

BOOK REVIEW

Ooi Keat Gin and Volker Grabowsky (Eds.). *Ethnic and Religious Identities and Integration in Southeast Asia*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books and Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2017.

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This book emerged from the project “Integration in Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion” (SEATIDE), funded by the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission from 2012 to 2016. The partners comprise five European institutions (the École française d'Extrême-Orient or EFEO [France], University of Hamburg [Germany], University of Cambridge [United Kingdom], Tallinn University [Estonia] and University of Milano-Biocca [Italy]), and four from Southeast Asia (Universiti Sains Malaysia [Malaysia], Universitas Gadjah Mada [Indonesia], Chiang Mai University [Thailand] and the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences [Vietnam]). The 13 contributors to the edited volume are drawn from Universiti Sains Malaysia and University of Hamburg (including the two co-editors), Chiang Mai University, the EFEO, the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and University of Milano-Biocca. In this regard, the volume focuses primarily on ethnic and religious issues in Thailand (mainly but not exclusively northern Thailand) and Malaysia (specifically Penang), with some attention to central Vietnam and southern Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, Myanmar and Indonesia. The main issues focus on minority populations: the Bru on the Lao-Vietnamese border; tribal minorities in northern Thailand (Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Tai Lue and Lua); Pakistanis in Penang; Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State, Myanmar; and Muslim minorities in Thailand; with the exception of more general chapters on Indonesian Muslims and political Islam; the historical development of the multicultural state of Penang under British colonialism; the Thai-Cambodian conflict over the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site of Preah Vihear and

the conceptualisation of heritage; and the emergence of northern La Na Thai regional identity in the context of the worship of sacred sites associated with local heroes and leaders. The main disciplinary interests of the contributors comprise anthropology, history and languages and cultures.

Andrew Hardy, the Scientific Coordinator of SEATIDE, has written a Foreword to the volume and explains that the project with its focus on regional, subregional, national and local integration in the ethnically diverse region of Southeast is not only concerned with the processes and consequences of integration and inclusion, but also those of exclusion, marginalisation and deterritorialisation, and in some extreme cases of ethnic minorities the denial of citizenship and the legal rights, social services and security which accompany this recognition (as in the case of such northern Thai minorities as the Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu and Tai Lue); the physical dislocation of the Karen Leke members on the Thai-Myanmar border and their movement into refugee camps and cities in Thailand away from the armed fighting in their homelands; and the experience of the Rohingyas of Rakhine State of suppression, communal violence, ethnic polarisation and genocide.

This ambitious collaborative project between European and Southeast Asian researchers recognises that, in the different approaches to regional integration in the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, then there is much that both regional associations can learn from each other. As Hardy indicates, the SEATIDE project undertook research on a range of communities in order to understand their experiences in the context of postcolonial nation-building. He identifies three “common threads” in the volume which are “not explicitly addressed by the authors”: “a strong sense of history” in identity formation (expressed in most of the chapters in the volume); “an awareness in all integration projects of a tendency to fragment” when movements for constructing common identities are challenged by those who are arguing for other agendas of identity (there is much in the volume which addresses this issue); and “the depth and quality of the empirical data” provided in the several chapters (pp. xi–xii). Indeed, a special feature of this volume is the detailed and rich ethnographies and case-studies provided.

The coverage then is somewhat uneven and disparate, but it captures the ethnic diversities of the Southeast Asian region. The volume has been assiduously and carefully edited and this gives it a certain coherence. The editorial introduction by Ooi Keat Gin and Volker Grabowsky is especially well-crafted; the editors explore the concept of “identities” and present a thoughtful overview of the main concepts which have been deployed in understanding how and why people engage in interactions which bring

them together and support increasing integration and which also press for politico-cultural separation and fragmentation. One of the classic concepts in the history of social science in Southeast Asia was John Furnivall's "plural society" which demonstrated some of the consequences of colonialism in the construction of a divided socio-economic and ethnic structure and how this was maintained in spite of ethnic-based differences. Religion has also always been one of the crucial elements in the formation of ethnic identities and in finding some common ground in nation-building. In this volume, as the editorial introduction indicates, ethnic and religious identities tend to be treated as conceptually and empirically distinct, though these are very closely interrelated.

