conservation problems in biodiversity-rich forests. His first observation is perhaps the key to the following ones. He notes that: "not all ignitions lead to forest wild fires, defined here as uncontrolled burning in forest areas" (p. 52). Vayda goes on to note that in East Kalimantan, at least, the hotspots for fire-ignition zones were in those forest areas that were subject to heavy commercial logging operations, not in ones closest to villages (p. 60). With much further local detail (q.v., pp. 62-3), he concludes that fire-management projects targeting established local indigenous communities are probably not the most efficient way to deal with such problems (p. 63): rather, logging areas and areas entered into by extra-local entrepreneurs should be scrutinized.

What is additionally interesting here is that Vayda's whole discussion is premised on the perception that forest fires are to be seen as problematic, as indeed they sometimes are. Fowler's exposition, however, shows a much more positive or nuanced side of things.

In our own long-term fieldwork in Papua New Guinea we have also seen both sides of ignition practices. First, and in a primary sense, the burning of

vegetation in order to clear garden areas for cultivation is intrinsic to the horticultural regimens of all Highlands Papua New Guinea societies, just as it is for the Kodi. Gardens are left in short or long fallow and vegetation is cut down and left to dry and at a later stage picked up as brushwood and burnt, producing ashes as fertilizer, in which new crops are then planted. Standing trees may be pollarded and further left to dry, to be used later as firewood. The fires here do not generally get out of control and are a part of land management practice generally (Sillitoe, Stewart, and Strathern 2002). Indigenous cultivators of gardens in the Highlands have thousands of years of history behind them, as well as experience in adapting their practices continually to new situations. Sillitoe's work lucidly illustrates the kind of indigenous knowledge (IK) that goes into the making of gardens among the Wola people of the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Like the Hagen people, with whom we have carried out long-term fieldwork, the Wola generally do not burn whole areas to clear a garden of undergrowth. They gather piles and burn these in specific spots and do not attempt to spread the ash over the whole garden area (Sillitoe et al. op. cit., p. 64). They sometimes, however, will dry out piles of biomass and then burn these directly into the mounds they make to plant sweet potatoes in, after a process of drying out has taken place (p. 65). Wola burning is thus targeted and small scale and does not take place in primary forest areas. The same is again true of Hagen and is probably a reflection of the relatively high population density and proximity of settlements, which would make extensive fires dangerous. Needless to say, the Kodi people are also well aware of matters like this and deplore events when fires get out of control. Indeed, Fowler notes that inappropriate ignitions, which result in damages to property, are expected to bring down punishment from the ancestors as acts that spoil the land.

A second field area in Papua New Guinea where we have worked for many years is among the Duna people of Lake Kopiago District in the Southern Highlands. These people live in forested areas in which they make extensive clearings for their gardens and settlements. They are keenly aware of the importance to them of the forest and its resources. Men hunt in it for marsupials, cassowaries, snakes, and birds, including birds used for their plumage as decoration. They harvest wild tree-pandanus fruits that grow up in the high cloud-forest areas around 7,000 feet above sea level. They gather wild-fowl eggs. Women collect mushrooms, and ferns for cooking and consumption. The forest also provides firewood, and is seen as the abode of spirits, including crevices where ancestral stone relics may be hidden. The forest is an arena of conservation: people must be careful how they make fires there. This attitude contrasts with the

practices followed in low-lying open grassland areas that fringe the massive Strickland River at the boundaries between the Duna and the people of Oksapmin to the west. There, in dry-season times, hunters deliberately burn fires in order to flush out wild pigs, which they then hunt down with the aid of dogs. These grassland fires probably have contributed to the expansion of grassland areas themselves, indicating their anthropogenic origins. They can get out of control. As we have described in previous publications (Strathern and Stewart 2000: 106-110, 2004: 118), in 1996 two men of the Aluni parish who were out hunting pigs with a large party were burnt to death by a fire that swept over them as they hurried at the vanguard of the hunters, and village people said that witches had taken the form of wild pigs and enticed the two hunters into the fire as they ran to kill them. Divination was resorted to and persons identified as the witches were accused and had to pay compensation. The two men who died should have known better how to stay out of the fires, people said, and their failure to do so was taken as a sign that local witches had deceived them. The fact of their death, and the opinion that witches are very prevalent in this low-lying area near the Strickland, explains why blame was allocated and compensation exacted.

In a parallel, but different, case in 1998 some boys of a particular parish's main cognatic group stretching downhill from Aluni to the Strickland were out in the forest and lit a fire which then accidentally spread wildly through large areas of high altitude forest in dry limestone areas. The people saw this as an act disturbing the ancestral dead, some of whose relics were in forest corners, and their leaders organized a ritual cooking of pork within the forest to apologize to the ancestors and also to make Christian prayers over the meat before it was distributed and shared among those present as an act of peace-making (Strathern and Stewart 2004: 84-87). Here, the boys were blamed for their carelessness, but no-one died, and no compensation was made between the living, but the slaughtered pigs were offered as a sacrifice to the land and to the mountain where the forest grew. Land in this sense among the Duna is called *rindi*: it is sacred because it is ancestral and must not be harmed (Stewart and Strathern 2002). Duna ideas here coincide with those of the Kodi.

