

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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History Reformatted: Vietnam's Great Famine (1944–45) in Archival Form

Ken MacLean*

The number and types of memory projects in Vietnam have proliferated rapidly since the mid-1990s. These projects, most of them intensely local in focus, reconfigure selective aspects of different “pasts” for strategic use in the present. Government-approved memory projects exhibit similar patterns. However, some of them openly diverge from official narratives of patriotic resistance. The project featured in this essay—the creation of an archive to document the Great Famine (1944–45) by a joint Vietnamese-Japanese research commission—is such an example. Close attention to the methodological procedures used to assemble this archive, which is highly unorthodox in form and content, provides insights into how historical evidence is fashioned rather than found in the Vietnamese context. The details reveal partial silences in four thematic areas: (1) the allocation of blame, (2) the suppression of sentiment in oral form, (3) the depersonalization of suffering in visual form, and (4) the comparative absence of organized resistance. Close attention to these elisions explains why the Great Famine and the hungry ghosts it produced continue to resist incorporation into state-approved histories of the “exceptional dead,” who sacrificed their lives to defend the “nation” from foreign aggressors.

Keywords: history, memory, commemoration, archive, famine, Vietnam

We primarily see the archive as storehouse of memory and fact, as the place from whence history issues forth. However, the archive is much more than this; it is . . . a place of trauma and pain. It is a place of sorrow and loss for many, where unpacified ghosts with unfinished business await, yielding stories and letters different from expectation, a site where loss is localized and realized. (Murphy 2011, 481)

Many Vietnamese present ritual offerings to wandering spirits during Tết Trung Nguyên, a popular festival that occurs on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month. Participants recite prayers and then light seven sticks of incense to appease these spirits, who cannot become benevolent ancestors due to the unjust and often violent nature of their deaths.

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People pour small portions of boiled sweet potato, cassava, roasted corn, hard rice pancakes, and porridge—foods commonly eaten during periods of scarcity—into cones made of leaves from banyan trees. They then place the offerings outside in bushes, small shrines, and other hidden spaces for these “ontological refugees” (Kwon 2008, 16), who are neither fully dead nor alive, to dine upon. The festival’s primary purpose, several Vietnamese explained to me, is to absolve the hungry ghosts of any harm they may have caused the living, such as misfortune or serious illness, over the past year. Several of them told me that the offerings also function as insurance against future problems because the offerings are meant to keep the hungry ghosts satiated for the next 12 months. The explanations are not mutually exclusive, and since the early 1990s growing numbers of people have used the festival to commemorate the victims of the Great Famine of 1944–45 (Nạn đói Ất Dậu).

Official Vietnamese estimates, first put forward in a famous speech by Hồ Chí Minh and then reiterated with little empirical support until recently, place the number of people who died within the space of six months at approximately two million (Nguyễn Khắc Đạm 1988; Văn Tạo and Nguyễn Khắc Đạm 1988; Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2008, 921; Gunn 2014, 259n1). Given the vast number of hungry ghosts this famine reportedly produced, the gradual inclusion of its victims, as part of this festival, is not surprising.¹⁾ The Great Famine affected 32 provinces across colonial Tonkin and Annam, reducing the population of what is now northern and central Vietnam by an estimated 15 percent (Dương Trung Quốc 2005). Yet, despite the size and scale of loss, no national monument exists to collectively memorialize the deaths. Instead, commemorative practices remain decidedly local in nature and revolve around the mass graves that can still be found across the countryside, usually in close proximity to villages where death rates were particularly high. “Ghost graves” (*cồn ma*) and “hunger tombs” (*mả đói*), as they are colloquially known, typically consist of a small mound of earth or a pile of carefully arranged bricks. These sites become visible to nonresidents only when famine survivors and their descendants visit them during the festival to appease the hungry ghosts.

A three-meter-high concrete memorial, once part of a “charity cemetery” (*nhĩa trang hợp thiện*) in Hanoi, is an exception to these informal practices. The remains of thousands of people who fled the countryside to seek refuge in the city but perished shortly after their arrival are interred beneath it. Residents of Hanoi raised funds to construct the memorial, which was completed in April 1951. Photographs, displayed in a small room adjacent to the memorial, indicate that people visited the site year-round for the next several years. But the memorial fell into disrepair by the time the Second

1) Similar beliefs about hungry ghosts are widespread throughout Southeast and East Asia.

Indochina War (1954–75) began. In September 2001, the People’s Committee of Hanoi announced that it would rectify this situation by providing funds to renovate the long-neglected memorial. The announcement, which appeared as a small sidebar in local newspapers, stated that the renovations would be completed by 2005, in time to mark the 60th anniversary of the Great Famine.

The decision to renovate the memorial was not an isolated one. By the late 1990s, the number and types of memory projects were increasing so rapidly that Hue-Tam Ho Tai coined the phrase “commemorative fever” to capture the country’s mood (2001, 1–17). These projects, most of them local in focus, reconfigure selective aspects of different “pasts” for strategic use in the present (MacLean 2013, 176–204). Government-approved memory projects exhibit similar patterns. However, some of them openly diverge from official narratives of patriotic resistance and heroic sacrifice in defense of the “nation.” The project featured in this essay—a research effort led by the state-sponsored Institute of History to document aspects of the Great Famine—is one such example. I focus primarily on the unorthodox report that resulted from it, *Nạn đói 1945 ở Việt Nam: Những chứng tích lịch sử* (The Famine of 1945 in Vietnam: Some historical evidence), edited by Văn Tạo and Motoo Furuta (1995).

Close attention to the decisions the researchers made with regard to the project’s design, the methodology employed, and the representational strategies used provides insights into how historical evidence regarding the Great Famine is fashioned rather than found. This essay does not provide a comprehensive overview of the Great Famine or the Vietnamese literature published prior to this study as a result. An extensive, though still incomplete, list of sources can be found in the volume’s bibliography (*ibid.*, 704–722) and in Geoffrey Gunn’s recent *Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam: The Great Famine and the Viet Minh Road to Power* (2014). The focus here is instead on the ways the researchers from the Institute of History and their Japanese counterparts from the University of Tokyo reformatted micro-histories of the Great Famine into a larger archival form.

It should be noted at the outset that the Institute of History has since published two expanded versions of the report, one in 2005 and another in 2011. I restrict my analysis to the original 1995 version for several reasons. First, the publication of the 1995 edition coincided with the 50th anniversary of the tragedy. In Vietnam, such anniversaries provide opportunities for political and intellectual elites “to restructure and reshape collective memory through rituals of commemoration” (Pelley 2002, 164). The 1995 version thus marks the first of what would become several efforts to accomplish this goal. Second, the 1995 publication was available when I began my fieldwork. I conducted ethnographic and archival research on mass campaigns to eradicate hunger and to reduce poverty in the northern Vietnamese countryside during 2000–02. The Great Famine was my tem-

poral starting point. I draw upon this material to destabilize the standard assumption that historical “evidence” emerges out of the closeness of fit between the records used and the event described. Instead, I take the position that primary sources do not possess an inherent “truth” value; rather, their evidentiary force—and thus credibility—arises out of the “very processes that treat and use records as evidence” (Trouillot 1995; Meehan 2009, 160). Jennifer Meehan’s argument serves as the point of departure for my own, hence my decision to focus on the first version, as it serves as the archival foundation for the subsequent editions. Finally, the 2005 and 2011 editions do not differ significantly in form or content from the one published in 1995. The continued accumulation of empirical data and personal testimonies they contain does shed light on a paradox that I revisit in the essay’s concluding section, however. Commemorative activities fix selected aspects of “the past” and then re-present them, often in ritualized form, to specific audiences. The Great Famine, as an “event,” remains an archive in formation, as the expanded editions and periodic academic conferences regarding the tragedy attest. Yet, the efforts to institutionalize the commemoration of the Great Famine nationally continue to generate disagreements that, to date, have prevented the outcome desired.

The essay is structured as follows. The first section provides background on the conflicting narratives regarding the Great Famine, particularly the question of whether the tragedy helped or hindered the August Revolution of 1945. I then present details about the research project itself, which culminated in the publication of the 1995 edition. Subsequent sections focus upon the report. Interspersed throughout are personal accounts from “eyewitnesses” to the Great Famine I gathered during field research in the Red River Delta, as well as selected historical documents, memoirs, and literary works relevant to the inquiry—some well known, others not. When put into “conversation” with one another, four unexpected themes emerge regarding: (1) the partial allocation of blame, (2) the suppression of sentiment in oral form, (3) the depersonalization of suffering in visual form, and (4) the comparative absence of organized resistance. Close attention to how each of these partial silences shapes the terms of the others reveals why what occurred during the Great Famine remains largely disconnected in historiographic terms from what happened in its aftermath—the struggle for national independence. The essay concludes with a brief overview of recent discussions about the disaster and what needs to be done to reconfigure the place of the Great Famine within the historical imagination.

Conflicting Narratives

Symbolic reconfigurations often coincide with physical transformations. These are the dynamics that prompted me to visit the neglected memorial to the famine victims in Hanoi before the planned renovations transformed it. Finding the memorial proved much harder than expected. It required nearly a half-dozen trips to Vĩnh Tuy, a poor working-class area of the capital, before I was able to locate it. Much of my difficulty lay in the fact that the charity cemetery no longer existed. Successive waves of postwar housing construction had transformed the once-rural area on the southeastern edge of Hanoi into a densely packed urban one connected by a chaotic network of narrow lanes, many of them barely 1.5 meters wide. Indeed, the ongoing process of urban encroachment was such that very few of the ward's residents I encountered during my search believed the memorial still existed. It did, as I discovered quite by accident on my fifth trip. But the site was surrounded on all sides by multistoried row houses that towered above the memorial. This situation clarified why Hoàng Văn Nghiê, then the chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee, suddenly declared in December of 2001 that the memorial was a "vestige" (*di tích*) of historical and cultural significance. This bureaucratic upgrade in status granted a measure of protection to the memorial, but it did not result in any immediate changes. In fact, no major changes occurred until 2005, the 60th anniversary of the Great Famine, when I again visited the site.

The slow pace was surprising given the unusual prominence of sites that are linked to the struggle for independence. Indeed, many of the officials I met while conducting research in Vietnam over the past 15 years expressed genuine disappointment that the monument remained so difficult to locate. Nearly all of them regarded the tragic famine as a catalyst for the August Revolution and Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945. Three quotes, all of them from former commune-level cadres in three different provinces in the Red River Delta who had survived the Great Famine, follow.

Vỹ, for example, pointed out there were three different but interlinked forms of oppression during the conflict: "Japanese fascism, French colonialism, and the feudal system of the Vietnamese themselves." Taken together, he explained, "It was inevitable that by twisting the worm," by which he meant the suffering brought about by the Great Famine, "you would cause [us] to rise up" (*con giun xéo lắ phải quắn*).

Khoa, another cadre, explained: "We could not stand it anymore; we had nothing left to lose, and the famine was simply the drop of water that caused a full glass to overflow" (*giọt nước cuối cùng làm tràn cốc*).

A third, Phong, was more succinct. "The famine was part of a long historical process; we had no choice but to rebel."

Not everyone agrees with these assessments. Trần Văn Giàu, one of Vietnam's most eminent historians, placed less emphasis on the Great Famine as a key cause of the August Revolution. He instead stressed the many problems the famine subsequently posed. In his view, the Great Famine constituted a major obstacle to revolutionary activities, as the immense death toll "drained its power" (1962, 621; see also Hoàng Văn Đức 1946). Nguyễn Thế Anh, another highly respected historian, similarly argued it would be a fundamental error to conclude the Great Famine was the primary cause of the political instability that enabled the August Revolution to succeed. However, he maintained that the impact of the catastrophe was undeniable and that widespread fears that another large-scale famine might reoccur helped maintain the Party's political standing (1985, 98).

These views of the Great Famine differ in detail; nevertheless, all of them recognize the importance of this tragedy. Yet, the famine receives little attention today. For example, an official university textbook, published after the 50th anniversary of the Great Famine, devotes only a single paragraph to it (Lê Mậu Hãn *et al.* 2000, 11), while another textbook solely emphasizes the famine's statistical dimensions: the number of deaths and the material assistance the Provisional Revolutionary Government provided (Hoàng Phương 2015). Because the famine had such a tremendous impact on Vietnamese social life, culture, and economic issues (Hoàng Văn Đức 1946, 16–17), it should have been treated more comprehensively. The situation has not significantly changed, however. The Communist Party's annual yearbook devotes only four pages to the famine (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2008, 921–925), nearly all of it concerning the precipitating causes.

What accounts for the marginal place of the famine in the historical imagination in these representations of the past? While no single cause explains the famine's diminutive role in contemporary historiography, the Communist Party's manipulation of statistical evidence is surely implicated. Of course, such manipulation is not limited to the Great Famine. Statistics have long formed a key component of the Communist Party's efforts to centralize all forms of representation through itself by claiming to be the primary, if not exclusive, agent of unity as well as moral and economic progress (MacLean 2013). The Party's representational strategies have diversified somewhat in recent years. But the focus here is on how bureaucratic categories and practices affect the form and content of what can be remembered about the Great Famine. With this goal in mind, the remainder of the essay examines a highly unusual state-sponsored documentation project and the archive that has resulted from it. The details provide a common point of departure for ongoing debates regarding how the Great Famine and the hungry ghosts it created should be properly memorialized and commemorated. These debates, although notable in their own right, also reflect broader tensions concerning two closely related matters.

First, which tragedies of the past still need to be afforded a place in the present given the government's heavy emphasis on the socioeconomic development targets it has set for the future? (The current goal, according to the official slogan, is to build "a strong, independent, prosperous and democratic country.") And who should retain primary control over how these commemorative spaces are used—government officials or ordinary citizens?

Formatting an Archive

The Joint Vietnam-Japan Cooperation Committee for Researching the Famine of 1945 grew out of a larger study, begun in 1986, to jointly examine the effects of the Japanese occupation of Indochina during World War II. The massive 728-page study, titled *Nạn đói 1945 ở Việt Nam: Những chứng tích lịch sử* (The Famine of 1945 in Vietnam: Some historical evidence), was one result of this collaborative project (hereafter the Joint Committee). The study, compiled by researchers from the Vietnamese Institute of History in Hanoi and their counterparts from the University of Tokyo in Japan, collected oral histories from hundreds of famine survivors in three phases during the early 1990s. Excerpts from 157 of these "eyewitnesses" (*nhân chứng*) are featured in the volume and constitute its evidentiary core. A number of other semiotic technologies play an important supporting role as well. The most notable of these technologies include several hundred pages of "inquest reference tables" (*bảng tra cứu*). The tables provide annotated statistical breakdowns of local mortality rates, hand-drawn maps that depict the location of unmarked mass graves, and 42 photographs of famine victims. The result is an ethnographically detailed, though fragmentary and geographically uneven, depiction of the Great Famine as it unfolded in 23 different locations across what is now northern and central Vietnam. It also constitutes one of the most unusual memory projects ever undertaken by a Vietnamese state research institute.

The study, officially framed as an impartial and objective inquiry, thus invites a number of questions: first and foremost, why? What gaps were thought to exist in the historical record? How are the materials it contains—especially the first-person testimonies, which are normally *excluded* from official accounts of the past—supposed to fill them? My overarching discussion centers on what is imperfectly remembered in this multi-sited "history from below," a genre that is itself quite rare in Vietnam, to explore these questions. My intent here is not to read the survivors' accounts "against the grain" in order to fashion a critical counter-narrative that challenges the evidentiary claims the subaltern memories are used to make in the study. Such an exercise is questionable in

most instances (Stoler 2009). Nor will I argue that the Vietnamese historians involved deliberately excluded material related to the Great Famine that diverged from dominant narratives regarding the period, although this may have in fact been the case. (I requested but did not receive permission to review the interview transcripts kept in the Institute of History's archive.) Instead, I wish to take seriously Michel-Rolph Trouillot's claim that relations of power introduce "silences" at different moments in the process of historical production through the making of sources, the organization of archives, and the crafting of narratives (1995, 26–30, 82–83). Trouillot argues that these silences permit some accounts of the past—but not others—to appear plausible. Drawing on his insights, I explore the extent to which the procedures of the Joint Committee both produced and silenced certain kinds of evidence and thereby determined which aspects of the Great Famine could be memorialized and commemorated.

I should point out that a long-running and complex dispute between the governments of Japan and Vietnam over reparations and development aid prompted the formation of the Joint Committee and its study of the famine. A brief summary of the dispute follows, as the 1995 volume contains quite limited information on it (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 28–42). Forty-eight nations signed the Treaty of Peace with Japan on September 18, 1951. Less than two weeks later, Bảo Đại, the State of Vietnam's head of state, informed the Japanese government of his intent to request US\$2 billion in war reparations. But no records indicate that he pursued the matter. Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm, who declared himself president of the newly created Republic of Vietnam (RoV) following a rigged election in 1955, renewed the issue of reparations. His foreign minister, Vũ Mạnh Mậu, submitted an *aide-memoire* (memorandum) to Ambassador Akira Konagaya on September 18, 1956, requesting US\$1 billion in *paiements de bouche* (reparations) for the people who died during 1945 due to Japan's military food policies and rice seizures by its troops (Gunn 2011, 7).² President Ngô Đình Diệm further asserted that Japanese military forces had caused US\$2 billion in war damages but limited the official request to US\$250 million. The Japanese government declared the total costs Diệm put forward as being "fantastically excessive and absolutely unjustified" (*ibid.*, 6). Following 18 months of negotiations, the RoV foreign minister reduced the claim to US\$200 million, but the Japanese ambassador refused to consider any figure higher than US\$50 million (*ibid.*).

The disagreement proved to be a significant obstacle to normalizing trade negotiations for several more years. Eventually, the focus of the negotiations shifted from the issue of war reparations to development aid, which resulted in a bilateral agreement,

2) On the differences between "reparations" and "grant aid" from Japanese perspectives, see Asomura (2013, 138–191, 228–328).

signed on May 13, 1959 (*ibid.*, 7–8).³⁾ (Most of the aid requested was earmarked for the construction of the Đa Nhim hydroelectric project, which would become the RoV's first such dam.) The need for further aid and the intensification of the Second Indochina War during the mid-1960s meant that subsequent discussions concerning famine-related compensation did not occur. Similar dynamics shaped post-treaty negotiations between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and Japan. Discussions also revolved around grant aid, and DRV representatives did not raise the issue of famine deaths during them. The monetary award was also much the same. The DRV received US\$39 million, approximately the same amount of aid that Japan granted to the RoV (Shiraishi and Furuta 1992, 18; Minami Yoshizawa, cited in Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 18–19).

Katsuichi Honda, a reporter best known for his books on the atrocities Japanese troops committed against civilians in China during World War II, especially the Nanjing Massacre, raised the issue of accountability a decade later. In 1973 he published an article in Japan's leading daily, *Asahi Shimbun*, in which he asserted that nearly a quarter of a million people starved to death in Thái Bình Province during the Great Famine, and his estimates from nearby Nam Định Province were even higher (Cao Văn Biền 1990, 451). Honda's controversial claims prompted the Institute of History in Hanoi to conduct further field and archival research in both provinces during 1992. The initial findings appeared to confirm Honda's findings, which inspired a joint team of Vietnamese and Japanese historians to carry out a more systematic study.

The efforts to resolve the disagreements concerning the actual number of deaths were more complicated than anticipated, due not only to the amount of time that had elapsed but to the uneven nature of the extant source material. The Joint Committee's report divided the sources into three separate categories—material evidence, written documents, and oral accounts—as a way to manage these problems (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 19–27, 704–722). Lists in Vietnam, however, implicitly rank various kinds of evidence in a way that privileges physical remains over historical records and these, in turn, over individual memories. Nevertheless, the three categories all belong to the same analytical field, as the information derived from one source helps define the others. From this perspective, the boundaries that delineate the three kinds of evidence are thus less

3) An internal study reportedly conducted as the negotiations were taking place rejected the commonly cited figure of two million deaths as Vietnamese Communist Party propaganda. Instead, the authors of the official report allegedly concluded that no more than 300,000 Vietnamese died during the famine, a figure significantly lower than earlier French estimates of 600,000–700,000. Reviewer B contacted the director of the 1st Southeast Asian Division in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to verify the existence of the internal study and its conclusion; however, the director's office has yet to respond. Interestingly, Văn Tạo maintains that 1.97 million died at a minimum, whereas Motoo Furuta believes that the research done to date is not sufficient to “fix the total,” as reported by Reviewer B.

clear than one might assume.

This blurring of boundaries is most evident in the organization of the written documents. The researchers did not consistently distinguish primary sources from secondary ones or works drawn from vastly different genres such as memoirs and statistical atlases. Instead, other considerations shaped the “section” (*phần*) into which researchers placed them. Section one, for example, contains more than half of the known sources relevant to the Great Famine, collectively labeled “contemporaneous sources” (*đương thời*) documents. The period, although not explicitly defined, includes a diverse array of materials from 1941 to 1945. The significance of this temporal frame is twofold. Most obviously, the dates reflect the primary concern of the inquiry, which was to document the effects of French and Japanese policies through the enumeration of the dead in different locales. But the dates also illustrate how ideological assumptions influence the categorization of sources—in this case, along a political continuum. The editors grouped the reports by French colonial officials, Japanese military staff, and Vietnamese administrative personnel under the same heading, “lackeys” (*chính quyền tay sai*), despite important differences in their form, content, and communicative purpose. Articles that appeared in popular Vietnamese-language newspapers, such as *Thanh Nghị* (Public Opinion) and *Bình Minh* (Dawn), were placed in a separate group, presumably because French and Japanese officials censored them prior to publication. Documents prepared by the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and the Việt Minh, however, as well as articles that appeared in their clandestine publications, especially *Cứu Quốc* (Save the Nation) and *Cờ Giải Phóng* (The Flag of Liberation), constituted the final group. By contrast, section three, which forms the next largest collection of written documents, includes administrative records that Communist Party cells and mass mobilization committees in 15 different provinces produced both prior to and shortly after the 1945 August Revolution.

At first glance, these records appear misplaced; however, the report’s authors justified their separate categorization on the grounds that the documents were primarily bureaucratic rather than political in nature. In most cases, these records languished in back rooms for decades until it became fashionable for low-level officials to compile some of the information they contained into amateur histories that highlighted district-level, but more often provincial-level, contributions to the revolutionary struggle. This trend, which began during the 1990s, helped precipitate the diverse range of official memory projects that followed. The collection of oral testimonies, such as the ones featured in the report on the Great Famine, is an important but understudied aspect of this trend. The testimonies, due in part to the procedures used to recover them, evince considerable similarities across the different locales studied; thus, they provide the basis of recasting local experiences as “national” ones.

Constructing Objectivity

Due to the continued dispute over the death toll, researchers were preoccupied with gathering evidence they believed would finally document the “true” scale of the Great Famine, hence the empirical nature of the questions that oriented the inquiry as a whole. Where did the famine originate? Which places experienced the most deaths?⁴⁾ Which socioeconomic classes were most affected and why? Since the Great Famine left some areas untouched and decimated others, the researchers limited their site selection to locations that had experienced “average” death rates, which they defined as between 30 percent and 70 percent of the total local population (Vãn Tào and Furuta 1995, 684–685). The researchers then collected oral histories from famine survivors in these locations with the assistance of local officials. To help further ensure the findings would be as representative as possible, the researchers also privileged what they regarded to be “typical” accounts rather than “extraordinary” ones in the report.

Taken together, these oral histories form the evidentiary core of the report. Yet, despite the crucial role these accounts play in it, no standard format was created to present the information they contain in a uniform manner. All of the eyewitnesses are named. However, some entries include other biographical details such as their age, place of residence, and/or occupation, while others do not. Similar variation marks the use of photographs, which accompanied approximately two-thirds of the eyewitnesses. Most of the images mimic, in both size and style, those that appear on national identity cards—a simple head-and-shoulder shot of the person who stares directly back at the camera with no visible sign of emotion. But in other cases, the eyewitness is depicted in action, pointing out a mass grave or discussing the Great Famine with the researchers. Each entry also includes a “statement” (*lời*, literally a “speech” or “address”), which consists of an excerpt taken from a longer first-person account that researchers elicited from survivors. These too vary in terms of length, detail, and narrative style. But nearly all of them exhibit a peculiar mix of anecdotes and statistics concerning family, hamlet, and/or village mortality rates:

Trần Đình Khả, 76 years old (Hải Dương Province)

I was 26 years old in 1945, and I am able to “testify” (*chứng kiến*) that the famine was terrible. [It is] something I will remember forever. My paternal uncle’s family was too hungry, so they had to head off toward the bridge in order to beg for food. I don’t know if they died of starvation. Đạo’s

4) Thái Bình Province, in northern Vietnam, and Thanh Hóa Province, in central Vietnam, are thought to have suffered the greatest number of deaths (Bùi Minh Dũng 1995, 574; Quang Thiện 2005).

family had five people; all five of them died of hunger. Diên's family had four people, and all four died. Phuong, five people died of hunger, the entire household. Mạc, Nhiêu Lân, and Bồng died of hunger. There were no reed mats to bundle them in. Their deaths were utterly tragic, their corpses only bones enclosed in skin. [They] died at the head of the road at the corner of the market. To look at them was truly horrible. (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 393–394)

The excerpt, which is representative of the majority of those found throughout the report, exemplifies how fact and affect intermingle uneasily with one another in the memories of those who “witnessed” the Great Famine, at least as they appear here in written form. I explore this tension in greater detail later, but I note them here to raise a broader question: specifically, what effect does the “content of the form” have upon historical representations of the Great Famine (White 1987, 26–28)? In other words, how does the content of stories we wish to tell shape the form the narrative takes? This effect is most apparent in the pairing of the photograph with the excerpts taken from the famine survivors. These visual and textual elements, when combined, create the appearance of peasants and laborers speaking about their personal experiences as distinct *individuals*, which is quite rare in histories officially approved for publication in Vietnam.

The process by which memories were “individually” recalled also remains somewhat unclear. Researchers sought out informants who had not only survived the Great Famine but were also old enough to understand what they saw unfold around them, which meant the vast majority were between 75 and 85 years of age when interviewed. Of these survivors, researchers gave greater weight to those who held positions in local Party cells or mass organizations or otherwise “served the people” (*phục vụ nhân dân*) during the struggle to achieve national independence. The researchers did so on the grounds that their official positions afforded them greater access to information, which explains why more than one-quarter of all the survivors were members of this category. The preference for these survivors also reflects the widely held belief among older Vietnamese that individuals who participated in the struggle for independence did so for entirely selfless reasons. “Purity” (*sự trong sạch*) and “honesty” (*thật thà*) are two commonly used adjectives to describe them—hence the assumption that such individuals can provide accurate, factual accounts of what happened in specific locales as well.

These observations are not intended to suggest that the effort to identify “objective” sources was a disingenuous one designed to obscure the agendas of those who conducted the inquiry. Rather, the point is to draw attention to some of the assumptions that made the category of “objectivity” possible in this context. Doing so is important given the highly “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1991) of the survivors and the methodology researchers used to elicit information about the Great Famine. For example, a casual glance at the report reveals that hearsay, rumor, and other kinds of factually suspect

information permeate many of the eyewitness accounts. Other factors, such as the passage of time, the existence of cultural scripts for recounting hardship and suffering, and the use of standardized questionnaires to elicit information from famine survivors affected what could be remembered about the Great Famine. Admittedly, Vietnamese state historians rarely explicitly discuss such concerns, in part because they raise difficult questions concerning the authority of any narrative to provide a “found” rather than constructed account of what happened (White 1987, 20–21). But these concerns are further marginalized here as a consequence of the stated purpose of the inquiry: to elicit memories that would help enumerate the dead.

Interestingly, efforts to extract targeted forms of recollection from the survivors produced two dramatically different “statements” about the Great Famine. The first consisted of vignettes that provided powerful “snapshots” of what conditions were like, often in disturbing detail. Đỗ Mạnh Đích, who was a blacksmith at the time, provides a representative example. In it, he recalls what happened when residents from a nearby village traveled to his town to beg for food at the local market after Japanese troops had uprooted all of their rice seedlings. Since rice stocks were nearly exhausted, none of the traders wanted to give away any of the bran—a by-product of the milling process—they had left to sell, which led to this desperate scene:

... People would pilfer the bran by thrusting their hand into it and eating it off their fingers. The vendors took their shoulder-poles and lashed them as they ran by. As one person got lashed, another person would run up and grab some bran to eat. The situation was the same along the sewers. People sat down, and groped around in the water looking for some seeds or grain to eat ... (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 542–543)

By contrast, the second kind of “statement” took the form of “memory-data,” i.e., highly detailed statistical lists that provided figures on the number of fatalities a particular family, hamlet, or village suffered. Nguyễn Khinh, who was the secretary in a commune-level People’s Council during the Great Famine, provides just such a statement:

Compared with other patrilineages the Nguyễn experienced the fewest deaths. Approximately half the Tô lineage died. The entire Lê lineage died, except for Khoa, who was 18 years old that year. Half the Hoàng lineage also died. The Đặng lineage had three taxpayers [but] 15 household members died, leaving only two. Compared with the Tây Bắc Hamlet, in which two-thirds died, the Nam Thị Hamlet had more deaths. Adding up the entire village of Hiên, two-thirds died. Hoàng Mạnh Tiếp’s family had eight members ... and they all died ... (*ibid.*, 77)

Since the primary goal of the study was to document the scale of the Great Famine as accurately as possible, the preoccupation with the facticity of the information extracted from the survivors is not entirely unexpected. However, the relentless focus on what

was remembered at the expense of how it was recalled signals an ethnographic refusal (Ortner 1995), one that continually resists rather than incorporates the meaning of the survivors' experiences and their aftereffects. Consequently, the report sheds surprisingly little light on how the Great Famine affected the survivors personally, the communities in which they lived, and Vietnamese society as a whole.

Allocating Blame

A relatively small number of examples of popular verse describing the hardships of life under French-Japanese rule during World War II have survived to make the transition into published form. Not surprisingly, much of it centers on food (Vũ Ngọc Phan 2000, 596–598). Some poems lament wartime policies that forced people off land where their ancestors were buried, whereas others assert that it was better to be reduced to eating roasted manioc and boiled sweet potatoes—two crops commonly fed to swine—year-round than to become “quislings” (*Việt gian*). During interviews with elderly Vietnamese in the Red River Delta, I frequently asked whether they recalled any examples from their youth. Three examples, because of their overlapping content and their broader relevance to the allocation of blame and thus moral accountability, are included here:

Version 1

Nhật cười, Tây khóc, Tàu lo
Việt Nam Độc lập chết co đầy đường.
 The Japanese laugh, the French weep, the Chinese worry
 The Vietnamese, independent, curl up and die all on the streets.

Version 2

Tàu cười, Tây khóc, Nhật no
Việt Nam hết gạo chết co đầy đường.
 The Chinese smile, Westerners weep, the Japanese are full
 Vietnam is out of rice, [they] curl up and die in the streets.

Version 3

Mấy năm thiếu thóc các vì ai?
Lâm dân ta chết hơn hai triệu người,
Ta thì khóc, nó thì cười.
 How many years [have we had] to pay extra paddy and on account of whom?
 [They] made our people die, more than two million people,
 We cry, while the full smile.

The ditties are reminiscent of satirical folk narratives (*vè*) common to northern and central Vietnam. Although *vè* are far longer and follow a four-syllable rhyme scheme rather than the six-eight form used here, they serve a similar purpose—namely, to pass judgment on people who transgressed the boundaries of morally acceptable conduct (unseemly family quarrels, households that beat their servants, etc.) by singing their stories out loud, but where no one could see them. But in other cases, the narratives commented on historical incidents, such as the heroic, though typically unsuccessful, struggles by ordinary peasants and scholar-mandarins to hold abusive and corrupt officials accountable for their actions (Vũ Ngọc Phan 2000). Since the poetic forms themselves are quite flexible, the content could be modified to suit the particular circumstances in which they were sung, which meant multiple versions were often in circulation simultaneously, as is the case here. In each instance, the emotional response of the different nationalities to the Great Famine varies. However, no clear reason is offered as to why one will “smile” while the others will alternately “weep,” “worry,” or “be full.” Additionally, without any particles to indicate tense, it is impossible to tell whether these affective states are real or imagined reactions to the Japanese occupation (the past), the Great Famine itself (present), or what the prospective end of World War II will bring (the future). Unfortunately, my efforts to obtain further details on the ditties from the survivors I spoke with were met with a strikingly similar response: “That is what I heard.”

Nonetheless, several constants emerged. The first is the repetition of the verb *cuòì*, which is rich in its varied meanings and occupies the ambiguous space between “to smile” or “to laugh,” on the one hand, and “to laugh at” or “to mock,” on the other. Without other lexical elements, it is not entirely clear which of the two was intended. However, the verb “to cry/weep” (*khóc*) offers a further clue since it is closely paired with *cuòì* in the adjacent clause in each of the three examples that I collected. What kind of smile, but a false one, is elicited by the sound of someone weeping? The same theme reappears in the last line of each of the three versions, which all share a common conclusion: independence is empty when there is no rice in one’s belly.

By contrast, the eyewitnesses in the Joint Committee’s report commonly speak of the joint French-Japanese regime. Sometimes the order is reversed, but the hyphen always remains, which suggests the average famine survivor saw little to differentiate them, even though underground Việt Minh publications during the period in question carefully distinguished the evils of French colonialism from those of Japanese fascism. When pressed, most of the people I interviewed identified the Japanese and their “policy of stealing paddy” via French and Vietnamese intermediaries as the primary cause of the Great Famine, which a combination of floods, pests, and the bitterly cold weather compounded (Trần Văn Giàu 1962, 122–123; Bose 1990; Phạm Quang Trung, 1990). The

Comité pour le Commerce et L'Exportation des paddys, riz et dérivés (CODIRIZ) was the most visible symbol of this policy; it also serves as the primary point of departure for debates regarding the proper allocation of blame. The following details focus on blame, as a detailed discussion of French and Japanese food policies is available elsewhere (Gunn 2014, 135–164).

A joint Franco-Japanese agreement established CODIRIZ in May 1941 to subsidize the cost of the occupation and, later, the war effort more generally. The managers of CODIRIZ instituted a compulsory rice purchase program shortly afterward. The impact upon rural households in Tonkin and Annam was immediate and dramatic, as a majority of them already lacked sufficient land to meet their dietary needs. The program required all rural households to sell a fixed percentage of the paddy harvested on each *mẫu* (3,600 square meters) of land they owned at well below market rates to its agents. Japanese regulations also forbade people from accumulating or dealing in cereals (Nguyễn Quyết 1980, 9). Policymakers incorrectly assumed that each *mẫu* of land could produce between four and five tons of paddy per year. Actual yields were much lower and further varied from place to place; consequently, the purchase program consumed 50 percent to 80 percent of the actual annual rice harvest (Trần Văn Giàu 1962, 122–123; Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 204; Hội Nông Dân Việt Nam 1998, 124). The quota system was thus crucially dependent upon village elites. They collaborated with the much-hated and feared rice unions (*liên đoàn thóc gạo*) that CODIRIZ outsourced to collect paddy. Yet, there are almost no references to them in the report. Where references do occur—fewer than five in the entire volume—eyewitnesses mention them in dispassionate terms. Indeed, they focus on isolated incidents where an unnamed landlord or wealthy peasant refused to help neighbors in need rather than the systemic nature of the exploitation.

