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Introductory Essay

Plural Ecologies in Southeast Asia

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Grounded in Southeast Asia's cultural, political, and environmental diversity, the five articles in this issue of *SOJOURN* not only document massive environmental transformations and the tremendous social exclusion that they entail, but also elaborate on conceptual shortcomings of modern universalist concepts of ecology. Shared understandings and basic definitions of terms guide all of the articles. Theoretically inclined to political ecology and the anthropology of ontologies, they employ political ontology as a major reference to bring those two approaches together. Analytically, the articles investigate a continuum of plurality, along which incompatible concepts of beings and relationships coexist, and hegemoniality, a process by which one ecology may marginalize or dominate others.

Keywords: ontology, political ecology, plurality, hegemoniality, cosmology, Southeast Asia.

The five research articles in this issue of *SOJOURN* draw on ethnographic work undertaken in Southeast Asia to account for ecologies in conflict. They share an understanding of "ecology" as a more or less coherent set of relationships between humans and non-humans. An ecology implies specific conceptions of beings and relationships. These concepts of what there is and how it potentially relates to other beings are at the same time modes of practice. Ecologies recognize beings — human as well as non-human — or neglect them, or address or ignore them, or even deny their existence. States, NGOs, companies, indigenous peoples, peasants and city

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dwellers can appear as human actors, while animals, plants, spirits, gods, the weather, the landscape and natural elements like fire and water may figure among non-human actors. A particular ecology may cast these beings as necessary or contingent, agentive or passive, connected or not connected. This way of recognizing and relating is the ontological or cosmological aspect of an ecology. Ecologies thus relate to ontologies, but they are less encompassing and more local than "worlds".

The ontological or cosmological aspects of ecologies mean that recognition and relating involve including and excluding certain beings or aspects of their existence — their agency or communicative abilities, for example. In many settings in Southeast Asia and beyond, plural ecologies exist in parallel, and inclusion or exclusion is thus a matter of practice, sometimes even of choice. It is also a matter of hierarchy, power and value. Which beings and which relationships are more important, more pertinent, more powerful than others? Inclusion, exclusion and hierarchy are, that is, the political aspects of ecologies. While in many practical situations, mutually incompatible concepts of beings and relationships may coexist, the differences between ecologies become salient and often clearly defined in moments of conflict.

The authors of the five articles that follow therefore approach plural ecologies with reference to two axes. Political ecology and the study of ontologies define our complementary theoretical approaches, while analytically, we investigate the continuum between hegemoniality and plurality.

Concurrent Approaches

Kohn (2015) and Orr, Lansing and Dove (2015) have made clear the diversity of approaches to the environment current in anthropology today. Two problematics — represented by political ecology and the anthropology of ontologies, respectively — are conspicuous. In this issue, the authors of the articles position themselves at their intersection, analysing particularly contested situations of coexistence and friction to propose the notion of plural ecologies.

The first currently influential problematic, political ecology, focuses on power and the globalized exploitation of resources. It draws attention to asymmetric, sometimes even violent, conflicts over land, livelihoods, property rights and national or global integration among local groups, subaltern classes, states and translocal economies (Blaikie 2012; Forsyth 2003; Robbins 2012). Political ecology helps us map processes of commodification and exclusion under new conditions of labour, especially as these conditions have an impact on access to and control over environmental resources.[1] Intersectional lines of gender, class, ethnicity, and religion are important considerations in any attempt to understand the dimensions of power in socio-ecological conflicts (Darlington 2012; Großmann, Padmanabhan, and Afiff 2017; Elmhirst 2011; Großmann 2017). Studies adopting the political ecology approach typically cross scales from local to regional to national to global; they simultaneously encompass rural and urban areas (Harms 2011; Leshkowich 2014; Johnson 2014). However, modern-Western conceptions of power and of exclusively human agency often impose limitations on the approach.

The second problematic, the anthropology of ontologies, relates the naturalistic framework of human-environment interaction to ontologies that differ radically from naturalism. While inspired by science and technology studies (Latour 2008 and 2014; Haraway 1990 and 2003), it highlights non-modern ontologies (Ingold 2011; Descola 2011). It thus draws attention to the agency of non-humans, including animals, plants or spirits.[2] The anthropology of ontologies adopts the local and specific as a vantage point, in an effort to radically challenge the premises of modern epistemologies. This challenge points out the ways in which modern science eliminates numerous beings and interactions from the realm of the social. Ontology, in the limited sense that we find inspiring, thus does not suggest an all-encompassing "culture". Rather, it applies to specific relationships and institutions that are linked together in specific cultural configurations. This approach captures the radical differences among locally salient ecologies, sometimes without explicitly talking about ontology. However, studies in this direction rarely account for the plurality of coexisting ecologies and their hierarchical relationships.

