

*Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*. Edited by Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. Pp. x, 309, with map.

In their introduction, Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz recognize that the political economies of Southeast Asia today are full of strains (“Post-Colonialism and Cultural Struggle”), incompatibilities (“Contested Genders”), and profoundly unstable and uncertain connections (“Body Politics”). As modernity has spread, its styles have proliferated, and this very proliferation poses a challenge to anthropologists as well as to anyone concerned with gender analysis:

In this volume, we situate and examine contested genders within specific contexts, tracing the different interpretations — male versus female, hegemonic versus counterhegemonic, official versus local, religious versus secular, this world versus the next, and capital versus labor — that follow the shifting faultlines of social change. We show that gender domination is never a thing in and of itself, and that it intersects with and is in a very basic sense constituted by other hierarchized domains like the body, the family, civil society, the nation, and the transnational arena, each of which is variously gendered. (p. 4)

They explain that the collection is not intended only for its documentation of current gender meanings and practices in contemporary Southeast Asia; it also attempts to reveal the ways gender operates in the force-field of “political economies of social change” and to open new vistas on development and modernity, domination and resistance, and “cultural life at large” (p. 13).

There follow nine papers, each preceded by the editors’ introductory comment (following the convention in Atkinson and Errington’s *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, Stanford University Press, 1990). The first three (chapters 1–3 by Suzanne Brenner on Javanese market women, Jennifer Krier on a Minangkabau Malay woman’s protest, and Michael Peletz on Malay wives and husbands in Rembau) concern women’s and men’s perceptions of themselves and the ways they divide the cultural and political “work” of gender. Next come three

papers (chapters 4–6 by Evelyn Blackwood, again on the Indonesian Minangkabau, Aihwa Ong on the Malaysian Malays, and Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan on the Singapore Chinese) about the gender of nation-states and how they impose their will on women to try to turn them into useful wives and mothers. Finally, there are three studies (chapters 7–9 by Jacqueline Siapno on women in the 1982 novel *Dekada '70* by Lualhati Bautista, Mary Beth Mills on poverty and symbolic protest in an Isan village, and Jane Margold on Ilokano overseas workers) examining crises of gender powerlessness and sexual identity and how the actors and characters respond to them.

Apart from the solitary paper on a northeastern Thai village, the book is entirely devoted to four ethnic groups of the archipelago — Malays, Javanese, Singapore Chinese, and Filipinos — and they belong to just a few regions — peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Java, Sumatra, and Luzon in the Philippines. As the editors rightly say in defending their selection of included papers, they are about people who are in the direct firing-line of paradoxes, confusion, conflict, negotiations, and all the other conundrums of modern gender life and meaning. The precise balance of the cases is maybe less defensible; a third of the book is taken up with Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan Malays and this proportion rises to a half (pp. 51–194) with the inclusion of Ong's chapter on peninsular Malays.

Bulk and balance, of course, do not foretell quality, and none of these objections undermines the book's claim to topicality as an elucidation of *some* gender patterns and sexual situations in today's Southeast Asia. The editors are well known as specialists on the politics of Malay gender and society in West Malaysia. The collection strongly reflects their interest and inspiration and is none the worse for that.

Nevertheless, out of the papers, I would say that Evelyn Blackwood's "Senior Women, Model Mothers, and Dutiful Wives: Managing Gender Contradictions in a Minangkabau Village" (chapter 4) is the only one that fully maps the *ground* of gender relations. Blackwood does not attempt a grand scheme, in which token embodied genders are buffeted by multifarious post-colonial forces of "dislocation, ethnic heterogeneity, nation-building, religious revival, and international business", not

to mention outright “Westernization”. Instead, she carefully and concisely sets out Minang social structure (“Minangkabau Matriliney and Gender”, pp. 130–35), and explains the recent introduction of state ideologies of gender and the increasingly organized Islamic debates on gender. She then draws extensive case data from the villagers themselves on how they navigate this field of competing notions (pp. 139–46). She concludes with the vivid personal statement of Nurani, an intelligent, ambitious and successful woman in middle age, on how each aspect of her personal life has been affected by the different and conflicting demands on her gender (pp. 148–50).