The relative silence is striking since the violence and corruption associated with these organizations, which operated with the full consent of French and Japanese officials, was well known and widely documented in the press at the time. According to Việt Nông, a journalist who wrote for the Sunday edition of *Trung Bắc*, rice unions took advantage of their positions in every province to extort “small gifts” (*vi thiếng*), i.e., bribes, and to illegally confiscate paddy stockpiled as a safeguard against famine, which they consumed and/or sold at a huge profit on the black market (Bùi Minh Dũng 1995, 615; Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 619–620). Nguyễn Phúc Lộc, a journalist with *Trí Tân*, reached the same conclusion, and he noted that the program had “created a gang of thieves that was reducing the people of the North to starvation” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 611–612). In response, peasants with sufficient land to produce a surplus employed a number of tactics to limit how much paddy they were forced to sell to the rice unions. Some reduced production levels to meet their subsistence needs in addition to the required quota, which

rapidly led demand to outstrip available supply. Others abandoned nearby fields to secretly cultivate distant ones. Still others illegally transferred arable land to economically less fortunate households, who were often kin, to work for them in exchange for a portion of their harvests (Marr 1995, 97n103).

These everyday forms of resistance, in conjunction with inclement weather, contributed to a 15 percent decline in the amount of paddy produced between 1941 and 1944, even though the total area under cultivation remained approximately the same (Shiraishi and Furuta 1992; Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 583–600; Nguyễn Sinh Cúc and Nguyễn Văn Tiêm 1996, 13, Table 2). The decline prompted French officials, who were likely pressured by Japanese ones, to take more decisive action; however, their decision to further raise quotas, raid private granaries, and sharply restrict the import of paddy from Cochinchina to compel compliance only served to exacerbate existing food shortages. These shortages rapidly gave way to widespread famine during the summer of 1944.

Food shortages were not limited to the countryside. In Hanoi, monthly food rations declined dramatically between late 1943 and early 1945 from 15 to 7 kilograms of paddy per person. Much of that paddy was either stale or moldy and heavily cut with rice husks and bran, according to the survivors I spoke with in Hanoi. The steady decline in size and quality of the rations fed fears that existing stockpiles were approaching exhaustion. The fear led the black market price for paddy to rise dramatically from 57 to 700–800 VNĐ/kilogram over this period. The price eventually peaked at 2,400 VNĐ in July of 1945 (Đặng Phong 2002, 71). Vietnamese-language newspapers, although subject to censorship prior to publication, also carried regular reports and, later, photographs of the worsening famine as well. Several poets hauntingly conveyed in verse what it was like to helplessly watch thousands of men, women, and children collapse and die of starvation in the streets of the city on a daily basis (e.g., Vũ Khiêu 1945; Bànng Bá Lân [1957] 1985; Tố Hữu [1945] 2003). Yet, high-ranking French and Japanese officials remained largely silent, at least publicly, on the mounting crisis (Marr 1995, 96–107).

In recent decades, a limited number of memoirs written by former high-ranking French officials have appeared, but these accounts either minimize or overlook the significance of the Great Famine entirely. By contrast, Japanese memoirs, although equally small in number, offer a somewhat more accurate description, perhaps because low-ranking soldiers authored them. These autobiographical accounts notwithstanding, no persuasive new evidence has emerged to counter Vietnamese claims that neither French nor Japanese officials took any decisive action to curtail the famine; instead, representatives of both sides attributed the disaster to the policies and incompetent personnel of the other (Huỳnh Kim Khánh 1986, 301; Bùi Minh Dũng 1995; Marr 1995, 105n140). But to this day, many elderly Vietnamese I spoke with continue to assert that although

the Japanese were primarily responsible for the conditions that gave rise to the Great Famine, it was the French who sought to exploit the tragedy as a means to delay Vietnam's independence. However, the authors of the Joint Committee's report, as well as the famine survivors featured in it, are mute on the question of blame and how it should be properly apportioned. The excerpts included in the report contain minimal descriptions of Japanese soldiers and their conduct, and almost none that pertain to French ones. Ethnic Chinese, who figured in two of the three ditties described earlier, are completely absent, even though they played a crucial role in the rural economy as moneylenders and rice mill owners. So, too, did Vietnamese who actively collaborated with the French-Japanese regime, such as members of the rice unions. This silence reflects the lack of sentiment expressed in the report more generally.

Suppressing Sentiment

At first glance, the heavy emphasis on personal testimonies of the eyewitnesses would appear to undercut the broader goal of collecting and presenting "objective" data on the Great Famine. But the members of the Joint Committee repeatedly justified the inclusion of the oral accounts by claiming that their recollections made the report more "penetrating" (*sâu sắc*), "truthful" (*chân thực*), and "appalling" (*rùng rợn*). The intended effect was to convey the "terrible" (*khủng khiếp*) nature of the event. Yet, the reader is confronted with a persistent flatness in the oral testimonies that leaves one strangely unmoved. The flatness is particularly striking when juxtaposed against the highly emotional accounts, excerpted at the end of the same report, from Vietnamese writers and journalists who survived the Great Famine, the report's editors among them (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 610–679).

To a certain extent, the form conditions the content. Many of the testimonies, for example, reproduce a style of oral expression that I have repeatedly heard when ordinary people are requested by government officials to express their views on a particular topic. Typically, such orations begin with the stock phrase: "I request permission to express . . ." (*xin phép phát biểu . . .*). Then, after specifying which issue(s) are to be addressed, the speaker locates himself or herself in bureaucratic space and time, as is the case below:

I am Hoàng Hải Nam, 68 years old, residing in Pác Gà Village, Nhượng Bạt Commune [now in Bế Triều Commune], Hoà An District, Cao Bằng [Province]. My family during the period 1944–45 had five people; we had 10 *pùng* [5,000 square meters] of land and were considered to be a middle peasant household. When the French colonialists built the farm and stables in Bê-na, they stole one-third of the land . . . (*ibid.*, 279)

Visually reinforcing the flatness of such accounts are the “inquest reference tables” (*bảng tra cứu*), which consume more than one-third of the 728-page study. The tables always precede the oral accounts of the eyewitnesses and offer a quite different sense of the Great Famine. Unlike the accounts, the information included on these charts, which mimics the form used today for detailing local land tenure patterns, varied considerably. Typically, the charts were organized in hierarchically descending order by village, hamlet, lineage, and then household. Some of them merely recorded the names, number of people within the household, and the household’s economic situation (i.e., amount of land, draft animals, and type of house—either wood or bamboo) at the time of the Great Famine. Others included the number of deaths within the household and their kinship status (son, mother, etc.). Still others, more elaborate in design, stated the primary occupation of the household members, age at the time of death, current location of surviving members if known, and detailed statistical breakdowns of death rates by hamlet.

Again, no explanation is provided for this idiosyncratic presentation, which may simply reflect the disparate interests of individual members on the research team and/or the level of detail available in different locales. But regardless of the answer, the same question remains: what evidentiary weight should be given to these decontextualized fragments of people’s lives that fill the tables, especially as the report contains few methodological details on the circumstances of their collection? Were the statistics derived from the memories of the survivors and their descendants? Or were local documents and the revolutionary histories they later informed crucial to this effort as well? Alternatively, were the tables used as memory aids to prompt the recollections of the eyewitnesses, as I often witnessed during my fieldwork? If so, does this help explain why detailed mortality statistics are so firmly embedded within their oral accounts?

Close attention to the respective content of both forms of evidence suggests that each helped fashion the contours of the other. Access to arable land, for example, clearly emerged as an important site for knowledge production. Stage I of the research project narrowly focused on the impact of the Great Famine on one commune, Tây Lương, in Thái Bình Province. While overall mortality rates were severe throughout the area (over 66 percent of the inhabitants perished), households that had access to some private land in addition to the communal fields not surprisingly reported lower death rates (Vân Tào and Furuta 1995, 120). Questions regarding landholdings became progressively more detailed during Stages II and III of the project. Interestingly, the data collected on this topic resulted in dozens of inquest tables that noted in precise detail what portion of a *sào* (360 square meters) a household cultivated, but not the “class status” that was commonly associated with its inhabitants (*ibid.*, 444–447). The omission is interesting for several reasons. Bureaucrats employed such “Marx-ish” categories from the 1950s

onward to label people in ideological terms (Pelley 2002, 9). The designation given had a determining effect on one's life chances, as well as those of one's children (MacLean 2013, 31–53). These designations are rarely employed in everyday speech today. But scholars and local officials routinely project them back in time to describe colonial-era class relations and to justify the postcolonial campaigns in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to abolish the material basis of “feudal” and “capitalist” forms of exploitation in the countryside (*ibid.*, 54–110). Consequently, one would expect that class terminology would permeate the testimonies of the eyewitnesses, especially as more than half of them were low-level cadres who “served the people” during the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, this is not the case.

A few scattered references to a landlord or a collaborator (almost always anonymous) can be found in the report, but almost none of the witnesses openly or directly blamed other Vietnamese. Two tragic examples from Tây Lương Commune in Thái Bình Province follow. Nguyễn Văn Tư sold all his rice to buy his neighbors' precious heirlooms, and then died of starvation when his food supplies ran out and no one was willing to buy back these goods. Nguyễn Văn Lý made the same wager and similarly lost. Of the 16 people in the Lý household, 15 died (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 689).

However, vast areas of productive land were abandoned or sold for a song as the owners, both French and Vietnamese, fled or died of starvation and the cholera that quickly followed. Conditions were reputedly so severe in nine provinces in Tonkin that approximately 50 percent of the arable land was temporarily abandoned during the winter of 1945 (HNDVN 1998, 154). Landlords, at least those with better luck than either Tư or Lý, reportedly bought much of this abandoned land at prices a mere fraction of their market value, which became a major point of contention when land reforms began in the mid-1950s (Trần Phương 1968, 56–84). But again, no one mentions these practices in the study.

Nowhere is this silencing of affect and, by extension, blame more apparent than in the accounts of what people ate during the famine. Individual recollections typically take the form of lists that convey both the passage of time and the steady decline of viable food sources, but not the terror this experience must have evoked when family members began to die in great numbers. Cô Kim Thành offers a typical example: “During that time in my house, we first ate gruel, after that rice bran with pennywort [and] sweet potato vines. After that was gone, we ate roasted rice bran, with a little bit of salt, which caused bad heartburn and extreme constipation” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 488). By contrast, famine survivors I spoke with in Hưng Yên and Hải Dương, as well as other written accounts I gathered over the years, vividly describe the taste, textures, and smells of what they were able to eat as the sources available to them became increasingly scarce.

The first to disappear were sources of protein, they explained. Meat, never common, disappeared quickly as people consumed all their chickens and ducks and then the frogs, snakes, salted fish, and field rats; after that, they ate their own dogs, cats, and songbirds. Bad weather and poor storage facilities meant that stale, musty rice, though widely despised, remained the staple food, at least during the early months of the Great Famine. When cooked, it produced a sour smell that caused most people to lose their appetite. To help fool themselves, survivors told me, they mixed stale rice with water to produce a weak gruel to which small bits of whatever was still on hand could be added. Water spinach and sweet potato vines were common, as were other fast-growing vegetables, such as bitter melons and mustard greens. Aubergines and salt, according to one survivor, made the gruel more palatable because “they went together perfectly, like the moon loves the color white.” But even these vegetables, which form the cornerstone of the everyday diet of the rural poor, began to disappear as peasants became too weak to grow them. This left pennywort leaves, since their sharp, acrid smell helped counter-balance the gruel’s insipidity, as well as banana and potato peels, soybean dregs, rice bran, and corn stalks. But these scraps, which Vietnamese normally fed to their pigs, quickly became scarce as neighbors “began to steal from one another to eat,” one survivor confessed. When this swill was exhausted, those who sought to stay alive turned to edible grasses and plants, such as dayflower and duckweed, which traditionally served as meals of last resort whenever crops failed.

But perhaps the most tragic aspect of the famine concerned those people who died from “being full” (*chết no*). Famine victims require the careful reintroduction of foods in small quantities, due to the deterioration of the digestive system and to correct for multiple nutritional deficiencies brought about by chronic malnutrition or the complete absence of food. Many people were either unaware of this need or, more likely, simply could not control themselves when they finally got access to some food, especially during the spring harvest of 1945. By this point, the Great Famine had already lasted six months in most places. According to Nguyễn Thị Chúng, people in her hamlet went out to the drought-stricken fields in March, just prior to the harvest, where they ate the immature rice grains raw. Many of them, she noted, promptly died from intestinal blockages (*ibid.*, 326). In other places, people were able to wait until April, when the rice was ready for harvest. But again, their patience proved insufficient. Trần Văn Sứ lost four of his relatives, including his maternal grandmother, when the smell of partially steamed rice overcame them. According to Sứ, they ate the contents of the pot before the rice had completely cooked and died a short time afterward (*ibid.*, 454–455). Nguyễn Duy Nhi also watched his paternal uncle eat four small bowls of rice and then die (*ibid.*, 259).

Similar examples are scattered throughout the text. Yet, the circumstances are

again described in strikingly unemotional terms and frequently appear almost incidental due to the prominence eyewitnesses gave in their “testimonies” to enumerating the dead. One startling exception to this pattern appears in the report. Nguyễn Thị Chúng, quoted above, was 10 years old when the Great Famine began. When asked by the research team what she remembered, Chúng responded in “double-seven six eight” (*song thất lục bát*) verse. Chúng noted that the rhyme scheme, which is typically used in Vietnam to chant lengthy elegies and ballads, helped preserve the events in her mind. An excerpt from her 75-line poem follows:

People appear like underworld ghosts,
 Wearing torn ill-matched clothing,
 Peering at you for a long while without showing their eyes.
 Eating pennywort leaves, clusters of figs and amaranth
 Banana tubers boiled with a side plate of salt
 Eat hoping to ward off our hungry stomachs.
 Dry cakes pretending that they are rice dumplings filled with green bean paste.
 People slit open sweet potatoes and smeared them with ancient bran dregs
 To keep from wilting like swine.
 Ponder how depressing and miserably wretched this is and then
 Judge those watching outside the store
 What reason is there for their misery? (*ibid.*, 325–326)

What I find most distinctive in this poem is the open recognition of misery and depression, especially when one compares it to the emotional flatness of the other eyewitness reports. But it is the issue of non-judgment, upon which the excerpt ends, that foregrounds these differences most clearly. In Chúng’s view, the starving were already little more than hungry ghosts. For this reason, they should be forgiven—if not entirely absolved—for the shameful acts they frequently committed in the effort to remain alive.

Depersonalizing Suffering

Võ An Ninh captured on film what Chúng conveyed through verse. Ninh was a young photographer when the Great Famine began, and he traveled throughout Tonkin on assignment to document the tragedy as it happened. His photographs were first published in the Việt Minh’s *Cứu Quốc* (Save the Nation) magazine (No. 133, January 3, 1946) and then quickly reprinted elsewhere. Forty-two plates of his black-and-white photographs are reproduced at the end of the Joint Committee’s report, and their content forms a stark contrast with the rest of the report. The report’s authors state that they included them because Ninh’s photographs “note the truthfulness [of what happened], and call on

us to remember, with deep grief and resentment, what can never be forgotten” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 673). In a later interview, Ninh said his photo-“reportage” (*phóng sự*) constituted a visual denunciation of the French and Japanese crimes but added that what struck him the most was the inescapable smell of the dead and of those about to die (*ibid.*, 679). These sentiments, which stand in marked contrast to the subdued tone of the Joint Committee’s report as a whole, are embedded in the images themselves, but in a manner that depersonalizes the victims, hence the additional attention they receive here.

Vietnamese reportage first appeared in 1932. The genre was modeled after investigative French *reportage*, which itself was derived from the literary tradition of social realism. But the Vietnamese word for *reportage* carried an additional connotation. *Phóng sự* means “to blow up” or “to magnify events” and conveyed the popular understanding that it was acceptable, if not required, for the writer to enlarge the facts to achieve a desired aesthetic and/or political effect (Lockhart 1996, 27). By using this term, Ninh is signaling that the “truth” of the Great Famine requires something more than “facts” to fully represent the tragedy to people who did not personally endure it. Ninh achieves his desired effect in several ways. Most of his photos are hand-signed on the front (though without the requisite diacritics) rather than the back, as if to evoke Western-style paintings and other artworks. The lengthy captions, with their liberal use of exclamation points, also move beyond simply factual descriptions to create short, almost cinematic stills that dictate what we are to conclude from the presented image. Photograph No. 18, for instance, is a close-up shot (head and shoulders) of a male corpse lying on the ground, with disheveled hair, and severely sunken eyes staring blankly upward. The caption reads, “Dead and unable to shut [his] eyes! The rancor and bitterness are spent here!”

The emotional power of the photographs arises not simply from their content, which is often disturbing in its own right, but through their juxtaposition with the “testimonies” in the report, as previously mentioned. Photos of the nearly dead in Thái Bình and Nam Định Provinces show small groups of emaciated women and children standing, squatting, or lying down on the ground. The subjects are either dressed in filthy rags or completely naked. Their gaze is aimed in every direction, often directly at the camera lens, but only rarely at each other. The recently dead, by contrast, appear in great numbers and take the form of corpses piled on wagon carts and the back of flatbed trucks or in great stacks at impromptu graveyards. Still others are shown wrapped in mats made of sedge—normally used in rural areas as a dining surface—and then placed in shallow graves in rice fields. The differences in formal composition aside, all of the individuals portrayed in Ninh’s photographs are depicted as nameless victims whose anonymity is further reinforced by the captions that accompany them (see also Campbell 2012). These cap-

tions offer little to contextualize the scenes Ninh captured on film. Instead, the captions instruct viewers on how to respond emotionally to their visual content, compassion for those “near the earth and far from heaven” (*gần đất xa trời*), and outrage on behalf of the already dead.

The instructions provide a useful reminder of a broader dilemma people faced at the time: namely, what should be done with the corpses, especially given the dangers they presented to the people who handled them? Ironically, professional gravediggers were often the first to die because they had no arable land of their own and thus no reliable sources of income and food. As the speed with which people died accelerated, others had to find ways to dispose of their kith and kin to avoid cholera outbreaks. In rural areas, the most common solution was the creation of “ghost graves” and “hunger tombs,” such as the ones described at the outset of the essay, which were normally placed apart from those used for one’s ancestors. This problem was further compounded in urban areas due to the sheer number of people who arrived in cities each day in desperate search of food but perished shortly afterward. Since there were no known relatives to take responsibility for their unidentified remains, tens of thousands of corpses were placed in hastily constructed mass graves, typically in close proximity to the bus stations and markets where they collapsed.

In 1950 residents of Hanoi raised funds to exhume, wash, and then rebury some of the remains in the city’s charity cemetery, according to the caretaker of the famine memorial whom I met. The reburial effort was unusual for several reasons, the least of which was that it occurred during the middle of the First Indochina War (1946–54). Funerary practices in north and central Vietnam commonly require two burials, the first in special containers located at geomantically auspicious locations in one’s own rice fields or near bodies of water. The remains are generally exhumed after two years, when they are carefully cleaned with alcohol, counted, and then re-interred by a ritual specialist, as an incomplete skeleton can result in serious problems for the living as well as the dead. However, the mass burials made this impossible, which perhaps explains the decision made in 1951 to further violate normal mortuary practices and collectively entomb the remains inside the memorial that was erected on the grounds of the charity cemetery. Ninh’s photos of the reburial, although not published until five years after the process was completed, showed the culturally unthinkable: piles of skulls three meters deep, rows of femurs stacked like kindling, and jumbled masses of ribs. An elderly woman, Nhung, who lived next to the memorial and regularly encountered the spirits of the famine victims, told me the collective reburial was nonetheless a marked improvement. Before 1951, she explained, it was not unusual to see bits of exposed bone lying on the ground among the weeds; however, the decision to place all of the disarticulated remains

in a large ossuary under the memorial ensured, in her opinion, that the “thirsty and hungry victims of injustice” (*oan hồn đói khát*) would never be fully at peace.

Missing Resistance

Rural Vietnamese employed a range of strategies with mixed success to survive the famine. Theft was an obvious choice, as was buying and selling rice on the black market while supplies lasted. However, most turned to begging, but the scale of the famine was so terrible that it was impossible. “The markets,” the former assistant chairman for Thái Bình Province, Bùi Thọ Ty, recalled, were too crowded with people “who were nothing but skin and bones” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 85). Nguyễn Văn Đăng similarly remembers how Vũ Thị Ang (*sic*), who was 12 years old at the time, went to the local market to beg after her grandmother, Bà Mẫn, collapsed. “She was too hungry to ask for food, so she lay down at the corner of the market and died . . .” (*ibid.*, 387). The comparatively better off sold their property and clothing, piece by piece until there was nothing, and then they sold their homes. Once the money from that was gone, they sold whatever family heirlooms remained. But even that, according to Nguyễn Thanh Vân, the former president of Thái Bình Province’s historical research council, was often not enough. “When everything was gone [sold],” he explained, “you would still die, impoverished, of starvation” (*ibid.*, 87–88). The only other option, according to Chu Bá Hoan, was to leave for the mountains in the far north, where rumor had it food could be had if one joined the Việt Minh (*ibid.*, 232).

There were, of course, more active forms of everyday resistance *prior* to the Great Famine. Rural households, as I noted earlier, sought to hide the true extent of their landholdings and to harvest crops in secret to limit what the rice unions and others could seize from them. Fields officially designated by Japanese officials for the production of cash crops (e.g., peanuts, cotton, and jute) needed to supply the war effort commonly went under-planted and thus reduced the amount of materials available to them. In several isolated instances, mobs “borrowed” (i.e., seized) paddy from landlords and Japanese-managed granaries as well (*ibid.*, 86). But these isolated actions were not coordinated (*ibid.*, 626–629); moreover, they appear to have largely ceased by August 1943, months before the Great Famine began (*ibid.*, 124–131, 626–629). The apparent lack of organized action is significant, again by contrast. Peasant uprisings hold a conspicuous place in the new histories of the national past written after the creation of the DRV in 1954. Details regarding them are routinely cited as proof of two things: (1) the revolutionary potential of Vietnamese peasants, and (2) the concomitant need for the

Communist Party to guide their actions in an effective manner (Vũ Huy Phúc 1979, 387; Pelley 1995).

The lack of large-scale, organized resistance on the eve of the Great Famine helps explain the peculiar position of the tragedy within historical accounts of the period. Slump famines are generally associated with a sudden and unexpected drop in the economy or one of its sub-sectors, which produces catastrophic mortality rates—even though sufficient food exists to prevent it. The sudden onset of the crisis instead leads to loss of a household's substantive ability to establish ownership over an adequate amount of food to preserve life, either by growing it or by purchasing it. But in this particular instance, there was no sudden economic downturn, only an inexorable decline that began in 1930 (Nguyễn Thế Anh 1987; Bùi Minh Dũng 1995, 580; Gunn 2014, 75–105). By the eve of the famine's beginnings, there was no fat left on the land—or, for that matter, on Vietnamese bodies. So, within a very short period of time, people were too weak to do anything.

For many of those who witnessed the Great Famine, their survival cannot be separated from intense personal feelings of shame. Their shame has several causes, many of which fall under the generic heading of selfish acts committed in the name of self-preservation, such as the abandonment of families, sale of children, theft of food and clothes from others who were weaker, and cannibalism (Tô Hoài 1994, 58–70; Marr 1995, 106n144; Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 638, 649). “A hungry belly renders the ears deaf,” (*bụng đói thì tai điếc*) one survivor in Hanoi told me, by which he meant being momentarily indifferent to the needs of others. But the crime that appears to haunt survivors the most was a ritual one. As conditions worsened, it became impossible to present daily offerings to one's ancestors, much less to bury family members properly when everything of value was sold to purchase food:

An offence against Heaven has been committed
 The antiques are brought out
 Everything belonging to the Grandparents is sold
 The [lesser] lines of descent are also sold
 Now, on this day, even the ancestors are sold.

This lullaby and the shame it describes alludes to another obstacle to state-sponsored commemorations of the Great Famine. The Communist Party justifies its monopoly on political power by placing itself at the head of a long line of “ancestors” that defended the “nation” against “foreign aggressors” (Pelley 1995). The Great Famine did not contribute to any well-known acts of heroic sacrifice, however. Consequently, the accounts of individual suffering and passive nature of their deaths have little historical significance,

except in statistical form as a means to validate Vietnamese claims regarding the scale of the tragedy. When viewed from this perspective, the Great Famine constitutes an example of suffering without “sacrifice,” a point Ninh’s photographs continually reemphasize.

The absence of any mention of “sacrifice” in the oral testimonies is a further reminder that not all deaths are equal. Since the victims of the Great Famine did not die in defense of the “nation,” they cannot be interred in the “martyrs’ cemeteries” (*nhĩa trạng liệt sĩ*) the government has constructed throughout the country to honor individuals who sacrificed their lives to achieve its political goals. While the millions of hungry ghosts produced from the First, Second, and Third Indochina Wars can be converted into martyrs once their physical remains are located (typically with the assistance of spirit mediums) and properly buried, victims of the Great Famine cannot be similarly transformed. The ontological status of these hungry ghosts remains ambiguous, as no officially approved ritualized procedures have emerged to change them into either benevolent ancestors or the “exceptional dead” (Malarney 2007, 521), whose sacrifices are worthy of emulation by others.

Partial Reincorporation

Despite the Joint Committee’s findings, the Great Famine remains a non-event, at least within official histories of the revolutionary struggle. The tragedy produced no heroes, a point that Văn Tạo, senior historian and co-editor of the volume, stated in the report’s concluding section. He painfully noted that the indignities Vietnamese suffered and the shame they carried from what they had to do to survive made people “lose their humanness” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 693). As time passes, therefore, the Great Famine becomes increasingly marginal in depictions of the national past.

That said, restoration work on the 1951 memorial to the famine victims, which began in 2001 under the direction of faculty at Hanoi Architectural University, updated its existing features using historical sources, and added some new ones. The result was a modestly sized “zone of recollection” (*khu tưởng niệm*) on what remained of the former charity cemetery. Sturdy cement walls and a padlocked gate now protect the zone, poetically named “the sleeping place of a thousand years” (*noi an giấc ngàn thu*), from further encroachment by the private homes that surround it on all sides. Once inside the zone, a curved pathway bordered by decorative trees and potted flowers leads visitors around the monument, which was fully restored and repainted in the same colors as the national flag. Two further elements were added in 2003. The first was a large polished

black granite slab that features the full text of the 114-line poem by Vũ Khiêu, a famine survivor and former vice-director of the Institute of History. (He composed the poem in March 1945 to honor its victims.) The second was a small two-story structure built a few meters to the left of the memorial. The top floor contains reproductions of the photographs Võ An Ninh took of the Great Famine on its walls, while the bottom one houses a large altar for visitors. Thăng, the part-time caretaker of the zone, informed me that visitors are largely limited to government officials and Japanese dignitaries, who periodically come to “recall” (*tưởng niệm*) the dead with a ritual prayer, incense, and small offerings, especially during the festival to appease the wandering souls of the dead.

The zone was not simply about honoring the famine victims, however. The funds the People’s Committee allocated for it were drawn from a much larger item in the city’s budget. Funds were earmarked for the restoration of other sites of historical and cultural significance, then scheduled for completion prior to September of 2010, when nationwide celebrations would mark the 1,000th anniversary of the founding of Hanoi. The restoration thus prompted renewed discussions among the historians who participated in the research project. The topic was whether the memorial, in its new form, should serve as the national “site of memory” (Nora 1989) for all victims of the Great Famine. These informal discussions gained strength prior to the 60th anniversary of the tragedy—a date that carried additional cosmological significance. The year 2005 marked the completion of the sexagenary calendar, which in Vietnam is used not only to predict the future, but to account for the moral character of the past as well.

The historians organized a number of public events that year to mark this anniversary, which included the release of a revised and expanded version of the Joint Committee’s 1995 report. But the most notable of these events was the symposium held in May 2005. The event brought together scholars from the Institute of History, many of whom had participated in the inquiry in 1995, assorted government officials, reporters, and several eyewitnesses. Dr. Vũ Khiêu opened the event by tearfully reciting his well-known poem regarding the event. The discussion then turned to the question of how to prevent further ritual marginalization of the victims.

Professor Văn Tạo, the co-author of the 1995 report and a famine survivor as well, argued that this outcome could best be forestalled through the establishment of “one death anniversary and one shrine” (*một ngày giỗ và một bàn thờ*) to commemorate the victims. Not everyone agreed with his proposal, however. Some participants noted that it would require the adoption of a national standard, which would reduce and possibly eradicate the diverse array of commemorative practices that now exist. For example, one person pointed out that at least four different dates were currently used to present offerings to the Great Famine’s victims: (1) September 3, when Hồ Chí Minh announced

that a mass movement would be organized “to raise production to resist famine”; (2) October 11, when he provided concrete details on how to implement the campaign; (3) the full moon in March, when death rates reached their peak in 1945; and (4) the full moon of the seventh lunar month, when all hungry ghosts annually emerge (Quang Thiện 2005).

The tensions over whether the death anniversary should coincide with the political or religious calendar also resurfaced around the question of whether a national monument was needed. Most felt that the restored memorial, which also included the remains of individuals killed during the 1946 bombing of Hanoi that marked the start of the First Indochina War, was too small and difficult to find to serve this purpose. But there was sharp disagreement over where a new one should be erected, especially since a substantial number of the dead were also buried at the Phúc Thiện Cemetery, near the zoo. Some proposed other sites in Hanoi where large numbers of people perished, such as the Hàng Da Market in the Old Quarter or the Giáp Bát Bus Station on the southern outskirts of the capital. Others argued that a national monument should be placed in Thái Bình Province, where more than a quarter of a million people died. Advocates of this site wanted to place it next to the road marker three kilometers north of the provincial seat on Highway One in honor of the famous photograph Võ An Ninh took there of two young male victims. Participants from Thanh Hóa, a province farther south, claimed it experienced a higher death toll and should host the monument. Still other participants expressed concern that a national monument would encourage the mass graves scattered across the countryside to gradually “fall into oblivion” (*ibid.*).

These debates over how the hungry ghosts should be recalled and ritually “cared for” (*chăm sóc*), as one participant in the symposium put it, remain unresolved despite ongoing efforts to establish a larger place for the Great Famine in the historical imagination, including public exhibitions of the photographs in the Museum of Vietnamese History and university textbooks (Hoàng Phương 2015; *Thanh Niên News* 2015). They remain unresolved because the archive that resulted from the Joint Committee’s inquiry documents features the unmaking of an entire population rather than its productive management toward officially desired ends: the struggle for revolutionary independence prior to and immediately after the August Revolution. And it is primarily for this reason that the Great Famine and the hungry ghosts it produced continue to resist incorporation into official narratives about the “exceptional dead,” who sacrificed their lives to defend the “nation” from foreign aggressors.

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The Irony of Democratization and the Decline of Royal Hegemony in Thailand

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I intend to approach the current decade-long political crisis in Thailand from two perspectives: power shift and cultural political hegemony. From a comparative historical point of view, the current crisis fits into a pattern of cyclical power shifts in modern Thai politics in which an initial opening/liberalization of the economy led to the emergence of a new class/social group, which in turn grew and rose to politically challenge the existing regime of the old elites and their allies. An extended period of political contest and turmoil ensued, with varying elements of radical transformation and setback, reaction and compromise, which usually ended in a measure of regime change. A remarkable feature of the ongoing power shift in Thailand is the ironic reversal of political stance and role of the established urban middle class, who have turned from the erstwhile vanguard democratizers of the previous power shift into latter-day anti-democratizers of the current one, with the globally dominant ideology of liberal democracy being torn asunder as a result. The preferred strategy of recent anti-democratic movements has been violent street politics and forceful anarchic mass occupation of key administrative, business, and transportation centers to bring about socioeconomic paralysis, virtual state failure, and government collapse. The aim is to create a condition of un-governability in the country that will allow the movement's leaders to exploit King Bhumibol's hard-earned hegemonic position and the deep-seated constitutional ambiguity of the locus of sovereignty in Thailand's "Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State" so as to appeal to heaven for divine political intervention. This has inadvertently resulted in the increasing politicization of the monarchy and concomitant decline of royal hegemony as the symbolic ties between democracy and the monarchy in Thailand become unraveled. In this light, the latest coup by the NCPO military junta—on May 22, 2014—was a statist/bureaucratic politic attempt to salvage the cohesiveness of the Thai state apparatus in the face of the societally self-destructive, protracted political class conflict that has reached a stalemate and the aggravatingly vulnerable monarchy.

Keywords: Thai politics, class conflict, monarchy, liberal democracy, mass movement

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I learned about the May 22, 2014 *coup d'état* by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) under the leadership of the then commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the day it occurred. I was at a workshop comparing recent political developments and protests in Turkey and Thailand at the London School of Economics. The first thing that came to mind when I heard the news was a sentence I had come across long ago in my reading of Marx's writings on the state, in the preface to the second edition of his celebrated work on Louis Bonaparte's coup, dated 1869 (1974, 144):

I show how, on the contrary, the *class struggle* in France created circumstances and conditions which allowed a mediocre and grotesque individual to play the hero's role.

It struck me as an apt portrayal of the gist of the political crisis that had been plaguing Thailand for the past decade, namely, a mutually dissipating and destructive, protracted class conflict that had aggravatingly undermined its governing institutions and political civility, leading occasionally to partial state failures and anarchy in its administrative and business centers. With that class conflict reaching yet another impasse and stalemate in 2014, the NCPO's coup then presented itself as a statist or bureaucratic politic (*à la* Fred Riggs's Bureaucratic Polity in Riggs, 1966) solution to it in the *Bonapartist* manner.

