

Book Reviews

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Everyday Life in Southeast Asia. By Kathleen Adams and Kathleen Gillogly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 364 pp.

Ethnographers and cultural anthropologists spend long periods of fieldwork getting to know the intimate, complex and at times conflicted lives of the people about whom they write. They are, as a result, loath to simplify the world, and, as a collection of essays written mainly by anthropologists and ethnographers, *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia* has no single, simple take-home point. Rather, it tells us much about the world in which we live and about people from across Southeast Asia who live in it with us. It is a superb introduction to the diverse lives and cultures of the region, as well as an excellent example of contemporary anthropology.

While the essays in *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia* do not explicitly adopt a common disciplinary perspective, the book is largely situated within the American tradition of sociocultural anthropology. Well over half of the contributors are either American anthropologists or anthropologists employed at American institutions. Several are Australians. Of the three from Southeast Asia, one earned his doctorate in anthropology in the United States and another in Australia. Perhaps for this reason, the volume highlights the enduring strengths, and also some of the weaknesses, of social and cultural anthropology.

One minor but unfortunate feature of the book is that the editors and several of the contributors pitch their work explicitly to an American or “Western” audience. The introduction opens by stating, “Southeast Asia is one of the most dynamic, complex, and fascinating areas of the world. And yet, for most Americans, it also remains one of the world’s least understood regions” (p. 1). Similarly, an

otherwise insightful essay on Toba Batak senses of self insistently contrasts them to senses of self that “we in the West” have (p. 35). To encounter such unnecessary, rhetorical parochialism is a shame in a book that can certainly be engaging and insightful for a global English-reading audience.

Despite these minor lapses into neo-Orientalism, the volume draws strengths from the modern anthropological tradition of cultural comparativism and from more recent concerns with reflexivity and positionality. The chapters by Pattana Kitiarsa and by Juli Edo and Anthony Williams-Hunt (co-authored with Robert Knox Dentan) demonstrate the combined passion and analytical perceptiveness that flourish when scholars from Southeast Asia engage in “anthropology at home”. Pattana was an anthropologist originally from Northeast Thailand. Juli Edo, an anthropologist, and Anthony Williams-Hunt, a lawyer and scholar, are both Semai from Malaysia. Most of the other authors demonstrate the practice of anthropology in a more traditional mode of “strangers abroad”. Their long-term fieldwork has necessarily entailed a degree of productive, cross-cultural comparison between their American or other “outsider” worldviews and the worldviews of those whom they have come to know through work with peoples and societies across the region.

The greatest strength of the book is the intimate portraits of individuals whose stories and experiences inform the contributors’ understandings of their subject. Over the past twenty or more years, anthropologists have struggled to place a meaningful label on the people from whom we learn. The terms “informants”, “subjects”, “interlocutors”, “collaborators” and “respondents” all fall short in one way or another. Cultural anthropology maintains a tradition of “participant observation” and “ethnographic interviewing” — or, in less ostentatious terms, hanging out with people, spending time doing with them what they do, asking questions, observing and above all listening. This book is a terrific example of the pay-off of these methods. The people about whom we learn as individuals in the book, the anthropologists’ “informants”, are at the heart of the rich “thick description” on display across all the chapters. Equally

striking, these rich accounts are conveyed in a mere ten or so pages in each case. We read about Ambena Ladang, a Torajan woodcarver who strives to produce art and peaceful social relations; Ta Kam, a Khmer elder whose past haunts his tenuous relationship with his village community in the present; Mama', Saleh and Dadong, South Sulawesi fishermen who proudly catch fish "with our own hands, not with bombs!" (p. 308); Mai, a young woman in Hanoi, fed up with war museums, yet patriotically building a new Vietnam through education, hard work and fashionable consumption; *Phrakhru* Pitak, a Buddhist monk from Northern Thailand who ordains trees to save the forests; kickboxer Thongchai To Silachai, "the Thai version of Rocky Balboa" (p. 196), whose rise and fall speak to the pride and passions of Thai masculinity; Alema, a Lisu girl living in the mountainous border regions of Chiang Mai province and contemplating marriage and migration in a changing world. Their stories and many others are likely to be most engaging and most memorable to non-specialist readers, be they undergraduates or others.

Theoretical concerns take a backseat in most of the chapters. That said, the book does address, in more or less subtle ways, major anthropological questions, both new and old. The editors have organized the twenty-four chapters into seven sections of three or four chapters. The sections address notions of the self and identity, family, nation-states, religion, the arts and popular culture, war and recovery, and globalization and ecology. This organizing scheme is perfectly reasonable, and the editors do a fine job in drawing the analytical thread through the fabric of their book's component chapters. But reading the volume from cover to cover underscores another strength of sociocultural anthropology — the tradition of holistic cultural analysis. While the goal of describing "whole cultures" has long been abandoned, anthropology maintains an appreciation for complexity and non-reductive analysis. The goal of much anthropology remains to pay attention to the dynamic interactions of domains such as kinship, religion, economics, politics, education, personhood, environment, and ... the list could go on. While the editors introduce the various themes around which they

have organized the book concisely and effectively, I want to suggest here that additional themes come across clearly — if in complex ways — as one reads the chapters and diverse stories in the book: cultural dynamics, modernity and change, gender, and power and politics.

