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Eyes of the Ocean (Mata nu wawa) by Syaman Rapongan (review)

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Syaman Rapongan. *Eyes of the Ocean (Mata nu wawa)*. Translated by Darryl Sterk. New York: Columbia University Press, 2025. 272 pp. Hardcover \$110.00, ISBN 9780231219808. Paperback \$28.00, ISBN 9780231219792. E-book \$27.99, ISBN 9780231562904.

Euro-American scholars and Asian states have long viewed “Asia” as a postcolonial space where either Western notions of “indigeneity” are problematic or all citizens were (and are) united in their movements for independence from foreign aggressors, especially Euro-Americans. Euro-American scholarship on indigeneity has been further constrained by its geographical anchoring or centering in the Americas, where it is presumed to apply unproblematically to certain groups of people and in relation to which scholars have developed and critiqued dominant conceptions of indigeneity. In writing this review, I feel this constraint and am tempted to put Syaman Rapongan’s work in conversation with recent Indigenous Studies scholarship from the Americas focusing on Indigenous resurgence and refusal in the face of ongoing experiences of settler-state colonialism (Corntassel et al. 2018; Simpson 2014).

In *Eyes of the Ocean*, Indigenous Tao writer, scholar, activist, and fisherman Syaman Rapongan offers an engaging and powerful narrative drawing on his and his people’s experiences over the past half century that fundamentally challenges these longstanding views of Asia as a postcolonial space where the concept of indigeneity is at the very least problematic if not inapplicable. The narrative centers on Syaman Rapongan, his people—the Tao—and their “ocean First Nation” of Pongso no Tao. Auto-biographic/ethnographic and poetic in style, *Eyes of the Ocean* tells a story of colonization, survivance, and resurgence, or in Syaman Rapongan’s words, “a story of blood and sweat, of suffering and survival, but also of many meetings and memories that I cherish to this day” (p. 5). In this context, the colonizers include initially the Japanese military and later Han Chinese officials, soldiers, and teachers from another much younger island nation, namely

the Republic of China or Taiwan, as well as Christian missionaries and priests from Europe and Taiwan.

But Syaman Rapongan goes further in decentering the Tao and Pongso no Tao from Taiwan and Asia altogether, and re-centers them in relation to Oceania. This decolonizing practice is reflected in a powerful homecoming of sorts sparked by his discovery in a small bookstore in the Cook Islands of an atlas with a world map centered on the antimeridian, which runs through (rather than bisects) Oceania (p. 2). Here it is not land but rather the sea that is generative of Indigenous culture, in this case Tao culture, which he identifies as fish-centric. This emphasis on the sea, particularly Oceania, as a recurrent and generative space and source of connectivity recalls the work of Tongan and Fijian writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa. Hau'ofa's critique of the Euro-American colonial policies and mindsets that have produced and represented a view of Oceania and its peoples as disconnected ("islands in the sea" rather than a "sea of islands"), inferior, and dependent on outsiders for "development" or "civilization" is especially apt in reference to Taiwan's colonization of Pongso no Tao and the Tao people as described by Syaman Rapongan. I highly encourage readers to read Syaman Rapongan's *Eyes of the Ocean* alongside Hau'ofa's *We Are the Ocean* (2008).

Eyes of the Ocean opens with an excellent introduction to Syaman Rapongan and his work along with the colonial history of Pongso no Tao by Canadian anthropologist Scott Simon. Simon has worked with Indigenous communities in Taiwan and Pongso no Tao for decades and personally knows Syaman Rapongan. In the introduction, Simon stresses the importance and politics of names and naming. This is a theme that Syaman Rapongan weaves throughout the entire book. The following quote speaks for itself:

... my tribal name was Si Cigewat, the name given to me by the government was Shih Nu-lai ... when the foreigners came, we might have called them a "nation." And then that nation replaced our personal names with Chinese names, our ethnic name, Tao, with Yami, and our name for our national territory, Pongso no Tao, with Lanyu, "Orchid Island." They called our territory a Mountain Compatriot Reservation, so that it was reserved for the nation whenever the nation needed it. They disparaged our national festivals as mere local celebrations. They changed our future. (pp. 77–78)

Ultimately, “colonial violence aims to sever relationships,” whether in relation to people, inclusive of ancestors, places, or practices (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua 2018, p. 29). Syaman Rapongan’s refusal (and intense dislike) of his foreign, colonially imposed name (Shih Nu-lai) is a form of resistance and reclamation that recalls other acts of Indigenous resurgence focused on “remembering, restorying, reinterpreting, reconnecting to past and future generations, relating to one another to maintain continuity and wholeness as a people” (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua 2018, p. 29). In fact, the name “Syaman Rapongan” translates from the Tao language as “father of Rapongan,” driving home the primacy of kinship relations in Tao culture.