However, from the time of the preceding Thai Bonaparte—Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, whose military absolutist rule lasted from 1958 to 1963—to the current one, much has changed in Thailand. Its population has more than doubled, from 28 million to 65 million; its GDP has increased 239-fold, from 54 billion to 12,910 billion baht; and its civil society has produced at least two successful popular uprisings, in 1973 and 1992, that managed to topple the military government of the day (Riggs 1966, 16; Pasuk and Baker 1995, 162; Baker and Pasuk 2005, xvii–xviii, 24, 201; Bank of Thailand 2015). Therefore, if the hugely corrupt and bullying womanizer of yesteryear who drank himself to death was still capable of producing some real tragedies, his latter-day sober and chaste if no less bullying aspirant seems more prone to making boastful, careless, farcical statements that have often landed his military administration in troubles both domestic and international (Thak 1979, 193–205; Grossman *et al.* 2009, 133; Anderson 2014, 52–53; Hookway 2015).¹⁾ He does indeed fit Marx's description of a *Bonapartist* hero insofar as

1) All in all, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat used his usurped absolute power to order the summary execution of five suspected arsonists, five political dissidents/Communists, and one heroin producer, as well as the indefinite detention without trial of over 1,000 suspected Communists (Thak 1979, 193–205).

mediocrity and grotesqueness are concerned.²⁾

What I propose to do in this brief paper is to take a big picture and a long historical perspective of the current conflict and mass movements in Thailand, focusing on their class-related dimension, political dynamics, and royalist framing. Instead of focusing on the NCPO's coup *per se*, with its multifarious details and still ongoing eventuation, I would rather try to understand and assess it against the country's historical and cultural political backdrop.

Power Shifts in Modern Thai Political History

If one takes a long historical view of modern Thai politics since the late nineteenth century, one can't help but notice a recurrent pattern of major power shifts in modern Thai history. Its basic trajectory follows much the same logic:

- It begins with the partly pressured, partly voluntary opening up of the economy

2) In terms of mediocrity, with his limited grasp of the socioeconomic conditions of the country, Prime Minister General Prayut remarked in October 2014 that Thailand was a low-income country trying to acquire a middle-income status—when in fact Thailand already achieved lower-middle-income status about 40 years ago and is currently trying to escape the so-called middle-income trap (Felipe 2012, 16; Anon. 2014a). Early in 2015, he also said on the occasion of the Chinese New Year festival that the ancestors of the Thai people originally migrated from the Altai Mountain Range on the border of Russia about 3,000 years back, an outdated theory that was discarded from official Thai history textbooks almost 40 years ago (Anon. 2015c; 2015b). Initially, shortly after seizing power, he claimed that though he was a soldier, running the country was not difficult as the NCPO deployed the state apparatus and followed bureaucratic rules and regulations (Patshaya 2014). However, not long after assuming the premiership, he complained repeatedly of his resultant high blood pressure and desire to quit the political office (Wassana Nanuam's Facebook page, downloaded October 15, 2014). In terms of his grotesqueness, in one audience with the King prior to his rise to power, General Prayut was said to have lain still on the floor and let two of the King's favorite pet dogs lick his ears until they were wet all over. The King then commented that his dogs did so because they knew who was loyal to their master (Paisal Puechmongkol's Facebook page, downloaded January 21, 2015). Among the unusual things (not to say "unbecoming" of a PM) done in public by PM General Prayut so far are the following: in an interview with reporters, he almost unselfconsciously patted the head and tugged and fondled the left earlobe of a male assistant photographer kneeling beside him. While inspecting a trade fair for discounted goods at the Government House and being pestered by news reporters to pose for photographers, he ate a banana and then threw its peel at the reporters (Hookway 2015). His public statements and interviews were often peppered with controversial off-the-cuff remarks (such as suggesting that bikini-clad foreign female tourists might be unsafe on the beaches in Thailand in the wake of the killing of two British tourists, a remark for which he subsequently apologized), angry outbursts, bullying threats, and plenty of expletives (e.g., "damn you," "nuts," "lackeys," "so what?"), for which he lamely apologized afterward, saying that he was actually a "good-natured funny man" (Anon. 2015d).

Table 1 Three Major Power Shifts in Modern Thai History

International System	Economy	Society	Politics & Regime Change
Mid C/19–Early C/20 Colonialism	The country was opened up to the West and free trade regime	The rise of immigrant Chinese bourgeoisie & Western-style educated state bureaucrats	1932 revolution against absolute monarchy → constitutional regime
1960s–1970s Cold War	World Bank-advised, market-led, state-promoted economic development & Foreign Direct Investment	The rise of big bankers and urban middle class, esp. in Bangkok & provincial capitalists	Massrisings against military dictatorship in 1973 & 1992 → parliamentary democracy
1990s–the Present Post-Cold War & Great Recession	Economic Globalization & Financial Liberalization	The rise of globalized big capitalist groups & lower middle classes in the countryside and informal sector of the urban economy	The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra & the TRT party vs. “Democratic regime of government with the King as Head of the State” → ?

Sources: Saneh (1987; 1997); Anek (1993); Nidhi (1995); Anderson (2014).

- to the outside world, and the resultant rapid economic growth;
- That is followed by a big social change, especially the emergence and upward mobility of new social groups and classes in connection with the newly liberalized and expanding sector of the economy;
 - This leads to a political contest between the old elites and their privileged allies on the one hand, and the rising new groups and classes on the other;
 - Eventually, all this leads sooner or later to a regime change.

All in all, I reckon three such power shifts as laid out in Table 1.

A few general observations can be made on the dynamics of these power shifts. A power shift is a lengthy process, usually lasting more than a decade or so. It cannot be settled in one single political battle but involves a series of attacks and defenses, advances and retreats, cessations and resumptions of conflict, radical transformations and setbacks, reactions and compromises, both armed and unarmed, until it eventuates in a measure of regime change, i.e., an irreversible transformation of the *ancien régime* that nonetheless may not perfectly match the original objective of the new rising elite.

The rising groups and classes choose their preferred method of struggle for power on the basis of their particular available internal and external resources on the one hand, and the existing political circumstances on the other. Hence, as middle-ranking military officers and government officials under the absolute monarchy with no political rights and only limited civil liberties, members of the People’s Party had no alternative but to launch a coup to seize state power from King Rama VII in 1932. It was simply out of the question for them to set up a political party and run for an election, or to launch a public

campaign and agitate for a mass revolt (Pridi 2000, 125). The same is true in its own way with the student activists and leaders of the 1973 popular uprising against military dictatorship, with no possibility for electoral contest nor access to any part of the Thai Armed Forces at that time, but supported by the increasingly discontented and insecure emergent huge bourgeois strata (Anderson 2014, 50–62). In the current round of power shift, with ample money, a hitherto untapped lower middle class, a numerically superior electoral base, an extensive network of floating local electoral candidates and canvassers, under a relatively stable electoral democracy since 1992, a political party and an election were obviously the preferred vehicle and chosen method of power contest for a billionaire tycoon like Thaksin Shinawatra and his family and business friends—at least until his government was overthrown in a military coup in 2006 (Pasuk and Baker 2009).

The Irony of Class-Based Democratization

The above-mentioned series of power shifts also evinces a peculiar, ironic logic of class-based democratization as follows (see Table 2 below):

- The dominant former democratizers, themselves having been beneficiaries of previous economic reform and the subsequent power shift, initiate a new round of economic reform;
- That reform willy-nilly benefits and brings forth new social groups/classes that grow and evolve into new latter-day democratizers vis-à-vis their begetting predecessors,
- who in turn become diehard opponents of further democratization.

The emergence of the Thai lower middle class was first broached in the context of the unprecedented successive electoral victories of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT, meaning “Thais Love Thais”) as well as the rise of the anti-coup Red Shirt movement, on account of fundamental socioeconomic and political changes in the countryside

Table 2 The Ironic Logic of Class-Based Democratization in Thailand

Power Shifts	Old Anti-Democracy Power Holders	New Pro-Democracy Power Contenders
1932 Constitutionalist Revolution	Royalty and aristocrats	Bureaucratic elites
October 14, 1973–May 1992	Bureaucratic elites	Urban bourgeoisie
2005–the present	Urban bourgeoisie	Lower middle classes

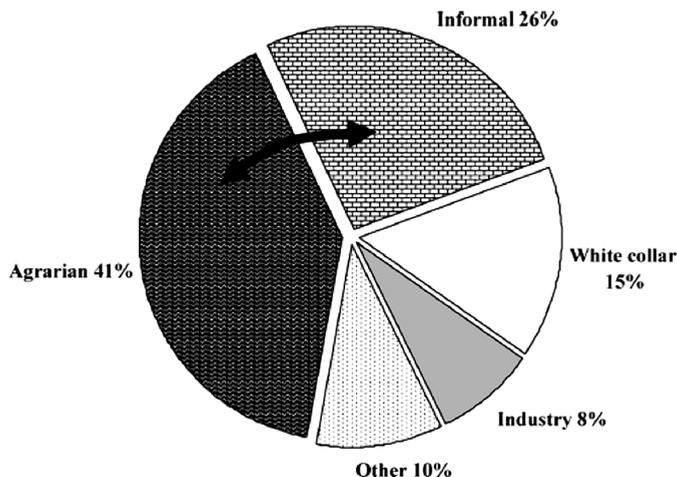


Fig. 1 Distribution of Labor Force, 2004

Source: Pasuk and Baker (2008, 71).

nationwide and, more specifically, of the rapid expansion of the informal sector of the economy in both the urban and rural areas in the past decade or so, by such scholars as Pasuk Phongpaichit, Chris Baker, Nidhi Aeusrivongse, and Attachak Satayanurak. It was Nidhi Aeusrivongse who first designated this key majority mass base as the lower middle class, on the basis of the definition of the middle classes around the world used by Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo (Banerjee and Duflo 2008; Nidhi 2009, 162–167). Meanwhile, Pasuk and Baker proceeded to give the first graphic representation of this emergent majority-voter group in Thai society in a scholarly publication (Pasuk and Baker 2008, 71). Variouslly dubbed “cosmopolitan villagers” (Keyes 2012), “urbanized villagers” (Naruemon and McCargo 2011), “political peasants” (Walker 2012), and the “new middle class” (Attachak 2014), they became the subject of the most comprehensive, multifaceted, and thorough research so far by a team of multidisciplinary Thai academic researchers led by Apichat Satitniramai, Yukti Mukdawijitra, and Niti Pawakapan. The researchers collectively presented a vivid and concrete portrayal of the lower middle class’s socio-economic rise, cultural sentiments, and political viewpoints, as against those of their well-established counterparts (Fig. 1) (Naruemon and McCargo 2011; Keyes 2012; Walker 2012; Apichat *et al.* 2013; Attachak 2014).

Hence the irony of waves or cycles of democratization in Thailand, and probably in other semi-peripheral democracies as well.

In addition, it so happened that during the current third wave of democratization in Thailand’s history, the country’s further opening up to the globalized economy took place

early in the post-Cold War world, where Marxism-Communism was passé and liberal democracy reigned unchallenged as the universal currency of political legitimacy at the “end of history” *à la* Francis Fukuyama (1989).

Thus, it should come as no surprise that both the old and new middle-class contestants for power in Thailand drew from this common repertoire of political ideology, each selecting and stressing those elements and components of liberal democracy best suited to their own respective resources and interests.

The upshot is the coming apart of liberalism and democracy at their seams, with the old, established Thai middle class adopting a liberalizing discourse and rhetorical posture against elected politicians and majority rule, and the new, emergent Thai middle class taking a democratizing stance against the unelected elite and non-majoritarian institutions, pretty much as discerned by Fareed Zakaria in his article about the rise of illiberal democracy in many post-authoritarian and post-Communist countries (1997), and by the late Peter Mair in his article about the rise of “democracy without a demos” in Western democracies (2006) in the post-Cold War world.

Nidhi Aeusrivongse, a prominent historian and the foremost public intellectual in the country, succinctly sums up the differences between the Red-Shirt illiberal democratizers and the Yellow-Shirt undemocratic liberalizers (2015; see also Norton 2012):

The current political division in Thailand is a result of extreme differences of opinion concerning the political future of Thai society (at least as alleged by both sides).

One side dreams of a more democratic future of the country. The voice of the people will be the definite ruling, made known through a political process free of any outside intervention. In order to achieve this, Thai society needs to be made more equal, not only politically, but also in other ways.

Meanwhile, the other side dreams of a corruption-free future of the country, with knowledgeable, capable and honest government and leaders to lead Thailand to an all-round affluence. Inequality is not a big issue, especially in view of the fact that political equality in and of itself could even stand in the way of getting good and able people to fill the administrative positions.

In the eyes of the two conflicting sides, differences of opinion in these issues are no trivial matters. Many claim they are willing to sacrifice their lives or personal liberties to achieve these disparate political and social objectives.

Having laid out the macro-political economic dynamics of the process of power shifts in modern Thailand, I proceed to discuss next the cultural-political opportunity structure and grammar of royalist mass politics since the constitutionalist revolution of 1932 and how it has been played out amid the decline of royal hegemony in recent years.

Royal Hegemony

The King is the key to understanding royalist mass politics in Thailand. The two greatest political achievements during the reign of King Bhumibol (since 1946) are royal hegemony and what is called “the Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State.”

Royal hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of consensual leadership and non-coercive compliance, is the monarchy’s cultural-political solution to the historic problem at the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, i.e., how best to manage the loss of sovereignty to commoner strangers/outsideers so as to preserve the vital interests and values of the palace and the nation (Williams 1985; McCargo 2005; Kasian 2011, 3–4).

For instance, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) had designated confiscation of private property and abolition of royal titles (*rib sap kab thod jao*) as forbidden policy areas in the first audience granted to leaders of the 1932 revolution on June 30, i.e., six days after the revolution (Mahithon 2002; Kasian 2011, 5–8).

Royal hegemony, gradually and painstakingly built up by King Bhumibol since the 1950s, has three main components: (1) the royal-nationalist ideology that conceptually identifies the essence of the imagined national community of Thailand with the monarchy; (2) thousands of royal initiative development projects that concretely and visibly exemplify the King’s untiring, self-sacrificing, and innovative work to improve the well-being of the Thai people, particularly the rural poor; and (3) the monarchical network that informally and hierarchically links together loyal and trustworthy subjects in all walks of life throughout the country in the service of their Majesties the King and Queen, especially in times of crisis (Thongchai 2001; McCargo 2005; Chanida 2007).

First becoming manifestly effective in the palace-supported popular uprising against military dictatorship in 1973, royal hegemony managed to quell or hegemonize the three traditional threats to the monarchy evident in both Thailand and other kingdoms: (1) the military, whose top commanders solemnly proclaim themselves “His Majesty the King’s soldiers”; (2) the armed Communist movement, which was politically vanquished and organizationally disbanded, and whose remnants have turned lately into “the People’s Liberation Army of Thailand—Royal Guards”; and (3) the established middle class, many of whose members proudly and publicly display the popular self-designating logo “the King’s people” on their cars’ rear windows and personal T-shirts on the streets of Bangkok (Anon. 2012b; 2013; Thongthai 2012).

Arguably, in his heyday King Bhumibol became much more powerful in an informal, extra-constitutional sense than some of his absolute predecessors.

The Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State

On the basis of royal hegemony, the post-1973 form of government in Thailand became officially designated as “the Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State” in the preamble of the 1978 Constitution, in which the righteous King is ideationally positioned above the dirty, corrupt, competitive, partisan politics, alongside and in symbiotic relationship with the Thai people, as embodying the essence of Thainess (Thai Parliament 1978; Thongchai 2008, 19–23).³⁾

King Bhumibol was quoted as saying sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s by the then caretaker secretary to the Privy Council, M. R. Thongnoi Thongyai, that the only occasion when the monarchy and its network would stoop to full involvement in politics was a political vacuum like the 1973 popular uprising against military dictatorship, when the military government of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikhachon stepped down and the National Legislative Assembly stopped functioning and was subsequently dissolved. However, once the vacuum was filled, the network monarchy needed to revert to its usual above-politics position as soon as possible, so as to be well prepared for the next such occasion (Nakharin 2006: 165, 183n66, 186–187n93).

Thai democracy and the Thai monarchy are thus conditional upon each other, forming an integral whole in which the former is unimaginable without the latter. Hence, democracy is made politically safe and tamed for the monarchy, unlike in the constitutional revolution of 1932 or in the surge of radical left-wing popular movements of 1975–76.

A key structural symptom of this political symbiosis is one provision that has typically appeared in almost all Thai constitutions except the very first one after the 1932 constitutionalist revolution, which specifies the following:

3) The evolution of this established epithet of the official political regime of the Kingdom of Thailand is intriguing in and of itself. Actually, it appeared for the first time in the aftermath of the royalist coup of 1947 against the ruling Pridi group, in Section 2 of the 1949 Constitution, but in a slightly different form, i.e., “Thailand has a democratic regime of government, and has the King as Head of the State” (Thai Parliament 1949). The two originally separate parts of the sentence became grammatically conjoined together and thereby politically conditional upon each other in the present form only with the return of the political clout of the monarchy following the 1973 popular uprising against military dictatorship in the preamble of the 1978 Constitution (Thai Parliament 1978). The resulting standard phrase (“the Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State”) has subsequently been incorporated into Section 2 of every constitution of the country since 1991 (Thai Parliament 1991).

Section 3.

The sovereign power belongs to the Thai people. The King as Head of the State shall exercise such power through the National Assembly, the Council of Ministers and the Courts in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution. (Thai Parliament 2007)

This key provision has always left unanswered the question of where sovereign power eventually lies: with the Thai people or with the King. A rather extremist, opportune interpretation of this constitutional ambiguity is made by Professor Borwornsak Uwanno, a prominent French-educated royalist constitutional lawyer and the head of the first and now defunct Constitution Drafting Committee established by the NCPO. He has put forward the peculiar argument that, based on the said phrase, the people and the King have been co-holders of sovereign power in the Thai democratic regime since 1932. In the event of a military coup, sovereign power is taken away from the people and therefore, as a matter of principle, reverts back to the monarchy, its pre-1932 original owner. Once a new constitution is promulgated by the King, the people and the King become co-holders of sovereign power again (Borwornsak 1994, 189–190). It is worth pointing out that, according to this fantastic interpretation, at no point in time during Thailand's Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State have the Thai people held sovereign power by themselves alone. They have sovereign power in their hands at all only when they hold it together with the King, as permanently stunted minors under perennial royal tutelage.

I would argue that at the heart of the Thai political malaise is this deep and persistent ambiguity about the locus of sovereignty inherent in the Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State. It is this wondrous ambiguity that provides a long-standing cultural opportunity structure for such political adventures as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, 2006–13) and the People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State (PDRC, late 2013–May 2014) as well as the NCPO coup.

Thaksin's Populist Capitalist Alternative Hegemony

The rise of Thaksin and his TRT party (including his network, nominees, and party avatars), which has won four consecutive valid national elections since 2001 (in 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2011), represents an alternative election-based nationwide hegemony on the platform of populist policy, neoliberal economy, and one-party dominant system (Kasian 2006; Pasuk and Baker 2009).

This unprecedented challenge to royal hegemony led subsequently to a reactive

excessive and widespread use and abuse of the monarchy and the *lèse-majesté* law for political purposes, especially against the democratically elected government of Thaksin and the TRT party as well as opponents of the military and royalist political forces (Streckfuss 2012; Anon. 2015a).

The political toll is telling: in less than a decade, four elected PMs—Thaksin Shinawatra, Samak Sundaravej, Somchai Wongsawat, and Yingluck Shinawatra—have been deposed by the iron triangle of the armed forces, senior judges, and royal-nationalist mass movements, the latter three in a string of judicial coups by the military-reorganized Constitutional Court. Meanwhile, the trial of *lèse-majesté* cases went up exponentially from around 30 per annum before the 2006 coup to nearly 500 in 2010. All these events are cheered on by people who proclaim themselves loyal subjects of the King.

The upshot is a waning royal hegemony, and a political repositioning of the network monarchy away from democracy and elections toward military rule and coups, that is detrimental to the long-term security of the monarchy itself.

Royalist Mass Movements

Be it the PAD, the short-lived Protect Siam Organisation (2012), or the recent PDRC, these and other minor royal-nationalist movements all share a basic political aim and modus operandi (Kasian 2006; 2009; Anon. 2012a; Thongchai 2013).

Essentially, they are not simply opposition movements, i.e., opposing the government of the day within a commonly recognized political system. Rather, they are resistance movements, i.e., aiming at overthrowing not only the government but the political system *in toto*.

This is because the democratic system of government that Thailand had as a result of the 1997 “political reform” constitution was vulnerable to the election-based, populist capitalist hegemony of Thaksin and his party, especially some of its components, such as the strengthened executive; the nationwide single-constituency party-list election that favored bigger, more affluent parties; and the effective subjugation of the centralized bureaucracy to the elected government (Rangsan 2003).

Hence an urgent, life-and-death need to overhaul this system, readjust the relations of power among its main institutional components by shifting power away from the elected organs to the non-majoritarian ones, installing some powerful checks-and-balances mechanisms, loosening the elected government’s hold over the bureaucracy, etc., so as to again make democracy safe for the network monarchy and royal hegemony. This is evident in the PAD’s and the PDRC’s political reform proposals (Anon. 2008; 2014b).

And since the military-drafted constitution of 2007, which clipped the wings of the democratically elected executive and legislature, still failed to prevent the continuing electoral victories and political comeback of Thaksin's ruling party and nominees as PMs (including Miss Yingluck, his youngest sister) time and again, the royal-nationalist resistance movement decided to strike again in order to further constrict the then existing democratic space under the slogan "reform before election" (Online Reporters 2013).

But how did it go about doing that? The *modus operandi* was to follow the proven successful formula of the October 14, 1973 uprising, namely, to artificially engineer a political vacuum and then use it as a pretext to invite "divine intervention." Only what was to be overthrown this time was not a *bona fide* military dictatorship but a democratically elected if allegedly corrupt government, and the way to accomplish it was not to hold a new general election and let the people decide, but to persistently disrupt one so as to silence and marginalize the voters and let the good, old, upright, and patriotic elites dictate to the nation.

Normally speaking, that might sound far-fetched and well-nigh impossible, but that was precisely the point: to exploit a crisis that presented itself as a rare window of opportunity so as to make the politically impossible become politically inevitable.

Thus, a political crisis provoked by the fatal miscalculation and mistake by the Yingluck government and the ruling Pheu Thai party in unceremoniously rushing through the House of Representatives a hugely unpopular and widely condemned, blanket amnesty bill that would have allowed Thaksin to return home a free and pardoned man provided a golden opportunity for Suthep Thaugsuban—a veteran shady politician from the South, former secretary-general of the opposition Democrat Party and one-time deputy prime minister responsible for the bloody suppression of the Red-Shirt demonstrators in Bangkok back in 2010—to launch an insurgent mass protest movement. The movement, centered mostly in the Democrat Party's strongholds in Bangkok and the South, was focused on ousting the Yingluck government and eradicating the Thaksin regime through "reform before election" since November 2013; at its height it allegedly numbered more than a million street protesters plus hundreds of hired armed thugs as protest guards (Eimer 2013; Li Li and Ming Dajun 2013).

During the six months of its continuing protest, the PDRC-led movement with Suthep as its secretary-general had forcefully occupied various key government offices and central business quarters in Bangkok; partly obstructed a general election; intermittently engaged in armed clashes with police and political opponents; and managed to paralyze the normal functioning of the Thai government, bureaucracy, electoral politics, and economy to a large extent, resulting in about 30 conflict-related deaths and over 800 wounded victims.

Maneuvering in tandem with/with the connivance of the Democrat Party, the army, various courts and constitutional independent bodies, etc., the PDRC managed to achieve the following political feats: the dissolution of the House of Representatives; the partial and temporary shutdown of the capital city of Bangkok; the boycott, disruption, and annulment of the February 2, 2014 general election; the legal protection of the PDRC demonstrations from suppression and dispersal by state authorities; the removal from office of caretaker PM Yingluck Shinawatra; and a general atmosphere of political vacuum, anarchy, and ungovernability in Bangkok.

What remained to be done was the usurpation of sovereign power by Suthep himself, the installation of an unelected PM and an unelected legislative People's Council, and the replacement of government by the people themselves with government for the people by the elite minority, with the 11th "final battle" of the PDRC declared by Suthep from the occupied Government House to be waged and won no later than May 26. Failing that, he announced, he would surrender himself to the police on May 27 (Anon. n.d.; Ratnikas n.d.).

Luckily, he was saved just in time by the NCPO's coup on May 22, which put an end to the engineered chaos, anarchy, and partial state failure and restored military-bureaucratic state power and security.

Conclusion: The NCPO's *Coup d'État*

The NCPO coup, which was the 13th of its kind in Thailand since the constitutionalist revolution of 1932, had as its declared aim the restoration of peace and order to the country, ravaged by a decade-long political conflict that at its worst threatened to degenerate into an open civil war. However, it seemed more like a stopgap or a pain reliever, carried out by those who held on to a questionable presumption that a centralized statist/bureaucratic politic regime of the postwar world could still resolve fierce and unrelenting class conflict in an increasingly globalized, cosmopolitan, politicized, and dehegemonized Thailand.

Based on their actual performance during the past two years, the NCPO and the Prayut government arguably set out to alter the preexisting mode of political participation under the so-called Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State in the following manner (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007):

- making use of coercion under martial law, *lèse-majesté* law, and other security legislation to create a permanent state of depoliticized exception (*à la* Giorgio

Agamben) as a way to control and regulate ongoing class conflict (Agamben 2005, 1–31);

- installing a retro-semi-democracy under the tutelage of royal-nationalist and hyper-moralist, non-majoritarian institutions (i.e., “Ammat” forces, namely, the military, the privy council, the judiciary) over and above the majority voter among the population and their elected representatives;
- readjustment of the military-monarchy security partnership in the transition to the post-Bhumibol scenario of declining royal hegemony and hence the need for enhanced state coercion and military intervention in politics;
- further enhancement of state power over society in general, and the grassroots movements in particular, for the purpose of accumulation of capital by dispossession (*à la* David Harvey) and development of new capitalist frontiers (Harvey 2005, 137–182).

In that sense, it is a sequel to the 2006 antecedent albeit an overhauled and newly strategized one. The 2006 coup is regarded as *sia khong* (lost opportunity) insofar as the non-majoritarian bureaucratic institutions entered into an alliance with the right-wing royalist social forces in which the latter dominated politically. The result was the bloody crackdown of 2010, which eventually failed to suppress the oppositional forces and even led to their eventual electoral triumph in 2011. Therefore, this time around, the NCPO tried to distance itself from its erstwhile allies and stay properly “neutral” while taking full and direct control of political leadership and governmental power.

The NCPO’s chance of success in this endeavor depends on its ability to overcome its own manifold limitations, which include the following:

- its reliance on the over-centralized but under-unified and hence structurally inefficient bureaucratic state apparatus;
- its aspiration for unaccountable absolutist/arbitrary power and control coupled with its insoluble lack of political legitimacy, and hence increasing reliance on force and coercion that in turn will most likely generate administrative over-extension, stronger reaction, and wider opposition;
- its Cold War mentality, anti-terrorist tactics and strategy, and psychological warfare propaganda campaign;
- its conservative/reactionary, paternalistic, royal-nationalist ideology and culture.

So far, the NCPO in general and its head-cum-PM General Prayut Chan-o-cha in particular have proven themselves to be rather blind and blinkered prisoners of these

limitations, extolling their virtues and necessity instead of becoming aware of their inadequacies. The political future of the NCPO and the Thai military looks rather bleak.

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Anut Grubyuk in the Voting Process: The Neglected Explanation of Javanese Voters (Preliminary Findings)

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The “Javanese factor” is a strategic consideration in Indonesian electoral politics, as the Javanese are Indonesia’s most numerous inhabitants. However, seminal masterpieces such as those by Geertz (1960) and Gaffar (1992) apply only a limited and individual-based voting approach in their efforts to explain Javanese voting behavior. Recent qualitative case studies explore *anut grubyuk* (fitting in) as a unique form of grouped rural Javanese voting behavior, rooted in the Javanese communal philosophy of life and hierarchical values. A study in four selected villages in Blitar and Trenggalek Regencies in East Java argues that individual Javanese voters adjust their voting decisions based on the major preference in their neighborhood, in keeping with the communal spirit of living in harmony as well as to avoid conflict and respect neighborly relationships. This article presents a preliminary assessment of *anut grubyuk* as group-oriented voting among the Javanese, a topic that has been relatively absent in academic discussion. Beyond cultural explanations, recent illiberal democratic practices have made *anut grubyuk* vulnerable to manipulation, since certain community leaders or brokers exploit Javanese communality in return for both individual and communal short-term benefits from candidates. Instead of helping with the growth of liberal democracy, *anut grubyuk* potentially supports patronage-driven democracy, in which small numbers of elites use patronage for influential control over electoral processes.

Keywords: Javanese, group-oriented voting, democracy, Indonesia

Introduction

The Javanese are ranked as the most numerous ethnic group in Indonesia. The 2010 national census reported that they amounted to 40.22 percent of the national population (92,217,022 people), with 48.72 percent of them living in rural areas (Na’im and Syaputra 2011, 28). This numerical majority is one of the reasons for scholarly studies to examine

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the Javanese as a political entity.¹⁾

However, the number of published scholarly works on Javanese voters is not commensurate with the dominance of this population. Clifford Geertz (1960), in his pioneering masterpiece *The Religion of Java*, introduced the *aliran* (streams) approach that attempted to map Javanese electoral orientations. The approach is founded on Javanese socio-religious norms that contribute to the Javanese people's worldview (religious beliefs, ethical preference, and political ideologies) and yields three main cultural types: *abangan*, *santri*, and *priyayi* (*ibid.*, 4–5). Geertz explains this well-known trichotomic nature of Javanese society as follows:

Abangan, representing a stress on the animistic aspects of the overall Javanese syncretism and broadly related to the peasant element in the population; *santri*, representing a stress on the Islamic aspects of syncretism and generally related to the trading element (and to certain elements in the peasantry as well); and *priyayi*, stressing the Hinduist aspects and related to the bureaucratic element. (*ibid.*, 6)

In the postcolonial period, these socio-religious groups changed their positions from religious to political (*ibid.*, 363).

Afan Gaffar (1992) deployed Geertz's Javanese cultural types to study Javanese voting behavior for a political party. This quantitative research succeeded in revealing some explanatory variables of Javanese voters, especially in rural Java. The general

1) Even though Javanese are large in number, scholarly works on them rarely consider their significance in Indonesian electoral politics. Exceptions are Hill and Shiraishi (2007), who mention Javanese domination of the state (that is, the domination of mainly Javanese army officers), and Woodward (2011), who holds the view that Javanese occupy a position of "first among equals" with two visible attributes—being the largest ethnic community and having always been politically dominant. Meanwhile, Liddle and Mujani (2007) found that in the 2004 legislative election, ethnicity had little impact on voting. In the 2004 presidential election also, ethnicity had no impact. The strength of Javanese as an ethnic identity can only explain the lower probability of votes for Partai Golkar (Functional Group) relative to other parties; in other words, Golkar is a non-Javanese party. Recent explanations by pollsters found that in the 2014 presidential election the ethnic background of presidential and vice-presidential candidates was not a dominant consideration. Poltrack Institute's polling of Indonesian voters found that only 27 percent of voters voted for the Javanese presidential candidate and 23 percent for the Javanese vice presidential candidate (December 2013). In January 2014, Poltrack found slight changes—21.18 percent and 25.10 percent respectively. In contrast, the Indonesia Survey Circle (LSI) found that among the two most numerous ethnic groups (Javanese and Sundanese) the presidential pair of Joko Widodo-Jusuf Kalla were preferred by Javanese voters (47.6 percent in June 2014 and 52.18 percent in July 2014) and the presidential pair of Prabowo Subianto-Hatta Rajasa were preferred by the Sundanese (51.6 percent in June 2014 and 61.4 percent in July 2014). In particular, LSI revealed that Joko Widodo-Jusuf Kalla were more influential among voters in Central and East Java, where the Javanese formed the majority. These data minimally show the relevance of Javanese as an object of electoral studies in the country.

conclusion was that norms and values, which were transferred via political socialization, contributed to the creation of partisan choices among Javanese villagers. Gaffar concluded that voters' preferences are shaped by their interaction with leaders. Voters attached to formal leaders (village officials and their assistants and the heads of hamlets) vote for the government party (Golongan Karya, Golkar). In contrast, voters affiliated with informal leaders, especially religious leaders, vote for the Islamic party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP).²⁾ Consequently, the influence of socio-religious orientation shows a clear pattern of *abangan* voters attached to formal leaders voting for Golkar and *santri* affiliated with religious leaders voting for PPP (*ibid.*, 193–194).

It is important to note that Gaffar's research was conducted in the context of a hegemonic party system and authoritarian government. It is fair to say that contemporary Indonesian politics is very different. Indonesia has implemented open political competition or regular and fair elections since 1999. Freedom House classified Indonesia as a free country in terms of electoral democracy (Puddington 2013, 15).³⁾

Some scholars working in the Javanese or Indonesian context are involved in academic debate over Geertz's crucial work. Kahn expands Geertz's argument that *aliran* does not merely inform citizens' political affiliations with parties. In the Indonesian context, *aliran* is an ideological element, along with ethnicity and patron-clientage (Kahn 1978, 120). Meanwhile, R. William Liddle observes that Indonesia is very diverse in political values, beliefs, and attitudes. The uniform dynamic of Islam between 1960 and 90 and *abanganism*'s existence indicate the continuing diversity (Liddle 1996, 631).

However, Robert Hefner (1987, 550) reveals that the politics of the New Order had oppressed political Islam but Islam as a religion expanded in Java due to state facilities and policy support for education. Similarly, Bambang Pranowo argues over the *santri-abangan* dichotomy, indicating that the New Order "floating mass" policy at the village level meant people were not segregated by political affiliation. Consequently, the Javanese villagers' preference for following Islam replaced the *santri-abangan* segregation among them (Bambang Pranowo 1994, 18). Through an intensive study in rural Banyuwangi, East Java, A. Beatty revises Geertz's *aliran* by making the opposite argument that political and social tensions are able to shape, stimulate, and mute religious expression. In other words, relations of power affect religious expression

2) Golkar is an acronym for Golongan Karya, or Functional Group. PPP is an acronym for Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, or the United Development Party.

3) However, Freedom House downgraded the country's freedom status from "free" in 2013 to "partly free" in 2014. The house considered that the adoption of the new social organization law (UU Ormas) had undermined Indonesia's civil liberties.

(Beatty 2004, 6, 239).

In the post-Soeharto era, the debates are likely to refute this *aliran* approach. Anies Baswedan (2004) states that political Islam remains relevant to explain voters' alignment. The emergence of Islam-friendly parties that have evolved out of Islamist aspirations has attracted electoral support in both legislative and presidential elections (*ibid.*, 689–690). Nevertheless, changes in formal institutional arrangements and the outcomes of socio-economic change have reduced the significance of *aliran* and resulted in a modified *aliran* or dealignment of political parties (Ufen 2008, 20–34). Furthermore, R. William Liddle and Saiful Mujani (2007) refute *aliran* with academic evidence of national opinion surveys following parliamentary elections in 1999 and 2004 and the two-round presidential election in 2004. Religious orientation is no longer as influential on voting behavior as leadership and party identification (*ibid.*, 851). The scholars echo similar findings following parliamentary and presidential elections in 2009 (Mujani and Liddle 2010, 39).

