

***The Politics of Aid to Burma: A Humanitarian Struggle on the Thai–Burmese Border.* By Anne Décobert. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016. Hardcover: 247pp.**

Humanitarian practitioners and academic researchers evolve in universes that hardly seem to converge. In *The Politics of Aid to Burma*, Anne Décobert — who wears both a development specialist’s and an anthropologist’s hat — successfully manages to bridge the gap. The author provides a detailed description and analysis of the politics of aid through the lens of people and organizations working along the Thai–Burma border, and draws heavily on her personal experiences and participatory observation approach. This authentic first person narrative provides a chronicle of how lines drawn on paper — marked by marker stones, barbed wire and land mines — at times decide life and death.

The focus of the book is Back Pack, a civil society organization which provides access to basic public healthcare services to people who lack access to such facilities in remote areas along the Thai–Myanmar border. It depicts the lives of individual aid workers, but also the political aspects of humanitarian aid, and questions the dynamics of legitimization of cross-border aid at a time when international donors decided to increase engagement with the Myanmar government after President U Thein Sein introduced economic and political reforms in 2011. At this time of transition, accounts of how political changes impacted people’s lives in peripheral areas of the country have been scarce.

The author summarizes the seemingly irreconcilable Myanmar aid debate as follows: “Historically, the two models of aid delivery came to be associated with opposite ends of the internationalized Burma debate... ‘Burmaphiles’ typically supported cross-border aid and denounced state-sanctioned aid bolstering an abusive regime. ‘Myanmarites’ advocated for engagement, the removal of the sanctions and aid ‘through Yangon’ as not only possible but politically strategic” (p. 65). Décobert vividly reminds us that, until very recently, the debate over humanitarian aid to Myanmar was a very emotionally charged one, even within academic circles. As the author notes, the “Burma aid debate was the extent to which academic analyses had in fact further contributed to pitting individuals against each other — instead of attempting to understand why there was a need to take sides, and why even attempting to ‘sit on the fence’ could make you an enemy” (p. 74).

In the course of seven chapters, the author explores Back Pack's work against the backdrop of Myanmar's changing political and socioeconomic landscape. Chapter 1 provides an overview of humanitarianism and how the concept has evolved over time. It highlights the older, as well as the more contemporary, tensions between humanitarianism (which relies on the notion of the neutrality of health aid workers during armed conflict) and on the ground political realities. The author then briefly addresses anthropological theories, with an interesting (and hitherto unknown in this part of the world) focus on the notion of victimhood. The second chapter provides a summary of the conflict and humanitarian situation along the Thai–Myanmar border. The third chapter describes humanitarian needs and Back Pack's programmes to address those needs. The following two chapters present case studies highlighting the organization's values and motivations. The sixth chapter explores Back Pack's struggle for international legitimacy. The final chapter highlights the challenge of the organization's new positioning in a political system that is moving towards democracy.

Décobert provides a sound and insightful description of the microcosm of the border, and sheds light on the experiences and beliefs underlying cross-border operations through the testimonies of health workers. In this sense, the book provides a very valuable account of a place where so many Myanmar migrants and refugees, but also international aid workers, strive to cope with the human and material costs of armed conflict.

The book's concluding chapter summarizes the situation of all groups along the border who have seen their relevance and legitimacy increasingly challenged, often by those donors who used to fund them. "Back Pack's leaders had led claims to the elusive substance of humanitarianism, and in so doing had defined and justified their actions. ... as the political tides shifted away from the actors at the border, actors who persisted in swimming against these tides increasingly risked losing their claim to the label of humanitarian" (p. 263).

*The Politics of Aid to Burma* is a well-documented testimony of the country's civil society situation along the border before international aid politics started to focus on other parts of the country. The ethnographic method used by the author conveys a particular feeling of proximity to the Back Pack aid workers, even if, inescapably perhaps, this methodology has its limitations. The Back Pack leaders' personal (and justified) flaws due to their own

sufferings could have been the subject of a more detailed critical analysis when it comes to their narratives of legitimacy and *raison d'être*.

The self-conscious and overt “Burmaphile” standpoint of the author is obvious (with, for example, her refusal to use the official name “Myanmar”, as is the case with most humanitarian and political activist organizations based along the Thai–Myanmar border). A similarly well documented study of the “Myanmarite” approach would help provide an understanding of the rationale and consequences as international aid shifts towards the interior of the country. It could be an opportunity to compare the impact of aid and its actual interactions or influence on the country’s political transition.

After the field research for this book was conducted, general elections were held in November 2015 which resulted in a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy. Most international aid actors and donors are now working closely with the new government, and its State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who has stressed the need for the government to assume the role of aid coordinator. The question of legitimacy and neutrality is more than ever before being politicized while the “tide” at the border seems to have irrevocably shifted.

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