

BOOK REVIEW

Southeast Asian Anthropologies: National Traditions and Transnational Practices

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Renato Rosaldo, Evelyn Blackwood, James C. Scott, Clifford Geertz, Janet Carsten, Benedict Anderson, Miriam Stark, Wilhem Solheim II, Fenella Cannell – to name a few – are some of the anthropologists and archeologists from the West whose works on Southeast Asian countries have become classics in the field. With their foundational works having stirred and shifted disciplinary debates, it is a mystery why the American Anthropological Association until today does not have a Southeast Asian section which would gather specialists on the region during the association’s annual meetings and which would open a space for mentoring new scholars. It is even a bigger mystery why works by scholars of Southeast Asian heritage have not made it to mainstream anthropological conversations, which attests to the work that needs to be done to impact the flow of knowledge, this time foregrounding the works of Southeast Asian anthropologists.

The ten chapters in the collection *Southeast Asian Anthropologies: National Traditions and Transnational Practices* take on a “world anthropologies” perspective – in the plural – to follow earlier arguments that emphasize the different contexts and imperatives that have produced different forms of knowledge. Edited by Eric C. Thompson and Vineeta Sinha, the collection brings together authors that represent contemporary “practices of anthropologists ‘at home’ in Southeast Asia” (4). The chapters in the book provide a strong introduction to anthropological works emerging from Southeast Asia by Southeast Asians in an effort to make scholarship and political advocacies from the region more visible in the larger anthropological conversations.

The formation of “traditions” in the anthropological scholarship of Southeast Asia around the concept of “nationhood,” and departures from this frame fill the pages of this collection. Writing about the case of the Philippines, Jose Jowel Canuday and Emma Porio discuss in Chapter 1 the generalized “Filipino” identity and projects of state-making in the Philippines in relation to anthropological theory-making. They trace the formation of Filipino identity to various historical moments: nineteenth century Spanish Philippines, U.S. colonial occupation, postwar rehabilitation, the Marcos dictatorship, and the post-Marcos democratic years. The authors deliver a productive discussion of anthropology intertwined with identitarian politics in the Philippines, unpacking along the way the “fissures in colonial anthropology” and Filipino anthropologists’ responses to these enduring universalist renderings of identity in the country.

That academic fields struggle for relevance and existence are set within damages of violence and colonialisms appear consistently in all chapters. In Chapter 2, Chivoin Peou discusses Cambodian anthropology as it struggled for survival during long periods marked by social upheavals, such as the spillover of conflict from Vietnam in the 60s and the reign of the Khmer Rouge in the 70s. These were underpinned by French colonial influence which introduced “legacies” through which modernity and development could be achieved. Peou argues that anthropology was a useful tool in the effort to construct and reconstruct Cambodia’s past in the context of social upheavals, but the

effort “remains a long way from coming of age” (76). Layers upon layers of conflict have severely damaged educational structures resulting in a dearth of suitable venues for advanced anthropological training that would enable the wider use of anthropological tools for social and political repair.

The collection touches on the diverse schools of thoughts taking root in certain countries that shape local anthropological traditions. Nguyen Van Chinh suggests in Chapter 3 the necessity of breaking away from the common argument that Marxist anthropological knowledge production in Vietnam is distinguishable from Western anthropology. Nguyen rejects the iteration of Vietnamese anthropology’s “sovietization” and instead calls for locating its development at the “crossroads of socialism, nationalism, and globalization” (84). This chapter stresses the important point that anthropological traditions, those with Marxist orientations included, carry evolutionist assumptions that have repercussions on the ways that minority ethnic groups are rendered by anthropology as static and timeless.

The chapters all acknowledge the effects of colonial anthropology in the process of subjectification in Southeast Asia by “native” anthropologists. The search for the exotic other influenced by Western scholarship came at the expense of marginalizing themes that would otherwise be locally significant. Chapter 4, by Maria F. Mangahas and Suzanna Rodriguez-Roldan, provides an illuminating account of the underexplored area of maritime anthropology in the Philippines. The authors highlight the need to inquire into the “inland bias” (131) of Philippine anthropology and a need for intensified research in the coastal areas in the Philippines, especially considering the country’s archipelagic geography and the fact that the majority of its population resides in coastal areas. The dearth of research on coastal communities in the Philippines is also a result of the “terrestrial-orientation” of Western anthropological scholarship, in which Filipino scholarship is grounded.

In Chapter 5, Yeoh Seng-Guan writes about the context of anthropological knowledge production in relation to subject-making and fieldwork in Malaysia. Seng-Guan’s chapter provides an interesting historicization of academic development as it emerges from the clutches of Euro-centric theorizing and the influences of canonical works on Malaysia such as those by Raymond Firth and Edmund Leach. Seng-Guan’s account enriches debates about “native” and “indigenous” research as Malaysian anthropology is yet to expand its “transethnic” horizon given the orientation of local anthropologists to study their own communities without crossing ethnic boundaries.