Recent work (Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2015; Holbraad, Pedersen, and de Castro 2014), sometimes characterized as political ontology, demonstrates the possibility of bringing political ecology and the anthropology of ontologies together. The aim of this work is to analyse multifocal power in practices that form ontologies — as in the case, for example, of the struggles of indigenous people — in order to enhance inclusion, offer alternatives, make the "otherwise" (Povinelli 2012) visible, and reflect on the positionality of the anthropologist. These studies connect the focus on power and conflict of political ecology with notions of multiple ontologies (Blaser 2009*a* and 2009*b*).

Up to now, scholarship taking the political ontology approach has mostly drawn on research on indigenous movements in South America. It has emphasized predominantly philosophical approaches and lacked comparative, empirically grounded analysis. The five articles anchor the approach in wider contexts and practices with analyses of Southeast Asia.

No unifying concept fully accounts for the intersection of diverse dimensions of power interrelated with cosmologies, epistemologies and ontologies. It is at this point that the scholarly interests of the authors of these articles situate themselves. In employing the concept of plural ecologies, we aim to open an analytical space for the connection of theories that build on diverse ecologies — some modern, some not. We also heed the call for accounts that look at contested ecologies (Green 2013), equivocations (Viveiros de Castro 2004) and misunderstandings (Tsing 2005) in human-environment relationships. Our articles seek to contribute to this debate by developing a non-exclusivist approach to situations in which hegemonic and plural politics intersect.

Hegemoniality and Plurality

The plurality of ecologies arises from diverging ontologies, epistemologies, cosmologies, politics and economies within and among social formations. The inclusiveness and exclusiveness of ecologies is a function of their systematicity, as no ecology can relate

every being or any of its aspects to every other being. Inclusion, exclusion and hierarchization shape the epistemological power of an ecology; they may or may not also translate into hierarchical political relationships. The articles ask how such power becomes hegemonic and how it is distributed within a plural field of various modes of inclusion and exclusion.

In order to capture this dynamic, we posit hegemoniality and plurality as complementary aspects of each situation examined in the articles.

Plurality draws attention to the way in which ecologies coexist with one another at the moment of observation — that is, not normatively. It implies ongoing situational negotiations and focuses on the local, the specific and the relational. The "pluriverse" (Blaser 2010) contains multiple worlds or realities.

Hegemoniality, in contrast, is the process by which one ecology becomes dominant over its alternative ecologies, in what Anna Tsing describes as "aspirations to fulfill universal dreams and schemes" (Tsing 2005, p. 1). Attention to hegemoniality generates questions about how political authority, violence, technological advances and, importantly, systematic means of persuasion and compliance enact such claims of ontological and political superiority (Guha 1997). Scholars associated with subaltern studies and the ontological turn have increasingly criticized the epistemological and political implications of such constellations of power.

But hegemoniality and plurality imply and contain each other. Hegemony implies that at least one ecology tries to dominate or "re-programme" another, while plurality does not exclude asymmetry and hierarchy. Egalitarian coexistence is as rare as stable hegemony. Analytically, we first need to recognize plurality in order to account for hegemoniality. In situations of conflict, the reproduction of ecologies becomes more distinctive — through, for example, the employment of state forces or the proliferation of sacred sites.

Both pluralizing and hegemonizing processes enable navigation of the various ecologies present in a particular situation (de la Cadena 2015). However, actors operating on a global scale or representing

hegemonic positions appear less able to accept a plurality of ecologies, as Bräuchler (2018) indicates. From the point of view of such actors, alternatives either do not exist or are to be relegated to tradition, religion, superstition or backwardness, as Großmann (2018) and Sprenger (2018) show. As distinctions between ecologies emerge most conspicuously from situations of conflict, we aim in the articles published here to conceptualize plural ecologies in terms of the specific ontological and epistemological differences, power relations, misunderstandings and frictions that prevail within the sociocultural frames of particular environmental transformations. The ecologies under consideration then emerge systematically from their differentiation — not isolated, but rather "partially connected" (Strathern 1991).

Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia's cultural and political diversity in a terrestrial and maritime environment of forests, fields, waterways, uplands and lowlands, is as a region particularly apt for developing approaches centred on plural ecologies. With its layers of cultural influence, related to the waves of world religions that have reached it from the west and to the proximity of China to the north, Southeast Asia is home to a wealth of diverse, often competing ecologies. Scholars have elaborated on the complex relationships between society and the environment in this region, ranging from Clifford Geertz (1972) to James C. Scott (2009).