In my view, it is this sensitive balance of the social structural, the biographical, the everyday local knowledge conveyed by the observing anthropologist, and the state-mediated and often politically coercive forces that distinguishes Blackwood’s approach. And in my view the other papers to a greater or lesser degree tend to suffer because this balance is less well achieved. Indeed, some are surprisingly thin on context and empirical data, and others, as I have hinted, are too schematic, and less convincing as a result.

The 1992 paper (reprinted as chapter 6) “State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality and Race in Singapore” by Heng and Devan, on Singapore’s “unreproductive” and “unpatriotic” women, has already become well-known. It wittily demonstrates how in the 1980s the state ideology of a reformulated “Confucianism” was grafted onto the government’s quality population campaign. The episode seems to have raised chuckles even among ordinary Singaporeans.

It must be said that the articles by Brenner, Krier, and Mills, while concerned with valid issues of women’s status contesting men’s — in Solo market-places, in a Minang village, in a poverty-stricken Thai village — barely rise above the anecdotal. They are the disappointing ones here, offering too little data and conclusions that are not as valuable and original as they could be. Suzanne Brenner’s argument is in some ways ingenious — that men view women as women view men, though for different reasons and in different contexts: lusty, domineering, even dangerous (pp. 30–31). (I am not sure if this is what she means by “alternative paradigms”, p. 32.) The dichotomy *alus/kasar* lights this game of

mirrors. It is worthwhile noting in contrast that Brenner was not able to confirm the presence of the polarity *hawa nafsu/akal*, a point also made by Blackwood (p. 153 n. 14) for her Minangkabau data. These findings suggest that *akal* and *nafsu* are not quite the “key symbols” Michael Peletz contends they are (chapter 3), despite his attempt at qualification (p. 114, n. 9). However, Brenner then goes on to deduce the presence of *nafsu/akal* by conjecture, which seems definitely misguided. Almost as an afterthought, she includes a splendid vignette of a *banci* who headed the market *arisan* — a male crossing into the world of expert money-handling, or “woman’s world” (*donyané wong wédok*) (p. 37). It is a nugget of ethnography that does not enter into her analysis. Instead of “stories” from the houses and market-place, one wishes she had looked at more of the people in those places and told us about the sex of real Javanese in ways that, for example, Jerome Weiss, Hisako Nakamura, Gavin Jones, and others have done ever since Hildred Geertz opened the way in the 1950s. It is the thinness of data and narrow reference of the analysis in these papers which makes it hard for the reader to gain more than an impression of the gender situations they claim to be about.

The chapters by Michael Peletz and Aihwa Ong, both previously published as journal articles, are much more ambitious, not the first work of students fresh from the field but muscular essays striving to set their own field-work into a general framework of Malay social and gender systems. In their analyses, social class and political economy rather than kinship, descent, and marriage become the structural element delineating gender. Against this common background of social class and political economy, Peletz argues that *masculinity* deserves a place after long neglect whereas Ong considers a wider scope is required to account for recent changes in *female roles* since the recent and dramatic shift of economic and social participation in the larger Malaysian scene in favour of young women, with all the perceived “threats” posed to male roles, female identity, and state controls (pp. 167–74). But once again their evidence tends to be extrapolated more from ideological beliefs than the multilayered body of data social anthropologists like to be availed of. In both accounts the political-economy framework (while a

good departure in principle) become ponderous and even tendentious, tending to smother the gender data proper — who is gendered, what gender means in action, how it is acquired, its linguistic expressions, and so on; in short, their essays produce more rhetorical than analytical effect. In Ong's one perceives an uneasy mix of conventional field data (from her study of 1979–80), reflections on twenty years or so of national social engineering, and a selective reading of Malaysian current affairs (religion, popular protests, ministerial interviews, public opinion surveys, and so forth). Here the programmatic masquerades as panorama and is likely to leave the reader more bemused than informed. I am not saying they have nothing to say, far from it, but what they have to say is still struggling to get out.