The chapters go a long way in answering, without foreclosing, as Dentan et al. (p. 292) put it, the “question that was once common in introductory anthropology classes: what do people mean when they talk about culture?” Nearly all of the chapters address, in one way or another, the dynamics of structure and agency, which have become a central analytic in contemporary anthropology and social theory more generally. Nowadays, this is largely what anthropologists mean when they talk about culture — the sorts of structures or systems of human relationships and meanings that both constrain and enable people’s lives. At the same time, anthropologists are keen to attend to the active agency of individuals and groups who act within, produce, reproduce and transform such structures. The dynamics of structure and agency are dealt with most explicitly in the chapter by Michele Ford and Lenore Lyons, who relate the life histories of Lia and Ani, two Indonesian migrants to the Riau archipelago who are married to, respectively, Singaporean and Malaysian husbands and have overcome social, economic and cultural constraints to position themselves as middle-class housewives but must continue to live with what the authors call the “stain” (p. 296) of their former experiences in the sex trade.

Two of the oldest (and previously published) chapters in the book, each revived for this volume, are one by Harold Conklin originally published in 1960 and another by Lucien Hanks first published in 1962. They stand at opposite poles as writings representing perspectives of individual agency and structural analysis. Conklin’s vivid portrait of Maling, a young girl from a mountain community in the Philippines, is perhaps the most grounded, “everyday” narrative in the book. Hanks’s analysis of the Thai social order, by contrast, is the most abstract, structural analysis. Nir Avieli’s chapter on the everyday cuisine of contemporary Hoi An in Central Vietnam

provides another example of structure-oriented analysis and seems almost an ode to Levi-Strauss.

Modernity and change is another pronounced theme in the volume that transcends any one of the sections into which the editors have organized the chapters. Far from rendering everyday life in Southeast Asia as governed by static cultural traditions, the two dozen chapters in the volume engage with contemporary conditions and to varying degrees highlight the ways in which people struggle with or embrace change. The intimate, complex ethnographic accounts in the chapters elide any simplistic suggestion that diverse Southeast Asian societies are converging on a single, global norm of modernity. At the same time, they convey the often rapid social and cultural changes taking place throughout the region.

Attention to gendered experience and gendered social dynamics also runs throughout many chapters. Most of these chapters focus on the experiences and concerns of women, such as Nancy Smith-Hefner's reflections on women and veiling on Java. But Pattana's analysis of the rise and fall of the "Thai Rocky" provides a welcome analysis of masculinity. Many other chapters centring on women and men's stories also provide rich material for a gendered analysis of contemporary Southeast Asian societies.

Finally, the contributions to *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia* illustrate anthropologists' attention to politics and power. Where anthropology was once criticized for producing ethnographies that eschewed politics and power dynamics, this book goes a long way towards demonstrating that this eschewal is no longer the case. The chapters reflect the politics and the power struggles of everyday life and everyday people. Chapters by Shaun Malarney on the memorialization of war dead in Vietnam and Eve Zucker on the position of Khmer Rouge collaborators in contemporary Cambodia come the closest to analyzing politics in the formal sense. But issues of politics and power at a more immediate, personal level are infused throughout almost every chapter.

This book offers an exceedingly rich cornucopia of stories, themes, and analytical insights into contemporary Southeast Asia. Moreover, it is a pleasure to read. Many edited collections in the social sciences

aim or at least claim to appeal to an audience beyond specialists. *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia* is one of the rare collections compiled and written by academics that should indeed speak to a broad audience as an introduction to the societies and peoples of one of the world's most richly diverse regions. Specialists, too, will take pleasure and find insights in this book.

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Beyond the Sacred Forest: Complicating Conservation in Southeast Asia. Edited by Michael R. Dove, Percy E. Sajise, and Amity A. Doolittle. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 372 pp.

This fascinating book is the result of an extended collaborative research project that has sought, as the subtitle states, to complicate thinking about a wide range of aspects of what we usually think of as “conservation” in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Most of its chapters report on research in ethnic minority areas of Indonesia and Malaysia during the 1990s; one chapter concerns the Philippines. Three are revised versions of papers previously published elsewhere. The authors represent an impressive range of disciplines, including anthropology, biology, history, rural sociology and social ecology, and their institutional affiliations are roughly evenly divided among Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and the United States. The overall quality of the scholarship and the writing in *Beyond the Sacred Forest* is very high, and the book will be of interest to scholars and practitioners working on conservation, natural resource management, and agrarian political economy in Southeast Asia and beyond.

The introductory chapter by editors Michael Dove, Percy Sajise and Amity Doolittle begins with a succinct and stimulating overview of some of the main changes that have taken place in scholarly