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## **Inter-Ethnic Dynamics in Asia. Considering the Other through ethnonyms, territories and rituals. Introduction**

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### ► **To cite this version:**

Christian Culas, François Robinne. Inter-Ethnic Dynamics in Asia. Considering the Other through ethnonyms, territories and rituals. Introduction. Christian Culas; François Robinne. Inter-Ethnic Dynamics in Asia. Considering the Other through ethnonyms, territories and rituals, Routledge, pp.1-10, 2010, Routledge contemporary Asia series, 978-0-415-83678-4. ⟨halshs-01866859⟩

**HAL Id: halshs-01866859**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01866859v1>**

Submitted on 5 Sep 2018

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# Introduction

*Christian Culas and François Robinne*

## **Crossing views on the same subject of study**

South-East Asia is one of the most complex regions in the world as far as ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity is concerned, with an extremely rich ancient and contemporary history. Because of this, it offers an exceptionally rich field of study for inter-ethnic relations, which will be the focus point for the analyses developed throughout this work. To our way of thinking, the notion of a geographical area – South-East Asia – is not in itself determining in the sense that our aim is not to consider this region as ‘a cultural area’, nor to look for traits of continuity specific to South-East Asia. Most of the contributions to this volume concern South-East Asia; others, devoted to the Himalayan world and to Siberia, have been chosen because they adopt a new approach to the issue which focuses on the different forms of relating to others.

The aim of this work is twofold. On the one hand, it attempts to describe and to understand the cultural, social, economic, political and historical complexity of the mountain regions of Asia through processes of exchange and relations. Nearly all researchers today agree on the fact that studies focused on a single ethnic group are insufficient for an understanding of human relation dynamics and of socio-economic, political and religious changes. If the trend for monographs would seem to be over, a strong interest in academic specialization by ethnic group still remains, sometimes indirectly. In this book we propose going beyond intellectual trends in order to give an account of the practical reality we see daily in the field – that is, to treat social realities from an inter-ethnic angle so as to apprehend the exchange dynamics as accurately as possibly.

On the other hand, although inter-ethnic relations have become – since Edmund Leach’s founding work (1979 [1954]) devoted to the fragile balance between the Shan administrations and the Kachin political systems – an important research topic in the social sciences, we remained unsatisfied with the main orientations of the majority of texts available. Our aim will therefore be to refocus the angles of approach on everyday relationships and on those which structure the ethnic groups’ social spaces on a local or micro-regional level.

Exchanges and inter-ethnic relations have already been the subject of numerous works, in particular with respect to the south-east Asian massif – for

example, Peter Kunstadter (eds), *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* (1967); Charles Keyes (eds), *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity. The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma* (1979); David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in South-East Asia* (1994) and, more recently, Jean Michaud, *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples. Mountain Minorities in the South-East Asian Massif* (2000), Andrew Turton, *Civility and Savagery. Social Identity in Tai States* (2000) and Christopher R. Duncan and Ileen A. DeVault, *Civilizing the Margins. Southeast Asian Government Policies for the Development of Minorities* (2004).

One of the points all these works have in common is the fact that their approaches are centred on relations between the central authorities (in different forms) and the ethnic populations (in their diversity).

From an epistemological point of view, the fact of focusing research on exchanges between central government and ethnic populations is not neutral. To begin with, we should note that the central authorities themselves produce certain types of discourse on their relations with ethnic populations (annals, laws, regulations, development projects, etc.). Thus the researcher, whether an anthropologist, a sociologist, a geographer or a historian, who considers and describes inter-ethnic relations through the central government/ethnic populations dualism himself re-uses (usually without clearly stating it) the central government's categories of thought with regard to ethnic groups. This intellectual position poses several problems of a descriptive and ideological nature.