Meanwhile, contemporary political facts demonstrate that the era of authoritarian government in Indonesia ended in 1998, when people power forced President Soeharto, who had run the country for 32 years, to resign from office. Soon after entering the new era, the country ran a more competitive election in 1999 in which 48 political parties contested. Five years later, Indonesia ran the first direct presidential election. It was followed by the first year of direct elections for local government heads (regent/mayor/governor) (*pilkada*) ever in 201 regions and seven provinces throughout 2005. Of the 201 regions, 36 are located in Central and East Java Provinces and the Special Region of Yogyakarta, where Javanese have lived for centuries.

These growing democratic contests have encouraged the interest of many academics and NGOs, which have established pollsters for both academic and commercial interests (Mietzner 2009, 117). However, this mushrooming of pollsters has not been followed by sufficient studies on Javanese voters. Pollsters merely capture Indonesian voters' preferences, mainly approaching the legislative and presidential elections of 2004, 2009, and 2014. Some more academic and seminal studies in the post-Soeharto period have dealt specifically with Indonesian voters, such as those by D. King (2003), Baswedan (2004), the Asia Foundation (2003), Liddle and Mujani (2007), and Mujani and Liddle (2010).

Published studies on *pilkada* in Java are, in fact, specifically non-voter oriented. They are mostly focused on *pilkada* dynamics and the political survival of local leaders. Three articles in M. Erb and P. Sulistiyanto's *Deepening Democracy in Indonesia? Direct Election for Local Leaders (Pilkada)* (2009) by Priyambudi Sulistiyanto, J. Schiller, and Tri Ratnawati are based on fieldwork conducted in the regencies of Bantul, Jepara, and

Kebumen, where Javanese culture is very influential.⁴⁾ Also, the current and well-respected literature on *pilkada* discovers factors behind the victories of three Muslim women *bupati* (regents) in Java. The women deployed Islam, gender, and social networks to gain office in three regions. In particular, Islamic ideas provided a strong religious foundation for their campaigns in *pilkada* (Dewi 2015). Although these studies on *pilkada* in Java are worth mentioning, they do not give any insight into voters' logic.

In addition to the lack of concern for Javanese voting studies, Indonesian and non-Indonesian scholars have approached Javanese voters through a limited perspective, which is based mainly on an individual voting behavior model. Both Geertz (1960) and Gaffar (1992) apply the social cleavage structure as an analytical base for individual Javanese voting behavior. Some contemporary studies on Javanese voting behavior in the post-Soeharto era, specifically during *pilkada*, focus on similar voting concerns, such as the study by Susilo Utomo (2008) on the victory of Bibit Waluyo and Rustriningsih in Central Java's gubernatorial election in 2008. Wawan Sobari and M. Faishal Aminuddin (2010) studied personal image and popularity as determining factors in the 2010 *pilkada* in Malang Regency, East Java. Lastly, a quantitative survey in Semarang Municipality examined the influence of the candidates' image, party identification level, and campaign effectiveness on the Javanese in voting for governor and deputy governor in the 2008 East Java gubernatorial *pilkada* (Wicaksono 2009, 129–130). These studies' contradictory results fail to provide a conclusive explanation for Javanese voter behavior. This raises the question: What other original explanation is there that can enrich studies on Javanese voters, particularly with regard to their group-oriented voting behavior rooted in Javanese culture and current electoral politics?

This study seeks to enrich the literature on Javanese voters. With respect to Geertz's *aliran*, this study sees the importance of Javanese communal norms, rather than religion, in explaining voting orientation. Also, it presents a preliminary assessment of *anut grubyuk* (fitting in) as a group-oriented voting preference among the Javanese, a topic that has been relatively absent in academic discussion. Moreover, it extends the explanation that *anut grubyuk* is part of electoral manipulation by local and neighborhood elites.

4) In the *pilkada*, the significance of ethnicity varies in different regions. LSI (2008) found that the ethnic background of candidates and the proportion of dominant ethnic groups in the provincial population resulted in different *pilkada* results in the three provinces. In the 2007 gubernatorial *pilkada* in West Kalimantan, voters tended to vote for candidates with a similar ethnic identity. However, in the 2007 gubernatorial *pilkada* in South Sulawesi and Bangka Belitung, voters accepted candidates with a different ethnic identity. Although ethnicity is not a dominant factor referred to by voters, it is relevant to explain the *pilkada* result.

The last concern should not be ignored, since several studies reveal that Indonesian liberal democracy is susceptible to unfair practices in competitive elections. Violence, money politics, and alleged political kidnappings are not appropriate for the country's infant liberal democracy (Robison and Hadiz 2004, 256). These practices subsequently lead to illiberal forms of democracy (Hadiz and Robison 2005, 231).

In the 2014 legislative election, blatant patronage—mainly extensive vote buying among candidates, brokers, and voters—was an embarrassment to Indonesia's democracy. Patronage has worsened the party system in Indonesia, which has become less programmatic and more fragile (Aspinall 2014, 109). *Anut grubuyuk* is allegedly an electoral manipulation that can be indirectly related with these illiberal practices of democracy. This article, thus, contributes by providing a non-cultural explanation of this group-oriented voting phenomenon among the Javanese.

As its main focus, this study proposes a group-oriented explanation of voting behavior revealed in the 2010 *pilkada* in two rural regions in East Java. It provides a distinctive explanation of Javanese voting behavior by asserting the practice of *anut grubuyuk* among rural Javanese. The analysis sheds light on a logical link between *anut grubuyuk* in voting and the Javanese philosophy of life, and between socio-political dynamics pertaining to *pilkada* and their effect on the country's democracy. The arguments in this paper do not interpret *anut grubuyuk* as an exclusively cultural Javanese reality, as the study evaluates the involvement of group leaders or brokers who are on a political drive as well.

Political scientists have analyzed this group-oriented voting. Carole Uhlaner (1989) proposes the importance of groups for a rational turnout. She argues that “individuals do not behave *atomistically* within the political sphere but rather are joined with others in groups with shared interests.” Group leaders transact policy positions or options with candidates, and voters under the coordination of group leaders are rewarded for voting or penalized for abstaining (*ibid.*, 419). In other words, individuals intelligently adjust their ballot to conform with those of their neighbors to gain certain communal benefits. Using similar language, A. Glazer, B. Grofman, and G. Owen (1998, 29) reveal that racial backlash and support for candidates representing the median voter can shape grouped voting. In a similar vein, Timothy Feddersen (2004, 100) views voters as ethical agents, in a group-based ethical voter model, who are directed by their beliefs to be ethically obliged to behave in accordance with the group's interest after reviewing the possible outcomes that would occur and the positive payoff that would be received. Nonetheless, voters do not blindly follow the norms of the group; they also consider the centrality of the issue to the group (Smith *et al.* 2005, 167).

To clearly explicate the preceding arguments, the next section briefly describes the case study design to analyze *anut grubuyuk* among rural Javanese voters. The following

section explores the practice of *anut grubyuk* and develops arguments beyond this grouped voting practice, from the point of view of both the dominant Javanese culture and the rational motives of voters and group leaders. Finally, the availability of some recent studies on Indonesian electoral politics and democracy, including *pilkada*, provides a basis for serious concern that this Javanese grouped voting can be captured in patronage-driven political realities.

The Case Study

This study is centered on the incumbents' political survival and failure in the new and emerging local democracy in Indonesia, mainly in *pilkada* at the regional level. The study was conducted in four rural and urban regions: Blitar and Trenggalek Regencies (rural regions) and Probolinggo and Madiun Municipalities (urban regions). However, the analysis focuses only on the two rural regions, where the practice of *anut grubyuk* in voting took place in the 2010 *pilkada*: Blitar and Trenggalek Regencies.

This study applies qualitative research principles with interpretivism as its paradigm (Creswell 2009, 18). It utilizes the case study as a research method, involving "an exploration of event, activity and process of one or more individuals" (Stake, in Creswell 2009, 13). To gather qualitative data, the study utilized semi-structured interviews with voters who cast their vote in the *pilkada*. The analysis is focused on 8 of 31 selected participants in three villages (Tempur, Kerjo, and Laksono) who argued for *anut grubyuk* in voting.

Several criteria were identified before selecting Blitar and Trenggalek Regencies as the research sites. First, the regions had to have incumbents running for re-election. Next, the incumbents had to have occupied the post for five years. Finally, the degree of the incumbents' success or failure had to reach a minimum of winning or losing by 50 percent. This figure represents absolute winning or failure on the part of incumbents as well as challengers. Also, it indicates the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of incumbency. There were 18 regions conducting *pilkada* in 2010 in East Java, of which 15 were in rural regions. There were only five incumbents in the rural regions running for the second *pilkada* in 2010. Three of the five failed to maintain their post in the 2010 *pilkada*.

Blitar Regency, one of the most populous regions in East Java, is located in the southern part of the province. According to the 2010 population census, the regency had 1,116,010 people living in an area of 1,588.79 km². The population density was 702 per km², and the regency contributed 2.98 percent of the province's population. Blitar is categorized as a Mataraman area since the major and indigenous population is Javanese

(Rozuli 2011, 96).⁵⁾ Meanwhile, Trenggalek is one of the regencies located in the southern coastal area of East Java. It covers an area of 1,261.40 km², two-thirds of which is mountainous land. According to the 2010 national population census, Trenggalek's inhabitants amounted to 674,521: 334,769 males and 339,752 females (Indonesia, Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Trenggalek 2010, 6). The population lives in 14 districts and 157 villages. The majority of the population is Muslim, accounting for 99.25 percent of the regency's inhabitants (Indonesia, Badan Pusat Statistik Jawa Timur 2010, 22). Overall, according to the 2010 national population census, Javanese comprised 81.1 percent of the 37,476,757 inhabitants in East Java (Na'im and Syaputra 2011, 38).

Both Blitar's and Trenggalek's cultural features are categorized as Java Mataraman in the East Java Regional Division of Culture (Sutarto and Sudikan 2008). In other words, in the regional division of Javanese culture, these regencies are included in Mancanagari or "outer region." Mancanagari's culture is similar to the central Javanese court culture of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, with syncretism in religious life, unifying elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The folk culture and art of Blitar and Trenggalek are also similar to those of the two centers of Javanese culture (Koentjaraningrat 1985, 21–22).

The first *pilkada* in Blitar Regency took place in 2005. The official ballots counted on December 4, 2005 showed that the duo of Herry Noegroho and Arif Fuadi had won the *pilkada* by 42.18 percent of votes. Five years later, the two ran separately in the *pilkada*. Herry urged a former senior bureaucrat, Rijanto, to run with him. In turn, Arif urged a local legislator, Heri Romadhon, to challenge the incumbent. In the 2010 race, held on November 9, the incumbent Herry Noegroho survived in office with 59.7 percent of votes.

The *pilkada* in Trenggalek Regency turned out to be a unique race for democratic contenders, as it was a battle between two incumbents. In the first *pilkada* in 2005, the incumbent Soeharto⁶⁾ (2005–10) defeated the former incumbent Mulyadi WR (2000–05). In the second *pilkada* in 2010, the incumbent Soeharto was defeated by the former incumbent Mulyadi WR. In the *pilkada* held on June 2, 2010, Soeharto faced Mulyadi WR and the deputy regent as well as his running mate in the 2005 *pilkada*, Mahsun Ismail. Soeharto garnered the fewest votes, only 22.4 percent (71,818). Mulyadi WR won the

5) A survey conducted by the Blitar Development Planning Board in cooperation with Airlangga University in 2009 presented the ethnic distribution of respondents, chosen randomly: 99.8 percent of the 1,000 identified themselves as being Javanese. Based on this survey, one could say that almost the entire Blitar population is Javanese.

6) The incumbent bears exactly the same name as the former Indonesian President Soeharto. The name Soeharto in this article refers primarily to the former regent of Trenggalek (2005–10).

race by gaining 174,656 ballots (54.4 percent) (Indonesia, Komisi Pemilihan Umum Kabupaten Trenggalek 2010, 79).

Trenggalek Regency was selected to represent a rural region with a failed incumbent. It met all the criteria: the incumbent running for the second *pilkada*, the incumbent having occupied office for five years prior to the 2010 *pilkada*, and the degree of the challenger's victory being above 50 percent. Blitar and Jember Regencies met all the criteria for a district with a successful incumbent. Finally, Blitar was preferred as a case study site because of the incumbent's more impressive victory compared to the one in Jember.

To interview voters, two districts were selected based on the criterion of their distance to the center of government of Blitar and Trenggalek Regencies. In Blitar Regency, Srengat District was selected as it met the criterion of a district that was close to the center. The other one was Wonotirto District, representing the opposite criterion to the former. In Trenggalek Regency, Trenggalek District was selected to represent a district situated close to the center. Meanwhile, Watulimo District denoted the opposite district to Trenggalek District. Due to the limitations of this study in gaining official data of the 2010 *pilkada* results, one village in each district was chosen, based on a limited assessment through a brief discussion with local government officers.⁷⁾ The assessment was based on an assumption of villages where the incumbent gained votes that exceeded or fell short of the district's average vote. Then, the study selected one village in each district: Tempur (pseudonym) in Srengat District, Kerjo (pseudonym) in Wonotirto District, Joyo (pseudonym) in Trenggalek District, and Laksono (pseudonym) in Watulimo District.

According to the voter list issued by the Blitar Election Commission, Tempur village had 4,957 eligible voters: 2,472 male and 2,485 female. These voters were distributed among nine polling stations (Tempat Pemungutan Suara). On Election Day (November 9, 2010), voting participation in this village reached 58.2 percent—that is, only 2,885 voters exercised their right to vote in the *pilkada*. Of the nine polling stations, the station where the incumbent gained the highest number of votes compared to the rival was identified. Polling station number 7 was then chosen as the location for the interviews. The incumbent in that station gained 75.3 percent of the 352 votes. In-depth interviews were conducted with six female and five male voters from various

7) I obtained the data on *pilkada* results from the Blitar and Trenggalek Election Commissions after gaining a research permit from the regencies. Consequently, I did not use these data for selecting villages where I would conduct interviews with voters; but I did use the data for selecting the specific location in each village (neighborhood) for the interviews.

social backgrounds.

In the 2010 *pilkada*, Kerjo village had 3,340 eligible voters: 1,651 male and 1,689 female. According to the *pilkada* results issued by the Blitar Election Commission, 39 percent of voters were absent. In contrast with Tempur village, in Kerjo village the incumbent Herry Noegroho ran a tough race with the challenger. At the final count, the incumbent gained 51.13 percent of votes. Among the seven polling stations in the village, polling station number 4 was chosen—this was where Herry had gained the most votes (98.4 percent)—to conduct in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with five female and five male voters. The interviewees included farmers, traders, the head of the hamlet, and the leader of a farmer group.

In Trenggalek District, Joyo village was chosen as the location to conduct in-depth interviews. The village had 5,449 eligible voters: 2,612 male and 2,837 female. The number of absentees in the *pilkada* amounted to 1,559 (28.6 percent). Nevertheless, the incumbent gained the highest number of votes in the village, 1,557. Mahsun Ismail (the challenger) gained 915 votes and Mulyadi (the winning challenger) 1,288. In this location, six male and four female voters were interviewed on September 12–13, 2012. In Watulimo District, one of the 12 villages, Laksono, was chosen for conducting in-depth interviews with voters. According to the 2010 *pilkada* results issued by the Trenggalek Election Commission, Laksono was ranked third among the villages in Watulimo District where the incumbent experienced a crushing defeat in the *pilkada*. Laksono village had 5,601 eligible voters: 2,774 male and 2,827 female. The incumbent obtained 29.46 percent of votes (1,089), whereas Mulyadi won the poll in the village by gaining 59.3 percent of votes (2,192). The number of absentees was 32.4 percent (1,815). In-depth interviews were conducted in the area of polling station number 8, where the incumbent experienced the most crushing defeat among the 20 polling stations. In this polling station the incumbent gained 39 votes (13.2 percent), Mahsun Ismail obtained 41 votes (13.9 percent), and Mulyadi won the race by obtaining 215 votes (72.9 percent). The number of absentees in this polling station was 190 (38.15 percent). In this area, seven male and three female voters were interviewed.

Anut Grubyuk: Communal Spirit or Rational Pragmatism in Voting?

To facilitate the best description of Javanese communal life, the discussion begins with the valuable Javanese advice of *rukun agawe santosa* (harmonious living in peace and security). It reflects an ideal Javanese type of neighborhood life, where people live in harmony with their neighbors. Javanese people believe that their neighbors are more

valuable than relatives living far away. Close neighbors are always available to help, unlike faraway relatives. Accordingly, Javanese feel a need to live in harmony with their neighbors and avoid arrogance. From a Javanese communal perspective, a person's worth can be judged through others' esteem for them in the three vital events of the life cycle: birth, death, and marriage. Neighbors come to a respected Javanese person to congratulate or deliver condolences on these three important occasions (Hardjowirogo 1984, 5). This old Javanese belief reflects one of the main pillars of Javanese communal life, living in harmony (*rukun*).

This communal value exists also in political life, particularly in direct elections of local leaders (*pilkada*). The case study in Blitar and Trenggalek revealed communal-driven voting behavior among rural Javanese, whether to vote or not vote for incumbents in their re-election bid. The Javanese phrase "*anut grubyuk*" was mentioned by voters as one of the reasons for voting the way they did. The literal meaning of the phrase is "fitting in" or using the neighborhood's preference as a basis for individual preference. In the context of *pilkada*, *anut grubyuk* is an individual decision and action that adjusts to the major preference in the neighborhood, whether to vote or not for certain candidates.

The argument of *anut grubyuk* in voting is revealed in voters' explanations for their preferences. Three participants in two rural neighborhoods in Blitar did not take individual stands in voting for the incumbent; in other words, they just followed the major preference in their neighborhood.

In Tempur village in Blitar, a female farmer delivered a simple answer for why she voted for the incumbent in the 2010 *pilkada*. She said:

Katanya orang-orang banyak yang milih nomor dua. Ikut-ikut sama teman-teman (I hear that many people voted for candidate number two [Herry-Rijanto]. I just followed my friends [neighbors]).⁸⁾

A housewife-cum-chicken farmer gave similar reasons for voting for the incumbent in the *pilkada*:

Semuanya tidak kenal, cuma ikut-ikutan warga yang lain. Asal milih saja karena tidak tahu (I do not know all [the candidates]; I just follow the others. I just vote because I do not know).⁹⁾

In Kerjo village in southern Blitar, another female farmer reiterated that she just followed the communal preference in her neighborhood. She said clearly in polite Javanese:

8) Interview conducted on July 4, 2012.

9) Interview conducted on July 4, 2012.

Namung Nyoblos nomer kalih, soale katah sing nyoblos sing niku. Nggih kirangan, nyoblos, nggih nyoblos (I voted for number two [candidate] as many others were voting for him. I don't know, voted, yes I voted).¹⁰⁾

In Trenggalek, the case study discovered that voters performed *anut grubyuk* by not voting for the incumbent in the 2010 *pilkada*. A trader-cum-farmer in Laksono village conveyed a simple reason for not voting for the incumbent. He said in polite Javanese:

Nggih mboten no-po sedoyo sae, sami sedoyo, sae dadhos milih niki mawon, nggih ngoten (Well, there is not any reason, they all are good, all [the candidates] are similar. It is good to vote for him [Mulyadi], that is it).

He continued that he had voted for the winning challenger (Mulyadi):

Insy Allah Pak Mul, namung manut grubyuk, namung manut konco-konco. Dukho ketokne, no-po himbauan (God willing [I voted for] Mr. Mul [Mulyadi], just fitting in, just following friends. I am not sure, it seems like an appeal).¹¹⁾

Two other voters gave similar reasons. They based their decision to not vote for the incumbent on the majority opinion in the neighborhood. A female voter admitted that she had voted for the winning challenger because Mulyadi's victory team had distributed free *yasinan* uniforms for all *yasinan* group members in her hamlet. She argued that there was no mobilization of support for the winning challenger.¹²⁾ In fact, she adjusted her ballot based on the majority of her fellow neighbors' votes.

Interestingly, "fitting in" was also given as a reason for voting for the incumbent. Two female participants said that they voted for the incumbent in order to follow their friends in the neighborhood. In Javanese, they said the reason was "*manut wong-wong*." The literal meaning of these words is "following people or matching other people's decisions." A female participant added in Indonesian:

Ya, saya ini cuma orang kecil, cuma ikut-ikutan. Saya tidak tahu cuma ikut-ikutan saja (Yes, I am only a little person, just following. I do not know, just following [others]).¹³⁾

10) Interview conducted on July 5, 2012.

11) Interview conducted on September 18, 2012.

12) Interview conducted on September 18, 2012. The *yasinan* group is a communal male or female religious group at the neighborhood level. The main activity of this group is attending weekly meetings and reciting the *yasin* epistle in the Koran. This group does not perform religious activities only; it also acts as a social medium or meeting point for male or female villagers to discuss issues and developments that are considered important for the community. In Blitar and Trenggalek Regencies, *yasinan* activity is usually conducted every Thursday evening for males and on other days for females.

13) Interview conducted on September 18, 2012.

In a focus group interview conducted on September 29, 2012 in Trenggalek, one participant—an NGO activist and former local legislator—confirmed the phenomenon of fitting in. The participant used the Javanese term “*anut grubyuk*.” The literal meaning of this term is “following the majority or going anywhere others go.” From the interview, *anut grubyuk* was understood as the practice of fitting in. Individuals’ voting decisions for the incumbent were not the result of their own assessments of the candidates. Rather, individuals based their decisions on the mainstream opinion of their neighborhood.

Another explanation for the practice of *anut grubyuk* in voting can be found in cultural aspects of the Javanese philosophy of life. These include assumptions, ideas, and mental attitudes and form a foundation as well as give meaning to every single Javanese person’s attitude to life (Gauthama 2003, 11). Javanese culture has two principal dimensions that influence everyday life: communality and hierarchy (Mulder 1978, 58). Relevant to the research findings is the nature of human relationships in the Javanese philosophy of life, namely, *rukun* (harmony). This represents the predominant value of communality. Javanese require the principles of *rukun* in human relationships at the household and community levels. They are taught to prioritize harmony rather than conflict. Javanese society demands the avoidance of behavior that can lead to conflict (*ibid.*, 57–59; Handayani and Novianto 2004, 67–68). The spirit of togetherness, leading to similar preferences between individual voters and the majority of voters in Tempur and Kerjo villages in Blitar and Laksono village in Trenggalek, may be explained by the principle of *rukun*. Individual voters adjusted their preferences to the majority preference in order to achieve harmony.

However, the implementation of *rukun* does not tolerate coercion. Javanese culture allows individuality, as it accepts that every individual has different problems, rights, and interests. To support individual freedom in voting, a hamlet head in Kerjo village clearly explained, “I did not direct my people [in the hamlet]. They also think by themselves, vote individually.”¹⁴ Still, individuality must align with the principle of *rukun*. The adjustment of individual preference to the majority preference in the neighborhood is understood as an individual voter’s effort to achieve harmony in society as well as to gain collective benefits from local government policies credited to the incumbent.¹⁵

Another possible explanation for voting adjustments by individuals is their limitations in gathering adequate information to support their voting decisions. Adjustment is

14) Interview conducted on July 5, 2012.

15) This assumption is based on fieldwork in Kerjo village. The incumbent has a close connection with the neighborhood and has disbursed many development benefits, particularly the construction of roads and ponds for farming, the disbursement of a micro revolving fund program (*simpan pinjam*), and seed distribution to farmers groups.

an efficient manner or a short cut to support decisions. Indeed, the application of the *rukun* principle to explain the practice of individual voting adjustment is also reasonable. The individual voter considers the benefits that can be gained from communal facilities promised by the incumbent. Hence, adjusting individual voting preferences to the majority preference is a contribution to collective choice. Voter adjustment is understandable in both possible explanations. First, an individual voter expects to gain benefits from collective voting decisions, as promised by the incumbent. Second, an individual voter can overcome their limitations in gaining adequate information to support their individual voting decision.

The other principal value is *hormat* or *aji* (respect), representing the value of hierarchy. The traditional Javanese view is that “all social relationships are hierarchically ordered, and on the moral imperative to maintain and express this mode of social order as a good in itself” (Geertz 1961). In any social behavior, respect is manifested in many different contexts: toward government officials, in school, in relationships among neighbors, among others (*ibid.*, 147).

In order to better understand *anut grubyuk*, one needs to refer to the Javanese conception of the relationship between the individual and society at the neighborhood level. Because the phenomenon of *anut grubyuk* appears particularly at the neighborhood level, it is useful to refer to the Javanese philosophy guiding relationships among people in a neighborhood. In addition to the Javanese advice of “*rukun agawe santosa*,” there is a proverb stating “*sing sapa ora seneng tetanggan kalebu wong kang ora becik*” (whoever is not a lot like his or her neighbor is not a good person) (Rachmatullah 2011, 80). Javanese live under concomitant or coexistent norms in relating to their neighbors. Individuals as well as families strive to live in harmony with their neighbors. In the wider context of relationships between the individual and society, N. Mulder (1992) refers to a Javanese perspective on the relationship between man, world, and cosmos emphasized as one of the core ideas of communal relationships among the Javanese, namely, the concept of the unity of existence. In terms of individual and societal relationships, the appropriate explanation of this concept is that people should accept and respect order and inevitability; adapt themselves to its requirements; and fulfill the obligations required of the place where they live so as to achieve good order in communal relationships (*rukun*). In order to maintain a *rukun* relationship, a person should suppress his or her individual will, emotions, and self-interest (*ibid.*, 143–145).

This ideal of living in harmony elucidates the Javanese cultural context in which *anut grubyuk* is situated. As a member of a community, an individual intentionally respects communal opinion when voting for a candidate in a *pilkada*. The means of showing respect is adjusting individual ballots in accordance with the majority opinion in the

neighborhood. Consequently, the practice of *anut grubyuk* among participants in Laksono village makes sense. By displaying similarity in voting decisions, voters achieve two aims: communal peace and the exercise of individual rights as voters.

Nevertheless, voters in Laksono village in Trenggalek held different perceptions concerning the incumbent Soeharto's performance. They identified positive and beneficial programs credited to the incumbent, for instance, accessible health and education services; the development of dams, irrigation, and neighborhood and village roads; free uniforms for village officers; and the provision of subsidized fertilizer and free seeds. The incumbent was also perceived as a generous and religious person. A dissenting opinion pertains to the incumbent's failure to meet all the promises made when he campaigned in the 2005 *pilkada*. A community leader involved in supporting the incumbent felt disappointed as the latter did not keep his promises. The incumbent experienced the most crushing defeat in polling station number 8, where voters were interviewed. The incumbent's better performance did not automatically encourage voters to vote for him; voters decided not to vote for the incumbent because they matched their preference with the majority opinion in their neighborhood.

From the findings in Laksono village, three important points emerge. First, participants had different perceptions of the incumbent's performance during his time in office, compared to those of participants interviewed in Joyo village. A more positive perception of the incumbent's performance did not automatically persuade voters to elect him. The cultural phenomenon of *anut grubyuk* can both disfavor and favor the incumbent. Second, party attachment and personal connection with the contenders can encourage voters to disfavor the incumbent. Third, the support of an informal leader in Laksono village was important, as he could also act as an opinion leader who probably provided guidance for voters to disfavor or favor the incumbent. This could be a possible explanation for the phenomenon of *anut grubyuk* among voters in the village; voters matched their decision with the majority opinion in the neighborhood, which was probably under the influence of an informal leader. Voters in Laksono village also demonstrated a differing acceptance of local government policies and programs credited to the incumbent. This acceptance was unlike the non-government and government elites' opinions in the regency, which were inclined to disfavor the incumbent. These opinions did not express negative perceptions or gossip about the incumbent, as propagated by the local mass media.

Lastly, the practice of *anut grubyuk* in voting decisions and voters' ignorance of evidence-based local government performance and *pilkada*-related issues can explain the disconnection between the incumbent's performance during his time in office and the *pilkada* results. The practice of *anut grubyuk* among rural voters in Blitar and Trenggalek

could lead voters to ignore their individual choices as they adjusted their voting decision to the majority opinion in the neighborhood. Furthermore, *anut grubyuk* could negate positive or negative campaigns about the incumbents' performance. Voters made their decisions based on communal judgment without considering the costs or benefits of the incumbent's leadership in terms of long-term social, economic, or environmental outlook. It was such behavior (*anut grubyuk*) that disfavored the incumbent in Trenggalek and supported the incumbent in Blitar.

Other Motives in Voting

In addition to the practice of *anut grubyuk*, the case studies in these two rural regions found four other categories of motives that shaped voters' preferences at the polls. First, voters referred to the tangible policy output credited to the incumbent. Better infrastructure (roads) at the neighborhood level was recognized by voters in the regions. In Trenggalek, voters also considered rural infrastructure constructed during the incumbent's time in office, such as irrigation for rice fields, as a reason to vote for the incumbent. Nevertheless, the incumbent in Trenggalek was regarded as having failed to improve the regency's roads during his incumbency. This opinion was widely held among voters, though official data showed that under the incumbent's administration there was better development of the regency's roads compared to the previous administration's performance.

Second, complementary to the tangible and direct policy outputs are the populist images of the incumbents. The incumbent's so-called *blusukan* (impromptu community visits) was clearly remembered by voters. Voters frequently mentioned them as extraordinary activities performed by a person who held the most honorable and prominent position in the region. This admiration persuaded voters to vote for the incumbent. The incumbent's frequent visits to villages in Blitar Regency were appreciated by voters. Moreover, voters considered tangible aspects of the incumbent's populist activities, namely, donations and appearances. However, some voters in Trenggalek Regency perceived that the incumbent was not really a local person like the winning challenger was. Although the incumbent was known to be a religious person, some voters felt that his half-hearted local identity would discourage him from working for the regency's interests if he regained control of the regent post.

Third, voters compared the incumbent and the challenger before making their decision. Their basis of comparison was the competitive advantage between the candidates. This comparison was made mainly by voters who held leadership positions in the community, such as hamlet heads, neighborhood unit (Rukun Tetangga) heads, community unit (Rukun Warga) heads, and village heads. Voters voted for the incumbents in Blitar

Regency because they perceived that the incumbents were more experienced and better grounded than the challengers. Many of the incumbents' programs had not yet been completed in the first term, but voters felt that the development programs should be continued in the second term. By voting for the incumbents, these elite voters sought to minimize the risk of uncertainty. The case study in Blitar found a Javanese proverb to express this consideration: "*tinimbang golek wong nambal* or *tinimbang bakal aluwung nambal*" (it is better not to take a risk with a new leader). Voters are assumed to play safe or to avoid risky choices. In other words, voting for the incumbent was better than voting for a challenger who had not yet proven his worth. Voters wanted to continue to gain policy benefits equal to those they had received in the incumbent's first term. There is an Indonesian proverb expressing this idea: "*ibarat membeli kucing dalam karung*" (to buy a pig in a poke), or to avoid a mistake by not voting for a candidate who has no previous record. In other words, voters do not want to take a gamble as they do not have adequate information about the challenger's prior performance. In Trenggalek, voters decided to vote for the winning challenger as he had been the former regent (Mulyadi, defeated by the incumbent in the 2005 *pilkada*). Voters felt that the winning challenger showed better leadership compared to the incumbent. This could be called the "Mulyadi effect."

Finally, some voters considered party loyalty when deciding whether or not to vote for an incumbent. Voters' alignment with the party that nominated the candidate shaped their preference. Sometimes voters obeyed the party's decision and voted for the nominated candidate. One voter voted for the winning challenger in Laksono village in Trenggalek, since the party he was loyal to (PDI-P) had nominated the challenger.

Beyond a Cultural Explanation

Voters' social profiles probably shed more light on the external factors that shape *anut grubyuk* (see Table 1). Voters who practiced *anut grubyuk* had similar social profiles of inadequate involvement in organizational life, mainly at the neighborhood or village level. They did not join mass organizations, political organizations, professional organizations, or semi-government organizations. All participants stated that they regularly attended the weekly *yasinan* meeting conducted by *yasinan* groups.¹⁶⁾

In Java, *yasinan* is popular for both Javanese performing Javanism or Javanese rituals (*kejawen*) in their lives and traditional Javanese *santri*. *Yasin* epistle recitation is part of

16) See footnote 12 for an explanation of *yasinan*.

Table 1 Social Profile of Voters

Voter's Identity	Sex	Age	Education	Occupation	Organizational Life
Blitar 2	Male	50	Junior high school	Small entrepreneur	No
Blitar 4	Male	40	Elementary school	Peasant	No
Blitar 5	Female	40	Junior high school	Housewife	No
Blitar 10	Female	40	Senior high school	Housewife	No
Blitar 13	Female	50	Elementary school	Farmer	No
Trenggalek 12	Male	55	Elementary school	Farmer and micro-trader	No
Trenggalek 15	Female	47	Elementary school	Micro-trader	No
Trenggalek 17	Female	55	Junior high school	Micro-trader	No

Source: Fieldwork data, 2012.

Muslim funeral rites practiced several days after death and as collective veneration of a teacher or respected person (Woodward 2011, 40, 119).¹⁷⁾

In connection with *pilkada*, *yasinan* weekly meetings are also a campaign medium for candidates. In Tempur village in Blitar, an incumbent's campaign team member distributed free uniforms to the male *yasinan* group. In addition, the challenger's campaign team attended the weekly *yasinan* meeting in Kerjo village. In Laksono village in Trenggalek, participants said that the challenger's victory team distributed free *yasinan* uniforms for all *yasinan* group members in the hamlets where fieldwork was conducted. This profile shows less varied involvement of participants in organizational life. It can limit voters from having wider views and better arguments in voting.

Other social profiles of participants who practiced *anut grubyuk* in voting show that they mainly did domestic work or informal sector jobs for a living. Furthermore, the majority of voters had only completed their education up to elementary and junior high school. Also, *anut grubyuk* in voting was practiced by both sexes. Thus, the study cannot claim that *anut grubyuk* refers only to male or female voting behavior in rural Java.

Compared to voters who have individual stands on their preferences (non-*anut grubyuk*), this case study found different degrees of "engagement" based on the reasons given by the voters interviewed. Engagement is a degree of contact between voters and local political issues as well as policy implementation and organizational life prior to *pilkada* that can shape voters' choices. There are two categories of engagement to cover

17) In East Java, *yasinan* is an identical religious expression of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) followers (Shelia 2012, 4; Lukman 2014, 38). Therefore, *yasinan* can tell us about the presence of NU tradition in expressing Islam in three villages. Moreover, the existence of NU is very visible via the presence of NU branches (*pengurus ranting*) in Tempur and Kerjo villages. In Tempur, Ansor (Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, Ansor Youth Movement), a youth wing of NU, also exists. In Laksono village in Trenggalek, two schools under Maarif NU's supervision—a *madrasah ibtidaiah* (elementary school) and *raudlatul athfal* (kindergarten)—have served the village for the last two decades.

all contacts between voters and local political issues and policy implementation: simple engagement and intensive engagement.