In particular, the study of swidden agriculture has produced classics of Southeast Asian ethnography (Conklin 1957; Izikowitz 1979). What these studies also show is that local Southeast Asian economies are often autonomous and at the same time closely linked to translocal trade and markets (Dove 2011). The articles by Sprenger (2018), Großmann (2018) and Hüwelmeier (2018*b*) published here build on this finding. The systematization of trade, production and political rule in the colonial era and into the present-day era of globalization has introduced new tensions and new ecologies. Moreover, governments in Southeast Asia have enforced authoritarian development regimes

focused on the extraction of natural resources from the periphery (Haug, Rössler, and Grumblies 2017). State development schemes, agro-industry, natural resource exploitation, and tourism entail transformations of livelihood strategies and economic structures, as well as the transformation of or end to the socio-political structures of local communities (Dove, Sajise, and Doolittle 2011; Li 2014; Tsing 2005). Sprenger (2018), Großmann (2018) and Bräuchler (2018) flesh this point out.

Migration and modernization programmes also shape rural and urban landscapes,[3] inducing struggles over governmentality and cultures of consumption. Consequently, conflicts over territorial organization occur, whether concerning access to and control of marketplaces (Hüwelmeier 2018*a*; Bonnin and Turner 2014; Leshkowich 2014) or land and sea (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011; Nevins and Peluso 2008; Pichler and Brad 2016). National and international development discourses construct remote rural areas as margins and their inhabitants as subjects for "civilization" in the name of modernization (Li 1999), as Großmann (2018) illustrates. Moreover, hegemonic industrialized agriculture and universal environmental conservation schemes ignore and endanger traditional knowledge (Forsyth and Walker 2008; McAllister 2014; Scoones and Thompson 2009), local ideas and patterns of sustainable resource use (Hornidge and Antweiler 2012) and animal-human relationships. Großmann (2018) and Hüwelmeier (2018*b*) address similar issues. Therefore, the establishment of national parks and heritage sites induces conflicts born of the overlap with community lands and cause policy and regulatory uncertainties over land use and property rights (Jonsson 2005, pp. 130–45).

The period since the 1990s has seen a revival of the political importance of ethnicity (Davidson and Henley 2007; Van Klinken 2007). Similarly, the assertion of indigeneity has become a means of claiming rights in struggles over natural resources (Hauser-Schäublin 2013; Li 2000; Großmann 2017) — a matter on which Bräuchler (2018) touches. Aiming to enhance indigenous peoples' rights, environmental organizations have come to stress local ideas, customs, cosmology and identities. They tend therefore to deploy a

rather essentialist stance (Großmann, Padmanabhan, and Afiff 2017). Only recently has scholarly attention begun to focus on alternatives to modern-Western naturalistic notions of human-environment relations and thus to provide a more nuanced account of local ontologies, epistemologies and cosmologies in Maritime and Mainland Southeast Asia (Århem and Sprenger 2016; Kammerer and Tannenbaum 2003). Sprenger (2018) contributes to this body of work.

Notwithstanding these developments, in contrast to the scholarship on South America, only a few studies on Southeast Asia have attempted to bring both the cosmological and the political dimensions of ecological transformation in Southeast Asia into focus, as for example Dove (2011). We situate the five research articles in this issue of *SOJOURN* among the studies making this same attempt. They not only shed light upon the massive environmental transformations taking place in the region, often entailing tremendous social exclusion for local peoples, but also reveal the conceptual shortcomings and pitfalls of modern universalistic concepts of ecology.

The articles offer examples of the intersection of ecologies of different reaches and of conflicting inclusions in specific field sites. In modern ecologies, the paired terms of exploitation and protection describe the relationship with the environment. Bräuchler (2018), Haug (2018) and Großmann (2018) focus on these issues. Großmann highlights the localization of the idea of natural resource use. Bräuchler and Haug explore the ways in which environmentalist and local ontologies might ally with one another to oppose capitalist ecology. Sprenger (2018) demonstrates the ways in which modern economic ecology and Buddhism enforce changes in local ecologies, while Hüwelmeier (2018*b*) brings these tensions to urban landscapes on which localized economies and spirits are subject to forced relocation.

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NOTES

1. On Southeast Asia, see for example Nevins and Peluso (2008), Hall et al. (2011) and Hirsch (2017); on Indonesia, Li (2014); and on Laos, Barney (2009).
2. See for example Århem and Sprenger (2016).
3. On struggles in urban areas, see Schwenkel (2012), and Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan (2013).

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