The co-editors also provide other important observations in that identities operate at different levels or scales of magnitude and that these levels interact. In addition, they discuss approaches to the understanding of ethnicities which can be broadly categorised into two main ones: the primordialist or essentialist on the one hand, and the constructivist or instrumentalist on the other. The social construction of identities has been the major orientation of anthropologists who have studied ethnicity in Southeast Asia. The co-editors also conceptualise ethnic-based processes and transformations in terms of politico-cultural centres and peripheries, or between "cores" and "margins" which in turn requires them to clarify the concept of "nation-state" and "nationalism" within which these oppositions are negotiated and changed. The consequences of the development of a national consciousness and identity are inevitably the politicisation of ethnicity. Reference in this regard is made to the important work of Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Thongchai Winichakul, Anthony Smith, Anthony Reid and Aviel Roshwald, among others.

The formation, maintenance and the crossing of political and cultural borders or boundaries is another concern in this volume. These comprise national-political boundaries, particularly in the chapters by Vathana Pholsena, Kwanchewan Buadaeng and Volker Grabowsky. Ethnic boundaries and boundary-crossing, which so concerned Fredrik Barth in his seminal work on ethnic groups and boundaries but, in a Southeast Asian context, was explored in detail by Edmund Leach and James Scott, among many others, is also addressed specifically in the chapters by Shakila Abdul Manan and Christopher Joll. Perhaps more could have been said about religious conversion in pursuit of national integration, the ways that it has been used in nation-building, the national agencies and strategies which have been used to bring others into the Muslim or Theravada Buddhist folds and local responses and resistances to proselytisation.

The book is divided into three parts: (1) Ethnicity and Identities comprising four chapters: border-crossing and the Brun ethnic minority in southern Laos and central Vietnam (Vatthana Pholsena); northern Thailand ethnic minorities and their interaction with the Thai state (two chapters: Mukdawan Sakboon, Prasit Leepreecha and Panadda Boonyasaranai; and Amalia Rossi) and the relations of the Pakistani minority in Penang to Muslim-Malay political and cultural dominance in Malaysia (Shakila Abdul Manan); (2) Religion and Identities comprising four chapters: the Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State and the conflict and disaffection with government and military in Buddhist-dominated Myanmar (Jacques Leider); the Karen Leke religious cult and the dislocation of its members in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands (Kwanchewan Buadaeng); the diminishing influence of Islamic political parties in Indonesia and its paradoxical association with the general progress of Islamisation and other cultural expressions of Islamic identity and orthodoxy (Remy Madinier); and the kaleidoscopic character of Sufi Islam in Thailand and the changes brought about the adoption of the Thai language among Muslims (Christopher M. Joll); and (3) Integration and Identities comprising three chapters: the historical development of the “unique” and “separate status” of multi-ethnic or “plural” Penang in a colonial context in comparison with neighbouring states, and the relatively peaceful nature of interethnic relations in the island state (Ooi Keat Gin); the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the inscription of the temple complex of Preah Vihear in Cambodia as a World Heritage Site and Thailand’s opposition to it as a failure to recognise Thai sovereignty and cultural heritage (Volker Grabowsky); and the worship of political-cultural heroes at sacred places in northern Thailand, centred on Chiang Mai, who carry great spiritual power in the history and myths of Lan Na, and the consequences of these sites of worship for ethno-regional identity (Pantipa Chuenchat).

This volume provides us with a valuable store of primary ethnographic data on ethnic relations in selected countries in Southeast Asia. The empirical detail is admirably presented, most of the chapters are more than 40 pages in length and give us considerable grounding in ethnic issues and the concepts deployed to analyse them. Interestingly in the case studies there seems to be more attention to the dimension of dissension, tension, conflict and resistance in ethnic relations particularly between ethnic minorities and the agencies of the state, rather than to processes of integration. This is welcome in that it draws our attention to local agency, the roles of cultural brokers and the importance of local political entrepreneurs in negotiating the strategies of integration and assimilation adopted by the organs of the nation-state. Obviously there

has been some positive integration in the construction of nation-states and the mechanisms provided through the development of national languages, education systems, religions, histories and symbols (anthems, flags, national days, monuments to past leaders and heroes); but the desire for the maintenance of subregional identities (in northern Thailand, and the Muslim south in Thailand and ethnic minorities in Myanmar and the Thai borderlands in particular) continues to surface and carry resonance for the populations involved.

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