Simple engagement is a typology covering voters who pay less attention to *pilkada* issues, irrespective of the experience they have in gaining the benefits of local government policies. The majority of these voters belongs to the masses and has a less educated background. A male brick maker (50 years old, elementary school graduate) who has lived in Tempur village since 1980 said that shortly before the 2010 *pilkada* he heard that the incumbent had donated several sacks of cement for constructing a bridge in the village. To the best of his knowledge, education and health services were not totally free. He stated his reason for voting for the incumbent in the 2010 *pilkada* in plain Indonesian:

Hanya ikut-ikutan, aslinya tidak tahu. Ikut-ikutan kawan, pedoman utama (untuk memilih) tidak ada (Just fitting in, I actually do not know. Just blindly followed my neighborhood mates, [there is no] particular guidance [on whom to vote for]).¹⁸⁾

A micro-businesswoman (55 years old, junior high school graduate) who has lived in Laksono village since she was born recalled that she had benefited from a revolving fund program for women under the national program for community empowerment (*simpan pinjam perempuan program nasional pemberdayaan masyarakat*). Her children had also benefited from the national program of school operational aid (*bantuan operasional sekolah*). She gave a short answer for her reason for practicing *anut grubyuk* in voting for the incumbent: “*Alasannya, manut wong-wong, gitu aja*” (My reason is just following my neighborhood mates, nothing else).¹⁹⁾

In contrast, voters who pay attention to *pilkada* issues—mainly village leaders and other officeholders—can argue about the reasons for their choices. They show an intensive engagement with the issues as well as gaining the benefits of policy implementation. The leader of a farmers group in Kerjo village conveyed a clear answer about his reason for voting for the incumbent:

Saya nyoblos nomor dua karena kita menginginkan sarana transportasi lancar. Setelah kita bertanya ke teman-teman di daerah lain, janji-janjinya terbukti. Pak Herry itu orangnya enak, setiap diundang mau datang. Bantuan ke kelompok tani juga sudah ada sebelum pilkada (I voted for [candidate] number two [the incumbent] because we want a good infrastructure for better transportation. After asking for many fellows [farmers groups] in other villages, [the incumbent] kept his promises. Mr. Herry is a humble person; he wanted to come when we invited him [to the village]. [I also saw that] Aid for farmers groups was provided prior to the *pilkada*).²⁰⁾

18) Interview conducted on July 4, 2012.

19) Interview conducted on September 18, 2012.

20) Interview conducted on July 5, 2012.

An interesting reason for voting for the challenger was given by a village officer in Laksono who was responsible for managing the village's irrigation. He recognized that he had received an official uniform from the regional government during the incumbent's stay in office. He added that the incumbent had paid proper attention to infrastructure development at the village level, such as roads, dams, and irrigation. In fact, he voted for the challenger in the *pilkada* for a simple reason: "*Pak Mulyadi dulu pernah menjabat jadi Bupati, dulu ya baik . . .*" (Mr. Mulyadi was the former regent; he [performed] well . . .).²¹⁾

In rural regions, voters who are categorized as being intensively engaged are those who have official or cultural positions in the village, such as village heads, hamlet heads, the heads of farmers and religious groups, and those who have enjoyed a better education (are at least senior high school graduates). These voters are able to argue about their rationale for whether or not they vote for the incumbents. In urban regions, the case study found that all participants or voters were categorized as showing intensive engagement. They could explain the incumbent's popular policies and the benefits of these policies. As a consequence, they had clear arguments for their reasons to vote for either the incumbents or the challengers.

Related to *anut grubyuk* in voting, the degree of "engagement" can explain why rural Javanese voters practice *anut grubyuk* in *pilkada*. Inadequate engagement with *pilkada*-related issues can encourage voters not to take individual stands in *pilkada*. Engagement provides a complementary explanation of communal Javanese values that connect individuals to the life of their society in a rural neighborhood.

Beyond these cultural aspects, the profile of villages can also shed light on the nature of *anut grubyuk*. Tempur village in Srengat District is located 10 km southeast of the district capital and 8 km west of the Blitar Regency capital. The village is composed of four hamlets. About 40 percent of Tempur's territory consists of rice fields, 20 percent is residential, 35 percent is dry fields, and 15 percent is used for other purposes. Residents in this village mostly work as farmers, with some being traders, stock farmers, clerks, and factory workers. Kerjo village in Wonotirto District is located in southern Blitar, at a distance of 25 km from the central government of Blitar Regency. In 2011 the population was 3,962 people: 51 percent female and 49 percent male. The composition of the educational background in the village is dominated by elementary school graduates (68 percent) and those who did not graduate from elementary school (12 percent). The majority of the population is farmers (58.1 percent). Chili or red pepper is a prominent agricultural product of the village. This village is also known to be one of Blitar's migrant

21) Interview conducted on September 18, 2012.

worker contributors. According to the Blitar Regency branch of the Indonesian migrant workers union (Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia), the village had 257 migrant workers in 2013 (Rahayu 2013, 2). During fieldwork, the prominent role of the farmer-based group (*kelompok tani*) in the neighborhood where the interviews took place was apparent.

Joyo village in Trenggalek District is located exactly in the center of the regency of Trenggalek, as the regency office is located there. Many local government offices are also located in the village. Interestingly, the village is also where both Soeharto and Mulyadi were born. They still have their childhood homes in the village, in different hamlets. The majority of the population in the village consists of Javanese Muslims. Since this is an urban village, most people are occupied as civil servants, traders, entrepreneurs, and clerks. Observations in the village showed that most of the neighborhood infrastructure was well developed. The distance between houses was very short, and almost all the houses had vehicles.

Laksono in Watulimo District is a rural village in the southern coastal area of Trenggalek Regency, about 53 km from the center of the regency. In addition to fishing, the majority of the population in the village relies on the forest-based agricultural sector for their livelihoods. According to data from the Forest Village Community Institute (Lembaga Masyarakat Desa Hutan, LMDH), the village has 6,269 members. The LMDH working area of the village covers 4,271 hectares. In cooperation with the state-owned forestry company (Perhutani), LMDH manages forest areas in the village through Community-Based Forest Management (Pengelolaan Hutan Bersama Masyarakat). As a village-based association with a large membership, LMDH has a strong bargaining position in the village. Moreover, several key persons in LMDH at Laksono also hold important positions in the LMDH association in Watulimo District.

The above brief profiles can provide additional explanations for *anut grubyuk* in voting, beyond Javanese cultural aspects, by showing the rural and urban character of villages and the variety of villagers' occupations. The majority of the population in Joyo village is engaged in non-agricultural occupations, such as teachers, civil servants, street vendors, and entrepreneurs. In the village, the study did not find any explanation from voters concerning *anut grubyuk* in either voting for or not voting for the incumbent. Voters had their own arguments in this respect, based on their individually oriented preferences, and did not follow others in the neighborhood. In three other villages where *anut grubyuk* was found, the occupations of the population were homogenous, such as farming or fishing.

Another important non-cultural feature of villages and neighborhoods is the presence of farmer organizations. LMDH is the most popular farmer-based organization in Laksono village in Trenggalek. With its huge membership and wide networking, LMDH

is a potential political force in the *pilkada*.²²⁾ The incumbent was supported as well as challenged by LMDH in both *pilkada*. In 2005, LMDH's networks helped Soeharto to gain victory in the *pilkada*. There was an informal agreement between the incumbent and LMDH's leaders prior to the 2005 *pilkada*. LMDH supported Soeharto with the expectation of gaining direct benefits during his term in power, namely, infrastructure (roads), fertilizer donations, and seeds. However, the incumbent did not keep his promises during his term in office.

In the 2010 *pilkada*, LMDH's networks diverted their support to Mulyadi WR. A chairman of an LMDH forum at the district level as well as chairman of LMDH in Laksono village remarked:

When finally Mr. Harto [Soeharto] was elected [as the regent], the promise was not fulfilled. When he came here [to visit the village] he never greeted us or [LMDH] administrators. Finally, the LMDH board was not needed anymore by Mr. Harto. So, the promise was violated. He gave assistance to fishermen, but we farmers were not taken care of. We [LMDH] decided not to support Mr. Harto.²³⁾

Like Soeharto, prior to the *pilkada* Mulyadi and his running mate Kholiq met with LMDH networks in Nglongsor village. LMDH's decision to support Mulyadi in 2010 was influenced also by an informal agreement to support LMDH members. Mulyadi promised to subsidize fertilizer and farming tools for LMDH. Mulyadi's first attempt to fulfill his promise was the inauguration of the LMDH Association of Trenggalek on March 23, 2011. In the inauguration, Mulyadi also conducted a dialogue with LMDH's representatives to hear their aspirations.²⁴⁾

The effort to divert LMDH's support from Soeharto to Mulyadi prior to the *pilkada* was planned. An actor who encouraged LMDH to withdraw its support from the incumbent was Mr. K (pseudonym), a timber businessman who had close connections with LMDH networks. In 2005, he supported Soeharto's run in the *pilkada*. In the 2010 *pilkada*, Mr. K had registered to be the candidate for the regent through the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa). Finally, he shifted his support to Mulyadi

22) Of the 157 villages in Trenggalek, 75 percent are categorized as forest villages with the total number of members (LMDH) amounting to approximately 104,000, both youths and adults (http://www.kabarbisnis.com/aneka-bisnis/2815165_Libatkan_LMDH_untuk_optimalkan_potensi_ekonomi_hutan.html, accessed December 10, 2013; <http://www.antarasumbar.com/id/berita/berita/j/21/175988/ibas-safari-kunjungan-kerja-di-lima-kabupaten.html>, accessed December 10, 2013).

23) Interview conducted on September 18, 2012. The interviewee lives in Laksono, where he was the former village head.

24) Interview conducted with a chairman of the LMDH forum at the district level on September 18, 2012. See also the inauguration news in <http://humas-trenggalek.blogspot.com.au/2011/03/bupati-kukuhkan-paguyuban-lembara.html>, accessed November 27, 2013.

in the 2010 *pilkada* by directing LMDH networks' support to Mulyadi.²⁵⁾ In the LMDH association of Trenggalek, Mr. K was the adviser.

Meanwhile, Tunas Makmur, a farmer-based group, is the only organization in the area of polling station number 4 where interviews were conducted in Kerjo village in Blitar. The incumbent paid special attention to this group. Prior to the *pilkada*, the local agriculture office built a pond for farming in the village. The office also gave tractors and goats as aid for the farmers group and free bean and corn seeds for farmers. Moreover, the incumbent visited the village twice. A farmer and wood trader talked about the incumbent's visit: "Mr. Herry came when the farmers group conducted a chili harvest festival and inaugurated the operation of the pond in 2010."²⁶⁾

During the campaign, or one month prior to the *pilkada*, the chairman of Herry's campaign team (Mr. Z) met with villagers in the hamlet's hall. During this meeting, the chairman promised to build the hamlet's roads if Herry won in the *pilkada*.²⁷⁾ After the *pilkada*, Herry's people kept their promise to the villagers. The head of the hamlet testified that after the *pilkada*, one of Herry's victory team members visited the hamlet and donated a goat as well as Rp.1 million in cash to support the hamlet's activities.²⁸⁾ Mr. Z also kept his promise to the villagers. The leader of the farmers group testified that the local government had carried out development of the hamlet's roads. It was predicted that all roads would be built by 2014. In addition, Mr. Z wanted to donate materials to the farmers group when it built the group's hut. Mr. Z also helped to support the group's proposal to gain agribusiness development funds (Pengembangan Usaha Agribisnis Perdesaan) from the local government. In fact, before gaining Mr. Z's support, the group found it difficult to access funds. After gaining Mr. Z's support, the group regularly obtained funds of Rp.100 million per year from 2010 to 2012.²⁹⁾

These narratives show the power of farmer-based group leaders to shape voters' preferences by practicing *anut grubyuk* in voting. *Anut grubyuk* is probably a form of mobilization of voters to vote or not to vote for incumbents in return for benefits for the farmers groups as well as their leaders. However, the case study cannot judge the importance of the role of village heads and hamlet heads in shaping voters' preferences as they provided relatively formal answers during the interview by admitting that they had to be neutral in the *pilkada*.

25) Interviews with a local journalist on September 21, 2012; a local activist affiliated with the winning challenger on September 21, 2012; a local academic as well as a lawyer on September 19, 2012; a young party activist affiliated to the winning challenger on September 17, 2012.

26) Interview conducted on July 5, 2012.

27) Interview with a leader of a farmers group in the village on July 5, 2012.

28) Interview conducted on July 5, 2012.

29) Interview conducted on July 5, 2012.

The next question, then, among theories of voting behavior is how *anut grubyuk* can make a scientific contribution. The analysis of voting behavior is closely related to the discussion of factors that can shape voters' preferences in voting, in terms of rationale for both voting and not voting. The two main theoretical streams of voting behavior explain how external factors and internal evaluation by voters can shape voting preferences. The former is known as the social cleavage theory, and the latter is the rational choice theory.

Seymour Lipset and S. Rokkan (1967, 13) stress that locality and its dominant culture, class, and interest can shape voters' decisive criterion for alignment to parties or candidates. On the one hand, voters—without taking into consideration their economic position—vote for parties or candidates due to their commitment to locality and its dominant culture. On the other hand, due to the commitment to class and its collective interest, voters vote for parties or candidates that have or represent the same position irrespective of their localities. The importance of the social cleavage structure is not merely about class interest but a wider understanding of social influence. In addition to class, the criterion of alignment can be shaped by religion, gender, and other social aspects.

Another mainstream political scientist has criticized those who analyze voting without taking into account that citizens are rational people who respond rationally (efficiently) to political realities, particularly in the situation of imperfect information. A. Downs (1957a, 149) has suggested adoption of the economics of political action in analyzing the political behavior of citizens in a democracy. Rationality in political realities is not a simple cost-benefit analysis in which every rational action is justified by the result of a surplus equation between benefits and costs of action (benefits exceed costs). In an imperfect information situation in a large democracy, an intelligent citizen does not always use logical thinking in taking action, because “the marginal return from thinking logically is smaller than its marginal costs.” Consequently, rather than spending much to gain perfect information to support rational action, the citizen sometimes acts rationally (efficiently) to act irrationally, by intentionally avoiding devoting much time and cost for an uncertain outcome. In voting, voters act rationally in being apathetic toward elections or ignore the issues when they know that there is a very low probability that their ballots will make a difference in the election outcome. Furthermore, A. Downs (1957b, 49–50) concludes that voting behavior could be shaped by current party differentials, chance of winning, and the possibility of voter abstention.

Anut grubyuk in voting covers both theoretical streams. Javanese voters who practice *anut grubyuk* link their decision to a locality and Javanese as the dominant culture that encourages voters to live in harmony. Individual voters voluntarily align with a major

decision in the neighborhood in order to respect communal values and integration. *Anut grubyuk* can also be interpreted as a rational behavior. A voter intentionally does not engage in *pilkada* issues to overcome the cost of perfect voting. Fitting individual voting decisions to communal guided preferences is a result of logical thinking that shapes Javanese voters.

A more relevant logic views *anut grubyuk* as group-oriented voting, that is, the awareness of Javanese voters as being parts of groups in a society. The voters act rationally as a group of voters who demand that individual Javanese act with a communal logic. The case study in Blitar and Trenggalek found that individual voters matched their ballots to the preference of neighborhood voters that aimed to meet communal benefits promised by candidates as well as the ethical obligation of group interest.

As a result, understanding Javanese voters in a group perspective provides a different explanation for a previously existing framework (individual voting), which is predominantly viewed from the perspective of social cleavage, mainly locality and its dominant culture or Javanese socio-religious norms. This study interprets *anut grubyuk* through four possible explanations. First, *anut grubyuk* is a personal expression of Javanese voters to avoid conflict with neighbors by implementing the principle of *rukun*. By following *anut grubyuk*, Javanese also show respect for both community leaders and neighbors and apply the principle of *aji*. Second, *anut grubyuk* is probably a form of Javanese pragmatism in voting due to the situation of imperfect knowledge and irrationality in gaining adequate information to support the ballot. Third, *anut grubyuk* refers to mobilized group voting that is coordinated by a group leader or broker in return for specific rewards from candidates. Finally, *anut grubyuk* in voting is directed by an obligation to comply with group norms that share group interests, based on the positive result of evaluation of outcomes and payoffs.

Furthermore, regarding group-oriented voting, *anut grubyuk* echoes the works of Uhlaner (1989) on the possible voting mobilization for transactional benefit of elites in the neighborhood or in the region. This non-cultural logic enriches an explanation that relies on cultural factors, which remain influential among rural Javanese.

Arguably, the non-cultural explanations of *anut grubyuk* emphasize the need to assess its impact on running genuine democracy in Indonesia. In contrast to liberal democracy, *anut grubyuk* raises the issue of independence in voting. This group-oriented voting is contrasted to voting as an individual right ensured by the constitution. In terms of democratic process, this remains a critical question in the ongoing democratization of the country, as equal power relationships in democracy are challenged by communality. Moreover, *anut grubyuk* can potentially be distorted to become a hegemonic instrument of certain parties or elites to gain or retain office in national or regional elections.

Finally, beyond the cultural factors identified in the case studies, farmer-based organizations as well as leaders are influential in neighborhoods, including in mobilizing voters to practice *anut grubyuk* in *pilkada*. The leaders form a major opinion in neighborhoods, referred to by voters, by providing options to vote or not to vote for the incumbent. Not surprisingly, the regional leaders who survive in *pilkada* are consummate strategists who strengthen patronage-driven democracy. The regular succession of a leader who demands the major support of the people is, in fact, determined by much fewer numbers of vital backers. These backers attach themselves to the incumbent leaders who control the dynamics of support and opposition.³⁰⁾

Therefore, *anut grubyuk* is susceptible to becoming trapped in patronage-driven democracy practices when community leaders trade benefits in return for the support of candidates. These practices potentially threaten voters who have inadequate engagement in election issues and community organizational life. Additionally, *anut grubyuk* as a local form of Javanese wisdom can be permanently converted to transactional political practices; and it can consistently support this inconsistent practice of democracy.

Conclusion

There have been repeated attempts to explain the behavior of Javanese voters in the Indonesian democratic framework, in both the Soeharto and the post-Soeharto eras. Unfortunately, these works have neglected the social reality of Javanese communal and hierarchical culture as well as its potential patronage in democracy.

This study reveals that Javanese voters do not base their decisions solely on individual preferences. Among rural Javanese, voters are familiar with the idea of applying *anut grubyuk* to voting. Individual voters adjust their preferences to the majority preference in their neighborhoods. *Anut grubyuk* is firmly rooted in the Javanese communal philosophy of life, namely *rukun* and the hierarchical value of *aji*. To live in harmony as well as avoid conflict, individuals in rural Java tend to follow the majority voice in the neighborhood, and this applies to voting as well. Individually, Javanese also apply the value of respect—not merely in relationships with people who have informal or formal positions, but also in relationships among neighbors.

Nonetheless, relying solely on the explanation of Javanese dominant culture would be misleading in comprehending Javanese voting behavior in the recently democratic

30) The word “patronage” in this article has two meanings: defender and protector (from the Latin word *patronus*). Political patronage means “distributing favors to the supporters in return for votes” (McMillan, in McLean 2003, 400).

Indonesia. Beyond cultural explanations, Javanese individuals who cast their votes in accordance with communal preferences in the neighborhood aim at gaining collective benefits from local government policies credited to certain candidates who run in the electoral race. In recently democratic Indonesia, *anut grubyuk* is vulnerable to manipulation (via mobilization), because certain community leaders or brokers exploit Javanese communality in return for both individual and communal short-term benefits from candidates. Instead of helping liberal democracy to grow, *anut grubyuk* potentially supports patronage-driven democracy, in which democracy ends up in the hands of certain elites who are able to play the politics of particularism.

As a preliminary finding that relies on only a small number of participants, this study needs further exploration. Future research might need more in-depth fieldwork in other rural regions where Javanese culture can be found. In addition, a further comparative study is urgent, to find out whether non-Javanese voters are more independent in voting than Javanese ones. Finally, both cultural differences and non-cultural explanations are relevant to discern voting patterns among Javanese and non-Javanese in the outer Java regions where Javanese also live, such as Lampung and North Sumatra.

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Philanthropy and “Muslim Citizenship” in Post-Suharto Indonesia

Hilman Latief*

The spawning of Muslim philanthropic associations signifies an increasingly visible Islamic social and political activism, in Indonesia as elsewhere in the Muslim world. Acting as non-state welfare providers, the associations provide “social security” to poor and disadvantaged groups as a means of promoting the public good. In the intricate relationship between state and citizen in the world’s largest Muslim country, Muslim philanthropic ideals of promoting the well-being of the community (*ummah*) are in turn contested. Will they lead to a more democratic citizenship or to new types of clientelistic relations within a plural society? This research deals with the following questions: To what extent are welfare issues perceived by Muslim philanthropic organizations as shaping a new debate over “citizenship”? Can the Islamic concept of *ummah* be reconciled with modern ideas of citizenship?

Keywords: Islamic philanthropy, citizenship, welfare, rights, *ummah*

Introduction

Welfare provision in a nation-state era has become an interesting issue to investigate. In many developing countries, economic growth is often hindered by an inadequacy of a reliable welfare system to benefit society at large. Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia, which is inhabited by more than 250 million people, seems to have suffered from such an inadequacy. After the fall of Suharto in the late 1990s, Indonesia recovered from the financial and political crises and then started experiencing considerable economic growth and democratization. Nevertheless, an adequate welfare system that can reach all parts of society remains hard to find, despite the increased economic growth in the past 10 years. The public does not easily accept Indonesian government statistics showing a decrease in the number of people living below the poverty line. As such, statistical reports do not stop civic organizations from acting as non-state welfare

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providers by trying to provide aid for particular segments of society unreachable by state welfare agencies.

In this increasingly democratic country, civic organizations with different social, religious, and political orientations have flourished. In post-New Order Indonesia, civil society organizations have appeared publicly in different ways: as NGOs focusing on community development projects (Sinaga 1995; Hadiwinata 2003), as ethnic-based mass organizations supporting political institutions (Aspinall 2011), and as religion-based paramilitary groups focusing on the imposition of religiously inspired public norms (Hasan 2002; Jahroni 2004). Others have appeared as voluntary welfare associations attempting to offer an alternative to the state's role in fulfilling social needs. These types of groups have had a massive presence in the public sphere. One may argue that such a lively civic engagement in the public sphere can lead society to the achievement of democratic values, in a way comparable to what happened in the New Order era. While this assumption may be true in a certain context, the increasing participation of society in Indonesia's political sphere may also lead to other consequences that are not necessarily suitable for democratic values. Corruption, collusion, clientelism, new authoritarian culture, predatory political groupings, social disparity, and economic inequality are examples of how civil society in a democratic era is still "burdened" by undemocratic behavior (Aspinall and Van Klinken 2011).

This paper examines the roles of Muslim volunteer organizations—which are referred to as Islamic philanthropic associations—in shaping the nature of democratic culture in Indonesia and analyzes their contribution to the creation of a just society. Studies suggest that in the past three decades Islamic philanthropic associations in Indonesia have had a vibrant public presence, more than ever before. They have actively engaged in various types of social projects to cater for the poor, as well as had a profound impact on Muslim discourse on welfare issues (Fauzia 2013; Latief 2014; Retsikas 2014). The objectives of Islamic philanthropic organizations, as reflected in their organizational mission, include fostering social justice and bettering the welfare of society. In practice, Islamic philanthropic organizations provide aid for those in need, including low-income families, orphans, disaster victims, and refugees in city slums and disaster-affected areas. Given the wide range of Islamic philanthropic activism in Indonesia, this paper examines Muslims' understanding of citizenship and how they interpret people's rights and the state's responsibility by analyzing two cases. The first case concerns the role of Islamic philanthropic organizations in validating the rights of the poor. The second is about how Islamic philanthropic organizations define the rights of underprivileged minority groups, including Shi'a and Ahmadiyya communities, and whether or not these groups deserve assistance from their fellow Muslims.

Citizenship: The State, Welfare, and Volunteerism

Analysts have tried to relate benevolent deeds and traditional philanthropy to the role of the state as the main welfare provider in certain countries. Some have looked at philanthropy vis-à-vis the state in offering social security. The public sector and voluntary sector are often situated at opposite poles. Philanthropic organizing is seen as a “social innovation” of civil society and an active counterbalance to “excessive state bureaucracy” (Villadsen 2011, 1059). From this point of view, philanthropic activism arose as a response to the state’s inadequacy in sustaining a welfare system and alleviating distress (Latief 2010; Fauzia 2013). Thus, the social and political engagement of philanthropic organizations in public life signifies an attempt by civil society to fill the vacuum left by the state (Clark 2004).

Other observers and practitioners seem to be interested in reconciling philanthropy and volunteer organizations with the state. According to this “co-operative paradigm,” the relationship between philanthropy and the state is marked by “collaboration, overlaps, and interdependency” (Villadsen 2011, 1059). Hence, the roles of volunteer organizations complement the state-based welfare agenda. In this respect, philanthropic associations can “help citizens to learn the civic virtues of trust, moderation, compromise, reciprocity, and the skills of democratic discussion and organization”; and through their well-organized social welfare-oriented activities, they can “link individuals’ private interests to broader community interests” (Eikenberry 2007, 858).

Philanthropic activities by volunteer organizations and individuals in order to strengthen grassroots social security are perceived mainly as individual and collective benevolent deeds. We should note that from the state’s perspective, volunteer activities may symbolize “active citizenship” as opposed to “passive citizenship” or “negative citizenship” (Finlayson 1994, 15–16; Stokes 2008, 86–87). In sum, to discuss charity and philanthropy in a nation-state, we can employ ideas of citizenship as a framework—not only to evaluate whether voluntarism has rightly functioned to stand in for the state’s role in offering welfare provision but, more important, to understand to what extent philanthropy is changing citizens’ attitudes toward the state and interpretations of the state. The engagement of philanthropic organizations signifies “the citizenship of contribution” (Finlayson 1994, 12), which differs from “the citizenship of entitlement.” It can be said, therefore, that volunteer activity in a Muslim charity can be an expression of citizenship in the second sense but at the same time it might also be driven by convictions that other citizens have certain welfare rights that a community needs to provide for.

Due to the multilayered meanings of citizenship and philanthropy in today’s world,

it is interesting to relate the modern concept of citizenship to the Muslim idea of *ummah*. *Ummah* is a religious and ideological concept of the political community. In Islamic literature, the meaning of *ummah* is normatively juxtaposed with that of “nation,” which points to a group of people “to which an individual may have a sense of belonging and attachment” (Kamali 2009, 124, 130). The literature suggests that there are at least two streams of thought about how *ummah* is formulated in Muslim societies. The first is the inclusive nature of *ummah*. The normative meaning of *ummah* is associated with the Quranic concept of people or nation (*syu’ub*) and tribes (*qabail*), according to which the most notable people in the sight of God are the most righteous of them (Qur’anic Verses 49: 13). As for the concept of the state in early Islam, scholars refer to the Constitution of Medina, which is believed to be the earliest form of the state in Islamic history. Prophet Muhammad protected the residents of Medina, who comprised different tribes and religious groups (Lubis 2008, 79; Kamali 2009, 124). The inclusive nature of *ummah* is indicated in M. Hashim Kamali’s studies:

The Prophet-cum-head of state himself did not insist on embracing Islam as a precondition of citizenship. The Constitution of Medina acknowledged and declared the Jews of Medina to be part of the *ummah* that the Prophet organized immediately after his migration to Medina. Moreover, there is nowhere a requirement in the source of Shari’a to say that a non-Muslim resident, the so-called *dhimmi*, must become Muslim first before he or she can become a citizen of an Islamic state. (2009, 125)

The above quotation suggests that in the cosmopolitan city of Medina, religion was not the main factor determining the citizenship status of residents. This postulation is supported by the prophetic narratives (*hadith*) putting emphasis on the egalitarian principles within *ummah*: “People are equal as are the teeth of a comb. There is no merit for an Arab over a non-Arab; merit is by piety” (Salam 1997). Accordingly, “distinctions based on rank, wealth, kinship or race were not recognized” (*ibid.*, 134). Therefore, people of a different race, religion, or ethnicity residing in an Islamic state are entitled to equal rights and treatment from the state.

Nevertheless, there is also an exclusive nature of citizenship in Muslim society that indicates an idea of exclusion. Based on historical accounts, observers relate the idea of citizenship in Muslim societies to *dâr al-Islam* (Abode of Peace, or House of Islam). In the classical form of the Islamic state, citizenship was—and could be—distinguished not only by people’s membership in political communities but also by their religious affiliation. According to this view, citizens are those who follow and embrace the Islamic faith in an Islamic state. Non-Muslim inhabitants (referred to as *dhimmis*) who take up domicile in an Islamic state are considered second-class citizens. Therefore, observers argue

that the early form of citizenship in Muslim societies could be less egalitarian (Kamali 2009, 122) and thus non-Muslims could “neither acquire the equal status” nor enjoy their “equal rights” (Salam 1997, 134). As to the reasons why non-Muslims were considered second-class citizens in the early form of *ummah*, Nawaf A. Salam notes: “Islam, strictly speaking, did not know citizenship . . . and the *ummah* as a political community, being exclusively based on *jus religionis*, the *Dhimmi*(s) did not qualify for membership.” Salam also suggests that the *dhimmi*(s) “could not enjoy, accordingly, the same rights as those accorded to Muslims, but neither were they obligated by the same duties” (*ibid.*).¹⁾

The aforementioned competing streams of understanding of citizenship are based on experiences of Muslim society where the modern concept of a nation-state was still absent. Both inclusive and exclusive concepts of citizenship in early Islam are relevant to our discussion about how the state and society attempt to satisfy the rights of citizens. It appears that the rise of a modern nation-state as a result of the decline of Western colonialism in Muslim regions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has changed Muslim understanding of citizenship.²⁾ In a modern nation-state system, the political community is not restricted to certain religious groups but can cover all members of the community regardless of their religion. But among Muslims, the unity of *ummah* still becomes an essential issue. In fact, *ummah* has been a central idea that justifies Muslims’ social, economic, and political activities. *Ummah* has also been imagined as an ideal concept of the Islamic community, blurring geographical boundaries between Muslim nations. Inter-state relationships and globalization have transformed the elements of citizenship in general, and *ummah* in particular, from what was simply local society residing in certain regions into “global citizens” or “transnational citizenship” (Hutchings and Dannreuther 1999; Stokes 2000; 2004).

The emerging public appearance of Muslim social and political activism has had far-reaching consequences for the revitalization of the Muslim ideal of the “Islamic community.” Similar interests among community members, for example, have enabled Muslim societies with social concerns to establish and expand their networks nationally and internationally. In his study on transnational Islamic NGOs in Chad, Mayke Kaag argues that the flow of humanitarian aid brought by transnational Islamic NGOs is inspired by

1) It is worth mentioning that Islamic egalitarianism within the early form of *ummah* is also challenged by the fact that slaves and women did not have equal rights (Salam 1997, 135).

2) Sami Zubaida in his study on the constitution and shari’a in Egypt found that a number of Egyptian Muslim intellectuals who supported Islamization, such as Adel Hussein, Fahmi Huwaydi, Tariq al-Bishry, and Muhammad Amara, seemed to be “liberal” in conceiving the status of non-Muslims in the Muslim constitution. They believed that “full citizenship rights for Christians is fully compatible with the *shari’a*” (Zubaida 2005, 179).

the “idea of Muslim solidarity” and has functioned as a way “to bring (more) people (closer) to God” (Kaag 2007, 94). Therefore, *dakwah* (Islamic proselytizing) is embedded in humanitarian activities, and vice versa. In areas where both Muslim and Christian missionaries are active, Islamic transnational philanthropic organizations provide humanitarian aid with the aim of competing with Christian NGOs. Kaag further notes, “it is generally considered a Muslim’s duty to help and expand the *ummah*, and it follows from the foregoing that this expansion can be interpreted in both a moral and a territorial way” (*ibid.*).

Similar findings can be seen in the work of Marie Juul Petersen, who questions whether the aid offered by Islamic philanthropic organizations is primarily for the sake of humanity or *ummah*. Petersen (2011) compares two types of “aid culture” that have characterized Muslim philanthropy: “Islamic aid culture” and “Western development culture.” She argues that Islamic aid associations from Gulf countries, such as the International Islamic Relief Organization (established in Jeddah in 1978) and the International Islamic Charitable Organization (established in Kuwait in 1984), with their “Islamic aid culture” apparently attempt to adopt a Western development perspective in their organizational mission. In the same way, Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid, two Islamic aid organizations founded in the United Kingdom in 1984 and 1985 respectively, emerged with a Western development style but at the same time “seek to maintain a strong relationship to the culture of Islamic aid” (*ibid.*, 15).

More important, the role played by Islamic philanthropic organizations in the international arena, such as helping in disaster- and conflict-affected areas, can also be justified by the idea of solidarity and unity of the community of believers (Kochuyt 2009, 105–106; Petersen 2011, 146–147). In sum, domestic philanthropic associations in certain areas can be linked to global society, and thus they can operate not only to relieve the poor in their neighborhood but also to overcome crises on other continents. Ideas of the “global citizen” among Muslims have inspired and compelled advocates of Islamic volunteer organizations to operate in the international arena. Hence, the terms “global charities” and “transnational philanthropy” signify the rise of what Olivier Roy (2004) terms “globalized Islam” as a result of the globalization of *ummah* (Lubeck 2002).

Islamic Philanthropy and the Rights of the Poor *Ummah*

The proliferation of Islamic charities in Indonesia indicates that there has been an active effort within Muslim communities to define the rights and obligations of society. Muslims are urged to donate a portion of their wealth as a means of fulfilling religious duties and

helping those in need. The practice of giving has increasingly become a concern among Muslims, who are willing either to pay *zakat* (almsgiving/Islamic tax) through charitable organizations or to directly channel their money to the masses. In the past, every Muslim whose wealth or annual wage reached a certain minimum amount (equivalent to the price of 85 grams of gold) was obligated to pay 2.5–5 percent *zakat* to appointed institutions, usually state-sponsored *zakat* organizations (*‘amil*). But over time the nature of *zakat* practice among Muslims has changed considerably thanks to the rise of community or civil society-based *zakat* organizations (see Benthall and Jourdan 2003).

There are at least two types of *zakat* organizations in Indonesia. The first are those established by civil society, referred to as Lembaga Amil Zakat (LAZ). While in the past *zakat* organizations were not registered, in recent times civil society-based *zakat* organizations, including charitable and humanitarian organizations, are required to be registered and recognized by the government, especially the Ministry of Law and Human Rights and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Some charitable organizations are registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs, as they appear publicly as humanitarian organizations even though they receive donations, including *zakat*, from the public. Although there are some *zakat* organizations that are legalized and recognized by the government, many small-scale ones have never registered but remain active in collecting *zakat* funds from Muslim benefactors.