Ideas that conceptualize the land of a group as sacred because it is ancestral are found very strongly among the indigenous groups in Australia, where land is often referred to in ethnographic accounts as "country". Fiona Magowan's study of mourning practices among the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land in Australia brings out this point in a particularly vivid and embodied way as she recounts how mourning songs and ritual dances are designed by the Yolngu to make a pathway for the spirit of the dead person to travel along, through

places the person was identified with in kinship terms. Magowan notes: "Songs reinforce the order of social relations and by extension people's ecological relations to country" (Magowan 2007: 81). The Yolngu are expert ecologists and their songs encapsulate much knowledge of the environment. Magowan notes that food sources are seasonal, and in the dry time between May and August people burn off grasses and find yams and other bush foods (p. 47). She does not mention any contexts in which such fires burned out of control.

Bill Gammage, an Australian historian, has dealt extensively with the use of fire by the Australian Aborigines in his book "The Biggest Estate on Earth" (Gammage 2011). He notes the very extensive damages caused by bush fires in recent times, for example the fires that burnt through almost three quarters of the Australian Capital Territory in 2003 (p. 157). Numerous other examples have appeared regularly in world news. We ourselves, traveling to visit areas of diaspora Scottish settlement north of the city of Perth in Western Australia, have encountered large swaths of forest and scrub burnt down in times of drought and attributed to deliberate arson or careless actions of casual fire-lighting. Gammage, however, immediately notes that fire can be helpful to human activities. He also reports how a Pitjantjatjara elder once explained that large bush fires seem to have come with the arrival of outsiders, as a result of the land not being properly looked after (p. 160). And he adds that whoever among the Aborigines lit a fire "answered to the ancestors" (p. 160, *ibid.*). Following on the theme of songs in Magowan's discussion, Gammage quotes the words of an Arnhem Land man: "you sing the country before you burn it. In your mind you see the fire, you know where it is going, and you know where it will stop" (p. 161). Areas of wild food crops were generally not damaged by fires (p. 165), but fires aided hunting (p. 167). Fires could kill off insects, including flies (p. 182). European settlement brought an end to the effectiveness of many of these patterns of activity (p. 182).

Colleen McCullough gives a vivid account of the devastating effects of a fire in her novel about generations of a family who migrated from New Zealand to a ranch at Drogheda in Australia, set in the 1920s and 1930s. The father of the family at the time, Paddy, is out in the bush when the storm breaks (McCullough 1977: 248). A huge lightning bolt strikes a big dead gum-tree, surrounded by dry grass, and the whole area went up in flames. Paddy's horse was tied up and his dogs "were enveloped by the racing fire, faster in gale than anything on foot or wing" (p. 249). Paddy is burned to death, and a huge fire rages in the estate area, threatening the house and yards and leading to panicked efforts to save the homestead. When rains come, the sons go out to find the father, and one of them, Stuart, is also killed by the charge of a huge wild boar, almost like

a symbol of the ferocity of the fire that killed Paddy (p. 262) or like the pigs that killed the Duna hunters. McCullough's startling narrative brings the terror of fire directly into view. If we now realize that the total effects of such fires must have been increased by the ecological changes sheep farming brought with it, we may understand indeed how "estate management" had altered since the Aborigines were stewards of the land and were able to engage in largely controlled burnings of it .

Cynthia Fowler's innovative, highly readable, and enlightening exposition of "ignition stories" and their social contexts among the Kodi will certainly inspire her readers to think about indigenous eco-logics and to ignite in their minds an appreciation of the complexities that occur when such logics, and the practices that go with them, are set into the wider political economy of the nation-state. Between the ancestors and the government the forest and its territory dwells, its future uncertain: who owns the Kodi land?

Notes

* Prof. Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Prof. Andrew Strathern are a husband and wife research team in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, and are the 2012 DeCarle Distinguished Lecturers at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. They are also Research Associates in the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and have been Visiting Research Fellows at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan during parts of every year from 2002-2012. Their long-term, diverse, and creative research work has been published in over 40 books and over 200 influential articles on their research in throughout the Pacific, Asia (mainly Taiwan), and Europe (primarily Scotland and Ireland, also on the European Union). Their most recent co-authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); and *Self and Group: Kinship in Action* (Prentice Hall, 2011). Their recent co-edited books include *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008), *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009) and *Ritual* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). They have broad interests which embrace and engage with global issues, utilizing their cross-cultural linguistic skills, a powerful comparative and interdisciplinary approach, and a uniquely engaged scholarly gaze. Their current research and writing is on the topics of political peace-making and the new arena that they

are developing on Global Disaster Anthropology Studies. Their webpages are:
 (<http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/sandspublicat.htm>)
 (<http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/>) and (<http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/>)

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