### **Describing: presenting the social actors' point of view**

It is often said that anthropology is first and foremost characterized by its tendency to give accounts of the points of view of the groups present and, in particular, the often neglected one of the local actors (Olivier de Sardan 2008, Long 1989, Long and Long 1992) and, second, by its capacity for going back and forth between theoretical approaches and data gathered in the field, which the sociologists of the Chicago School call the 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1973). Yet, on the subject of inter-ethnic relations, it is significant that we should observe in most of the texts published a very strong overrepresentation of relations between the central state and ethnic populations. We can talk of overrepresentation because in the reality of field observations it is always local exchanges, from village to village, hamlet to hamlet, often between distinct ethnic groups, which play the main role in the practices, discourses and everyday representations of the people we study. In neglecting this aspect of the everyday reality of the people studied, the researcher misses the way in which ethnic populations think and act in their social universe.

Our aim is to attempt to re-establish a balance between everyday practices observed in the field and the descriptions and analyses proposed.

### **The necessary distance: the researcher and politics**

This is a very old debate, well documented by Max Weber (*Le savant et le politique*, 1919–1969), whose main elements we shall find again here.

The fact of apprehending inter-ethnic relations principally through the relations between ethnic groups and the central government has been internalized by many researchers without question. It is true that it is from this angle that these relations will be presented by officials; to such a degree that it is easy to believe it is the only approach possible. It should not be forgotten that officials in the host countries where we carry out our research – governments, academics, project managers, etc. – will be foreign researchers' first and sometimes main interlocutors. For example, it is thanks to them that researchers will obtain their visas to stay in the country and their research permits.

Moreover, in most Asian countries there is a great deal of locally produced literature on the ethnic populations, in the form of both published texts and grey literature. In both cases, it can be noticed that a 'national normative discourse' exists on the ethnic group populations and, in particular, on relations between these groups and the central government. This discourse is often repeated from one text to another, without any methodological critical analysis, and it thus eventually manages to acquire a legitimacy acquired from the length of time it has existed. Although based largely on fragile actual descriptive knowledge and on obvious cultural prejudices, it helps to form the main part of the foundations of the 'normative discourse' on ethnic populations. Few works have dealt with this question directly, but we should note Guérin, Hardy, Nguyen and Hwee's book (2003), *Des montagnards aux minorités ethniques. Quelle intégration nationale pour les habitants des hautes terres du Vietnam et du Cambodge*, which partly fills this gap.

This kind of relation is seen according to a dual or bipolar model: between centre and periphery, majority and minority, or lowlands and highlands. This model, although specific and ideologically connotated since it is the vision developed by central government actors, is acknowledged as the explanatory framework for inter-ethnic relations, usually tacitly, that is to say taken for granted by researchers.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this epistemological position of relations between the central government and ethnic groups, which is taken for granted, that we wish to question – that is to say, put to the test of field data, as this is one of the best ways of testing claims made by researchers.

It is clearly in order to offset the general tendency in publications which tends to neglect the actor's point of view as well as everyday relations on a local level that we organized a series of three workshops on themes which were sufficiently precise to prevent papers being too diverse.

### **The origin of this project**

The project of working specifically on relations between ethnic groups on a local level is the result of many discussions between Christian Culas and François Robinne. On the basis of their long experience of field work in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Burma, they formed the project of bringing together other field researchers around the theme of relations, with the latter analysed in their most everyday forms.

In order to launch a really international, intellectual debate on inter-ethnic dynamics, the most suitable means seemed to be small work sessions with about 15 participants, workshops on very precise themes so as to be able to gain as much as possible from the discussions without running the risk of overdiversifying into other related themes. This is also one of the limits of this exercise as, by favouring very precise themes, we perhaps missed some interesting ideas and propositions. But in the face of such a vast task, we were obliged to make choices.

In the context of the research programme *Dynamiques de l'identité et de l'ethnicité en Asie du Sud-Est et en Chine du Sud*, Christian Culas (French Institute on Contemporary South-East Asia (IRASEC), Bangkok) and François Robinne (Institute of Research on South-East Asia (IRSEA), Marseille), both researchers at the CNRS, organized three workshops at the University of Provence (Marseille) between March 2003 and December 2004. Thus, more than 40 papers were given by French, Swedish, American, Taiwanese and Australian researchers, and we finally selected only those contributions most central to our aim.

