

Seductive Mirage: The Search for Community in Southeast Asia. By Jeremy Kemp. Comparative Asian Studies no. 3. Amsterdam: Center for Asian Studies, 1988.

In *Seductive Mirage* Kemp elaborates his ongoing critique of how the concept of the village has been used in the study of Southeast Asia. His book complements Jan Breman's *Shattered Images* (1988), published in the same series. Where Breman focuses his attention on Indonesia and the colonial period, Kemp focuses on Thailand and contemporary academic writing. Together Kemp and Breman recover a project which was arguably initiated by Wolf (1957) in his argument that the corporate village in Java was the product of colonial rule.

In *Seductive Mirage* Kemp does not aim to describe the real characteristics of villages of Southeast Asia. Rather, he intends to criticize the assumption in Southeast Asian studies that the basic units of social life in rural Southeast Asia are village communities and households. Kemp traces the corporatist approach to European theories of rural society and argues that these ideas not applicable to Southeast Asia, where peasants have always been mobile and where basic relationships are not bounded by territory. Thus the notion of the pre-modern, bounded village is a mirage without substance, a mirage seductive to writers aiming to find social qualities destroyed by "progress".

Unlike some recent critiques of basic social science categories, Kemp does not stop at deconstructing the notion of the village. First, he suggests an alternative research method. Rather than begin with a search for corporate groups, he suggests that researchers begin with relations between individuals and with the clustering of such relations, with due regard to wider structural principles. State-peasant relations in the pre-modern period, for example, should be treated not as the control of the state over villages, but as the control of officials over individuals.

Second, Kemp suggests an alternative approach to understanding the history of villages in Southeast Asia. He argues that the village in its different forms must be understood as the creation of the state and analysed within that context. In particular, the village in Southeast Asia is the product of the imposition of European administrative models, in

which state officials organized the rural population into territorially defined villages.

Kemp applies a similar critique to the concepts of kinship and households. He argues that kinship is best understood as chains or clusterings of relations between individuals mobilized in different contexts for specific purposes. This contrasts with the usual image of households or families as corporate, bounded units fundamental to village organization in Southeast Asia. Like villages, he suggests, corporate households were created by the modern state as a source of labour and a unit of social control.

These arguments suggest that villages and households have somewhat more substance than that of a mirage. Villages and communities may not be expressive of some pure form of Thai social structure. Yet administrative villages and households are real. If we applied Kemp's advice on conceptualizing kinship to conceptualizing community, we might be less quick to describe the community as a mirage and more likely to understand it as contextual, momentary clusterings of relationships mobilized for specific purposes such as the defence of local control of land use against state agencies. As Kemp implies, communities cannot be "found" but should be explained historically. A second minor criticism of Kemp's argument is that he tends to treat Southeast Asia as a distinct region characterized by common cultural patterns different from outside the region. He does so by contrast with Japanese villages and kinship patterns, where, he implies, the corporatist approach might be more useful. The concept of Southeast Asia as well as its constituent national states are as much seductive mirages as villages or communities, mirages which hide variation within Southeast Asia and commonality with areas outside Southeast Asia.

Kemp's argument is brief; it also raises many issues which deserve elaboration and research. As he suggests in his "epilogue", this publication constitutes an important introductory foray which is certain to open and stimulate discussion. Together with Breman's *Shattered Images*, *Seductive Mirage* promises to transform the way we think about village and community in Southeast Asia. It is essential reading for anyone interested in rural transformation and rural development in this region.

REFERENCES

- Breman, Jan C. *The Shattered Image. Construction and Deconstruction of the Village in Colonial Asia*. Comparative Asian Studies no. 2. Amsterdam: Center for Asian Studies, 1988.
- Wolf, Eric R. "Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java". *South Western Journal of Anthropology* 13 (1957): 1-18.

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