The institutionalization of anthropology and search for legitimacy as a discipline in the postcolonial period appears in each chapter in the collection, but Singapore would provide a compelling example given the context of public bureaucracy in the country that exerts a strong influence on the academy. In Chapter 6, Vineeta Sinha presents a discussion of anthropology’s curious “co-jointness” with sociology which seems to receive higher priority from the state in terms of faculty appointments and support for research funding as it is “perceived to be more relevant to the needs of a developing, modern, urban society” (189). However, unlike the disciplinary split between sociology and anthropology common in Western institutions, Sinha argues that the academic landscape in Singapore accommodates a cooperation between the two, facilitating a congenial “institutional co-location” (195). Readers would perhaps be left wondering if the notion of co-jointness works organically, or if it works exactly within the expectations of the state.

In Chapter 7, Victor T. King and Zawawi Ibrahim document the local and transnational development of anthropology in Borneo’s four territories, tracing the development of the discipline through four “generations,” from “traditional” scholarship dominated by foreign researchers to the most current trends of politically grounded “cultural studies” covering a wide range of themes centered on majority and minority identities in relation to the nation-state, religion, media, migrations, interethnic conflict, heritage, and urbanity.

The overwhelmingly home-based orientation of anthropology in Indonesia is discussed in Chapter 8 by Yunita T. Winarto and Iwan M. Pirous. The authors respond to the question whether Indonesian anthropology has developed its distinct tradition of auto-ethnography, arguing that even if Indonesian anthropologists mainly work within the boundaries of the nation, there are in reality few auto-ethnographers, as the chosen fieldsites are usually not anthropologists’ home communities, rendering them “outsiders.” This form of knowledge production effectively replicates anthropological

methodological traditions of studying the other. The Indonesian example as chronicled in this chapter shows the persistence of othering in Western anthropology in the region even if locally-based anthropologists study at “home.”

In Chapter 9, Dang Nguyen Anh discusses the instrumentalization of Vietnamese anthropology in the age of Doi Moi or Renovation (1986–2015) that was oriented at market-oriented reform. The author writes that from a predominantly descriptive ethnological work in the pre-Doi Moi focused on ethnic minorities, contemporary anthropology in Vietnam has become participatory, mixed, and interdisciplinary, with research aiming to meet the “practical needs” of Vietnam. Anh points out that investment decisions in Vietnam “are heavily influenced by research findings produced by anthropologists” (283). Within the context of Vietnam’s heightened global integration, the author seems to call for “international integration” which includes a form or anthropological “renovation” that globalizes by transitioning to the use of English language as its primary tool for research, and with anthropologists welcoming opportunities to dialog with policy makers.

Ratana Tosakul writes about the emerging trend in critical transnational anthropology in Thailand in Chapter 10. Tosakul sees promise in global and transnational anthropology as these provide a “critical counterpoint to conventional, essentialist concepts of culture” (311). A “new wave” of Thai anthropologists coming home from study overseas in the early 2000s brought back to Thailand critical theory that innovated anthropological conversations beyond ethnography of village life, to include investigation into the cultural, social, and political lives within the fluid geopolitical borders of Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar. I would agree that anthropologists of Southeast Asia must seriously take into account the effect of migration and cross-border mobility in transforming everyday life in the communities that we study; a transnational lens is critical to breaking down assumptions about the timelessness of the anthropological subject.

The collection adds to the expanding volume of works highlighting themes in the region such as Jane Atkinson and Shelly Errington’s *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (1990), Stephen Sparkes and Signes Howell’s *The House in Southeast Asia: A Changing Social, Economic and Political Domain* (2003), among others. The book will be useful to researchers of Southeast Asia who are looking to be introduced to the formation of anthropological scholarship in the region. Researchers and graduate students looking to build the foundations of their project will find a wealth of references and suggested research direction across all chapters. The collection introduces readers to a wide range of possibilities in anthropological research in the region, but readers looking to be introduced to queer anthropologies would have to look elsewhere. Professors of anthropology looking to decolonize and decanonize their syllabus would also benefit from the plethora of foundational works by anthropologists of Southeast Asia beyond those commonly appearing in Western scholarship.

Overall, the chapters provide readers a bird’s eye view of the common experiences of colonialism, dispossession, and violence in the region, and the dynamic academic and practical responses that anthropologists have undertaken, and the challenges that remain as the discipline seeks to find its own place amid the shadows of colonial anthropology and burgeoning authoritarian regimes.

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