The second type includes state-sponsored but autonomous *zakat* organizations known as Badan Amil Zakat Nasional (BAZNAS). The inception of BAZNAS has several implications. From a political perspective, the state policy on Islamic philanthropy indicates that the state facilitated Muslim religious and political aspirations by specifically and directly sponsoring BAZNAS. BAZNAS, which was officially legalized through Presidential Decree No. 8 Year 2001, is the only state-sponsored national *zakat* agency in Indonesia. Apart from having the right and opportunity to collect public funds through fund-raising and *zakat* collection from state workers and private companies, BAZNAS receives “subsidies” from the government. It is an autonomous and non-structural state agency under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. According to the Zakat Organizing Law issued in 1999, BAZNAS had a similar duty, responsibility, and position to that of civil society-based *zakat* organizing. However, the 1999 Law was amended when in 2011 the government issued the Zakat Law. The latter provides more latitude for BAZNAS to manage *zakat* funds. BAZNAS functions not only as a regulator that can assess *zakat* organizing, but also as an operator that directly manages *zakat* funds. As a state-sponsored agency, BAZNAS has been able to build a partnership with both state bureaucracies and private corporations. Justified by the Zakat Law as well as government regulations at the provincial and district levels, which are referred to as “Shari’a-by law,”

BAZNAS regularly obtains *zakat* funds from Muslim employees of government offices.

In 2010, BAZNAS claimed that the potential *zakat* funds to be collected in Indonesia totaled about 217 trillion rupiah. However, in practice the combined Indonesian *zakat* agencies collected only 1.5 trillion rupiah. In comparison, the government obtained 723.3 trillion rupiah in tax the same year. Because of this envisaged large amount of money, BAZNAS, together with other civil society-based *zakat* agencies, actively engages in fund-raising to finance various types of social enterprises. As the state-sponsored *zakat* agency, BAZNAS focuses on different forms of development projects; but most of them are under the framework of *dakwah* (religious proselytizing) and the notion of *ummah*. BAZNAS's ideas of *ummah*, in particular, are expressed partly in the provision of scholarship for Muslim preachers as a way to combat Islamic liberalism and prevent Christianization.

It is worth noting that thanks to the enthusiasm of Indonesian *zakat* mobilization, which was in line with the rapid development of global Islamic charities, in 2007 Indonesia was entrusted to be the host of the inaugural World Zakat Forum. The forum or conference was formed by *zakat* collector activists in Indonesia and Malaysia and supported by other Muslim countries. It aims at energizing *zakat* activism and strengthening the vision of *zakat* organizations in projecting their capacity and potential. The first World Zakat Forum conference was held in 2010 in Yogyakarta, where hundreds of representatives of *zakat* organizations from many parts of the world met and shared their experience and vision of *zakat*. The title of the conference was "To Strengthen the Role of Zakat in Realizing the Welfare of the *Ummah* through International Zakat Network." The second World Zakat Forum conference was held in New York City in 2014, with the title "Zakat for Global Welfare." These two conferences, which were organized by Indonesian *zakat* activists, focused on welfare issues and poverty eradication around the world. At a glance, it seems that there has been a widening of orientation in determining targeted *zakat* beneficiaries, from simply strengthening the welfare of the *ummah* to global welfare.

Unlike other conferences on *zakat* that were focused mainly on the welfare of Islamic communities, the panelists in the second World Zakat Forum brought up some interesting points about inclusivity in *zakat* distribution. *Zakat* was defined in a broader context, such as how *zakat* funds could be used to overcome the problem of discrimination among minority groups, strengthen interfaith initiatives, and promote social solidarity with non-Muslims. It is under these circumstances that *zakat* for global welfare is defined. For Muslims in Indonesia as well as other countries, the points proposed in the second World Zakat Forum can shape the nature of philanthropic practices projected to protect underprivileged groups, including among the minority. This is partly because over the years

minority groups have faced a lot of difficulty due to tensions with the majority.

As mentioned earlier, many people prefer channeling their *zakat* and charity funds directly to the poor. The practice of direct giving—with the masses queueing up for small amounts of cash—has characterized the practice of *zakat* distribution in Indonesia for many years. There have been some cases where this method of *zakat* distribution even caused deaths. The most notable incident occurred in mid-September 2008, when a local Muslim entrepreneur in Pasuruan, East Java, distributed his *zakat*. There was a disordered mass of people awaiting their share, and with the congestion and lack of fresh air, 21 people died and many others sustained serious injuries. This incident became a religious, legal, social, and political issue. The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) insisted that direct *zakat* distribution was illegal and prohibited, because *zakat* funds should be redistributed to beneficiaries through appropriate institutions. The MUI emphasized that it was one’s right to deliver aid directly to people in need but that the extent to which *zakat* funds were distributed should be in line with Islamic principles. In an effort to prevent any harmful effects of *zakat* distribution, the MUI argued that distributing funds without engaging *‘amil*, whether civil society-based or state-sponsored, was religiously inappropriate and socially unethical, because asking the poor to queue in front of the rich was humiliating to the poor.

The story does not end here. It snowballed, reaching wider audiences. One of the family members who distributed *zakat* in Pasuruan voiced his disagreement with the MUI’s opinion. While emphasizing his family’s right to share their wealth with the poor without necessarily engaging *‘amil*, he argued that the government should thank his family for their willingness to help the poor rather than accusing them of wrongdoing. According to him, this tragedy was a result of the government’s lack of effort to alleviate poverty, especially after the increase in oil prices a few months before Ramadan. He also argued that since the government had not provided an appropriate welfare system the number of needy people in the countryside had increased rapidly.

On national television, talk shows hosted public debates to examine the issue. One of the speakers was the sociologist Imam B. Prasodjo, who said that the matter of poverty and social welfare was in the state’s hands but that local philanthropic organizations were also able to participate in empowering the community. Therefore, although there were official *zakat* collectors, their presence should not eliminate informal institutions organized by communities. According to Prasodjo, the Indonesian government was less able to identify and provide accurate numbers of poor people around the country, because the government did not have reliable databases to be used for purposes such as general elections, social security policy, and *zakat* distribution. He suggested that Indonesian citizens be provided with a social security number, as in developed countries.

Aid for Minority Groups

According to the 2012 annual report on *Religious Life in Indonesia* issued by the Center for Religious and Cultural Studies, Gadjah Mada University, communal and religious conflicts in Indonesia have been characterized by a rapidly escalating tension between majority and minority religious groups. Observers and social activists have questioned the role of the state in protecting minority groups in Indonesia and how the latter could gain their rights. The accusations brought against minority groups such as Ahmadiyah and Shi'a by certain groups of the Sunni majority have been among the intriguing cases, leading us to raise questions about citizenship in Indonesia. In mid-2012 there was a riot in Sampang District of Madura Island, East Java, displacing hundreds of Shi'a families from their hometowns and forcing them to live in "refugee camps" (sports buildings) for about three months. In the villages, some of the homes belonging to Shi'a families were burned, jeopardizing the future of the Shi'a minority in that region. Surprisingly, the Sunni leaders in the area of conflict said that the Shi'a could not return to their villages unless they converted to Sunni Islam. As the Shi'a refused to alter their beliefs, it was hard for them to return home. In that situation, the government offered an unpalatable option to Shi'a families: relocation from their hometown in Sampang to another region in Sidoarjo.

Relations between Sunnis and Shi'a in Indonesia became increasingly complex after the issuance of a *fatwa* (legal/religious opinion) by the MUI, according to which Shi'a was a deviant form of Islam. The minority Ahmadi faced a similar situation as some Indonesian Sunni Muslim groups became radicalized, losing their sense of tolerance. Riots took place mainly in West Java—in places such as Bogor, Kuningan, and Tasikmalaya—in which Ahmadi communities, including their homes and places of worship, were attacked (Crouch 2009; Burhani 2014a; Formici 2014). In response to this, people started questioning the state's role and reluctance to protect minority groups. They also questioned why the state, represented by government officials, failed to help the refugees return to their villages. At the same time, the MUI did not make a decisive effort to resolve this Sunni-Shi'a conflict.

Conflicts between majority and minority Muslim groups have put Muslim philanthropic organizations in a delicate situation. In conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims, such as that in the Moluccas—Ambon—a decade ago, a number of Muslim solidarity groups and philanthropic organizations were present to provide relief. On the other hand, if Muslim philanthropic organizations were to deliver aid to minority groups attacked by the majority, it may raise criticism from conservative groups. After the 2012 riot the local government in East Java did not even allow Shi'a refugees to return home

to visit their families after Ramadan to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, due to security reasons. It is also worth noting that the discourse among religious leaders in Sampang, including MUI members, never included ideas of *maslahah* or benevolent action to cater for those Shi’a refugees. The religious authorities have not raised the issue of the rights of Shi’a as Indonesian citizens, to show the *ulama*’s concern about the problem. Nor have local MUI members talked about reconciliation, forgiveness, and the need to distribute *zakat* funds to refugees.

Then Minister of Religious Affairs Surya Dharma Ali, who was also the chairman of an Islamic Party (PPP, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan), never showed a serious commitment to protect the minority’s rights. Instead, as reflected by his statements, the minister urged the perceived “deviant” minority groups to show repentance and to convert to “true Islam.”³⁾ Like the MUI’s fatwas, the minister’s statements in some way have had serious repercussions for the minority groups because his unfriendly statements could justify violent acts by radical and conservative groups toward the minority. Unlike Surya Dharma Ali, newly appointed Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, who is also a PPP politician, made the clear statement—as quoted by mass media—that “in principle, every citizen has the same rights to stay in the village and pray according to their belief because the state constitution protects them.”⁴⁾ Saifuddin also rejected efforts by local religious leaders in Sidoarjo, East Java, to convert Shi’a refugees to Sunni Islam, saying that the majority should treat their fellow Shi’a with more respect.

It is in this combative context that the way in which faith-based humanitarian organizations define beneficiaries is contested, and the way in which it is decided whether or not refugees and disadvantaged minority groups receive aid from faith-based humanitarian and philanthropic organizations. Whereas there were a number of Islamic philanthropic organizations active in raising funds from the public, only a few of them were willing to openly provide aid for Shi’a refugees in Sampang, Madura. Surprisingly, the modernist Muhammadiyah—through its MDMC (Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center)—provided assistance to the Shi’a refugees. As Indonesia’s largest modernist Muslim association, Muhammadiyah has been active in humanitarian and welfare-oriented activ-

3) Wawancara Menteri Agama soal Syiah di Sampang (Interview with the Minister of Religious Affairs on Shia in Sampang), July 27, 2013, <http://nasional.tempo.co/read/news/2013/07/27/173500167/wawancara-menteri-agama-soal-syiah-di-sampang>, accessed February 2, 2016.

4) Lukman Hakim Saifuddin is the son of Saifuddin Zuhri, who was the minister of religious affairs in the 1960s. Before his involvement in a political party, Lukman Hakim was active in the Nahdlatul Ulama and became the chairman of NU’s think-tank organization, LAKPESDAM, in the mid-1990s. See Rico Afrido, Rekonsiliasi tak harus ubah keyakinan seseorang (Reconciliation does not change somebody’s faith), SindoNews, August 13, 2013, <http://nasional.sindonews.com/read/770818/15/rekonsiliasi-tak-harus-ubah-keyakinan-seseorang-1376370137>, accessed February 2, 2016.

ities since its inception in the early twentieth century (Nakamura 2012). After its tsunami relief in Aceh (2004) and earthquake relief in Yogyakarta (2006), MDMC increasingly became known, both nationally and internationally, as Muhammadiyah's division specifically working on disaster relief. As noted by Robin Bush, MDMC's role in disaster relief "represents an important innovation and will influence the direction of future international humanitarian assistance" (2015, 34).

MDMC has focused on assisting vulnerable groups among the children and elderly by, among other measures, providing emergency education for the children of Shi'a refugees. Children became increasingly vulnerable because their relationships with parents deteriorated with the parents' increasing psychological stress. MDMC's chairman, Budi Setiawan, explained that although MDMC represents an Islamic humanitarian organization, this does not mean it can only work with—or distribute aid only to—certain groups. The Shi'a minority in Sampang were victims, and therefore, according to Setiawan, they should be treated equally by humanitarian organizations—just like the victims of other man-made disasters. Setiawan said:

The aim of providing aid for Shi'a refugees is to fulfill their basic needs and rights. There has been a trend in interpreting al-Maun, a Quranic surah that has underpinned Muhammadiyah's social engagement. In the past, we might have believed that we provided assistance to refugees because they needed help. But now we also have to think that we help them because they have the right to be assisted according to the standards of humanitarian principles. We provide assistance for Shi'a refugees to fulfill their right to have sufficient food, appropriate education, and health care as well as safety or well-being. (interview, April 5, 2015)

The quotation above signifies a new understanding and meaning of aiding the poor in the context of Indonesian Muslim philanthropy, from simply carrying out religious duties to fulfilling people's rights. This understanding emerged partly because state agencies as welfare providers were often reluctant to take the risk of providing full support for minority groups due to strong pressure from majority groups or bureaucratic mechanisms. In this context, Setiawan said: "We have seen that the state agencies somehow were weak and very bureaucratic. Many refugees could not access the local government's health services and education only because the refugees did not bring their ID (KTP)" (interview, April 5, 2015).

Another major humanitarian organization active in providing assistance for Shi'a refugees is YEU (Yakkum Emergency Unit), a Christian NGO specializing in health, emergency relief, and development. To run its program effectively, YEU has set up a partnership with a Shi'a organization (Ahlul Bait Indonesia) and MDMC. YEU and MDMC as humanitarian organizations have shared a concern with defining the rights of refugees.

For these two faith-based humanitarian organizations, the main duty is to provide assistance so that refugees can satisfy their basic needs and rights, such as education, health care, and well-being. Meanwhile, advocacy NGOs such as KONTRAS⁵⁾ and YLBHI⁶⁾ have attempted to advocate for the Shi’a communities by urging the government to sharpen its policy about the refugees’ future. KONTRAS and YLBHI pay close attention to the rights of refugees to live in their village. They have urged the government to give back the minorities’ right to return to their village in Sampang. Meanwhile, MDMC and YEU’s main concern is how to effectively provide aid. The different views and methods of faith-based humanitarian NGOs (MDMC and YEU) and advocacy NGOs (KONTRAS and YLBHI) in defining and establishing the rights of refugees have given rise to tensions during humanitarian missions.

A similar, or even worse, situation has been experienced by members of the Ahmadi minority, who have for nearly 10 years lived in a “refugee camp” in Transito, Mataram, and an ex-hospital in Central Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara. They were driven there in the aftermath of severe riots and violence in 2006 that forced them to leave their villages. They had great difficulty getting assistance from government agencies, notably in health care and education, because many of them did not hold an ID. Although a number of NGOs have attempted to push the government to provide assistance and protection as well as to revive the Ahmadi’s civil rights, it appears that the government cannot do much more to help them. Further, there has not been any information about Islamic charitable organizations attempting to deliver aid to the refugees. By contrast, in other cities—such as Bandung, Tasikmalaya, and Kuningan in West Java—BAZNAS channeled charitable funds to ex-Ahmadi or those who converted from Ahmadiyya to Sunni Islam. In this context, ex-Ahmadi are seen as *muallaf*, or “new converts,” and according to normative Islamic teachings they deserve *zakat* funds. The above case suggests that some Sunnis are still reluctant to see minority groups such as Shi’a and Ahmadi as part of the *ummah* and deserving of aid like other Sunni Muslims. In sum, understanding the concept of *ummah* has shaped the pattern of Islamic philanthropy, determining whether it is inclusive or exclusive in character.

5) KONTRAS stands for Komisi untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Tindak Kekerasan (Commission for Disappeared and Victims of Violence). It is an NGO working on human rights and was founded by a number of civil society organizations in March 1998 in response to violent and repressive actions by the state that caused the disappearance, killing, or injury of many activists.

6) YLBHI stands for Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia (Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation). It is a civil society organization whose work focuses on human rights and fostering a transparent legal system in Indonesia.

Rethinking Muslim Citizenship

From the above discussion it can be argued that Muslim philanthropy in Indonesia, just like in other countries, has to cope with a wide range of issues, including welfare, majority-minority relations, conflict, and state bureaucracy. The pattern of philanthropic practice in underpinning a democratic culture is also contingent upon various factors, such as ethnicity, religious identity, and understanding of citizen rights. While citizenship remains understood in a secular perspective, the question to be asked is: Can the current social and political setting in Indonesia shape a particular form of Muslim citizenship? In their study of religious pluralism and multiculturalism in Indonesia and Australia, Lyn Parker and Chang-Yau Hoon argue that religion or religious principles can be inserted in recent discussions of citizenship. The idea of “religious citizenship” therefore can be defined and put forward in the contemporary context of the nation-state era, partly because religious identity still matters in many societies. Unlike in many Western societies, where religion has undergone a rigorous privatization process, in the Muslim world—including Indonesia—there is an increasing presence of religion in the public sphere (Parker and Hoon 2013, 162; Weng 2014).

In concert with the function of religion in shaping people’s social and political identity, ethnicity is another major factor shaping the type of religious citizenship in Muslim societies. Muslims believe that they are part of the larger *ummah*. However, Muslims have also become part of local ethnicities, which has been instrumental in forming their social, cultural, and political identities. In this regard, the concept of *ummah* is understood in different ways by Indonesian Muslims depending on the social and political context. Michael Merry and Jeffrey Milligan note that for the Acehnese, the concept of *ummah Islamiyyah*

... is not necessarily antithetical to a sense of Indonesian citizenship, as was experienced briefly in the period of Acehnese involvement in the Indonesian independence struggle. Nor is it any guarantor of a common sense of citizenship within a larger Muslim state, as the long-running struggle for Acehnese independence from Indonesia demonstrates. (2009, 318)

They also argue that “despite the philosophical and theological ideal of *ummah Islamiyyah*, ethnicity remains an important dimension of identity construction and negotiation in Aceh and, presumably, other Muslim societies” (*ibid.*; see also Fadel 2012).

It is under these circumstances that religion should not be sidelined in discussions of citizenship, partly because there are “multiple identities” attached to the meaning of citizenship in a multicultural society (Merry and Milligan 2009, 320). In the era of globalization, Muslims’ understanding of *ummah* is influenced not only by their local identity

as members of a certain ethnic group or as citizens of a state, but also by their identification with transnational Islamic movements whose religious and political ideologies may differ from the ethnic groups or the state to which they are affiliated. It is not easy to reconcile different entities (citizen of the state, member of an ethnic group, or follower of a certain religion). Muslims' philanthropic activities are thus challenged by these cultural, sociological, and political complexities.

Religious citizenship in general, and Muslim citizenship in particular, can be understood as a new element in the complex meaning of citizenship. The complexity of the social, cultural, and political context may result in the birth of various meanings and categories of citizenship. Anthropologists, in fact, have discovered different qualifying adjectives for the term "citizenship," such as agrarian citizenship, biological citizenship, pharmaceutical citizenship, formal citizenship, substantive citizenship, etc. (Lazar 2013, 15). In the context of this paper, Muslim citizenship can attach to citizens' rights, responsibility, and obligation to other members of the community. Helping, caring for, and fulfilling the needs of members of the communities are among the rights and obligations of each community member. Likewise, although studies have pointed out that through the concept of citizenship democratic culture can be promoted and that the two should be linked, we can also note that citizenship meaning "membership of a political community" can still exist, even in a non-democratic state (*ibid.*, 4).

Conclusion

The development of philanthropic activism in Muslim societies contributes to the pattern of the current academic discourse on citizenship. First of all, the idea of Muslim citizenship is characterized by the incorporation of religion into the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of members of the community. Inspired and motivated by religious duty, Muslims are required to contribute to the community by sharing their wealth in order to help the needy and in turn foster the public good. This kind of benevolent action in the form of sharing and caring is mandatory according to Islamic teachings. Muslim philanthropy is managed by Muslims, contributed to by Muslims, and dispensed mainly for the betterment of the Islamic community. The governments of Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, have also facilitated, endorsed, as well as created laws to regulate such religiously inspired philanthropic practices. Likewise, in the global context, there are a number of Islamic philanthropic organizations that have transformed into transnational Islamic organizations catering to members of the Islamic community in various parts of the world.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the broader context of society, the form of citizenship is always contested when it deals with “the other,” including non-Muslims and minority groups. In practical terms, there are two contesting orientations of Muslim philanthropic activism: to be exclusive in character by serving and supporting only those community members with a similar religious affiliation; or to be inclusive and cater to those in need regardless of religion, political affiliation, race, and ethnicity. In the Indonesian context, both types of activism—exclusive Muslim philanthropy and inclusive philanthropy—have characterized Muslim social activism. In a nutshell, while there have been rigorous efforts by Muslims to foster a democratic culture, a just society, and the public good through volunteerism and philanthropic practices, there are obstacles to contend with, such as clientelism in the practice of philanthropy (Latief 2013). Therefore, the meanings of Muslim citizenship and *ummah* in the nation-state era are still being contested among Indonesian Muslims.

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Kuo Pao Kun's Zheng He Legend and Multicultural Encounters in Singapore

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This paper will examine Kuo Pao Kun's modern reiteration of the Zheng He theme in his 1995 Singaporean play titled *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* 郑和的后代. The memory of Zheng He and his legacy rooted in an anomalous series of sea expeditions makes him unique in Chinese history and speaks to contemporary issues of multiculturalism, ethnic hybridity, and the geopolitics of migration and diaspora. Kuo reappropriates the Zheng He theme to re-present the eunuch admiral as an ancient paradigm of the modern multicultural man in an increasingly transnational world. Scholars have noted the way Kuo uses storytelling to prompt people in Singapore to show a greater willingness to live together as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nation. However, I argue that the play's text reveals more somber and personal undercurrents, where Kuo draws upon an intimate understanding of the classical Chinese Zheng He story to record shrewd observations and articulate concealed shafts of criticism about Singapore's bureaucracy, intermingled with philosophical reflections addressing contemporary Sinophone lived reality.

Keywords: Singaporean theater, Kuo Pao Kun, Zheng He, Sinophone, multiculturalism, multiethnic, migration, diaspora

Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* 郑和的后代 (1995) (hereafter *Descendants*) is a Singaporean play that provides intriguing perspectives on the impact of Zheng He's voyages to Southeast Asia and their relevance to the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic issues of an entrepot through a literary lens. By reappropriating the Zheng He theme, Kuo re-presents the eunuch admiral as the ancient paradigm of a modern multicultural man in an increasingly globalized and transnational world. Through storytelling, Kuo prompts people in Singapore to show a greater willingness to live together as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious nation. Although recurring themes of plurality are sustained throughout the play, this paper argues that Kuo draws upon the Zheng He story to articulate disaffected critiques against the Singaporean bureaucracy and negotiate an ethnic Chinese Singaporean identity vis-à-vis Communist China in the 1990s.

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Kuo Pao Kun (郭宝崑, 1939–2002) is one of Singapore’s foremost cultural icons, renowned for his monumental contribution to Singaporean literature and theater. He wrote 24 bilingual and multilingual plays, translated 6, and directed 28.¹⁾ In the foreword to *Images at the Margins*, an anthology of his plays in English, Kuo describes unique multinational and cross-cultural life experiences as someone “permanently on the move” (Kuo 2000, 3).²⁾ Throughout his life works, one can ascertain Kuo’s sustained engagement with “invent[ing] vocabularies” to portray “images at the margin” and construct enlightening spaces located beyond the limits of racial, language, religious, and cultural segregation amidst environments marked by modernism, globalism, and capitalism (*ibid.*; Kwok 2003).

Kuo has won a unique position in the modern theater of Singapore not only for what he produced on stage, but also for what he practiced and advocated off stage for Singaporean society (Koh 2002; Quah 2005).³⁾ Krishen Jit comments that Kuo’s theater “is nothing if not purposefully persuasive about his social philosophy,” as Kuo himself saw “no sense in a theatre that is aesthetically exquisite but morally empty” (Jit 1990, 18). Indeed, Kuo consistently promoted the arts as a practice of “open culture” to celebrate the intermingling of cultures—both past and present, local and global—beyond the constraints of racial and linguistic origins (Kuo 1998; Devan 2000).

Descendants is unique in Kuo’s oeuvre as its focal theme draws upon a classical Chinese character to create a text riddled with cryptic historical references. To date, scholars and reviewers who have commented on the multilayered play point out its overt allusion to Zheng He’s maritime legacy in presenting the tensions between Chinese tradition and Sinophone⁴⁾ modernity; they emphasize the contemporary reappropriation

1) Kuo’s achievements as an artist have been recognized in Singapore and internationally: he received the Cultural Medallion in 1989, the ASEAN Cultural Award in 1993, the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the government of France in 1996, and the Excellence for Singapore Award in 2002. A number of his plays, including *The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole* (1985), *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree* (1987), *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988), and *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995) have been pioneering works on Singapore’s art scene.

2) He was born in a poor village in Hebei and spent his youth in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore before moving to Australia for university and then back to Singapore.

3) For example, *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988) pioneered the concept of multilingual theater as a means to represent the complex multiracial and multicultural Singaporean experience, investigating Singapore’s compartmentalization of diverse racial communities brought about by the government’s language policies (Chan 2003; Quah 2004).

4) The concept of Sinophone studies was coined by Shu-mei Shih in 2004 to describe “Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness” (2004, 25). The Sinophone as a field of inquiry provides an alternative to the paradigm of China-centered national literary studies, allowing for the plurality of cultural identities, ethnicities, and linguistic practices of Sinitic-language communities globally, particularly those arising from colonial and postcolonial influences.

of Zheng He to evoke themes of harmonious multiculturalism and Kuo's notion of an "open culture" in Southeast Asia, especially Singapore. However, more somber and personal undercurrents saturate the play; Kuo draws upon an intimate understanding of the classical Zheng He story to record shrewd observations and criticisms about the Singaporean bureaucracy, intermingled with philosophical reflections addressing geopolitical dimensions of contemporary Sinophone lived reality.

The Grand Eunuch as Modern Expatriate in Southeast Asia's Entrepot

A common starting point for discussion of Zheng He's influence in contemporary Chinese studies begins with the revival of the maritime theme with Liang Qichao (梁启超) and Sun Yat-Sen (孙中山) in the early twentieth century. Both men commented on the early Ming voyages in the context of tumultuous periods in modern Chinese history, marked by decay and imperialistic foreign aggression against China (Low 2005; Ptak 2007). In the perspectives of these two men, Zheng He was held in high esteem as a national hero, representing China's more prosperous times when the country stood out as a leading world power, enjoying peace and material wealth. Liang Qichao, in particular, became very interested in early Ming politics and saw in Zheng He's tale an exemplar of reviving the image of China as a wealthy nation in its golden age of exploration and international diplomacy. Subsequently, many "Zheng He Studies" research institutes have been set up in Nanjing and other places in China, publishing Chinese journals that commemorate the Grand Eunuch.

Zheng He's career at sea was a curious episode in Chinese history: his expeditions signify Ming China's attempt to project its power by sea over a great distance, where China as an imperial power had previously focused only on land-based and continental exploits. Indeed, scholars have pointed out that even in world history, there is no prior example of power projection by sea comparable in distance, scope, and duration to Zheng He and his fleet, as even the later European colonial empires were sustained by fleets composed of smaller and fewer ships (Chang 1976; Hsu 1988; Church 2004; Dreyer 2007). The most detailed outline of Zheng He's life is provided in a bibliographic note in Volume 304 of the *Mingshi* 明史 (Zhong *et al.* 1990; Dreyer 2007). However, firsthand accounts of his voyages were written by some of his followers, including Ma Huan's (马欢) *Fascinating Scenes of Foreign Lands* 瀛涯胜览 (1451), Fei Xin's (费信) *Enchanting Sights of Astro-Navigation* 星槎胜览 (1436), and Gong Zhen's (巩珍) *Record of Barbarian States in the Western Ocean* 西洋番国志 (1434). Modern scholars have conducted studies on Zheng He and his deeds based on these primary materials, but the man's background remains

inconclusive (Hsu 1988; Chee 2003; Cheng 2008).

Drawing upon the historical Zheng He figure, *Descendants* resonates with parallels to Kuo's own changing personal and psychological stance toward an ancestral Chinese cultural and literary tradition. Two key and interrelated subjects addressed in Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants* are hybridity and expatriatism, along with a moral jousting with an excessively rationalistic bureaucracy and its pragmatic pursuit of capitalism. The play is divided into 16 scenes narrating the official history and speculating upon unofficial anecdotes about Zheng He's autobiography and personal experiences. From the beginning, themes of solitude, mobility, haunting dreams, and uncertain origins are emphasized. The contemporary Sinophone narrator begins with the statement that "dreaming has become the centre of [his] life," but although these dreams make him feel "alone, painfully alone, and floating away," the loneliness is "promising" as it allows him to "[dive] deeper and deeper into the stark loneliness of [him]self" to come to the discovery that he was "so closely related that [he] had to be a descendant of the eunuch admiral" (Kuo 1995c, 38).⁵ The link between a diasporic Chinese figure from the past and the contemporary Sinophone subject is emphasized as both concept and practice. Throughout the play, waves of images focusing on the "vast, seemingly endless" potential of the ocean and the liminal position of Zheng He "in the limbo between departing and arriving, between being a man and a non-man" presents displacement and wandering as productive for the "dreaming, hoping, searching, struggling" of an uprooted person (*ibid.*, 49, 68).

In commenting on *Descendants*, scholars have highlighted Kuo's cultural orphan mentality, which the playwright has conceptualized as a "condition of marginality" where one is unable to "return to [. . .] cultural parentages" or "be at home in the past" (*ibid.*, 16). Consequently, cultural orphans "can only grope for a way forward, to make his or her spiritual home in the midst of loss and alienation" and are compelled to accept multiple lines of parentage so as to "counter the cultural impurities already infused in [their] blood" (*ibid.*). As an alternative foundation for a common local identity and culture, Kuo suggests that cultural development "should be de-linked from the racial and linguistic origin of the individual" to build upon a generative practice based on structures of multiculturalism and racial diversity beyond the constraints of state governance (Kuo 1998, 60).

The narrator of *Descendants* ponders Zheng He's seven voyages across the Western Ocean during the early fifteenth century in comparison to the present-day experience of global mobility: "Maybe he was feeling what we would be thinking when we travel out

5) Page numbers cited from *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun* (2003) edited by C. J. W.-L. Wee and Lee Chee Keng.

of the country. In a state of limbo, but free from constraints and controls” (Kuo 1995c, 52). In this way, Zheng He is appropriated as an ancient example of the modern cultural orphan—a “nameless, sexless, rootless, homeless” figure who has to live a “rootless wanderer’s” life (*ibid.*, 56, 68). The eunuch admiral is believed to have been a prominent Muslim in Confucian high society, a Hui minority loyal steward in the Han-dominated imperial palace, and the primeval example of an overseas expatriate. Yet, Kuo’s play reveals how the “600-year old legend of a molested and incarcerated man” remains “a humble alien, a wandering slave, a worthless servant to all and sundry” (*ibid.*, 1, 9).

As a “faithful servant of the Ming Emperor and an imperial emissary to blaze a trail of glory for the Middle Kingdom,” the Grand Director was an expatriate, forced to create his own indefinable domiciliary zone, a home “across the ocean, on the seas” (*ibid.*, 60, 66). The play dramatizes the way Zheng He comprehended his own liminality:

To keep my head
 I must accept losing my tail
 To keep my faith
 I must learn to worship others’ gods
 To please my lord
 I must eliminate his enemy
 To serve his pleasure
 I must purge my own
 Allah knows my bitterness
 Buddha has mercy upon my soul
 Sea Goddess protects my fleet
 Voyages to the West fulfil my life
 Alone, I can stand up to any man
 Freed, I can scale any height
 “Cleansed,” I cling to but one thought
 My master’s will is my survival. (*ibid.*, 54)

Zheng He’s soliloquy highlights the currency of his marginality in the multiple spheres of ethnicity, gender, and religion as one making him “a loyal creature,” “highly marketable” and capable of assimilating distinct cultural environments (*ibid.*, 58). By invoking the blessings of Allah, Buddha, and the Sea Goddess, Zheng He exhibits a tripartite state of being in which he is able to turn the physical violence of being “cleansed”—i.e., castrated—to reinvent his identity and “survival,” one where he would “seep into the lives of so many people in so many places, through so many ways over so long a time . . .” (*ibid.*, 54, 60).

Framed in the context of a dream, *Descendants* exposes that, unlike Zheng He, the contemporary man seems not to have woken up to the productivity of his own liminal

state as a space of encounters, transcendence, and reflection. Instead, modern individuals are castrated by the pursuit of pragmatic economic gain and postcolonial capitalism that has led to the fragmentation of multicultural exchange. After Singapore's independence in 1965, the decolonization process posed significant challenges for the nation in harmonizing its conglomeration of ethnic cultures (including Malay, Chinese, and Indian Singaporeans) intermingled with the remnants of British colonial culture. The People's Action Party (PAP) led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew subsequently sought to construct a common identity uniting Singapore's multiethnic population (Bedlington 1978; Peterson 2001). In 1979 the government promulgated public policy that imposed English as the *lingua franca* and "first language" of Singapore, believing that a common language would allow people to communicate with relatively little conflict (Shepherd 2005). By transforming Singapore into a global village, the government aimed to promote international trade and develop science and technology (Bedlington 1978; Ganguly 2003).

Kuo, while recognizing the real gain in national wealth and the importance of overcoming language barriers for cross-cultural communication, lamented that privileging English formally marginalized all other languages. As he remarked: English as "the national first language relegat[es] all ethnic ones to second language status [. . .]. Has any other majority population ever committed such an extraordinary act of voluntary uprooting, preferring to its own language (a major world language) one which its former colonizer forced upon it?" (Kuo 1996, 168). In Kuo's view, it was incomprehensible that Singapore, as a multiracial and multicultural city-state inhabited by a majority population of Chinese (75 percent), with substantial Malay (14 percent) and Indian (10 percent) communities, would reproduce the colonial mentality after independence and display "a lack of self-reflexive, post-colonial consciousness" (Ganguly 2003; Quah 2006, 91; DSS 2013).

