Book review


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Throughout the history of mankind, conflicts have been a common factor leaving hardship, suffering, and privation in their wake. They have also stimulated dreams of finding a new home, offering hope for a better future than would have been the case in the old homeland. Although, a new area was not always instantly perceived as the ideal place in which to live, it did seem to be free from the threat of danger. The hope of a better future in areas other than wherever they were born has inspired many people to leave behind their places of origin, ancestral lands, families, and memories to go in search of pastures new.

The book entitled *The open door; Early modern Wajorese statecraft and diaspora* by Kathryn Anderson Wellen presents an interesting historical overview of migration by the ethnic group known as the Wajorese from the southern-western Sulawesi peninsula, who have dispersed to different places throughout the Indonesian Archipelago and beyond. The book is divided into eight chapters, with several maps, photos, and illustrative sketches depicting particular historical accounts.

The author describes how the Wajorese people established themselves in their homeland, characterizing the local rulers as once the central government in South Sulawesi. Historical accounts say that the Wajorese people were more or less continually embroiled in wars with various small kingdoms in their area of South Sulawesi up to the arrival of the Dutch in the region. Thereafter, the Wajorese people turned their aggression towards the intruders from outside, the Dutch, and launched the conflict later known as the Makassar War. This constant warfare was one of the reasons the Wajo people migrated to different places. The author also suggests that another reason the Wajorese people
migrated from their homeland was their desire to find metal to make tools for farming and trading. This quest encouraged the Wajorese to leave their homeland and sail across the seas. As the author describes, migration was the decision which must have been taken by the leaders of the communities living in Wajoq who wanted to search for new livelihoods by developing businesses in other places besides in their homeland. Their pride in their fame as a maritime community and their struggle to achieve lasting success in trading and finding other places to settle were other essential reasons for Wajorese people to migrate. People sailed over the seas and explored other places beyond their homelands to win fame as a seafaring group. Consequently the Wajorese communities dispersed to found settlements in various places but mainly in East Kalimantan, the Malay regions, and West Sumatra.

The centrality of the Wajoq migration was based on a number of factors “[..] all of the Wajorese origin myths attribute foreign origins to the first Wajorese leaders, and the chronicles present Wajoq itself as a land of colonization. Furthermore, the right to migrate is encoded in the Wajorese system of government” (p. 38). This steadfast belief characterized the patterns of Wajorese migration. The Wajoq migrants assimilated with the culture and governance of social life in the places in which they made their homes. Nevertheless, when they voyaged across the sea, the Wajorese leaders still continued to organize their immigrant communities under the system of government they had brought from their place of origin; therefore, the identity of their state administration was maintained and preserved.

The impact of the expansion of the pattern of governance brought by the Wajorese leaders and their people led to the emergence of two patterns of governance. First, the Wajoq patterns brought from their homeland, enriched the lives of the local people wherever the Wajoq resided. Second, as the local governance structures had to work in tandem with local customs and traditions, inevitably they were to some degree influenced by individual leaders associated with the local government structures through intermarriage. As illustrated by the author in Chapter III, intermarriage between the Wajorese people and local residents was common and often consciously undertaken to strengthen their presence in the new places. These marriages were not confined to ordinary people but were also entered into by people who had influence and power in the regions. Adaptation and assimilation were indispensable to the success of the Wajorese migrants enabling them to become a part of local social and cultural life.

Taking the example of the migration of the Wajorese communities, the author gives a clear and very relevant historical example of the contemporary social movement known as a diaspora. The concept of diaspora is raised to a practical level when it takes into account both the geographical migration of people and offers a conceptual framework which enables their politics, economics and identity to be analysed. The concept of diaspora is now a mainstream issue in academic debates. Using the concept of diaspora, the author explains that Wajorese communities have always maintained their
relationship with their homeland. The relationship has endured because the politics and government in South Sulawesi peninsula have always remained in the hands of the local rulers. The Wajoqese maintained their connection with their place of origin by keeping their own system of administration and their Wajoqese identity. In Dutch colonial times, the relationship between the Wajoqese and their family branches in other islands and the Wajoqese people in their place of origin remained strong, as is reflected in their politics (p. 65) and commerce (p. 86).

The author elucidates a few historical records which discuss the Wajoqese people, most of them about several prominent individual leaders of the Wajoqese community rather than writing about the majority of the Wajoq as an ethnic group. The leaders of Wajoq are portrayed as important figures in the emergence of Wajoq communities in the Archipelago, particularly in commerce and other significant aspects of life. The role of prominent Wajoqese individuals in politics is interpreted as a way to ensure and secure their business in commercial networks in the Archipelago as well as retain their identity as Wajoq. The representation of the Wajoqese identity by the prominent individuals, in my opinion, does not give a fully rounded picture of the life of the Wajoqese migrants and their identity as an ethnic group. If the concept of diaspora is strongly correlated with the notion of identity this should be reflected by the majority of community members of society. In fact, Wajoqese identity is multiple and, against their historical backgrounds in the diaspora, the Wajoqese people have constructed multiple identity practices for their own benefit to ensure that they would be accepted geographically and socially overseas (pp. 109-112).

My conclusion is that in her book, the author has attempted to provide detailed information of the diaspora of Wajoqese communities in various places in Southeast Asia. However, not all the information she has provided is confined solely to the Wajoqese people. Historical accounts of the Bugis, for instance, are used by the author to provide a broader picture in which to discuss the people living in South Sulawesi or even in the island of Sulawesi as a whole. The Bugis have been famous in South Sulawesi, an area known for its permeability, and, unfettered by ethnic boundaries, during their history of expansion this group never considered themselves as an isolated society. Another characteristic of the Bugis ethnic group has been their concern about maintaining their relative status. The Bugis have always had a profound interest in defence of their honour. Bilateral kinship has been another element characterizing Bugis identity. Their special knowledge and palpable aspects of heritage, like the maritime tradition they so honoured, could have encouraged the Wajoqese to have shared in some of the reputation of the Bugis as their part of their own identity. There is no reflection in the book about whether particular information recorded about the Bugis can also be extended to the Wajoqese people. Nevertheless, after going through the historical accounts, the author concludes that: “Despite the many ways in which Wajoq and the Wajoqese diaspora cooperated, there was one area in which they were
completely distinct from each other: political representation” (p. 161). It seems that the distinct Wajorese identity has always remained readily identifiable in their political representation and this is what differentiated them from other South Sulawesi groups.

The system of statecraft built by the Wajorese communities in the settlements they founded overseas, in which they nurtured their identity but also did not overlook their social connections to the local powers, seems to have been the principal reason for their success in sustaining their commerce and politics. Their efforts to build strong connections with other people through geographical expansion and in the divergent social conditions they met beyond their place of origin were intended to regulate the all-important trade links and keep them safely under their control. The trading system they built enabled them to remain connected to their area of origin and with their relatives who were living in other regions of the Archipelago. So, The open door not only enriches the more general concepts of statecraft and diaspora, but closer to home it also adds to our knowledge of the identity and of the political system of the Wajorese migrants in the Archipelago.