

***Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula.* Edited by Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory. Singapore: NUS Press, 2008. Softcover: 413pp.**

Only recently has the distinctive multi-ethnic peninsular zone encompassing Southern Thailand and Northern Malaysia been accorded the concerted scholarly attention it deserves, particularly with regard to historical and anthropological investigation. Thai folklore and historical scholarship on Thailand's south, pioneered by Suthiwong Phongphaibun since the 1980s, has been inaccessible to English readers, and it is fitting that a translated essay by Suthiwong is featured in this collection. Montesano and Jory's book is the second conference-based essay collection on this region that has appeared in recent years, following Wattana Sugunnasil's *Dynamic Diversity of Southern Thailand* (2005). Like the latter, this volume also emphasizes the distinctive diversity of this region, though as a collection it is more focused, both because of its predominant historical orientation as well as the more concerted analytical attention it gives to "plurality" as the defining historical dynamic underlying economic, ethnic, religious, cultural and political change and relationships. The editors emphasize the importance of questioning top-down national-based optics in studying this zone, and in so doing reflect the trend among anthropologists of Southeast Asia in studying contemporary borderlands between contingent national borders (Horstmann and Wadley, *Centering the Margins*, 2006). The collection is divided into four parts with thirteen component chapters, including contributions from Thai, Malaysian and Western scholars, with some contributions translated into English from Thai. The conference took place just as the violence in Thailand's Deep South was escalating dramatically, and a number of chapters have been updated and expanded to include this major phenomenon.

The introduction is a brave attempt to knit the diverse chapters into a coherent frame, with some important points being made that bear on historiography, geography and the ongoing turbulence in Thailand's southernmost Muslim-majority provinces. The editors query the categorization of the peninsula as "Malay", take a swipe at essentialized representations of Malayness, and question simplistic notions of ethnic primordialism that inform treatments of "Patani Malay identity" in the current conflict. They assert that historical studies of the forces behind this conflict are rare (curiously displaying an ignorance of some key work on the subject by the Canadian historian

H.E. Wilson), and argue, rightly, that there has been a common recourse to simplistic “nation-state-bashing” in treatments of the current crisis. Interestingly, however, the editors’ critical disposition is contradicted in the book’s key chapter on that conflict. Thanet Aphornsuvan argues essentially that “separatism” (it is fashionable now to parenthesize that word) was a creation of the Thai state: it was a demonic label conjured by a paranoid and authoritarian post-war Thai state, used to silence political criticism. True, the paranoia was real, as was the fervent Thai nationalist-authoritarianism of the state under Phibun Songkhram’s regime, but so too was the impulse to ethno-religious-based separatism, which emerged in response to various internal and external factors in the immediate post-World War II years. Hence, without considering the British official archives treated by H.E. Wilson for this period, Thanet fails to acknowledge both the divisions among British officials on the question of Patani and the evidence showing preparations (albeit rudimentary) for military organization among Patani Malays in Kelantan. As for the editors’ critique of simplified Patani Malay ethnic primordialism, this disposition is not entirely shared by contributors. Thus, the essay on Patani historiography by Davisakd Puakson, though informative and important in outlining this chronicle’s political and symbolic significance, lacks critical nuance by treating the Hikayat Patani as a “Patani Malay” expression of identity, without viewing such history as the production of a Patani power elite, like the Siamese dynastic chronicles. The author rightly notes that “historical perceptions about the Malay Kingdom of Patani still form a crucial foundation for the [ethnic nationalist] movement’s justification to reclaim ‘absolute independence’ for Patani.” But the chapter begs a glaring question that is beyond the capacity of an isolated textual treatment of the Hikayat and other written histories: i.e., how do ordinary Malay-Muslims remember Patani’s past?

The component chapters treat various topics, including legends and local identity in Upper Southern Thailand, Chinese family dynasties in Southern Thailand, the Peranakan Chinese of Kelantan, pilgrimage traditions and change among Muslims and Buddhists, as well as the legend of the wandering monk Luang Pho Thuat and its uses in incorporating Patani into the symbolic space of the Thai-Buddhist state. Electoral politics and the history of communism are also treated in interesting essays by James Ockey and Karl Hack, respectively. The chapters vary in their style, density of information, degree of conceptualization and readability. For example, Teo Kok Song’s chapter on Chinese-Malay-Thai interactions and Peranakan

Chinese Ethnicity in Kelantan is an old-style taxonomic treatment of cultural and language characteristics, punctuated by numerous report-style sub-headings. Contrast this with Irving Chan Johnson's fluid evocative ethnographic accounts of Kelantanese Thai miracle tales that highlight a range of interactions among ethnic groups and their conceptualization of place. Most contributions, aside from their particular topics, do succeed in speaking to the collection's theme of the dynamic connections between groups in the peninsular and the various ways that economic strategies, religious practice, and various forms of identification have changed and responded to forces and circumstances at various scales from the regional, to the national and the global. The best of the chapters (particularly those by Chan Johnson, Horstmann, Jory and Ockey) succeed in showing how economic and religious forces (local and global), as well as state policies and politics, have impacted on and interacted with, patterns of conflict, coexistence and plurality in the peninsular.

This volume is an important addition to the emerging work on a formerly neglected region of scholarship. Pluralism, as demonstrated in this book, has been the norm in this distinct region, but as the editors admit, the nature of the peninsula's pluralism has changed, and the key question for continuing inquiry, conspicuously raised by the complex violence in Thailand's Muslim-majority south, is the shape that sustainable coexistence and plurality might take in the face of disintegrative and homogenizing forces represented by the economy, ideologies and the state.

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