For the Chinese Singaporean community, the official appointment of Mandarin as a mother tongue was doubly limiting: the policy demoted Mandarin to the status of a second language and also discouraged other Sinitic dialects (Xu *et al.* 1998). This denied Chinese Singaporeans an important link to their ancestral heritage accessed through provincial dialects (Pan 1990; Xu *et al.* 1998; Rappa and Wee 2006). As such, the Singapore government's ethnic management policy to maintain racial harmony fundamentally divided cultural groups, leading to gulfs of interracial ignorance and indifference (Kwok 1998; Teng 2000; Tan 2013). Although the language policy successfully fostered racial peace, it restricted the development of cross-cultural exchange, impeding the emergence of a unified local identity (Rappa and Wee 2006; Gopinathan 2013). In *Descendants*, the amputating effect of a homogenous language policy is likened to the eunuch admiral's fate of being "cut and dried, plugged and exiled," wandering with a shriveled sense of self

(Kuo 1995c, 66). Yet, being an “orphan, wanderer, eunuch, admiral,” Zheng He not only reminds contemporary Singaporeans of the importance of being aware of one’s culture while assimilating others, but also prompts people to take advantage of their modern mobility and cultural liminality to fully appreciate the way “every land and sky and water is home” (*ibid.*).

Kuo’s critique of the Singaporean government’s approach to nation-building speaks to Ernest Renan’s canonical text on civic nationalism. Renan’s central argument proposes that the nation is a conglomerate of people who share a common past and have derived a strong bond anchored in an agreement to live together and be governed by mutual consent. He elaborates that it is neither race, language, religion, nor geography that creates a nation, but rather the “powerful link between men” that creates a “community of interest”: if people are willing to consolidate their past and perpetuate their unity to be governed together by consent, then they are a nation (Renan 1882, 204–205). The richness of creating such a nation through the transcendence of multiple physical and psychological frontiers is suggested in *Descendants* through the market exchange scene and the final pithy message “Departing is my arriving/Wandering is my residence” (Kuo 1995c, 66).

Descendants draws explicit parallels between the history of Zheng He and the modern Sinophone Singaporean to dramatize the tensions between service to the state, individuality, and capitalism. As Kuo notes in the 1995 performance program:

I am beginning to feel that affluence has produced enough frustration to make wondering an increasingly inevitable impulse. Zheng He is especially inspiring to Singaporeans on many levels and [. . .] dimensions. As a minority Chinese ethnically, religiously, culturally, and as a eunuch rising to the pinnacle of power and achievement, Zheng He mirrors [Singapore’s] existence in many ways. (*ibid.*, 1)

Being a major entrepot port of Southeast Asia, Singapore has been undeniably “rising to the pinnacle of power and achievement” as a global city-state representing bountiful trade and a burgeoning economy amidst a melting pot of multiple cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. Along these lines, the markets in *Descendants* are presented as spaces of prelapsarian capitalism and cosmopolitan contact zones for exchange of the carnivalesque (Wee 2004; Tan 2013). The marketplace becomes a site of active interaction for “a flotilla of people and goods” in an expansive Asian globalism (Pratt 1992; Kuo 1995c, 59). These contact zones are sites of transnationalism beyond “a simple homogenous idea of national culture within national boundaries policed by the nation-state” (Dirlik 2004, 15).

On the basis of a “great trading festival” facilitating the exchange of commodities such as metal, seeds, fabrics, and feathers, the marketplace then transforms into a car-

nivalesque space that embraces and celebrates cultural interactions of diverse forms and origins. The whole process involves competition, negotiation, and integration between global forces and local markets (Pratt 1992; Wee 2004). More than a mere display of distinct cultural features, all sorts of people gather at these markets, and there is “a show of mutual respect between the Muslims, the Hindus, and the Buddhists” that reveals the active and generative commingling of cultures in contact (Kuo 1995c, 59; Tan 2013). Such a festive space certainly invokes Mikhail Bahktin’s notion of the carnivalesque as a “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order,” marking “the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” with an “atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity” (Bahktin 1984, 153, 195).

It is intriguing that with these scenes of the marketplace, Kuo compares the Ming Dynasty and modern-day Singapore as going through similar modernizing processes in different eras: both experience periods of wealth and prosperity, where social life is marked by markets and a burgeoning consumerist culture. The portrayal of trading markets focuses on economic aspects that defined the Ming Dynasty and corresponds to Singapore’s own trajectory of recent economic development. Although foreign objects circulated widely during the Ming, Chinese people regarded them as fascinating but ultimately useless. This sentiment comes through in *Descendants*, where foreign objects—including “bulls that charge not at red but anything that is blue in color,” “acrobatic goats with green fleece,” and “dancing chickens as tiny and exquisite as pearls”—do not serve any functional purpose (Kuo 1995c, 59–60). Additionally, in Scene 11, the narrator provides a vivid description of polar bears “playfully amusing themselves in the imperial garden lake now richly covered with ice” (*ibid.*, 55). These polar bears reveal the way foreign animals are perceived as mere foreign spectacles. Kuo throws skepticism upon the lasting impact of markets to sustain cultural interaction and diversity, suggesting the need to turn to noncommercial engagements to achieve multicultural understanding.

Geopolitics of Cultural Identity and Self-Castration

When commenting on his inspiration for *Descendants*, Kuo explains that as he wrote the play, “a much darker and spiritually disturbing aspect of Grand Eunuch Zheng He began to grip and sting the deeper recesses of [his] being: His castration” (quoted in Tan 2013, 230). The narrator’s preoccupation with the experience of castration as such and his inexplicable fear of being castrated—“a removal of his manhood,” his *baobei*—is unnerving

for a play that concerns itself with the descendants of a castrated man. But what does it mean for the Grand Director of the Three Treasures to be permanently deprived of his “treasure,” to have his penis “cut, fried, and dried” and placed in a box to legitimize his status in the Imperial Palace’s eunuch service (Kuo 1995c, 40)? Kuo describes in detail how eunuchs had to show their *baobeis* as “their single most important document or article of qualification,” turning a commentary on the Ming Dynasty eunuch organizational structure into a critique of the modern world’s capitalist networks and commercial companies, stating that both organizations are “a network of pricks” (*ibid.*, 41).

The theme of castration is sustained throughout the play and is evocative of the symbolically castrated contemporary Sinophone subject. In Scene 5, the narrator initially imagines himself as a young boy, nicknamed “Doggie,” who made the life decision to become a eunuch and describes the discomfiting experience of being castrated by his father (*ibid.*, 44–45). This scene reveals that Kuo was aware that many men voluntarily submitted themselves to the literal and symbolic castration necessary for service in the imperial palace. In contrast to the voluntary eunuch, the narrator asserts that Zheng He did not have a choice: “He was summarily cut and cleansed by his masters when he was barely a teenager—because there was a need, a huge need for eunuchs. You see, eunuchs seem to have started fulfilling a very important aristocratic need since many thousands of years ago,” ranging from mundane bedside tasks to leading empire-building projects (*ibid.*, 45). Despite Zheng He’s castration, his voyages to foreign realms provided him with defining moments of transcendence.

The allegory of the castrated man is both a critique and a reminder for Singaporeans to appropriate their mobility and in-betweenness as contemporary subjects (Quah 2004). Kuo cautions that we should not be complacent that the days of eunuchs “are long gone with the demise of the imperial age. Indeed, castration has been recreated by modern man, and that castration is not always inflicted by others; there is now a modern version called self-castration which can be, and has been, effected simply by people permissively heaping affluence and comfort upon themselves” (Kuo 1996, quoted in Quah and Wee 2008, 229). The severed penis, a fundamental part of the male body for fertility and reproduction, is likened to the cultural sensitivity of the contemporary Sinophone individual. It is described as “a piece of something” that has been “deep-fried in oil to keep it dry and antiseptic” that a person has to sacrifice to “attain wealth and status” (*ibid.*, 45). The narrative here reflects criticisms of Singapore’s arts scene as a “cultural desert” during the 1990s, reproaching the modern Sinophone person for sacrificing their cultural identity and self-castrating artistic development in the myopic pursuit of material success (Wee 2003). Although the contemporary individual may have been unwillingly or unwittingly subjected to such forms of self-castration, the circumscribed reality of castration,

deracination, and entrapment by service to the state will remain as long as the pursuit of pragmatic economic gains continues to fragment local spheres (Koh 1989; Woon and Teo 2002).

As much as the play might have celebrated the appearance of harmonious multiracial relations, there is a much darker aspect of the Grand Eunuch Zheng He that reflects Kuo's personal narrative on the Singaporean experience. It is worth highlighting that the division of roles between author, narrator, and actor is blurred in the play, hinting that Kuo might have conceived of Zheng He as a sort of alter ego. At several points in the play, the narrator conveys suspicion about the glorious and unmarred story of Zheng He, his voyages, and the multicultural productivity of markets vis-à-vis foreign encounters. In Scene 9, the narrator explicitly addresses the intentions and actual history of Zheng He, whom he states everyone knows as "the cleanest and the most respectable" of all famous eunuchs (Kuo 1995b, 51). Yet, he questions: "Had he really done nothing evil or untoward as a trusted lieutenant of a powerful Emperor well-known for his cruel and scheming nature? [. . .] Was he more than the eunuch that we have generally imagined him to be, or less than the hero which the historians and legends have portrayed him to be?" (*ibid.*, 51–52).

What, then, is the purpose of Kuo making elusive references to tensions between eunuchs and civil officials, and how would such details be relevant to a contemporary Singaporean audience? The release of the play in 1995 is significant: in 1976, Kuo and his wife were interned without trial for allegedly being members of the Malayan People's Liberation League and "propagat[ing] leftist dance and drama" (*Straits Times* 1976, 30; Wee 2004, 775). Prior to Kuo's detainment, his radical theater practices overtly critiqued the displacement and exploitation that resulted from the Singaporean bureaucracy's blinkered focus on rapid modernization, with titles such as *Hey, Wake Up* 喂, 醒醒! (1968), *The Struggle* 挣扎 (1969), and *Growing Up* 成长 (1973).⁶ The PAP government released Kuo in October 1980 but did not reinstate his revoked citizenship until 1992—and then only after application (Wee and Lee 2003).

After four years and seven months in detention, Kuo moved away from a single-minded belief in drama as a means to reform society to a more complex understanding of art's relation to society as he continued experimenting with multilingual theater (Devan 2000). He described the detention as "a moment of humbleness" and "a very sobering experience—you get cut down, you know that you don't know enough" (Lo 1993, 138–139). *Descendants* was the only monodrama that Kuo himself wrote in both Chinese and

6) Notably, *The Struggle* (1969) was banned by the authorities as it overtly dramatized Singapore's social turmoil resulting from rapid urban reconstruction and inflow of multinational investment (Yu 2007).

English after being reinstated as a Singaporean citizen. The play's expressionism was a turn away from his previous works, which were more straightforward and culturally accessible staged dramas; as Lin Ke Huan comments, Kuo's earlier plays were "a little too eager in his social engagement. They were all like a tactless petition against social injustice and lacked the composure and cool detachment of a mature artist with the ability to rise above and transcend his material for the purpose of artistic creation" (Lin 2003, 140). Thus, Kuo's change in theatrical direction and narrative technique during the mid-1980s reflects a renewed questioning of reality, history, and social concerns (*ibid.*). On a practical level, the turn to expressionism also served to engage a wider multiracial Singaporean audience (Krishnan 1997; Koh 1998; Lo 2004).

The 1990s in Singapore corresponds with significant shifts in literary and cultural production, when racial and ethnic themes became an important aspect of the popularization of Singaporean literary production (Krishnan 1997; Peterson 2001). Beginning in the 1980s, against the backdrop of the dominance of the English language, the government also intensified its "Speak Mandarin" campaign (Ong 1991; Kwok *et al.* 2002). This campaign coincided with a "Confucianist" discourse of development that valorized a certain definition of "Chinese-ness" and Sinitic values as the foundation of Singaporean culture (Tu 1991; 1996; Wee and Lee 2003; Kim 2014).⁷

At the same time, the Singapore government also began plans to turn the nation into an international center of the arts by promoting an industry of aesthetic production (Nathan 1999). Although significant funds were provided by the Ministry of Information and the Arts for literary and dramatic productions, such activities pressured artists to commercialize their work to appeal to mass audiences for state sponsorship (Wong 2001). This move inevitably linked cultural production to state ideology, where literature and drama were incorporated in the government project of hegemonizing state ideology (Koh 1980; 1989; Wong 2001).⁸ The Singapore National Pledge of building a culturally open society "regardless of race, language or religion" seemed to be a rapidly fading vision

7) As a result of this discourse, literary texts were studied in school alongside colonial texts, producing a generation of young Singaporean consumers of local fiction. This radically altered the Singaporean arts audience, which now consisted of younger but less well-educated people perusing literary works for entertainment rather than enlightenment (Koh 1980; Holden 2000; Kwok *et al.* 2002).

8) Koh Tai Ann's work on cultural development in Singapore argues that the state's promotion of cultural activity is linked to the political agenda of developing national solidarity and shaping national culture so that both ethnic communalism and "over-Westernization" are contained (1980; 1989, 717–718). The government's ideological commitment to multiculturalism and a "democratic spirit that eclectically combines a socialist spirit with capitalism practices" means that cultural values and development are consistently, even insistently, linked to economic development and productivity (Koh 1989, 720; Wong 2001).

(Ong 1991; Wee and Lee 2003).⁹⁾

The discourse of the castrated man and intellectual exile sustained throughout Kuo's *Descendants* likely has personal significance. Although the author-narrator-actor attempts to speak out on behalf of contemporary society about issues of multiculturalism and the dangers of pragmatic capitalism, as a creative work the play reads more like an author's spiritual journey of self-doubt, self-debate, and self-actualization. The journey of the narrator from anxiety to acceptance and respect toward his roots—or lack thereof—is punctuated with satirical humor and absurd scenarios. As a Sinophone Singaporean artist always speaking from the margins and from a unique expatriate experience, Kuo may have found a foil in Zheng He as the fundamental paradigm of a hybrid and diasporic existence. The antithesis of purity, Zheng He is a man of (post)modern transnational times, yet also its opposite as a premodern legendary character. In Kuo's perspective, Singaporean society is one made up of “a body and history of uprooted peoples from different cultures, countries and races, living together, searching and struggling for something” (Kuo 1996, 172). Hence, Zheng He's emasculated, fragmented, and exilic Hui Muslim Chinese life—as fractured as the contemporary Sinophone Singaporean's cultural experience—fittingly comes through in *Descendants* as disjointed images.

The Modern Zheng He Figure

By positioning himself in the artistic role of a modern Sinophone eunuch, Kuo seeks to confront and overcome obstacles in his work put up by red tape and a mechanistic bureaucracy. Through this trying process, he gains a renewed respect for tradition, a newly gained perspective that leads him to a poignant recognition of his humanity, echoed in the concluding statement that “the eunuch admiral seemed never to have given up hope of finding an alternate life” (Kuo 1995a, 66). Kuo Pao Kun's appropriation of *Xiyang ji*

9) The public reception of literary texts was profoundly shaped and directed by the deep penetration of state ideological apparatuses. In 1994 Catherine Lim, a popular Singaporean author, wrote a social commentary on “The PAP and the People: A Great Affective Divide” published by *The Straits Times*. The article criticized the ruling party's political agenda as one based on “logic, precision, meticulous analysis and hard-nosed calculation and quantification. Their style is impersonal, brisk, business-like, no-nonsense, pre-emptive” (Lim 1994, 16). This provoked an aggressive response from then Prime Minister Goh, who asserted that the authority of the prime minister should not be undermined by “writers on the fringe,” singling out writers in general as a peripheral class, whose activity of cultural production was to be nonpolitical. He articulates that the arena of the cultural should be “sanctuaries” from the political fray, and that only politicians had the right to represent the nation. Hence, the Singaporean artist is forced to shrink from sociopolitical work (Lim 1995; Tay 2011).

and the Eunuch Admiral Zhen He's legacy in writing his Singaporean play therefore dramatizes an individual who holds on to a Chinese identity even while engaging with immersive multiraciality. The play engages the audience in what the narrator himself indicates as "dreaming all by [him]self" so as to be "able to look at [him]self, look inside [him]self, and look through [himself]" and into an encounter with the unfathomable depths of life together (*ibid.*, 38). Kuo sets up a dialogical relationship with the pre-modern tale in *Descendants*, responding to and negotiating with the classical tradition. Put another way, cultural and ethnic castration can serve as an impetus for producing new cultural identities that are drawn from a multitude of parental sources to develop an "open culture" that can extend beyond the shores of the city-state. However, in the end, *Descendants* seems to tell us that cultural identity and history are hard to extricate from the economic and political realms—even Zheng He ultimately heeds the call of the markets (*ibid.*, 67). Any person who is implicated in serving the state and the global markets must face the challenge of transcending the literal and symbolic violence done to the cultural sphere and aspire to flexible identities (Sim 2002; Wee and Lee 2003).

The theme of (self-)castration, read as a symptom, takes up the parameters of moral imperatives and reveals the inability and/or unwillingness of Singaporean Chinese writers to locate their ethnic identity in the flux of contemporary life. The severed and boxed-up penis that was once an essential part of a young man's body allegorizes the troping of a fundamental Chinese cultural identity as the "past" of Singapore—a reminder of the past within the present, as something that has been cut and dried, rendered anti-septic and dead. *Descendants* represents Kuo Pao Kun's yearning for a creative open culture and productive multiculturalism, but also directs an embittered critique at Singapore's bureaucracy and cultural policies in hegemonizing a multiethnic society and marginalizing artistic creation. Although castrated, the Grand Eunuch's corporeal non-productivity has been translated into textual and cultural Sinophone re-productivity as his legacy continues to sail on in the imaginations of many people. Artistic and cultural development is put forward not merely as an attempt to recapture a premodern past, but instead as a productive means to imagine a present moment of the past, and for proposing new directions toward a modernized and multiethnic Singaporean society.

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No Room to Swing a Cat? Animal Treatment and Urban Space in Singapore

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Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the People's Action Party government has launched an extensive urban planning program to transform the island into a modern metropolis. This paper discusses human-animal relations and the management of stray cats in postcolonial Singapore. In exploring the perceptions and handling of stray cats in Singapore, I argue that stray cats became an urban "problem" as a result of the government's public-health regime, urban renewal projects, and attempts to fashion itself and Singapore for international tastes, and that cat activists are the main agents of rebuilding connections between animals and everyday urban life. In particular, I analyze how cat-welfare associations and individual citizens assume functions that the government has been loath to perform unless absolutely necessary.

Keywords: animal geographies, human-animal relations, cats, Singapore, urban space

Introduction

Singapore, the "Garden City," has undergone a massive program of urban reform, renewal, and resettlement since independence in 1965. The government of the People's Action Party, which has enjoyed uninterrupted rule, dispersed the population of the overcrowded central-town district to peripheral "new towns," which were built on land appropriated from old village communities. Through education, land reclamation, military conscription, and public housing, the government created a disciplined industrial workforce (now housed in flats built by the Housing Development Board, or HDB, and linked to factories and offices via highways) along Fordist lines, thus engineering tremendous changes in the human landscape of Singapore (Barr and Skrbis 2008; Chua 1997; Dobbs 2003; Loh 2007; Wee 2007). This massive control over space defined the postcolonial history of Singapore, whose modernity depended as much on facilitating motion as on

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preventing it (Netz 2004, xii).

Although historians have delineated the relationship between authoritarian rule, economic development, and social engineering in Singapore, they have been slow in integrating the work of geographers, who have addressed how landscapes, both material and immaterial, serve as cultural representations and social channels that foster and maintain the state ideologies of human progress and nation building. The government redeveloped the city center—now marked by skyscrapers and the reconstructed “racial enclaves” of Chinatown, Kampong Glam, and Little India—to showcase Singapore’s global connectedness and historical legacies. It developed Marina Promenade and the banks of the Singapore River into a tourist attraction and up-market residential zone that appealed to expatriate executives and foreign visitors. It also created new art spaces such as the Esplanade (home to Theatres on the Bay) and renovated colonial landmarks and dilapidated shophouses to present Singapore as a vibrant arts and cultural hub worthy of admiration at home and abroad (Kong and Yeoh 2003; Chang *et al.* 2013; Ho *et al.* 2014).

In recent years, historians began to recognize the impact of the natural environment, and attempts to reconfigure it, on the economic, political, and social history of Singapore. They have established that the British colonial authorities and the postcolonial People’s Action Party government were interested not only in demolishing outdated structures and flattening the landscape but also in conserving heritage and preserving monuments and parks (including the Botanical Gardens, a new addition to UNESCO’s heritage sites as a “cultural landscape”) to promote scientific research, urban redevelopment, and the construction of a modern national identity (Barnard 2014; Blackburn and Tan 2015). Educated in English-language universities, Singapore’s leaders understood that modernization and national success emerged from urban industrial growth, as in the American and European historical experiences. To maintain economic and political legitimacy, they would need to succeed by these terms (Kwak 2008, 87–88).

Nevertheless, historians studying Singapore’s past have not picked up on animal geographies, which not only inquire into relationships between nature and society and how nature shapes human cultural practices, but also define animals as “central agents in the constitution of space and place, and all that entails” (Wolch and Emel 1998, xiii). The “power of geography” is unleashed when space constitutes, constrains, and mediates social relations. As Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh elaborate, the power relations that define and contest the specificities of the Singaporean nation are negotiated through “elements of the cultural landscape, including the landscapes and practices of everyday life” (2003, 15). Specialists on Southeast Asia have conducted a fair amount of research on animal-welfare activism and the discursive and practical uses of animals in both colo-

nial and postcolonial contexts. In particular, they have analyzed how wild animals such as tigers instilled fear that reshaped local practices and thrived in the popular imagination, and how domesticated animals such as horses and pigs were bred, constructed, and used (Boomgaard 2001; Bankoff and Swart 2007; Neo 2011). The humanlike orangutan, found only in Borneo and Sumatra, straddled the boundary between culture and nature, threatening the anthropocentric view of people who refused to define humans as animals (Cribb *et al.* 2014). In twentieth-century and modern-day Malaysia and Singapore, animal slaughter, which occurred as a result of the encroachment of residential development into animal habitats and the intervention of colonial and national laws in local cultures and trades, was revealed to be a contentious issue on moral, racial, and religious grounds (Yeo and Neo 2010; Yahaya 2015). That said, the existing scholarship on Singapore or Southeast Asia in general throws little light on human-animal relationships in specific urban settings, where human domination is absolute (animals are killed or subdued) and animals eke out a living in what is for them a “post-apocalyptic” world (Atkins 2012). As humans gain control over animals’ biological cycle (procreation, growth, and death) through culling and neutering, they also determine where (and whether) animals should live (Netz 2004, 15–16). This is especially true in cities, where humans and animals live in close proximity and have to compete for scarce living space, space that becomes “property” to which access can be limited.

By exploring the controversies surrounding human-cat relations in postcolonial Singapore, this paper examines how the People’s Action Party government, ordinary citizens, and social groups (mainly cat-welfare organizations) perceived the urban landscape, “with their own versions of reality and practice,” and perceived “conflicts over the production, definition, and use of space” (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 15). I argue that the government, which was far more interested in developing human resources than in harnessing animal ones, did not concern itself with the management of stray cats unless it received complaints or pressure from segments of the public, or unless a perceptible disease or health hazard arose from the presence of stray cats.¹ In lieu of the government, which played the role of arbiter, cat lovers and haters (and self-professed neutral intermediaries voicing their opinions) collaborated with one another or counteracted one another’s actions, according to what they saw as significant at the time. The public—conventionally categorized into groups constituting civil society but actually defying any facile characterization—served as the main agents reconnecting cats with everyday life

1) A case that illuminates the government’s nonchalance toward animal resources is its eradication of pig farming in the 1980s, when it decided that Singapore, given the country’s booming economy and expanding population, would fail to achieve self-sufficiency in pork in the long run and that the land occupied by pig farms could be redeveloped for more economically productive purposes (Neo 2016).

after an intensive phase of national development that alienated citizens from their ideals of and economic dependence on nature. As stray cats reemerged in the urban landscape, ordinary citizens and social groups endowed them with different meanings and came into conflict with one another over how to perceive and manage them. By acting as a neutral mediator, the government settled the differences with purportedly altruistic intent, but dominated the opposing camps as a result. Social forces gelled into fluid coalitions, but what linked them together was their concern for cats, which spawned a variety of configurations and interpretations of human-cat relations. Material and metaphorical boundaries created mental maps by demarcating urban spaces as domains of human dominance and cat subservience, but the boundaries were highly permeable and susceptible to animal transgressions (Yeo and Neo 2010, 682). Since stray cats are ubiquitous in Singapore but are seen as “out of place,” they are particularly interesting, having perhaps the greatest potential to disrupt cultural sorting systems (Holmberg 2015, 58).

This paper consists of a concise background of cats in Singapore, followed by three episodes concerning cats as pests, national symbols, and victims of cruelty. The three disparate episodes are productive because they disclose how stray cats became a problem as human-animal relations and state-society relations became spatialized owing to the government’s nation building, urban-redevelopment projects, and public-health regime.

A word is in order on the main cat-welfare activists under discussion—members of the Cat Welfare Society (CWS). The CWS was founded in 1999 by a group of volunteers concerned about the welfare of “cats living on the streets of Singapore.” It was registered as a charity in 2004. Run by volunteers, it does not receive regular funding, and most of its funds dedicated to outreach programs and cat sterilization is raised through public fundraisers and members’ donations and subscriptions. It prefers to call stray cats “community cats,” since it believes that their home is the human environment and pledges to “care for the nation’s cats.” Its main objective is “saving [cat] lives through sterilization.” It promotes the right of cats to be “represented accurately and humanely [and] be free of pain, fear, and suffering” (CWS, <http://www.catwelfare.org/>). While some CWS members are wealthy and well-educated elite Singaporeans, membership has expanded over the years to include working-class people. It has no official patron in the government and suffers from a perennial shortage of funds (*Straits Times*, hereafter *ST* 2015). Nevertheless, by working closely with state agencies to resolve cat issues in local communities, it has considerable influence over state policies toward cats.

Roaming Singapore, 1960–80

Singapore achieved self-rule in 1959, and the People's Action Party government perceived itself as inheriting an "environmental crisis" from the British colonial administration. Despite colonial efforts at urban planning, which were restricted to the central town, Singapore in the 1960s had one of Southeast Asia's largest urban-slum and squatter populations, characterized by dilapidation, overcrowding, and inadequate infrastructure (Yuen 1996, 959).

As People's Action Party rhetoric would have it, the *kampongs* (Malay for village) that dotted the rural landscape provided such deplorable living conditions that only a "planned programme of clearance and rebuilding" could render these settlements hospitable (Loh 2007, 8). Former Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee (1973) associated colonial Singapore with "nasty things like mosquitoes, insects, snakes, and centipedes, quite apart from the likely absence of creature comforts such as running water, modern sanitation, electric power, and air conditioning," which his government would offer to the people. A problem that Goh identified in the colonial economy was the lack of a "serious attempt to get the countryside into the grip of a dynamic modernization process," which the government remedied by a "hollowing out of the central area" and colonizing the rural hinterland (Hee and Ooi 2003). As a result, as *kampung* dwellers abandoned their gardens and pets to move into new HDB flats, gone were the old *kampung* days when children caught fish in drains, kept crickets and grasshoppers in matchboxes, and had cats and dogs in their homes without restriction (Lim 1996). The Chinese in the *kampongs* used to consume dogs and rabbits, but they did not eat cats because "it is not of the right type for food" (Chan 1995). The HDB decided that the "keeping of domestic animals and poultry is unsuitable in housing estates where families live in close proximity to each other, particularly, in compact multi-storeyed flats" (HDB 1960, 47).

However, soon after the housing estates were built, the government realized that it "could not entertain the stark vision of a landscape of concrete structures devoid of greenery." In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ruling elite launched an "urban beautification programme" to convert Singapore into a garden city of parks, trees, and open spaces, with the aims of providing recreational space for a growing urban population and attracting foreign capital (Yuen 1996, 957–965; Koh 2000, 40). The desire to "impose a rational order upon the relations created by the new productive system" took precedence over creating an affiliation with nature (Handlin 1963, 7–9). As a result of this embellishment of its model of development, the government preserved large tracts of forests for greenery and water catchment and left stray cats and dogs alone—at least

for a while.²⁾ In the open spaces of public parks, empty decks, and walkways of HDB flats, cats existed for human convenience and pleasure, a byproduct of an exercise of power that eliminated natural predators and threats to their survival and that created an unaesthetic landscape that called out for cats and greenery to adorn the HDB estates. Real affection for or coexistence with cats was impossible without dominance. Aggressive strays were reported, captured, and put down; only docile cats serving human aesthetics remained (Tuan 1984, 162–167).

The perception of stray cats and dogs had been negative in the central-town district. Street hawkers threatened public health with their improper disposal of food wastes, which fed strays thought to carry germs and spread disease (Yeo 1989; Kong 2007, 25–26). Throughout the 1960s, the HDB viewed hawkers as a “problem” and sought to relocate them to “modern and hygienic” hawker centers, where their activities could be monitored by officers of the Ministry of Health (HDB 1964, 49; 1965, 67; 1966, 60).

In Chinatown, residents blamed the ruckus that stray cats and dogs caused on a “thoughtless few” who turned their unwanted pets loose (*Singapore Free Press* 1960b). In the rural *kampongs*, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals collected stray cats and dogs in vans and founded a home for these “neglected animals” (*Singapore Free Press* 1960a). The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, known as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) after 1965, also set up kennels in churches for people to place unwanted animals in for collection (*ST* 1966). Some Singaporeans accused British servicemen of causing the problem of stray cats and dogs. The servicemen, after their brief sojourn in Singapore, allegedly released their pets to roam and spread danger and disease (*ST* 1968c)—a reminder of how medical discourse was adopted to legitimize animal exclusions and executions (Yeo and Neo 2010, 690)—although British residents vehemently denied such charges (*ST* 1968a; 1968b). The issue of stray cats and dogs remained outstanding throughout the 1960s as a result of bureaucratic inefficiency and a lack of resources to remove strays from the streets: police constables refused to handle the animals, and the SPCA and the Animal Infirmary (also known as the Veterinary Centre) did not operate on weekends (*ST* 1969).

Some Singaporeans had asked the Ministry of National Development to implement a policy of requiring cats to be licensed (*ST* 1971b). The ministry refused to do so, claiming that the number of stray animals collected by the SPCA had dropped by more

2) Race and multiculturalism eventually took their toll on stray dogs. Dogs are considered unclean by most Malays, so the government put down almost all stray dogs by the 1980s. At present, dogs roam only in Singapore’s remotest, most “pristine” regions (wastelands, as opposed to state land), and cats dominate on the island as the numerically and physically largest and most visible mammal besides humans (Stimpfl 2006, 75).

than half—from about 3,000 a month in the 1960s to about 1,250 a month as of mid-1971. The SPCA attributed the drop to the “increasing awareness of Singaporeans to the problems of health and hygiene caused by stray animals.” Nevertheless, stray cats and dogs continued to roam free in parts of Singapore as a result of the move of large groups of people into flats, since former dwellers of the *kampongs* abandoned their pets when they moved to HDB estates. The SPCA petitioned the government to provide an emergency 24-hour service to pick up any injured animal in HDB estates, but the government replied that “there was no need to provide such a service since there were private veterinarians . . . who were available on call at any time” (*New Nation* 1971b). The Ministry of National Development contended that the problem of stray cats originated in irresponsible ownership, and refused to devote its allegedly scarce resources to provide anything more than the Veterinary Centre (*ST* 1971a). Animal lovers found it “more productive” to send strays to SPCA kennels because the staff of the Animal Infirmary just “would not bother” (*New Nation* 1971a).

The SPCA suggested that eating places and markets were leading “dumping grounds” for unwanted cats and dogs because people believed that the animals could survive on leftover food in such places (*New Nation* 1973), so the SPCA instituted a spaying program—which the government encouraged by reducing licensing fees for spayed dogs from 15 to 5 Singaporean dollars per year—for stray animals captured in these areas (*ST* 1973). The requests from the public for help in spaying their cats overwhelmed the SPCA, which stated that it could not “meet the spaying fees for an unlimited number of cats” because it had insufficient funds (*ST* 1974). A “division of labor” emerged with regard to the treatment of stray cats in the open dining areas of food stalls and markets: the Ministry of Environment launched campaigns for more hygienic food to be served in those places, while the SPCA controlled the stray-cat population to prevent “cats at these stalls [from] nibbling at dirty dishes.” Stray dogs, for some reason, did not roam the eating places and wet markets (*ST* 1975). Many Singaporeans recognized that the SPCA, despite a perennial shortage of funds and volunteer helpers, had done a “commendable job caring for thousands of stray animals in Singapore” (*New Nation* 1975). Other Singaporeans believed that aside from support from the government, the SPCA required more cooperation from the public itself (*New Nation* 1976b). They perceived HDB officials as having tried their best at directing hawkers in the outdoor dining places not to feed the stray cats there, albeit to no avail (*New Nation* 1976a).

Yielding to the complaints of cat haters, the HDB issued a controversial ban on cats in flats in September 1978, on the grounds that “by nature [cats] tend to be stray and can be a nuisance to other flat dwellers” (*ST* 1978c). This soon proved to be counterproductive: cats were turned out of their homes and became stray as a result of the ban, and the

SPCA was overcrowded with cats (*ST* 1978a; 1978b; *New Nation* 1978). The SPCA continued its efforts to alleviate the longstanding problems of stray cats and the consequences of the HDB ban into the 1980s. The government never rescinded the ban and had left the public and the SPCA to assume the bulk of the responsibility of caring for stray cats and reducing their number. As if to exacerbate the problem, the government evicted the SPCA from the latter's premises for redevelopment, and the SPCA had to raise funds to build an expensive new building elsewhere (*ST* 1981). Over the next decade, until the late 1980s, Singaporeans, as one cat lover put it, hate cats so much that they break and cut the tails of cats and "force them to survive in drainpipes" (*New Paper* 1988).

The Singapura Cat as a National Symbol

News came to Singapore on the last day of 1989 that Singapore's alley or drain cats, introduced to the West as "Singapura" in 1975, had been winning awards and gaining championship status in global cat shows since 1981. The Singapura Cat attracted the attention of foreign cat breeders, who were keen on starting breeding programs for it, since it could fetch a price of US\$1,500 in the market (*ST* 1989).

The Singapura Cat was first introduced to the United States by an expatriate couple, Hal Meadow and her husband, when they brought four stray cats home from Singapore. After several years, their program of selective inbreeding produced the Singapura. When Meadow returned to Singapore in 1987 to scour the streets for cats to replenish the gene pool in her program, she sought the help of the Singapore Cat Club (established in 1973), which had been sending her cats that fit the bill. According to the Singapore Cat Club, its aim was "to get the breed recognized worldwide and to help Singapura cat lovers breed the cat worldwide" (*ibid.*).