Our purpose was to shed light on inter-ethnic relations using three complementary and connected angles of approach instead of collecting together studies of specific cases with no significant links between them. A reflection of the three workshops which structured our approach, this work is made up of three main parts:

- 1 Ethnonyms: naming oneself, naming others and being named in a multi-ethnic complex
- 2 Spatial configurations and appropriation of the social landscape in multi-ethnic contexts
- 3 Presence and use of the other in religious rituals.

### **Ethnonyms: naming oneself, naming others and being named in a multi-ethnic complex**

The methodological choice of focusing on the ethnonyms' social field consists less in treating the ethnonyms for themselves – that is to say the appellations and designations of the various groups likely to be listed – than in defining the pertinence of the ethnonyms considered at different levels of scales in relations with others, with different others. Examined from this angle, reflection on ethnonyms has shown the limits of the categorical approach, indicating on the contrary the pertinence of social, economic or religious strategies as well as the different zones of influence exerted by the central authorities.

Some studies that were innovative at the time, like the approach to inter-ethnic relations using the 'we' and 'they' categories (Bernot 1982) were fundamentally limited by the fact they start by taking attributes decided in advance in order to define the partners in the relationship. In doing this, the latter approach, like many others, tends to essentialize ethnic identities and consequently cannot grasp the key features and the real methods of exchange.

Even for anthropologists working on inter-ethnic relations the ethnonym concept still remains problematic. Victor King's creation (2003: 209–212) of the ethnonym 'Maloh' is in this respect extremely representative of the difficulty of cutting oneself off from the notion of ethnic categories. Although King became one of the intellectual leaders on inter-ethnic relations for South-East Asia, he paradoxically reproduced an approach similar to that adopted in colonial times and which consisted of creating arbitrary ethnic categories, a method whose artificial character he himself has demonstrated on many occasions. In this Upper Kapuas region, in the west of Kalimantan, where 'there has been considerable cultural exchange, intermarriage, religious conversion and assimilation', he applied the ethnonym 'Maloh' – based on the toponym Embolah – to people whose main element of homogeneity lies in the dynamic of the exchange networks. In other words, the idea these people themselves have of their social cohesion transcends the ethnic category and, therefore, the necessity of using a generic term to name themselves. Although the introduction of the ethnonym 'Maloh' played a part locally in generating new power struggles, its creator continues to defend its principle. Thus, even for an anthropologist like Victor King, the lack of a generic ethnonym is difficult to accept. This shows, if it were necessary, the epistemological distance still to be covered between the methodological analysis of inter-ethnic relations and the projection of arbitrarily constructed concepts in a trans-ethnic space which originally was not significant for the local actors themselves.

Far from being commonplace, the section on ethnonyms envisaged here in terms of relations with others cannot, therefore, be reduced to simply an additional point on the matter, since the ethnonym topic will be the subject of specific epistemological questioning. We shall use a similar approach for ethnonyms, territoriality and rituals. The inter-ethnic angle of approach will make it possible to open new perspectives for research.

Chapter 1: The first aim of Christian Culas' text which begins this work (*The ethnonyms of the Hmong in Vietnam: early history (1856–1924) and practical epistemology*) is to draw up an inventory of the knowledge on Hmong ethnonyms in Vietnam in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its second objective is to epistemologically analyse this knowledge in order to show that its main limits (little adequation between observable realities and data produced, interpretative bias) allow us to question current research, particularly on subjects more sensitive than ethnonyms, such as matters of national integration or environmental policies, from a more critical standpoint.

Chapter 2: Grégoire Schlemmer (*Rai, Khambu, Subbe, Kirant, etc.: ethnic labels or political and land tenure categories? Logics of identification of an ensemble of populations in Nepal*), shows that the grouping together of populations under the same generic term – for example, that of Limbu or Kiranti – was done on the basis of non-homogeneous criteria (language, socio-ritual organization, kinship or territory). It is on the basis of one of the principles structuring these groups' identity – politics – that the author suggests a rereading of the ethnonyms' divisions and groupings. Basing his work on a set of levels of scale

which go from the individual to the ethnic group, or even the ethnic ensemble, and involve all levels of social organization, he will show the impact of politics on a local and national level in the production and integration of ethnic designations.

