

has done in framing the collection. For anyone who would like to understand where the myths that swirl around modern Vietnam come from, how they are reproduced over time and how eventually they may be challenged, *Mythbusting Vietnam* is required reading.

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*Musical Minorities: The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam.* By Lonán Ó Briain. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxi+208 pp.

This is an important ethnographic contribution regarding the performing arts of the Southeast Asian Massif and its upland ethnic minority residents. Focusing on the music-making of an ethnic minority group in Vietnam, and based on three years of meticulous fieldwork—the permissions for which are challenging to acquire, especially for the northern borderlands where this book is based—Lonán Ó Briain is to be commended for this carefully documented account.

Three vignettes set the stage for this book and draw us into its highly readable and enjoyable ethnographic style. The first introduces the reader to the author heading off on his motorbike to the Vietnamese Institute for Musicology in Hanoi. Here, he joins an audience of visiting American tourists observing a series of musical pieces. After the lowland Vietnamese melodies are completed, a musical number is performed on a Vietnamese instrument called the *sáo mèò*, which Ó Briain later finds out is a modified version of a Hmong reed pipe known as the *raj nplaim*. He also finds out that Vietnamese scholars only know one piece to play on it, called “Hmong Pay Deference to the Party”—that is, the Communist Party.

This story is picked up again in chapter 2, where Ó Briain outlines how lowland Vietnamese musicologists have sought to research the

music of the ‘other’ in the country, including the Hmong. Focusing on the work of Kim Vĩnh, a renowned Vietnamese composer and scholar of Hmong music, Ó Briain details how the compositions that Kim Vĩnh created for the *sáo mèo* have become so widely known across the country that even Hmong now regard the sounds as part of their identity. As Ó Briain persuasively writes: “a distant, minority Other from the mountains is sonically disciplined and symbolically brought within the artistic control of the urban majority though the sound of the *sáo mèo*” (p. 47).

Another sketch takes us into the relatively distant homes and fields of Hmong households, where Ó Briain is finally able to find authentic Hmong music; we almost feel his relief. Here a female Hmong singer performs *kvv txhiaj*, a form of Hmong sung poetry. We meet this singer, Mu, and other Hmong women singing *kvv txhiaj* again in chapter 3. Here, Ó Briain details the most widely discussed forms of Hmong music: the *kvv txhiaj* and the *qeej*, a reed pipe used in particular during funeral rituals. He notes that these Hmong traditions “are inherited, predominantly secular styles containing only subtle, non-transformational changes that enliven the music at each subsequent performance” (p. 78). I am not an ethnomusicologist, so I will not attempt to summarize the findings of this chapter more, but I will say I found his ongoing connections in chapter 3 between musical instruments, their construction and playing techniques, songs, and renditions of daily life an enjoyable read.

Far from the authenticity found in household renditions of Hmong music, another vignette takes us to the annual Khâu Vai ‘Love Market’ festival in Hà Giang Province; the ‘Love Market’ label being an enduring misrepresentation of Hmong courtship rituals (frustratingly repeated by lowland Vietnamese tourist guides). Here, staged performances of Hmong and other minority music and cultures are choreographed by state authorities to enchant the tourist audience, including many lowland Kinh (the majority nationality). These performances are replete with lip-synching to pre-recorded background tracks, and as Ó Briain notes, are often painfully loud.

Related debates on cultural tourism as experienced by both participants and audiences are drawn out further in chapter 4. Ó Briain clearly demonstrates how performances for tourists are decontextualized and carry little or no relationship to Hmong culture. I have also witnessed these ‘presentational performances’ in hotels in Sapa town and nearby Cát Cát village, where ethnic minority or Kinh performers are often called upon to pretend they are members of other ethnic groups, while dressing in ‘cutified’ versions of customary dress, replete with heavy make-up for the sexualized young women performers. I therefore found Ó Briain’s interpretations depressingly accurate. His accounts of tourist ‘takes’ on these events also ring true, as I have had many interactions with overseas tourists who believe they have just witnessed the ‘real thing’—‘thing’ being an unfortunately accurate description of how these events and their actors have become increasingly commodified and essentialized. Among Kinh tourists, these performances play into ongoing stereotypes of ‘romantic’ and ‘pure’ uplanders that are also easily turned into accounts of ‘backward’ groups in need of ‘development’. The more informal performances that Ó Briain also outlines commonly take place in Sapa town’s main square on the weekends, and they create classic renditions of the “fetishization of the Other” by the (often, drunk) tourists present (Hall 1997, p. 287). Yet, as Ó Briain also notes, these performances are more than presentational performances, as they are also occasions for local Hmong male youth to socialize, albeit not necessarily being a comfortable space for young Hmong women, as he details.

