

**Marx, Tobias:** Zigeunkulturen im Wandel. Über Roma-/Zigeunereliten in Bulgarien und Mazedonien. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014. 386 pp. ISBN 978-3-8376-2937-8. Preis: € 44.99

Only a tiny note indicates that this voluminous work had its origin in a doctoral dissertation defended at Leipzig University in 2012. It is unclear whether the manuscript had been revised prior to publication, but judging from the numerous references throughout the text to “this dissertation,” it had not. That perhaps explains the length, which could – and should – have been reduced by more careful editing. It takes too many pages of literature reviews and explanations before we get to Marx’s original contribution. That consists of a “thick description” à la Clifford Geertz of the actors involved in the construction of Romani political elites in Bulgaria and Macedonia.

The work begins with the author’s description of the methods and goals pursued in his fieldwork that took place between 2008 and 2010 in a number of Bulgarian and Macedonian communities known for the presence of influential Romani leaders. Early on, Marx mentions a leitmotiv that pops up repeatedly throughout the book, namely the question of the leaders’ legitimacy. He indicates that since they differ from the constituents they claim to represent in being better educated, wealthier, and, above all, assimilated to the point of barely understanding the Romani language, “the question of the legitimacy of their leadership is, therefore, virulent” (36). A historical overview of Romani leadership emphasizes the role of various representatives appointed by state authorities to act as middlemen for the purposes of tax collection and maintenance of “law and order,” justifying the question whether things have changed since Ottoman, post-Ottoman, and communist times.

Marx tackles this central question in chapters 5 and 6 where he presents most of the empirical material gathered in Bulgaria and Macedonia. We learn here some interesting facts, such as that there are 28 Roma parties in Bulgaria, most of them being personal creations of rich Kalderash businessmen who use these political entities to further their own influence. The author interviewed one such *Rom baro* who maintained that Kalderash leaders’ foremost goals are to make money and maintain traditions. By contrast, young leaders representing other Romani communities emphasized education as a significant value for the emerging elite but also bemoaned the waning support from the West for local NGOs and the educated Romani professionals staffing them.

The bulk of Marx’s observations and conclusions comes from Macedonia, a country that is clearly at the centre of his attention. Unlike Bulgaria which is represented by two communities – Sofia and Lom – and twelve activists, the situation in Macedonia is sketched in a more nuanced manner. The author reproduces interviews with seventeen Romani leaders living in Skopje, Kumanovo, Tetovo, and Šutka whereby the last location is presented with particular interest and attention to detail. In the aftermath of the devastating 1963 earthquake, Šutka, a suburb of Skopje, became a resettlement site for Roma from destroyed neighbourhoods, and it grew into a cosmopoli-

tan centre where Romani leaders gathered popular support for their political ambitions. It was here that Abdi Farik became the first Romani member of Macedonian parliament in 1971, and it was largely thanks to his efforts that Roma were entrenched in the Macedonian constitution as an official minority that qualified for all kinds of protective measures, including Romani-language radio and television programs. On the eve of Macedonia’s independence, Abdi Farik founded here the first Roma party, and Šutka rose to further prominence as a city governed by Roma. Marx recounts the events of the 2009 mayoral election which brought to power Elvis Bajram, the son of a prominent businessman and financier of Farik’s party. The previous mayor had escaped to the United States together with the city’s coffers, and Bajram’s election was accompanied by many scandals and accusations of fraud that were never properly investigated. These conditions led one of the more prominent politicians to suggest that Macedonian Romani leaders are “merchants and criminals ... who do business with the misfortune and the votes of the people. And the result is always the same” (217).

Marx pays attention not only to prominent figures like the likes of Farik and the father-son Bajram team, but also to more grassroots representatives who lack the financial resources of the “businessmen” and, therefore, pursue different strategies. What is remarkable in this respect is the sheer number of highly educated and multilingual political activists who all seem to have spent some time abroad honing their skills and gaining valuable international experience. But while the acquisition of higher education is indispensable for rising above the local level (except in the case of the affluent businessmen-politicians), this step also contributes to a considerable degree of alienation from the home community and its members. Hence Marx asks the important question whether contemporary leaders differ significantly from their predecessors. Are they still mere middlemen, conveying the needs of the state rather than those of their own constituents? Instead of a stark Roma vs. *gadje* dualism, Marx prefers the concept of “transculturalism” which underlines the hybridity of contemporary Romani leaders and their political goals.

Marx’s book is valuable for the wealth of empirical data it provides about a topic of growing importance. The interviews with an impressive number of political figures certainly enrich the field of Romani politics. But what is sorely missing is the voice of the ordinary rank-and-file people supposed to be represented by these leaders. Without conveying that voice, Marx cannot effectively answer the question of legitimacy that has such a prominent place in this work.