Continuing with this perspective of considering identity formations at different levels of scales and in a similar context of heterogeneous identity construction, Chapter 3 (*Making ethnonyms in a clan social organization: the case of the so-called Kachin subgroups (Burma)*), by François Robinne, recalls the ambiguous historical relation between ethnic category and clan organization. The question is developed on the basis of a case study covering the so-called Kachin subgroups – a category that is meaningful in the relationship with the Burmese, Buddhist central government, but much less so in the more local context of the exchange dynamic of which generalized exchange is one of the main vectors.

In Chapter 4, Vanina Bouté gives us a study of an ethnic group from the far north of Laos, the Phunoy (*Names and territoriality among the Phunoy: how the state creates ethnicity group (Lao PDR)*). She attempts to define all the historical appellations applied to this group, but, besides the ethnonyms' many contradictions and superimpositions, no term seems capable of covering this local identity or, more correctly, these local identities. It is through the different kinds of relationships with national and local government, in particular that of the Tai and Ly groups, that she proposes a contextualization and historicization of the appellations applied to the Phunoy. The linking of ethnonyms and toponyms establishes the connection with the second view on inter-ethnic relations considered with regard to a social landscape – in the sense of a multi-ethnic complex – which is both diverse and deeply enmeshed, and as such is meaningful.

### **Spatial configurations and appropriation of the social landscape in multi-ethnic contexts**

Here, territory will be considered through the dynamic of the inter-ethnic networks, with all the issues underlying the process of appropriating the social landscape this implies in terms of social management of the territory and coherence in a multi-ethnic context. Each contribution helps to show that in the inter-ethnic relationship territorial construction tends to reduce particularities, though elsewhere it tends to produce differences. And this is indeed the paradox already observed in the reflection on ethnonyms: territorial space sometimes goes beyond the ethnically based community ideal and sometimes reifies it.

In Chapter 5 (*A sense of place: the spatial referent in the definition of identities and territories in the Dulong Valley (north-west Yunnan – China)*), Stéphane Gros attempts to show to what extent the space invested by the Drung people relates back to various levels of perception according to the period of time concerned and the perspectives we adopt. In the first place, the valley they inhabit is the primary referent on which the Drung base their vision of the organization of inter-ethnic space. The space of the valley is built and organized both on inter-group relations within the valley itself and on political relations with neighbouring groups outside

the valley, which implies overlapping territorial demarcations. It thus seems obvious that the evolution of inter-ethnic relations, envisaged both as identity and power relations, modifies the territorial configuration.

In Chapter 6 (*Territorial construction and ethnic relations in the context of collectivization: a case study from a mountain area in Northern Vietnam*), Marie Mellac shows how natural constraints and socio-cultural determinations interact in the territorialization process at work in the Cho Don district during and at the end of the collectivization process. In this district, the collectivization movement which formed the Tay households and the main means of production into cooperatives mostly devoted to rice-growing, was also accompanied by the arrival of Kinh households, moved from the delta, and the sedentarization of the Dao (Yao) in the lowlands previously settled by the Tay. This gave rise to the creation of cooperatives with different characteristics and more or less ethnically mixed. With the ensuing decollectivization, the inhabitants had to adapt to a new context of population distribution, and new ethnic balances came into being. From collectivization to decollectivization, ethnic balances and spatial recomposition were dependent on the territoriality of each ethnic group present, if only residually.

### Presence and use of the other in religious rituals

The construction and use of the other in the imaginary is a vast field of study, as yet little developed, which would shed light on many forms of racism or ethnicism present in ritual acts.