Shifting focus in chapter 5, Ó Briain presents a detailed account of the role of animism, Catholicism and Protestantism with regard to Hmong musical diversity. I especially appreciated the detailed ethnographic descriptions of shamanic practices surrounding Hmong New Year here (and suddenly realized I was reading about the shaman mother-in-law of a dear Hmong friend of mine). This chapter is not only fascinating for its continued links to Hmong music but also makes for an excellent introduction to local rituals for any scholar new to the region or those wishing to study Hmong villages here for comparative purposes.

Chapter 6 focuses on foreign-produced Hmong-language musical recordings and their distribution circuits. As Ó Briain notes, Hmong in Vietnam “are largely absent from the production side of these new media networks” (p. 160). He adds that access to overseas Hmong music, largely through DVDs, VCDs and radio, has allowed Hmong in Vietnam to begin to recognize and celebrate their identity as Hmong rather than as part of the Vietnam ‘Nation’. This access has also allowed Hmong in Vietnam to become more familiar with and fluent in the RPA Hmong script, which is used by many American-based Hmong and is influencing local religious practices. While the Vietnam state sees these outside influences as highly worrisome, Ó Briain conversely highlights how they make local Hmong aware of their limited agency within a socialist state.

In all of the ethnographically rich chapters briefly mentioned above, I particularly appreciated how easy it was to see Ó Briain’s respect for those with whom he connected during fieldwork. His ethnic minority Hmong key informants or participants became ‘consultants’, creating a sense of a more level playing field (even if a little too financially linked in terminology for me at times). Moreover, with their approval, he names his participants, and quotes them often, hence directly acknowledging their important contributions. Additionally, Ó Briain reflects upon his own positionality early in the book and then throughout, which added rigour and trustworthiness to his work.

Focusing on debates that bring Ó Briain’s introductory and concluding observations together, I fully agree with his interpretations of Hmong culture in upland Vietnam as resilient. Coming from a geography background myself, I know how the term ‘resilience’ gets held hostage by certain sub-disciplinary groups, and it is difficult to draw on this terminology without being pulled into their realm. Yet, as Ó Briain carefully notes: “It is the local negotiations between day-to-day strategies of resistance and acquiescence that matter; these negotiations reinforce subtle yet effective forms of sociocultural resilience that coproduce minority and majority” (p. 9). Concurrently, as he carefully portrays “the manifestation, manipulation, and contamination of ethnicity through sound” (p. 9),

we are left wondering in the conclusion, what next? Will the route forward be assimilation, as has been the case for many Hmong (Miao) in China (see Turner, Bonnin and Michaud 2015), or in the Vietnam case will this customary and well-worn resilience win out? Ó Briain ends by hinting at the latter, his work being a testament to Hmong cultural dynamism and the richness and diversity of ‘minority’ cultural resilience.

## REFERENCES

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*Traders in Motion: Identities and Contestations in the Vietnamese Marketplace*. Edited by Kirsten W. Endres and Ann Marie Leshkovich. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. xiv+264 pp.

In post-economic-reform Vietnam, urbanization and gentrification have had a huge impact on ordinary people’s livelihoods. Those who sold their land to the government now have to adjust to the new economy. In the past, they enjoyed a flexible lifestyle as mobile traders in other cities while waiting for their field harvests or in their hometowns during the fallow period. Today, however, many of them find themselves in a financial predicament because they were not fairly compensated by the government and are no longer able to rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. At the same time, in