In chapter three, Syaman Rapongan describes a powerful reunion between his father and eldest sister, who had two decades prior eloped to Taiwan with her Han Chinese husband. The broader movement of Tao people, especially youth, to Taiwan is another example of the severing nature of colonial violence premised on the allure of “civilization” and “progress” framed in opposition to presumably “uncivilized” or “undeveloped” colonized peoples, places, and practices. During their reunion, Syaman Rapongan’s father carries out a Tao ceremony in which he gives proper Tao names to his long-estranged daughter (“Sinan Manieiwān”) and each of his four grandchildren. His father further becomes “Syapen Manineiwān,” reflecting his newly discovered and celebrated status as a grandfather in relation to his eldest daughter and her children (pp. 145–146).

In the book’s main chapters, five in total, Syaman Rapongan shares an interwoven collection of stories about his deeply personal odyssey of self- and other-discovery, an odyssey that involves a journey outward on the ripples of the sea from his “ocean First Nation” of Pongso no Tao to the foreign island nation of Taiwan and much later other parts of the Indigenous world, in particular Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) and Ürümqi in Xinjiang, China. Along the way, Syaman Rapongan brings us into the worlds of missionary boarding houses, state schooling systems, and capitalist factories/warehouses, all during a time of rapid economic and political change in Taiwan and Pongso no Tao. His odyssey concludes (even as it is just beginning anew) with a grand homecoming to Pongso no Tao *and* Oceania more broadly. Along the way, he experiences discrimination and kindness, limitations and opportunities, struggles and achievements, othering and belonging, and separation and connection.

Syaman Rapongan's homecoming to Pongso no Tao in the late 1980s further marks the beginning of his engagements in Taiwan's, then expanding, Indigenous Peoples' movement. This engagement is marked by his spearheading an initiative demanding the removal of a nuclear waste storage site originally constructed on Pongso no Tai by the Taiwanese state-owned Taipower Company in 1982 (pp. xii–xiv). Syaman Rapongan briefly tells us that he called the initiative the “*Exorcize the Anito!*” movement (p. 224), bringing us full circle to the opening chapter. In that chapter, Syaman Rapongan describes at length and contextualizes his early childhood experiences of an annual mid-winter ceremony during which the Tao “worship our ancestors and evict the *anito*,” or devils, from Pongso no Tao (p. 13). In his animated retelling of the ceremony, Syaman Rapongan further introduces us to the foreign colonial forces working to “civilize” (and essentially denigrate, decenter, and even erase) Tao-ness, including European Christian missionaries and Han Chinese officials and teachers.

This colonial violence is saliently reflected in the simple yet profound acts of (re)naming and thereby simultaneously erasing and subjugating people, culture, and land, a recurring theme throughout *Eyes of the Ocean*. Yet as Syaman Rapongan tells and shows us, the Tao and other Indigenous groups the world over have long challenged and resisted these colonial acts of violence and erasure through everyday acts of resurgence that serve to sustain and restore their relations to their communities, lands, seas, and practices. For Syaman Rapongan, it is ultimately his intertwined homecomings to Pongso no Tao *and* Oceania that bring him much-needed healing, wholeness, and vision. His concluding paragraph is a powerful reflection on the re-centering and restorative nature of these homecomings:

I think I actually can call this book of mine a work of “colonial literature,” because I think in Tao and translate into Chinese, and because my spirit, my flesh, and my knowledge are nurtured by the sea. I would like to categorize my Chinese-language compositions as “colonial ocean island literature.” While writing, I address my ancestors, my ethnic community. I also speak to my map of the world. (pp. 234–235)

It is with an additional layer of translation by Darryl Sterk, a Hong Kong-based scholar with Canadian roots, that this English-language version of *Eyes of*

the Ocean has been brought to the world. While Sterk includes brief technical notes in the book on this act of translation, he goes much deeper into the actual challenges involved in a separate blog that I highly recommend to readers (2025).

In conclusion, Syaman Rapongan's *Eyes of the Ocean* is well worth the read. While it will certainly appeal to scholars working in Taiwan, East Asian, and Oceania Studies, it will further appeal to scholars from across the humanities and social sciences with interests in ethnicity, Indigeneity, religion, (post)colonialism, and human–environmental relations. I cannot find any limitations with this excellent and engaging book other than being left with a desire to hear more from Syaman Rapongan about different aspects of his fascinating life!

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