David Z. Scheffel

**Matthews, Peter J.:** On the Trail of Taro. An Exploration of Natural and Cultural History. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2014. 429 pp. ISBN 978-4-906962-17-4. (Senri Ethnological Studies, 88)

Themes of research are commonly chosen on the basis of what we encounter during our studies, sometimes rooted in things that caught our imagination during our formative years. By recounting how his father and grandfa-

ther before him used to grow taro in their gardens in New Zealand, Peter J. Matthews introduces us to its story. An often neglected root crop in literature, it actually represents an important source of food for people living in the tropical regions of the world, and has done so for thousands of years. Physically, taro is a semiaquatic aroid (i.e., it belongs to the Araceae family), with large heart-shaped leaves and underground corms that constitute the main edible part. Medical uses are also recorded. Wild taro plants produce flowers and viable seeds throughout the tropics; however, the predominant form of reproduction in the wild and in cultivated fields is through self-propagation of vegetative forms (corms, cormels). This plant is now cultivated in all of the tropical and subtropical regions of the world, with the distribution outside its natural range mainly due to human dispersal.

The retrieval of archaeobotanical taro starch grains in Pleistocene and Holocene sites suggests that this crop may be one of the oldest cultivated plants known to humankind. By following direct and indirect approaches, the author has examined the traces marked in the genetics of taro, and searched for signs left by people who transported taro during their journeys. The work of previous authors was not only inspirational but also essential in learning “that many of them have usually thought ‘his’ thoughts long before him.” This is also the meaning of the *trail*.

The central idea that the author is keen to convey is that only through the combination of botanical, ecological, genetic, and ethnographic disciplines it is possible to understand the history of one of the oldest cultivated crops. The research questions listed in the first chapter set the scene for this premise. The first question is a fundamental one: “By looking at modern (living) plants, how can we learn about the natural and cultural history of a crop?” This question implies an initial distinction between a natural species and a cultivated one, and this in turn leads to the next question “Does the natural geographic range of a natural species correspond to that of the cultivated one?” In the case of taro this spatial characterisation might not be so obvious. In this context, the distribution of wild types of taro offers a starting point for the identification of the natural taro range, and related species narrow down the geographical area of taro as a natural species with its origins in Southeast Asia. The analysis goes on to examine the role that taro might have had in an indigenous development of agriculture in New Guinea, where pollen production, insect association, and agriculture systems are all indicators which are studied for their relevance. In this respect, the author’s long experience in researching and observing noncultivated varieties knowledgeably shows how diverse natural wild-types of taro distributed in a wide geographical area might have been domesticated on multiple occasions.

The search for answers is meticulous and nothing is taken for granted with the reader always being treated as a critical observer. Arguments are often presented with hypotheses, questions, and the author’s own thoughts formulated through conceptual explanations. “On the Trail of Taro” is not only a book about a tropical plant; it also

represents a practical and useful guide for students who want to engage in the scientific and cultural study of the relationships between plants and people. It is, therefore, a convincing example of the significance and relevance of ethnobotanical studies. The laboratory techniques used to conduct taro research and described in this book may sometimes be outdated and hence overtaken by more modern procedures aided by elaborated computer-based calculations, but it nonetheless offers an example of the evolution and progress of ethnobotanical research in the last thirty years. In itself, it is also a picture of the progress of science through the eyes of taro.

The reader is taken on a fascinating journey by this book across the scientific research of the origins and dispersal of a crop where tantalising signs left by our previous researchers seem endless. Some simple illustrations by the author effectively show how it is possible to record field observations. Ethnobotany is indeed a field science, and as such, it must be played out through the eyes and minds of farmers, growers, men, and women who have been following taro life cycles since the appearance of its first green and tender shoots.

The book is divided into four parts. The first introduces the story of the plant, highlighting how writings can be used as a method for research purposes, and lays down the foundation stone for a geographical appraisal of taro in New Zealand. The second part reproduces an edited version of the author’s Master’s thesis, a study of taro distribution and variation in New Zealand. The author’s home country acted as a true living laboratory for the study of taro variants, which in turn led to the study of the origins, dispersal, and domestication of taro treated in the third part, the author’s doctoral thesis. Every answer inevitably leads to another question, and in doing so the author, and so the reader, follows the invisible and yet perceivable trail of taro. Part 4 covers some general trends in taro research to complete the picture, thus concluding the voyage of the natural and cultural history of taro.

Representing a lifetime’s research, “On the Trail of Taro” is an indispensable resource for an academic audience interested in Asian and Pacific vegiculture. It is a book that not only tells the story of taro origins, dispersal, and domestication, but it also shows how this fascinating story came to be told.

Ilaria Grimaldi

**Milner, Murray, Jr.:** *Elites. A General Model*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015. 203 pp. ISBN 978-0-7456-7183-3. Price: € 22.90

It is always nice to read new work on elites, Murray Milner, Jr.’s “Elites. A General Model” in this case. The book starts well, with Milner highlighting a number of issues that I, as an anthropologist studying elites, very much agree with. For one, he argues that the literature on elites has a far too limited focus on the roles of non-elites. He explicitly includes the latter in the process and argues that the power of elites is often overstated while the power of non-elites is understated (8) – an important point in my opinion, which I also discuss in my own work. Milner, moreover, uses a straightforward definition of power. He