

DOI: 10.1355/sj37-1i

Uneasy Military Encounters: The Imperial Politics of Counterinsurgency in Southern Thailand. By Ruth Streicher. New York: Cornell University Press, 2020. 186 pp.

This book is ‘groundbreaking’ as it sheds new light on Thai studies in general and the insurgency in Southern Thailand in particular, using the notion of ‘imperial formation’ from postcolonial studies to examine the formation of the Thai state and its relations with the southernmost region. It emphasizes an imperial formation of “policing” or “a governmental practice that connects the management of the population to the internal order and strength of the state” (p. 5). It examines the ‘policing’ in four areas: a history of modern Thailand in relation to the southernmost region in a military handbook, insurgents at the checkpoints, male Muslim drug users at a drug rehabilitation camp, and Muslim women under the Thai state’s guardianship. This detailed examination also illustrates how local populations and the region are racialized and gendered.

The book is one among a few works on southernmost Thailand that is both ethnographically informed and theoretically engaged. It is also the first to employ postcolonial studies theories to examine southernmost Thailand, which, according to some scholars, has experienced “internal colonialism” (Man and Kadir 1990, p. 241). By examining local populations’ ‘encounters’ with soldiers in daily life and specific circumstances, the book offers a new understanding of the region with a focus on how the counterinsurgency was/is constructed and how it is reproduced through local population’s ‘encounters’ with soldiers.

Its innovation notwithstanding, there are some issues of concern with the book. The first is about how the author entered the field and interacted with soldiers who are ‘key informants’ (p. 14). Military personnel regarded her research interest as “a welcome opportunity to correct false information” (p. 13) about their mission in the region. The author was, therefore, “not only allowed to conduct research at checkpoints but often even welcomed to do so”, and

many soldiers saw her as “a window to the international world” (p. 56). This raises the question of whether the author was able to fully explore all relevant sites and circumstances beyond what she was allowed to do for her research. Also, how did she deal with research questions that did not fall in line with the soldiers’ expectations? Importantly, given that the soldiers regarded her research as helpful to their counterinsurgency, how did the author manage to prevent her research from being part of an agenda that she wanted to critically examine in the first place?

The second concern is the lack of the local population’s voice. The author has examined how the counterinsurgency was designed and implemented using information obtained primarily from soldiers. However, fully understanding how power operates requires taking into account how those subjected to that power respond to it. Chapter 3 examines how Muslim drug users were disciplined through their religion to fit in with the citizens of the Thai state, but it does not include these men’s views of the programme. Of the author’s more than a hundred interviews (p. 14), none included these men nor those who directly experienced policing. Their voices are crucial because they render the analysis of power more complete.

This leads to the question of analysis and interpretation. Though theoretically sophisticated, the book sometimes does not consider how those involved perceived and interpreted local contexts and situations, such as encounters at checkpoints. The author prefers the adjective ‘imperial’ to ‘colonial’ because it does not “necessarily involve conquest, occupation, and durable rule by outside invaders” (p. 2). However, local—especially politically motivated—populations called the Thai state ‘*penjalah Siam*’ or Siamese colonists primarily because they regard Siam and the Thai state as invaders whose rule has no legitimacy. The author is also quick to relate women’s statements about young men in the region to the “Western imperial imagery of laziness” (p. 99) without considering the sociocultural context that shapes these statements.

This is particularly the case when it comes to politics. Rather than viewing the incident of 24 June 1932 as a ‘revolution’ advocated

by pro-democracy movements in Thailand, the author conceived of it as the first “military coup” (p. 6), citing the work of two Thai political scientists who are critical of the incident in favour of the establishment, supportive of the military coups on 19 September 2006 and 22 May 2014, and working for subsequent junta governments. These two military coups have been dubbed ‘royal coups’ because they were part of the attempts of the ‘network monarchy’ or ‘deep state’ to consolidate its power after being challenged by ousted prime minister Thaksin, the ‘populist’ leader. The expanded role of the military, especially the ISOC (Internal Security Operations Command)—the lead organization conducting counterinsurgency in Southern Thailand (p. 9) at the expense of the civilian SBPAC (Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre) since the 19 September 2006 military coup—should be considered in this political context. The royal counterinsurgency motto “understanding, reaching out, development” (p. 8) and the counterinsurgency policy that the military junta presented in “more depoliticized terms of paternal benevolence” (p. 9) than the Thaksin government should be viewed as part of the monarchy’s ‘counterinsurgency’ against its competitor and defectors in Thailand. Without this political context, the author risks being seen as supportive of the undemocratic regime.

Thus, though this book offers a new understanding on the unease that Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand have in encounters with the military, that uneasiness will not lessen without full inclusion of their voices, consideration of local culture and awareness of the broader political context.

Anusorn Unno

Associate Professor, Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University, 2 Phrachan Road, Phra Nakhon, Bangkok 10200, Thailand; email: anusorn.unno@gmail.com.

REFERENCE

Man, Che, and Wan Kadir. 1990. *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.