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REVIEW: *INTER-ETHNIC DYNAMICS IN ASIA*

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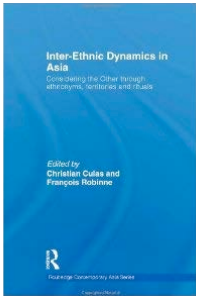

Culas, Christian and François Robinne (eds). 2009. *Inter-ethnic Dynamics in Asia: Considering the Other Through Ethnonyms, Territories and Ritual.* London: New York: Routledge. 215. Bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-0-415-55936-2 (hardcover, 130USD), 978-0-203-86138-7 (ebook, 99.61USD).

One of this volume's many merits is that it sets out to seriously address ethnic categorization in Upland Southeast Asia. Many valuable publications have dealt specifically with ethnicity in this region,[1] where the complex intricacies of collective identities are easily noticed by social scientists. A strongpoint of this volume is its highlighting certain dimensions that have traditionally received little attention. This is thanks to a relatively unusual approach aimed at understanding horizontal inter-ethnic relationships. While many scholars have focused on relations between the state and 'minorities', or on opposition between hills and valleys – and sometimes both, as in the case of Scott (2009) – this compilation examines the manifold identity relations that "structure the ethnic groups' social spaces on a local or micro-regional level" (1).

Several of this volume's contributions deal with ethnonyms, with which anthropologists have an ambiguous relationship, reflecting an ambiguous relationship with ethnicity itself. Noting the fuzziness of generic appellations, many brush ethnonyms aside as having little relevance for cultural interpretation, while others reject ethnonyms outright as colonial constructs concealing genuine social

[1] For example, Kunstadter (1967), Moerman (1965), Gellner (1997), and Michaud and Forsyth (2011).

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facts. Identity categories are too often confined to individual expressions of affective belonging to a culture, or to artificial tools manipulated for the sake of political domination, and therefore it is often overlooked that the forging of ethnonyms might provide deep insights into fundamental social processes. Ironically, the cultural inconsistency of ethnic categories, as theorized by Barth (1969:11-13), has been appropriated by many as evidence of their irrelevance. Paradoxically, anthropologists often unconsciously base their analysis on identity units when they write about a particular 'culture'. Beyond the issue of the specific forms taken by ethnonyms in particular areas, the status of ethnonyms in anthropological investigations and interpretations is not marginal.

The distribution of ethnic categories in Upland Southeast Asia is undoubtedly fuzzy, and contingent upon subjective, almost individual perceptions. As Bouté remarks when discussing the Phunoy category in Upper Laos, "It is possible to obtain almost as many combinations as the numbers of people questioned" (80). As several contributions demonstrate, part of the confusion stems from a lack of conceptual distinction in many local languages between different levels of social groupings. Similarly, Culas evokes "zones of inaccuracy in the autonym categories," (33) a formulation that translates the confusion and the lack of interest the Hmong sometimes display when questioned about ethnic categories. Thus, anthropologists are challenged to understand which 'group' interviewees are alluding to: clans, cultural aggregates, or ethnic categories. It would be too simple to assume that this hurdle is erected by anthropologists and their pre-conceived classifications. Culas rightly invokes the non-linearity of classifications as a possible reason. Indeed, in practice, entities corresponding to clans and ethnic groups dictate many social norms and actions. Another explanation that the authors have not explicitly envisaged might be that ethnic categories are pragmatic, verbalized only within certain relevant contexts, or not conceptualised at all as distinct realities. Nevertheless, a comparison between the various local cases described in this volume suggests that the relevance of ethnonyms varies according to region, time, and scale. Some ethnonyms have a longer history than others and some, more than others, are clearly linked to

descent groups and territories.

Concerning the label 'Kachin' and its various subsets, Robinne found that these generic appellations are part of a modern phenomenon initiated by colonial power and revitalized by contemporary Kachin nationalism. The creation and adoption of such categories had "exponential effects" through the dynamic emergence of numerous "isolates." This does not exclude the emergence of other labels and configurations in the past through the very same processes. As the data presented by other contributors strongly suggest (Gros, Schlemmer, Tapp), ethnic categorisation is a general phenomenon. Though not eternal, it seems to date back to ancient times in most areas and to have always assumed a fundamentally dynamic character. The fluidity of ethnic labels in Upland Southeast Asia and their confusing relation to clans and geography may be for a good part attributed to the impressive mobility of populations. In a very stimulating final chapter, Tapp explicitly questions the general paradigm of the permanent re-construction of identities and cultures, which he contrasts with the "isolationism" and "fundamentalism" of the Hmong. On the basis of data provided by Tapp on the relations between the Han and the Hmong, it seems that 'the' Hmong culture – the "Hmong world" as Tapp puts it – was not persistently isolated but rather, certain Hmong ethnic representations portrayed it as such. In this instance, as in others, ethnicity should be distinguished from culture. Though people have an essentialist vision of themselves, and though they conceive of themselves as isolated, we are not compelled to describe them as such.

In this region, mobility is a major determinant of ethnogenesis. As Gros makes clear, with people constantly on the move, older categories and identities moved with them and were adapted to new places. What was once a clan appellation becomes a toponym, what was once a toponym becomes an ethnic label, and so on. There were cumulative exchanges of designations between descent groups and localities on different scales, and continuous segmentations, producing ethnonyms that were neither purely spatial nor purely descent-based. Consequently, in each particular area, ethnonymy remains strongly affected by hysteresis, i.e., dependence on past environments. Under such conditions, classical cartography is most

ill-adapted to the depiction of ethnic phenomena in the region. Instead, Barth's boundary approach (1969:15-16) again proves effective, as when, for instance, Robinne focuses on what he very aptly calls "articulation zones" (75-76). In fact, Robinne primarily considers articulations between kinship systems to illuminate the trans-ethnic descent entities cutting across identity categories, a very important phenomenon often overlooked by authors writing about Asia. This does not contradict the existence of articulation zones between local ethnic configurations shaped by the different logic of ethnicity. Assertion of the arbitrary construction of ethnic groups should not be taken as far as Robinne does when, following Amselle (1990), he claims that "ethnic isomorphs disappear behind chains of societies" (179). Whatever the external and constructed origin of particular categories, human cultures are made up of chains of societies plus categorisations.

One of the few theoretical weaknesses of this book is an undue concern for the role of "the Other." Making distinctions between the Self and the Other is an important social process. However, an obsessive search for the "management of alterity," as Schlemmer (154) puts it, often leads to underestimating the "management of sameness" that, as shown in the cases described here, is the other component of the single phenomenon of ethnicity. This bias is particularly manifest in the section dedicated to the role of the Other in therapeutic rituals. Here, as in other regions, people call upon various therapists very pragmatically in search of relief. I am unconvinced, by the examples given, that "foreign" specialists are called upon in their quality of "Others" or that the rites they perform aim to enforce the Self/ Other boundary. The notion of exteriority should not necessarily be advanced whenever people from different backgrounds interact. This is what Schlemmer himself suggests in this volume when underlining the pragmatic adoption of techniques by shamans belonging to different ethnicities.

Overall, this publication provides a very consistent data set on local configurations and histories and many new theoretical approaches that encourage us to go beyond the mere acknowledgement of Upland Southeast Asia's anthropological complexity and highlights the numerous interactions between its

different levels of complexity.

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