After having looked at ethnonyms (the relation to others via appellations) and territorial space (the relation to *others* through the medium of space), the approach from the angle of religious rituals makes it possible to open up the field of inter-ethnicity study through the construction of an imaginary space. For ethnonyms and territories are two practical and tangible dimensions of the relationship to the other – two dimensions in which the other imposes himself: by contact, by his presence or simply evoked, whether he is named or not, he will have a place or be refused a place in the universe of language; to organize, share and manage a territory together is ultimately to recognize the other and often to negotiate with him. In the rituals, the form of the *other's* presence is quite different, for two main reasons. First, because the *other* is not necessary for the ritual, if he is present we have chosen – of our own free will – to invite him. And it is this very freedom to invite the *other* or not which seemed to us to bring a truly innovative element to the study of inter-ethnic relations. Second, because the *other* is usually physically absent from the ritual, so it is often his evocation and/or representation which will play the allotted role; as such it can be in the form of an ethnonym that he will be represented at the heart of the ritual.

We shall see in the three chapters comprising this part of the book how the other can be instrumentalized for very different purposes.

Though in his chapter (*Orthodox Russians, Siberian shamanists and a bear: how do you take an oath in Siberia*) Jean-Luc Lambert takes our imaginary far

from the south-east Asian cultural area, he enriches the question of inter-ethnic relations considered here with regard to the Other in the ritual imaginary. In Imperial Russia, oaths were of considerable importance. Traditionally, one would swear an oath by kissing the cross or placing one's hand on the Bible. All male subjects had to swear an oath of loyalty to the tsar, and oaths were a part of common judicial procedures. But how did the non-Christian peoples of the Russian Empire, in particular members of the shamanistic minorities of Siberia, swear an oath? This case study shows how the form of a ritual may be adapted in order to guarantee its efficacy. The analysis shows that the Russian authorities created the 'bear's oath', during which shamanists were supposed to kiss the skull or the paw of a bear when swearing an oath. In this way, the bear was construed as a divinity which could not be cheated and which could therefore serve as a guarantee for the validity of the oath. As a consequence, when Siberians killed a bear, they immediately deceived it by accusing the Russians of the death of the animal; furthermore, Siberian rituals organized to honour this 'divine bear' become increasingly complex.

Grégoire Schlemmer's chapter (*The illness is the other people: cross-representations and ritual management of alterity and illness among the Kulung (Nepal)*) deals with the presence of the Other in the narration and staging of rituals among the Kulung, a small group who speak a Tibeto-Burmese language and live in the Nepalese Himalayas. These 'Other' figures which will interest us are those of predatory, wandering spirits, emanations of alterity who are dangerous for other groups. The presentation of these spirits will reveal the existence of two types: those spirits of the dead belonging to other Kiranti groups, whose rituals are celebrated in 'ritual language', and those spirits of Indo-Nepalese dead, whose rituals are performed in Nepali. The kind of ritual treatment these two sets of spirits receive is correlated to the spatial location of the groups from which they come, thus showing how the way of pacifying these spirits betrays the relationship the Kulung have with the groups from which they are said to emanate. To conclude, we shall look at the importance of soothsayers, another form of the Others' presence in rituals, for they can belong to any group, in the emergence of a form of regional religiosity. We shall thus see that it is important to consider all the phenomena which at first sight might seem 'borrowings' or part of 'acculturation'.

In his analysis of inter-ethnic relations in the Lake Inle region, in Burma's Shan State (*Presence and use of the Burmese legend heritage in the dynamic of inter-ethnic and trans-ethnic partnership*), François Robinne considers the perception of the Other through the manipulations to which the circumnavigation around Lake Inle was successively subjected. They are consubstantial, on the one hand, with the influence exerted by the Burmese central government, and on the other with the region's multi-ethnic complexity. By integrating this dual horizontal and vertical level of scale into the exchanges, the aim is to show not only that the processional ritual is sensitive to events which rock the central government, but also that the reinterpretation of the Burmese legend heritage by some ensures that the social landscape is dominated by those who have managed to

appropriate it. In other words, going beyond the mere taking into account of the central government's instrumentalization of minorities, the premise envisaged here may be defined as follows: to what extent – and by what means – does the coherence of the multi-ethnic landscape locally integrate this dominant Other, the Burmese central government?