Two of the contributors — Siapno and Margold — deal with modern Philippine life and its representations. Siapno asks why female literary heroines, whether of the right or the left, are suppressed and marginalized. Using her study of Lualhati Bautista's Tagalog novel about a mother and her daughter-in-law — the mother, a well-off housewife, and the younger woman, a committed leftwing activist during the Marcos dictatorship — together with the heroines in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Indonesian novels, Siapno considers the conditions for an effective feminist literature under two Southeast Asian regimes which doubly colonize women, repressing them both as citizens and as women: "If the national community (*sambayanan*) was previously portrayed as passive, women as members of this community were doubly so" (p. 236). Margold reports the pained reactions of male Ilokano migrant workers to their Arab hosts' male-dominated work-places in the Middle East. Here two incompatible male gender forms collide, and the Ilokano men are shocked into silence: "Even wives [she states] were often surprised to hear the details that emerged during my interviews with the men" (p. 292). To account for a degree of dramatization, elaboration, and imaginary expansion in the men's recollections about their time abroad, Margold is forced to reject psychoanalytic models; these, she says, cannot account for Ilokano maleness, a distinctive blend of "verbal graces, emotional availability, a capacity for deep friendship with other men, and a willingness to be involved closely with children" (p. 282). To a

significant degree the experience scarred them and on return to the Ilocos they withdrew as though they really had been slaves or prisoners of war. Women are beginning to take over the work migration and this paper would have benefited from a complementary analysis of their experiences.

As always with a collection of this kind the reader has to ask, does it add up, does it hang together? Is there some similarity of problems, a congruence of perspectives, a compatibility of analytic styles? On the whole, yes. But on the other hand, readers may feel that in the papers the combination of anthropology, feminist approaches, political economy, and cultural studies is too all-embracing and too congested to let the empirical data speak for themselves. Some of the papers are over-ambitious, omitting to mention no conceivable large-scale development on the assumption that a panoptic approach necessarily carries theoretical weight and conviction, whereas it may result only in padding.

Two features of the book are slightly worrying. First, the title. Its exotic, *pantun*-like formula does not describe the substance of the contributions, if only because “bewitching” and “pious” are hardly leading aspects of gender meanings in the cultures of post-colonial, modernizing Southeast Asian polities. On the contrary, and on the testimony of the editors themselves, the book deliberately focuses on transformations of gender consciousness, on “conflicting relations of knowledge and power linked to transnational flows of labor, capital and culture” (p. 7) and on

cultural understandings of what it means to be male or female becoming increasingly blurred, varied and problematic ... especially among the mobile peasants, labor migrants and middle classes. (p. 8)

Had the collection included the cases of modern Balinese dancers, modern Muslim theologians, or modern Thai transvestites, for example, then one could justify calling it *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*. As it stands, the title simply contradicts much of the bureaucratic social science in this book. And too the paperback’s cover illustration jars — a modern Thai painting (titled “Fortune Telling”) apparently depicting well-behaved upper-class men with their wives/consorts, like the

book's title, not a very good guide to the contents, attractive though it is *per se*.

A conference-generated volume can always claim to present substantial individual chapters and *Bewitching Women, Pious Men* does that (although to be strictly accurate it is a hybrid creation in that half of it consists of reprinted articles: apparently these reprints were placed when some of the original conference papers could not be included). I know from experience that editors of conference proceedings need to make a virtue of fortuity, as far as this can be convincingly done, and as editors Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz manage this feat very well given the circumstances. It is a densely worked, wide-ranging compendium of current themes and debates and will profit any reader concerned for the direction of gender developments in Southeast Asia today. More generally, it proposes, as we would expect, and can well claim, to widen the scope of gender studies, and to respond to the need to understand the successive "New World Orders", which seem to appear with ever-increasing regularity on the horizon of local, national, and global communities.

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