

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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Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict

By ASHLEY SOUTH

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

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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

author reflects on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across the border whose 'rice and rhetoric' supported militarised ethno-nation-building. He criticises the fact that the tendency to fetishise ethnicity has led to a zero-sum politics among these actors despite the fact that ethnic unity is actually elusive, illusory and divisive. At the same time, however, South incisively criticises the deeming of ethnicity as arbitrary, pointing out that ethnic self-determination is grounded in deep and shared historical experience.

Second, over the years, insurgency has become institutionalised and associated with deep-rooted political economies. In this context, rebellions are driven by a mixture of genuine grievances and opportunism, especially along the border. Contrary to the views often held by international agencies working in the country, these ethnic insurgencies are not solely driven by the self-interest of the elites. On the other hand, opposition supporters based outside the country tend unquestioningly to emphasise the grievances of the insurgents in the face of a repressive military regime, uncritically supporting antigovernment groups and assuming that the insurgent groups are representative of ethnic nationality communities.

The aforementioned two related points have much to contribute to the understanding of the ongoing conflict. Based on such notions of ethnicity, and due to the 'institutionalisation' of ongoing insurgency, internal and external agencies have perpetuated the conflict. The author's experience with the border-based networks provides the basis of a fair and realistic perspective on the conflict. This conflict has continued at the expense of the voiceless villagers, while the louder voices of the opposition-in-exile tend to reinforce the notion of a homogeneous ethno-nationalist movement, thereby perpetuating the conflict.

The third and most important argument in this volume is that, contrary to pessimistic views, from the early 1990s to 2004, civil society has undergone regeneration, albeit limited, as an inadvertent result of government policy, ceasefire movements, and the increased presence of international NGOs (INGOs) as well as the partial opening of the economy. The author emphasises the importance of community-based grassroots organisations (CBOs) as well as NGOs, especially among the ethnic communities along the border. He states, 'If the ceasefires can be turned into vehicles for the long-term reconstruction of local communities and economies, they may yet promote reconciliation and reform at the national level, and perhaps over time foster the emergence of genuine peace. ... modest, and incremental change may be the most sustainable, and have the most significant long-term impacts.' (p. 198)

On the one hand, South sees that throughout the process from 1988 to the present, the Tatmadaw is gradually gaining the upper hand, and the incremental approach alone is insufficient. However, in regard to political change in Burma, he supports 'regime reform' over 'regime change', slowly improving state-society relationships, seeking to resolve conflict through reconciliation by a win-win scenario rather than explicit confrontational resolution and abrupt regime replacement. The international community must consider how to address the pressing humanitarian needs without at the same time perpetuating the conflict.

The author discusses the importance of a consociational approach, respecting the diversity of its subjects and their agency in constructing their own socio-political

realities, aiming to build models of co-operation within and between different sectors of the community.

The detailed micro-processes that have taken place since the 1990s (described in the latter half of the book) are valuable yet somewhat distracting for readers who are unfamiliar with the region as the chronological order constantly shifts. However, this is a minor drawback in a must-read book for anyone concerned or interested in the situation — NGOs as well as scholars.

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Romblomanon dictionary (Linguistic Society of the Philippines Special Monograph Issue, Number 52)

Compiled by LEONARD E. NEWELL

Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 2006. Pp. xviii, 853. Map, Notes, Bibliography, Index, Appendices.

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In his prefatory remarks, Leonard E. Newell sets three primary provisions as the goal of his Romblomanon dictionary: (1) ‘... an important tool for the translation into Romblomanon of some of the great literature of the world’; (2) ‘... a dictionary that would truly represent the Romblomanon language as it is spoken ...’; and (3) ‘some kind of model for Romblomanon speakers who wish to speak and write in English’ (p. x).

Based on the objectives enumerated above, the dictionary claims to cater to both the native and non-native speakers of the language being described. For the users whose native language is not Romblomanon and are speakers of English, this dictionary is an excellent tool for the comprehension of and text composition in Romblomanon, and translation from Romblomanon to English. However, since it is the meaning system, morphosyntax, and culture of Romblomanon that are described, native speakers of Romblomanon would find this dictionary inadequate if they wished to grasp the meaning of, as well as to produce text in, and undertake translation work from English to Romblomanon. Newell has amply given heed to this challenge by supplementing the dictionary with an English index, whose entries are grouped according to the semantic domains that they belong to; although the author has still called for an English–Romblomanon dictionary to balance as ‘the ideal solution’ (L.E. Newell, *Handbook on lexicography for Philippine and other languages with illustrations from the Batad Ifugao dictionary*, Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 1995, p. 17).

This Romblomanon dictionary is also notable for its use of a corpus as the basis for the lexical entries. As it is nowadays the demand that dictionaries describe languages as they are spoken and not as they should be used, a corpus-based dictionary would suffice this need. The compiler and his team have remarkably recorded and