### **A final chapter to open the debate**

The last chapter in this book is a text by Nicholas Tapp (*Ethnic isolationism in the China–South East Asia borderlands*), which seemed to us useful because it underlines our desire to open up the debate. Tapp gives us an analysis which is not directly part of the previous chapters' very tightly defined set of themes, although inter-ethnic relations are at the centre of his subject. Furthermore, his analysis partly adopts an opposing view of the question developed throughout this book. Though this is a rather unusual exercise, it allows us to be open to discussion; this seems to us intellectually stimulating and, ultimately, the main objective of this work is to integrate the other, including the contradictory and necessary elements he may bring to the discussion.

The three themes thus developed are part of the continuity of a collective reflection: just as inter-ethnic relations considered from the angle of ethnonyms suggested the following reflection on territorial construction to us, geographical space and its representations led us to see the *other* in imaginary space. This principle of continuity is representative of a line of thought which this work endeavours to explain. However, our ambition has also been to structure the study of inter-ethnic relations by considering different angles of approach in order to gain in precision. Ethnonyms are an important part of how we verbally express representations of ourselves and of *others*: the central government imposes its style on the necessity of classifying, naming and creating ethnic categories and the nationalist movements then adopt this. Territory makes it possible to structure certain relations to space experienced and conceived of through the relationship with the other: social management of territory appears to be a compromise reaction between the global and the local. The imaginary constitutes the moment during which the other is reconstructed in his absence simply because the group performing the ritual needs to do so. For example, the central government is presented – an indirect way of reappropriating it – in the ritual use made of it locally.

### **The book's composition**

The initial project was the result of a wish to fill a gap concerning the 'relations' as the subject of study, with the ambition of bringing together a group of international researchers who place inter-ethnic relations at the centre of their preoccupation. In doing this, we have tried to avoid an encyclopaedic kind of approach which consists of multiplying the case studies according to the ethnic groups and themes. On the contrary, our methodological choice has been to make every

effort to tighten up the theoretical framework and the overall structure. The contributions presented in this book endeavour to explain both the historical contexts which produced the current situations and the adaptation dynamics of the populations considered. In the attempt to give an account of the many social and historical determinants of the situations studied, it has seemed to us necessary, moreover, to vary the scales of description: micro-local (village relations covering one or several groups of villages), national (relations of ethnic groups to central authorities) or even international (relations between cross-border populations). In the micro-local approaches, the accent is put first and foremost on group-to-group relations. In the broader approach, the accent is put on the claims and legal possibilities of ethnic groups for obtaining recognition of their rights (this is the state/ethnic group relation). In general, all the contributions contain several levels of scale, and it is by passing from one level to another that local issues will be most correctly described and analysed. In this, our approach is similar to that of a social micro-storia applied to inter-ethnic relations (Revel 1996).

At a moment when globalization, worldwide, is accompanied by a revival of nationalist movements and the construction of new ideological barriers, considering relations with the other and connecting process is certainly not pointless even if, by doing so, we have undoubtedly only reopened certain classic social science files. In subordinating categorical hermetism to the dynamic of exchange networks and in choosing to go beyond the determinism of cultural areas and favour the dynamic inherent in the creation of links, our ambition has been to revisit certain presuppositions. The idea of ethnolinguistic continuity and the notion of ethnic categories are part of these. They both refer to a logic of distancing oneself from the other which does not correspond to the reality and the dynamic of exchanges. In order to show this, before examining the ethnic categories the dispersion spaces from which the coherence of multi-ethnic complexes emerges must be considered. Access to fields which had been closed until the last few years – after international conflicts (Vietnam, Laos) and post-independence civil wars (Burma) – and the concomitant advance of research have helped us to think of pluralism no longer in terms of cultural abstractions but in terms of social mixity.

## Note

- 1 'The *doxa* is a particular point of view, that of the dominant group, which is presented and accepted as the universal point of view; the point of view of those who dominate by dominating the State and who have made their point to view the universal point of view by making the State' (Bourdieu 1994: 129).