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Mekong Dreaming: Life and Death along a Changing River. By Andrew Alan Johnson. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2020. 195 pp.

Mekong Dreaming, by Andrew Johnson, is useful for demonstrating how people adjacent to the Mekong River in Northeast Thailand are engaging with the multitude of changes occurring from the construction of large dams upstream in China and Laos to the more localized impacts on fisheries caused by illegal fishing using electricity.

Structured into an introduction and five chapters, the book is not a particularly difficult read, although readers are expected to be familiar with key anthropological literature. The introduction presents the issue of how large dams are dramatically altering and damaging the Mekong River and the lives of the people who depend on the river. Johnson also introduces his ideas about dreams and potency, an important concept in the book. He ponders uncertainly, writing,

My focus here is on the productive potential of ‘maybe’. I see ‘maybe’ as a space of possibility. By announcing that a thing may exist, or by asserting that its essential qualities are uncertain, one allows for the possibility that the present order of things might be overthrown.... The uncertainty opened by ‘maybe’ allows for new things to enter into the world. (p. 14)

Johnson then turns to “weird phenomenology”, writing: “The book is inspired by this notion of the weird, and it is for this reason that

its title is *Mekong Dreaming*” (p. 17). In particular, Johnson writes, “Here is a common theme—ontological uncertainty is a problem. But I argue that it is not always so.” Johnson also introduces the village on the Mekong in the northern part of Northeast Thailand where his ethnographic research was focused; emphasizing that he looked at the downstream impacts of dams. Taking a somewhat classical approach, Johnson centres his study in a single village, so that he is able to gain intimate knowledge about the river and the people.

In chapter 2, titled “River Beings”, Johnson engages with fish, riverine ecology, human impacts, and the potential impacts of large hydropower dams upriver. He shows that water, fish and humans are intertwined, both biologically and socially. He draws on work about new materialism and the ‘nonhuman turn’ in anthropology.

Chapter 3, “Dwelling under Distant Suns”, turns somewhat away from the river, focusing on another important aspect of people’s lives in the village Johnson works in, migrant labour, not only within Thailand but abroad as well, and not only by humans, but by spirits too.

Chapter 4, titled “The River Grew Tired of Us”, looks at the transformation of the Mekong River and asks “how the movement of gods and spirits, and water serpents and ghosts fit into the large moment of migrants and dams, changes in the water and in the political fortunes of Isan [Northeastern Thailand]?” (p. 28).

In Chapter 5, “Human and Inhuman Worlds”, Johnson returns to his original idea of potency, dwelling and opacity. Finally, Johnson argues that “the search for efficacy along the Mekong reveals the means of productivity breaking apart the world in order to open the space for new possibilities” (p. 28).

Ultimately, I find Johnson’s anthropological approach to looking at Mekong development issues valuable. He does not take the same type of Science and Technology approach that Jerome Whittington (2019) does in his useful book about dam building in Central Laos, *Anthropocentric Rivers*. Instead, Johnson situates his theoretical work at the centre of cultural anthropology, including ethnographically investigating a community’s relationships with

non-human and inhuman elements. Thus, this book will be a useful text in anthropology courses.

It is customary to provide a few criticisms, or at least quibbles, at the end of book reviews, even when one is generally enthusiastic about a book. In this case, it would have been useful if the author had compared the downstream impacts of dams in the Sesan River Basin in northeastern Cambodia with the circumstances in Northeast Thailand. Of particular relevance to Johnson's interest in spirits, ghosts and human beliefs, people living downstream from the Yali Falls dam initially sacrificed animals to ask the water spirits to stop punishing them by changing the river flow so dramatically. Villagers also asked spirit mediums to help stop the Lower Sesan 2 dam. I also think it would have been useful if Johnson had spent more time on the Lao side of the river, in Ngoen Village or elsewhere. Thus, the perspective provided is firmly from the Thai side of the border. Looking at the view from both sides of the river would have provided more insights.

Ultimately, however, I highly recommend this book as it fills a niche. It provides new and important insights.

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