

and distinct from the Thai Sangha and the use of Buddhism to legitimise political power, which the French consistently avoided doing. The French did leave Buddhism in better shape than they found it, thus enabling it to regain something of its legitimising role under the democratic Royal Lao regime. However, Buddhism was marginalised in the early years of the Lao PDR, which created its own revolutionary legitimising mythology (as Oliver Tappe demonstrates in his paper) — so making the current use of Buddhism to shore up the legitimisation of the regime more than a little ironical.

The third paper on Buddhism, Karma Leshe Tsomo's study of women who have taken Buddhist vows, reveals the support that institutionalised Buddhism gives to the patriarchal structure of Lao society. This is exacerbated because there exists no order of nuns in Theravada Buddhist societies (unlike the Mahayana Buddhism of Vietnam). Buddhism thus provides little support for the struggle to create more egalitarian gender relationships — which, as Kinnalone Kittiphanh argues in her article on feminism in Laos, still has a long way to go. Once again a substantial gap exists between what the ruling Party proclaims and what it does — in this case by the way it constricts the very organisations working for gender equality.

In summary, the papers collected in this volume make a welcome contribution to the growing corpus of Lao studies.

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Malaysia

Transforming brickfields: Development and governance in a Malaysian city

By RICHARD BAXSTROM

Singapore: NUS Press, 2010. Pp. xiii, 283. Notes, Bibliography, Index.

Earlier published as: *Houses in Motion: The Experience of Place and the Problem of Belief in Urban Malaysia*

Stanford University Press, 2008.

doi:10.1017/S0022463411000506

The communal angst and politics of Malaysia present a rich field for both academic discourse and journalistic display. Too often, however, the alienation of Malaysia is presented in the grand context of identity politics — Joel Kahn's *Other Malays*, and my own *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya* would be classed as examples. Only rarely do we get down in the streets, shops and houses of the 'ordinary population' to see how these tensions actually work out — to see how the crises of identity are produced. Some of the essays of Farish Noor manage to do this; the present book certainly does it.

Richard Baxstrom takes his account into Kuala Lumpur's Brickfields. Though wonderfully entangled in the early history of Kuala Lumpur and heterogenic in both its population and present institutions, Brickfields is most notably an Indian-Hindu community area which, at the time of Baxstrom's research in 2000–02, was being 'improved' to make the neighbourhood 'safer, more orderly, more closely integrated with the rest of Kuala Lumpur' — and, more than coincidentally, to facilitate

the development of two ‘megaprojects’ smashing through the area. These grand schemes are seen to be linked to ‘a teleology of progress’ and ‘the Brickfields to come’ (p. 10); however, local residents lacked access to this *telos* though it might generously and paternalistically be ‘explained’ to them.

To understand the production of this alienation, Baxstrom turns to an argument from Deleuze: *belief* is immanent and always linked to a nexus of mind/body/culture; belief is always to be foregrounded as, even for secularists, ‘knowledge alone cannot make the world knowable or livable in a real sense’.

Not able to believe in Brickfields as their place in the world, residents lacked ‘resistance to the present’. ... the concrete outcome of this phenomenon was that Brickfields residents were largely denied their right to the city during the period of intensive transformation of the neighbourhood (p. 10).

Hence it is alienation from *belief* rather than identity that is the focus of Baxstrom’s work. Here lies the originality of the author’s theoretical contribution and his challenge to current Malaysian historiography.

The book’s first part (chapters 1 and 2) reprises the city’s history from a variety of sources, locating Brickfields in that wider history. The voices of British founding fathers are well reported; missing, however, are those of the Indians and Chinese relegated to that area. For all their merits, those chapters add little to an understanding of the lives and experiences of the antecedents of the people who are then the focus of the book’s second part.

This second, more original, part deals well (in chapter 3) with the root cause of the tragedy of Malaysia’s planning. Real plans (megaprojects) are formulated by developers and a very small group in the political elite: ‘... the decision making process within DBKL [the Kuala Lumpur city government] is sharply circumscribed by ministers in the Office of the Prime Minister and by property developers allied with those officials’ (p. 107). The task of DBKL planners is simply to ensure smooth implementation. There is no effective communication with affected communities lest, in the process, the hapless planner might communicate an ‘official secret’ — a criminal offence. Rumour replaces communicative rationality (p. 97). Chapter 4 is the book’s least satisfying: we are told of a Christian presence in Brickfields and of what Baxstrom calls ‘strangers’, ‘counterfeiters’ and ‘gangsters’ — however, where did these come from? How do they fit into the story? Hence we are back to the inadequacy of the book’s first part: why are we given a history of the colonial elites rather than a history of Brickfields? The chapter attempts to account for residents’ searches for identity (belief?) through the observation of these outsiders, counterfeiters and gangsters. Yet, ultimately, this endeavour remains unintegrated into the account of Brickfields ‘development and governance’.

The final chapter 5 is the book’s most contentious. It is expressly a discussion of the successful negotiations that enabled the relocation of three unregistered Hindu temples in Brickfields during the maelstrom of dislocations at the time of the 2000–02 megaproject frenzy. The suggested explanation for this unlikely outcome seems to come down to an enlightened Malay–Muslim self-interest that enables a tolerance of Hindu spirituality. Yet we are also informed that ‘[m]any unregistered Hindu temples were being demolished in Selangor during this time [and subsequently, one could add] without consideration of the spiritual consequences of such an act’ (p. 202). A deeper historical

perspective on the area's genealogy might have yielded both different insights and a stronger integration of the recounted narratives.

It is a fine book, a good read and a rare example of focused, Malaysian ethnography. I have only one significant complaint: the book's biographical blurb refers to the author's 'photographic works ... shown in gallery exhibitions ... and published in several books'. So why is this present text not illustrated? Why are there no sequential maps to show the evolution of the area, nor even a single map to clarify locations of places and objects referred to?

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Myanmar

Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict

By ASHLEY SOUTH

Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Pp. 304. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463411000518

Despite hopes instigated by the recent release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, most observers are wary of optimism in regard to the struggle for democratically accountable government in Burma. The complexity of the situation, particularly in terms of ethnic politics, is the topic of this volume. The author's abundant experience on both sides of the Thai–Burmese border over the past two decades renders his objective view of the agents involved all the more persuasive.

The book begins with a historical overview based on secondary sources, from pre-colonial years up to 1988. Part two focuses on the armed conflict, questioning its causes as well as the mechanism of its continuity, especially as seen from the border, including a discussion of forced migration and how various stakeholders, neighbouring states and international agencies have coped. Part three deals with the dynamics of ceasefire and the ensuing state–society relationships. Ceasefire is considered from both the regime's and the oppositionist ethnonationalists' perspectives in relation to the National Convention, events including the 2007 Saffron Revolution, which ended in a crackdown of the *sangha*, as well as case studies of specific ceasefire groups and their internal dynamics. The Epilogue discusses the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

I will introduce the major arguments in the volume. First, the author argues for a relational approach to ethnicity that traces the emergence of self-conscious ethnic minority groups, based on homogenising concepts of unitary identity linked to specific territory. South attributes this homogenising and territorialised concept of ethnicity to the colonial administration. The argument is best laid out regarding the Karen people. Karen-ness has been homogenised in the ethno-nationalist discourse, which supposes a monolithic political unity led by elites. English-language sources from the border enhance the unitary notion of ethnicity upon which political elites have mobilised support involving a range of internal and external actors. The