Within months, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board took its cue from the news and adopted the Singapura—touted as the smallest breed of cats in the *Guinness Book of World Records*—as an icon. In its project to "liven up" the Singapore River and promote the country's image as a "City of Surprises," the board erected a series of 25 sculptures modeled after the Singapura on the banks of the Singapore River. According to the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, the Singapura was chosen because of its "beauty and lively spirit" (*ST* 1990e). However, as soon as the news broke out, skepticism set in. Journalists asked the board how it would know whether the Singapura Cats flown in as models for the sculptures were genuine, and why it would not "pick up a couple of stray Singapura Cats off the street" instead. They also commented sarcastically that the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board was about to get writers "to pen glorious stories

about the Singapura Cat,” and questioned why the lion or *singa* (which gives Singapore its name) was not featured in its place for greater “authenticity” (ST 1990d). In light of how Singapore’s media system had been structured from its inception to “provide maximum freedom of maneuver for the [People’s Action Party] government,” these comments were bold, candid, and direct for the milieu in which they appeared (George 2012).

Journalists were not the only ones who expressed reservations. Ordinary citizens felt that “Singapore should not lay claim to the [Singapura] unless it was bred out of [Singapore’s] drain cats.” To complicate matters, the Cat Fanciers’ Association, the top cat-breeding authority in the United States, was considering revoking the status of the Singapura as a pedigree owing to lingering doubts over its origins. Meadow had not been able to explain the irregularities in her accounts of how she bred the cats, which might have originated in the United States. As one concerned respondent remarked, “What’s the point [of adopting the cat as our own]? The cat is only of significance to us if it [is] from our drain cats. Now that they are not sure of its origins, it might have nothing to do with us, except for its name” (ST 1990b). Nevertheless, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board proceeded with its project centered on the Singapura, although amid the controversies it did put on hold the decision to adopt the cat as its mascot (ST 1991b).

Upon confirmation by the Cat Fanciers’ Association that the pedigree status of the Singapura would remain unchanged and the association’s suggestion that the board accept the breed as Singapore’s own, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board adopted the Singapura as its mascot and called it the Kucinta (a blend of two Malay words: *kucing* for cat and *cinta* for love) in a bid to capture the “warm, affectionate nature of the cat” and “indigenize” it (ST 1990a). The Kucinta was then made into sculptured porcelain cats to be presented as gifts to foreign delegates and ministers (ST 1991a). The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board hailed the Singapura as a “National Treasure” (Helgren 2013, 257). Despite years of promotion, however, Singaporeans did not regard the Singapura as their national symbol. The main reason was that the Singapura remained a breed hardly seen in people’s everyday lives, in the drains or on the streets. For most Singaporeans, the Singapura existed only as a stiff sculpture. It became embarrassing to the Singapore Cat Club when it received requests from Europe and Japan for the cat, for Singapore did not have any Singapura, which remained an extremely rare breed based in the United States. Although the Singapore Cat Club managed to purchase a pair from an American cattery and the Singapore Tourism Board (successor to Singapore Tourist Promotion Board) continued to promote the Singapura, Singaporeans were hardly enamored by its rare status and kept a distance from it.

According to the CWS, Singapore’s drain cats are “smaller, have funny knots in their tails, and do not have the prominent ‘M’ on their foreheads, unlike the Singapura.”

Another group, the Animal Lovers League, did not see the point in bringing in the Singapura: “The Singapore cat should represent the local cats. They should be the sons of our soil, not imports, not man-made [or] cloned” (ST 2003j). A reader of *The Straits Times* backed the Animal Lovers League, requesting both the Singapore Tourism Board and the Singapore Cat Club to “get real” and remove the misleading sculptures: “In whose memory will these non-existent cats, claimed to be produced by an American breeder using three strays she had found in Singapore, live on, and why should they be represented as Singapore icons” (ST 2003i)?

The Singapore Tourism Board apparently overlooked these concerns when it decided to host four Singapura Cats (which by then survived only in the homes of pet owners in Singapore and abroad) in the Singapore Zoological Gardens to celebrate National Day in 2004. The rationale was to give all citizens a chance to see the rare, pure-bred “national symbol” (ST 2004). The Felidae family of cats was no stranger to Singapore’s national imaginings. Its members are featured in the National Coat of Arms, Singa the Courtesy Lion, and the Lionhead symbol on official documents. Although citizens had accepted these symbols, they rejected the Singapura, signaling a refusal to see matters as the state sees them and a passive resistance prompted only when asked. At best, Singaporeans identified the Singapura as another governmental initiative, albeit a futile one, to embellish the nation with a Guinness World Record. At worst, they associated the cat with bourgeois culture, as only affluent households could afford to import and keep one. Some cat breeders even called the Singapura “a money-making scheme” (Helgren 2013, 257). As with the Merlion, the Singapura’s status as a tourist attraction works against its role as an organically evolved national symbol (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 158).

Ordinary citizens and cat associations (except for the Singapore Cat Club) distinguished drain cats and Singapurans. They insisted that the cats most representative of Singapore were found in the drains and streets (“drain cats” and “stray cats” are synonymous for them), not in the tourist attractions along the Singapore River or in the Singapore Zoological Gardens. This takes on even greater symbolic significance if we consider that drain cats had hidden and taken shelter in the sewers to escape from human persecution at a time when national development was most intense in the 1970s and 1980s (Morris 1999, 185). Although it would be stretching the narrative too far to argue that Singaporeans had anthropomorphized themselves into drain cats that survived the fast pace of economic development, the allegory is too striking to dismiss. Unlike the Singapura, the origins of drain cats are not mired in controversy: most breeders and pet owners accept the drain cat as more Singaporean, against what state agencies had wanted them to believe (ST 2003j).

The Singapore Tourism (Promotion) Board (and to a lesser extent the press) sought

to construct an indigenous mascot contrary to reality. The episode of the Singapura Cat as a national symbol offers insight into how state institutions attempt to blend notions of authenticity and familiarity with universal appeal for consumption by the international community. The Kucinta saga was an “invented tradition,” whose authenticity is less in evidence than is popularly supposed, and where change is disguised or “mistakenly perceived as adaptation” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Cannadine 2008, 315). The Singapore Tourism (Promotion) Board, promoting the cat as a somewhat refined breed of local drain cats that was “uniquely Singapore” (the tagline of the Singapore Tourism Board’s destination brand from 2004 to 2009), chose to overlook the controversy of the origins of the Singapura Cat. Seeking to find features that could apply to Singapore or that only Singapore possessed, the Singapore Tourism (Promotion) Board ignored common drain cats and refused—against what the populace had chosen to believe—to acknowledge these cats as a national symbol. The official perception of stray cats as common, dirty, and hence unworthy of national recognition was challenged, and the division of urban spaces in the popular imagination reflected divergent views held by state and society.

SARS Kills the Cat

In 2003 a massive culling of stray cats, known as the “SARS cat-culling incident,” took place in Singapore (Davis 2011, 183). To be sure, the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) conducted annual cullings of cats to keep the stray population under control. Every year, about 10,000 to 13,000 stray cats were put down (AVA 2003b). However, after the SARS outbreak, which killed 31 people out of 206 reported cases within three months, the AVA looked set to intensify its efforts at culling stray cats. The National Environmental Agency began to disinfect and fumigate food stalls and food (or hawker) centers—the perceived hotbeds of viral infection (*Associated Press* 2003e). Although former Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan mentioned that cats and dogs ran no risk of getting infected and that the SARS coronavirus was not known to cross species (*ST* 2003h), *The Straits Times* ignited debate when it placed a cartoon illustration on the front page captioned “Don’t leave food in the open for stray animals” next to the “Reports on SARS” header. The CWS was disappointed to see the cartoon, which depicted a cat eating a meal and excreting what looked like a virus, arguing that such cartoons would “unduly alarm the public” at a time when many animals were being abandoned by owners fearful of SARS. The CWS ended its statement by saying that the cartoon might “undermine the Government’s efforts to get people to live their lives as per [usual]” (*ST* 2003g).

True to its fear, many Singaporeans came to believe that cats and dogs spread the SARS virus.

After three cases of SARS were linked to the Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre, the AVA put down 100 stray cats and dogs there. The AVA maintained that putting down the 100 strays was part of its annual routine practices, which had nothing to do with SARS. Yet with the benefit of hindsight, we can say that it had everything to do with SARS. Dr. Ngiam Tong Tau, Chief Executive Officer of the AVA during the SARS period, recalled that the AVA knew little about SARS and was “really afraid because [there were] a lot of stray cats in Singapore.” AVA executives, assuming that the SARS virus resides in cats, decided to cull cats at the Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre and perform post-mortem examinations of them to isolate and find out more about the virus. The AVA set up a temporary postmortem site in Sembawang, a remote area in northern Singapore, and collected stray cats from all over Singapore to confirm whether the SARS virus had infected the cat population. The finding was negative, but the AVA did not reveal that to the public for fear that the finding was still not conclusive (Ngiam 2007). The AVA’s actions came in tandem with an increase in the number of abandoned cats and dogs, as reported by the SPCA (ST 2003f).

Animal-protection groups monitoring the number of cats and dogs in HDB estates reported that town councils had moved in to intensify the campaign to kill stray animals, “mainly cats.” The CWS entered the fray again and condemned the actions of the AVA and town councils, but the authorities continued to claim that they had intensified the culling of stray cats in housing estates, food centers, and wet markets as part of the “Singapore’s OK” program to clean up the environment and improve public hygiene. When the CWS criticized that such actions added to the public hysteria over stray cats, governmental agencies retorted that cat lovers were being paranoid about their routine (*Channel News Asia* 2003). At their wits’ end, cat lovers took the rescue of stray cats into their own hands. The Animal Lovers League gathered more than 2,000 stray cats and planned to send them to a cat shelter in Johor, Malaysia, but Malaysian officials refused to accept the cats into the Johor shelter, saying that Johor is not the place to cast off stray cats. For its part, Singaporean customs refused to issue export permits to the Animal Lovers League for stray cats (*Associated Press* 2003c; 2003d). As the episode unfolded, the Ministry of National Development intervened, declaring it a problem that all involved parties would solve “internally” “with the help of the animal welfare groups in Singapore” through consultation and reconciliation (ST 2003e).

The Animal Lovers League proposed the alternative plan of building a cat shelter next to an existing private kennel in a remote part of Singapore (*Dow Jones International News* 2003). Journalists and readers backed the plan, arguing that the government had

neither consulted nor worked closely with the public, but rather had unilaterally halted the Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme, in which volunteers collected stray cats for spaying before returning them to their environments, in favor of removing stray cats amid the SARS scare (AVA 2003a). Although the AVA reasoned that the scheme had not worked in several town councils, cat lovers countered that the AVA's website stated that culling by pest control companies "removes cats that are easily caught, leaving the wilder and often more prolific cats to continue to multiply . . . , [producing] immediate, short-term results but the results are temporary." Using the AVA's own logic, animal-protection groups urged that governmental agencies return to the scheme to rehabilitate rather than eradicate stray cats (ST 2003d).

As the government was deliberating on the groups' proposals, some 80 people gathered in a meeting room at a five-star hotel to mourn an estimated 700 cats exterminated by the authorities. Reports had it that "many of the lawyers, engineers, and executives present wept openly." Because all gatherings require a permit and speakers must seek police approval in Singapore, the mourners decided to hold a "private" memorial at the hotel. Animal activists said that they feared laws used for years to limit demonstrations by political opposition groups could be used against them if they make their opposition to the cat culling "too public." Meanwhile, a coalition of animal-protection groups began selling 1,000 T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "Kill Ignorance, Not Animals," to raise funds for building a cat shelter managed by the Animal Lovers League and having capacity to accommodate 2,000 to 3,000 stray cats. Most animal lovers, however, preferred more passive forms of protest, such as signing Internet petitions and encouraging their friends to wear blue ribbons in support of stray cats. They also rescued strays by rounding them up at night and caring for them until a home could be found. Thus, by resorting to "routine channels of voicing disagreement," animal lovers circumvented strict protest laws to express their anger (*Associated Press* 2003b). These upper-middle-class, white-collar professionals, while politically acquiescing to the government, could navigate laws on public assembly by knowing the "permissible boundaries" or "gray areas" of these laws and by acting within established political perimeters so as not to offer a direct challenge to state authority (Chong 2005). They mobilized their resources to create an alternative discursive space to express their opinion.

In the face of mounting public pressure, the government relented by auctioning off land for animal shelters, hoping to appease animal lovers. The AVA announced that it would open up five one- and two-acre lots "for long-term boarding purposes" for the animals, stating that any group with "proven experience in taking care of and/or providing boarding for pet animals may bid for the land" (*Associated Press* 2003a). By mid-June, the AVA had picked up and tested the last of 140 stray cats, declaring them SARS-free

and clearing the “cloud of suspicion over cats.” This occurred after Singapore was removed from the World Health Organization’s list of areas infected with SARS on May 31 (ST 2003a).

To the cat lovers in Singapore, the government seemed to have confused civet cats—the alleged host of the SARS coronavirus—with “real” cats. They were frustrated that the government, in its “cleanliness” campaign, had targeted only cats caught near markets and other “neighborhood” places that served food (*Associated Press* 2003d). In essence, in the nation’s battle against SARS, the government was extending its power into the urban spaces of the commons—the food stalls, hawker centers, and wet markets—claiming that they were unhygienic. As state agencies moved in to reclaim these spaces on the pretext of health exigencies, animal-protection groups harnessed their finances and manpower to found new spaces for persecuted cats—a hotel ballroom for pseudopublic mourning, a transnational shelter for rescued cats, and private homes to house cats temporarily. When all their endeavors failed, these groups launched their own campaigns to raise public awareness of the plight of stray cats and the excesses of culling, hoping to galvanize public support to “exonerate” the cats. They succeeded. The removal of Singapore from the World Health Organization’s list was a major contributing factor to the government’s compromise. But more important to their success was that the government did not want to risk facing further challenges to its structural parameters if it appeared too unyielding, especially in light of citizens’ attempts not to flout the law or confront the state apparatus. The government associated its legitimacy with the ability of approved groups and individuals to seek redress or solutions through the “proper channels” of formal institutions. The cat-welfare groups had done everything within their means to fulfill this unspoken criterion, leaving the government little maneuver space in which to act.

Over the years the government has invoked Singapore’s victory against SARS as, in Lee Kuan Yew’s words, a display of “inner ruggedness” and national unity in adversity (*Channel News Asia* 2005). The conventional view was that the SARS crisis and the common experience of facing the crisis had strengthened political and social solidarity among Singaporeans. Yet in the eyes of cat lovers, the SARS episode was a human war against scapegoated cats, a unity abused and a ruggedness misplaced. The episode exposed the vulnerability of animal-protection groups, cat activists, and stray cats in a context of limited legal and social safeguards for them. As Frank Furedi observes, “People do not simply suffer a disaster. They interact with terror and emergencies, often adapt to it, draw lessons and meaning from it, sometimes are disoriented and confused by it but often learn to creatively reorganize their life around it” (2007, 171). As cat lovers came to terms with their vulnerability and forged their own solidarities against a

national unity that the government had appropriated to cull stray cats, they showed that trust in the government had been lost with regard to the management and regulation of stray cats, and that collective action had to be taken to provide cats with more protection and welfare.

Speaking for Cats

The CWS, the most vocal cat lovers' group in Singapore, was established years before the SARS outbreak, in 1999, but it was from the 2003 crisis that the CWS first gained prominence. The CWS was set up by "upwardly mobile professionals" who "invest their time and energy in saving what appears to be an unimportant sector of the Singapore populace"—stray cats. Alluding to the growing incidence of animal cruelty in Singapore—burning kittens alive, throwing cats from high-rise buildings, and governmental agencies' culling 13,000 stray cats every year from 1980 to 2000—the CWS resolved to promote tolerance for and understanding of stray cats among Singaporeans in line with the government's persistent call for a more gracious society, adding that "kindness to animals could be a part of the school curriculum in Singapore." The CWS aimed to forge a strong network devoted to the rescue of distressed cats and sterilization of stray cats (*ST* 2000a).

The SPCA, inspired by similar schemes in Britain, Canada, and the United States, had been promoting sterilization as a "humane way of controlling the stray [cat] population compared with destroying them" since the 1990s. This began as a response to increasing complaints among residents of HDB estates that cats had been rummaging through rubbish bins and had left uneaten food all over the place (*ST* 1994b). Critics argued, however, that "plentiful food sources and kind cat lovers" had indulged the cats and impaired their "natural instincts" to "make themselves useful by preying on rats, pigeons, and numerous scavenging birds that equally scourge city environment." The critics also believed that stray cats "co-exist with the lot [of animal pests] to compound the vermin problem," so they urged the authorities to round up strays, put them to sleep, and ensure quick and proper disposal of their carcasses (*ST* 1994a). Although veterinarians reassured the public that most strays do not carry germs, animal-welfare groups felt enough pressure to induce them to step up controlling stray numbers with the aforementioned Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme. The scheme, which started in 1998, had both supporters and detractors. Food-stall owners, rather than discarding leftovers, preferred feeding them to the cats. In contrast, residents saw such practices as emboldening cats to wander into the "human spaces" of coffee shops (*kopitiams*), food centers, and wet

markets (ST 2000b). After abandoning the scheme during the SARS period, the AVA turned to culling strays, educating pet owners not to abandon cats, and advising animal-protection groups to house cats at their own expense (ST 2014f). For its part, the CWS started approaching individual town councils and, as of August 2014, had been working closely with 16 of them to reduce the culling (*New Paper* 2014).

From 2003 to 2014, the main object of the CWS and several cat-focused organizations was to reestablish the Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme. Cat sterilization was never outlawed; the government might have withdrawn from the scheme, but cat-welfare groups were free to conduct it at their own expense. Owing to their limited resources, however, these groups hoped that the AVA and town councils would return to the scheme and mobilize sterilization to greater effect. Stating that sterilization remained the most effective method in controlling the stray-cat population, the CWS, in its capacity as the only registered association in Singapore for cat welfare, linked nonofficial groups together, holding true to the Singapura's name of Kucinta ("Cat-love") against the backdrop of increasing cat violence in the nation. The CWS distinguished itself from the Singapore Cat Club, which it said "organizes [only] shows and gatherings" (ST 2000a). The CWS relied on donations and worked with 28 veterinary clinics to help sterilize about 400 to 600 stray cats annually (ST 2012). The CWS also encouraged the public to adopt its sterilized cats with "value-added guidance" from affiliated cat-welfare groups. On one occasion, it stepped in to remind the public not to be enticed by a specific puppy sale coupon "with 0 percent installment plan" in the National Day Parade pack (distributed to each parade spectator), arguing that such coupons would only promote irresponsible pet ownership (ST 2014e).

Beach Road Cat Killings

Here I will briefly introduce a particular episode—the serial cat abuses at Beach Road—to explore the workings of the CWS and concerned groups and individuals in the 2010s, after such groups had expanded in scale, scope, and strength since the 2000s. Beginning in late 2011, a spate of cat abuses occurred in a cluster of flats along Beach Road, with cats being lacerated, flung down to their deaths, and decapitated (Save Beach Road Cats, September 27, 2011; October 27, 2011; September 2, 2012). Some cats suffered from sling shot wounds. Others were blinded (Save Beach Road Cats, December 10, 2012). Abuses were also reported in the immediate vicinity of Kampong Glam and North Bridge Road, causing considerable distress among cat lovers (Save Beach Road Cats, January 16, 2013; February 19, 2013; February 24, 2013).

That the abuses continued for years without one person being arrested, interrogated, or investigated added to the cat lovers' frustration, particularly in a nation that prided itself on having a highly efficient police force and a low crime rate. As a result of police inactivity, cat lover Anthony Hong set up the Save Beach Road Cats website in late 2011 to raise awareness and appeal for information. Hong, who owned a sundry shop in the area, first noticed the deaths after meeting with elderly people who were feeding Beach Road's stray cats. These elders, according to Dr. Ngiam (2007), were individuals who wanted to earn good karma by feeding stray animals but did not clean up the mess after feeding, which attracted cockroaches and rats to the neighborhood and hence caused conflict between themselves and other residents. Although the elders lodged police reports about one elderly man seen "shooting stones at cats with a catapult," the police did not act on the reports. Hong hired a private detective to check on the elderly man in question, but this did not unearth any evidence; the police stated that they could arrest the man only if presented "concrete photo or video evidence" (ST 2014d). An elementary school student, motivated by Hong's efforts, offered all his savings of 2,000 Singaporean dollars as a reward for information on the cats' deaths (ST 2014c). Meanwhile, some residents on North Bridge Road sent a carcass to the AVA, requesting a post-mortem on it to determine the cause of death; the results were not forthcoming (*Xinming Ribao* 2014).

The CWS reached out to the Beach Road cat caretakers (Save Beach Road Cats, "Background"). CWS executive officer Joanne Ng shared their frustration: "Why are the authorities not doing anything about it. . . . If the person who is doing all this harm ends up murdering a small kid . . . , it would be too late" (Yahoo News 2014). Hong (Save Beach Road Cats, September 18, 2014) also lashed out at the platitudes of the authorities, maintaining that actions speak louder than words: "How . . . can the government's stance on animal abuse be taken seriously if . . . swift resolutions are only reserved for major crimes like murder and robbery, and even lesser offences like killer litter and illegal parking?" That said, in 2014 the CWS, along with other animal-welfare groups, managed to pull Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam and Member of Parliament Yeo Guat Kwang to their side in recommending harsher penalties on perpetrators of animal cruelty, and Parliament went on to amend the Animals and Birds Act to impose stiffer penalties on animal abusers (*Today* 2014; ST 2014a; 2014b). To give some background, Shanmugam had been a longtime supporter of the CWS, having initiated Pilot Cat Ownership to ensure that cat owners in his ward get their cat sterilized, microchipped, and registered with the society (CWS 2012).

However, no one had yet been held accountable for the 50 cruel cat deaths along Beach Road, although the aforementioned elderly man remained the primary suspect.

In his own defense, the man confided in the Chinese press that he was now a target for harassment for a crime he had never committed (*Lianhe Wanbao* 2015a; 2015b). While the CWS could pull politicians into its fold, individual, unorganized cat lovers failed to elicit sufficient police or institutional support to nab the stray-cat killer(s) along Beach Road.

The additional legal provisions coincided with the quiet extension of the Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme earlier in mid-2014. In 2011 the AVA attempted to partially relaunch the scheme, but the town councils did not welcome the directive because they “did not want to clean up after the cats.” To be precise, the town councils did not want to pay to control, feed, and sterilize stray cats in their jurisdictions. After a three-year trial in four precincts, the AVA decided to reinstate the scheme in full, and this move drew praise from animal-welfare groups, which had all along maintained that culling was inhumane and ineffective. The groups cited the drop in stray-cat numbers from 80,000 to 50,000, along with the fall in culling figures, as evidence that sterilization worked. Another sign of success, they stated, was that the AVA euthanized about 1,000 strays in 2013, down from 3,300 in 2008 and 13,000 in 2001. In addition, the CWS reported that its volunteers had helped sterilize 4,479 cats in 2013 alone, showing that it was fully capable of working with the AVA and the town councils at cutting costs while dealing effectively with the issue of controlling the stray-cat population. Under the scheme, the AVA funded half of the cost of 30 to 60 Singaporean dollars to neuter a cat (trapping, neutering, and releasing cats to control the population of stray cats without killing them) and another 20 Singaporean dollars to microchip it. Now with added funding and endorsement from the AVA, the CWS felt confident of reducing the number of stray cats across Singapore and hence of silencing calls for cats to be killed (*ST* 2014f). The Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme was made possible by some AVA executives led by Dr. Lou Ek Hee, who, against the opinion of their “hawkish” colleagues, believed that the scheme could work in keeping a “manageable group of cats in a precinct which is also good for catching rats,” on the condition that they “do not interfere with people, do not cause nuisance, defecation, jumping on people’s cars, [and] scratching the paint work” (Ngiam 2007). The lack of consensus within the AVA may help explain the inconsistency in its policies toward the treatment of stray cats.

As the former Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan suggested, the People’s Action Party looked “more humane and less fixated on bread-and-butter concerns” with its members of Parliament pushing for “non-traditional” causes in recent years. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also observed that People’s Action Party activists were reaching out to more diverse groups, including animal-welfare groups, which had been neglected in the past. After the 2011 General Elections, in which the People’s

Action Party lost a substantial share of votes to opposition parties, People's Action Party members of Parliament seemed to have become responsive to "emerging areas" of concern such as animal welfare, and sympathetic to "less combative" and "less defiant" causes. This does not mean that the heightened support for social causes was all for show. Nevertheless, as Tan observes, some issues, unlike controversial or polarizing ones such as gay rights or migrant workers' rights, were easier to support so as to appear in touch with the people. To People's Action Party members of Parliament, lending support to certain causes could increase their popularity among voters (*ST* 2014a).

Failing to co-opt social groups can result in the expression of political dissent on social media. Vivian Balakrishnan, formerly the Minister of State for National Development overseeing the AVA during the SARS epidemic, was accused in a Facebook post during the 2015 Singapore General Elections of having conducted a "cat holocaust." The post quickly garnered more than 2,000 "likes," with comments condemning Balakrishnan's "act of cruelty" (Facebook 2015). Because it is "accumulative, publicly accessible, and practically permanent," the Internet poses challenges to the authoritarian structure of the government, allowing disgruntled citizens to access information, express opinions, and share insights outside the scope of conventional media and the state's censorship regime (Tan 2015, 277). When the SARS epidemic broke out in the country in 2003, most Singaporeans remained unexposed to Internet-based social media, and expressions such as "cat holocaust" were never used against any minister in Singaporean reportage.

The physical landscape of Singapore, which is increasingly built up, also contributed to growing attention to human-cat issues. Fundamental to these issues was the question of whether stray cats should share the urban space of humans. The controversy over such issues was essentially an ideological struggle over the intrinsic value of cats, a debate over the place or role of cats in both natural and manmade landscapes (Neo 2014, 73–74). Disagreement among HDB residents required the intervention or mediation of the government and cat-welfare groups for a conciliatory resolution. Disputes over spatial arrangements—whether cats should perish for transgressing into human territory, and whether cats and humans could cohabit in HDB estates—revealed that power structures and reciprocal interactions were inherently spatialized (Pearson and Weismantel 2010, 26).

Conclusion

Cats are a synecdoche for the complex relationships between the government, cat-

welfare groups, and HDB residents in the state project of reintegrating nature into the urban landscape. Postcolonial Singapore is a space of state intervention into private domains that parades under the universal guise of national development, with the state suppressing spaces for politically marginalized groups or individuals (King 2003, 178). Nevertheless, as cat lovers and cat-welfare groups have shown by their actions, there is always room to contest such metanarratives and offer alternatives on the basis of one's "local knowledge" (*ibid.*, 179). Human responses to stray cats varied according to perceptions of the built or cultivated environment, which render cat spaces either discrepant or acceptable features of the urban landscape and represent cats as either wild or potentially domestic (Griffiths *et al.* 2000, 68).

The government's disciplinary regime and exacting standards of urban cleanliness, health, and hygiene have led to a prevalent perception of cats as pests and carriers of germs and viruses. Stray cats have outlived their traditional purposes of curbing cockroach and rat populations, which are no longer a key concern for Singapore's urban health, and of scavenging and clearing the food waste of roadside vendors, who no longer exist save for their re-creations in tourist attractions or in such modern spaces as coffee shops, hawker centers, and wet markets. Nevertheless, for cat lovers, because humans have generated conditions that do not give space to stray cats to survive, humans have a "collective causal responsibility" to create and maintain spaces to allow displaced cats to continue to live (Palmer 2003, 68, 71). That cat lovers and cat-welfare groups of different classes could create a discourse and use their activism to address the alienation of Singaporeans from stray cats in particular and nature in general highlights government passivity. Such passivity was also on display in the lack of efforts to control the population of macaques through sterilization in the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. On the whole, state agencies give low priority to such issues (Yeo and Neo 2010, 695).

Because the government has been passive about cats (as well as such issues as LGBT behavior and public morality) and unwilling to devote much attention, effort, and resources to managing the stray-cat population unless absolutely necessary, individual cat lovers and cat-welfare associations assumed the functions of responding to appeals and requests from the public, collecting and keeping stray or unwanted cats, neutering and spaying these cats, and at times opposing what they view as a flagrant violation of animal rights—killing stray cats—on the part of the government. In the absence of active state involvement, cat activists try to fill the gap in the government's treatment of stray cats however they deem fit, with or without civil alliances or state support.

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Women and Sharia Law in Northern Indonesia: Local Women's NGOs and the Reform of Islamic Law in Aceh

DINA AFRIANTY

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One of the earliest Islamic legal texts available to us from the Malay world was written in Aceh at the request of its female ruler: *Mir'āt al-tullāb fī tashīl ma'rīfat al-aḥkām al-shar'iyyat lī malik al-wahhāb* of 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Sinkilī (d. 1693) commissioned by the contemporary sultana Ṣafiyat al-Dīn Tāj al-'Ālam (r. 1641–75). The book and its author, as well as the sultana, have been enjoying a memorable position in the historical memory of Aceh, appealing equally to its learned and unlearned classes. In present-day Aceh, Sharia law has generated much debate for almost last two decades especially with regards to the “oppressive” attitude of Islamic law towards the women, and one might wonder why a female ruler should ask a member of her religious elite to write a book about “oppressive” Sharia law. Although the answer might be a concern of historical enquires, the book under review gives an answer through ethnographical research. A rather provocative answer comes from a reputed pious activist at Banda Aceh who says: “There is something about the Acehnese that connects us with sharia and the people from outside Aceh will never be able to understand that connection.” Putting to one side any judgment, the book does try to understand the connection in a fascinating way.

Dina Afrianty's *Women and Sharia Law in Northern Indonesia: Local Women's NGOs and the Reform of Islamic Law in Aceh* conveys the nuances of women's lives under Sharia law. One of the major contributions of the book is implicit in its title itself: Aceh's differentiation between Sharia law and Islamic law, which might sound synonymous at a first glance. But Afrianty substantiates how both should be understood differently. Taking cue from the earlier arguments of Hooker (1983), Mir-Hosseini (2006), and others on the division between Islam and its law, she tells us how the Acehnese distinguish between the sharia as divine law based on such foundational scriptures as Quran and Hadith, and the Islamic law implemented as Qanuns. The latter is only a “Fiqh of Aceh,” which is “a product of Acehnese ‘ulamā’'s interpretation of Islamic scriptures that is then used by politicians” (p. 78). It would have been even more insightful if the author had elaborated

on this division and its conceptualization by local women activists in the following chapters.

Based on her six-months of fieldwork in Banda Aceh (the capital city of Aceh Province, north-western Indonesia), Afrianty investigates the responses of Acehnese women towards the implementation of Islamic law, the roles of their indigenous identity and local culture, and most importantly, the ways in which “religious Acehnese women activists reconcile their understanding of gender, equality, women’s rights with those of Western/international values” (p. 3). Afrianty conducted interviews, attended seminars and workshops, and utilized archival materials and the book is composed of five chapters (including one case-study), together with an introduction, conclusion, and a postscript.

In the first chapter titled “Women’s Movements in Muslim Societies,” Afrianty contextualizes her work within three broader concerns: the existing literature on the Muslim women’s movements across the Islamic world, their encounters with Sharia and Islamic law, and their collective attempts to engage with Islamic law that often resulted in “Islamic feminism.” She argues that since Muslim female intellectuals and activists understood gender inequality and repression towards Muslim women as deriving from the misuse and misinterpretation of scriptures by male rulers and religious elites, they turned towards the original scriptures to reinterpret those while being more sensitive to gender equality and women’s rights. This global movement has influenced Southeast Asia too, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia. Towards the end of the chapter, Afrianty focuses on Indonesian Muslim women’s initiatives, which resulted to the birth of individual and collective attempts strongly expressing the “need for a contextualized interpretation of Islamic texts” (p. 42). In this broader picture, Aceh gets only a passing reference, but she takes up that in the next chapter.

Chapter two, “Women and the Implementation of Islamic Law in Aceh,” explains how Sharia was formalized and institutionalized in Aceh, and how Acehnese people perceive it. The author demonstrates the varied responses among people towards implementation of Islamic law, and almost all of them criticize the failures in execution processes. The majority believes that this is not a problem of sharia as such and it is not a rejection of Islamic law; rather, it is a critical engagement with the ways and modes in which the law has been articulated and implemented. The former chairman of the Office of Islamic Sharia, Professor Alyasa Abubakr, admits that there are “weaknesses and mistakes” in the drafting, enactment, and implementation of Qanun (p. 80) and he hopes to rectify these in the future for a better implementation of Islamic law. His viewpoint reflects the stance of many Muslim women activists, who do not completely reject Islamic law totally, but only resent the discriminatory characteristics of existing legal code(s). This argument stands in line with what Michael Feener (2013) has demonstrated, as Sharia law in Aceh aims at the larger social wellbeing of its people, despite having many problems in its implementation.¹⁾

1) It is surprising to see that the author does not refer to Feener’s book, despite it being one of the ↗

Although the chapter claims to focus on women with regard to Islamic law, the impacts on women as such do not stand out in its argument or articulations. On the contrary, it only shows in effect how new laws have affected both men and women (as Afrianty aims to demonstrate “discriminatory Qanun” through the example of caning). Those who violate the regulations governing Muslim clothing, Friday prayer for men (both Qanun No. 11/2002), and *khalwat* or “close proximity of opposite sex who are not clearly related” (p. 71) (Qanun No. 14/2003) are to be punished by caning. In all the violations except Friday prayer, both men and women are to be caned and we do not see a clear discrimination between the genders here. Dressing would have been a possible realm for women’s issue to stand out, but then the author says: “. . . no women have been reportedly caned” on this issue (p. 74). Thus, discrimination appears to be more of a class issue in which the poor are targeted, and an attack on gender is less obvious with regard to the caning or the aforesaid Qanun. At least, its negative impacts on women’s social, religious, and economic lives have not been pushed to the front. However, the author’s own bad experience at the Grand Baiturrahman Mosque (a young man holding rattan cane prevented her from entering the mosque for wearing pants) indeed sheds light on the problem of patriarchal Islamic societies in general and Acehese community. In particular, this episode shows “how some men consider that they have absolute authority to judge women’s religiosity” (p. 78).

The following three chapters focus more on women in Aceh and their individual and collective attempts to engage with women’s issues over the last two decades. Chapter three, “Gender and Women’s Movements in Aceh,” draws close attention to historical aspects, especially the political, economic, and religious backgrounds that have compelled a few Muslim women to extend helping hands to their neglected sisters in the community. Afrianty enlightens us on how Acehese Muslim women enjoyed “high status” and “respected positions” in society, thanks to the matrifocal *‘ādāt* (customs) that facilitated social, economic, and even religious empowerment. But these were drastically interrupted through constant military conflicts and the Tsunami of 2004. During such critical situations, only a few women were able to initiate projects to address women’s issue. After the Tsunami and conflict, however, there have been more local, national, and international initiatives. The chapter hardly discusses legal issues (save a fewer passing references), let alone Islamic legal aspects. Also, it does not explain the abrupt transition, if any at all, from the matrifocal *‘ādāt* to the author’s taken-for-granted idea of contemporary Aceh where patriarchal Islamic law and socio-cultural norms arguably dominate.²⁾

The fourth and fifth chapters are dedicated to three women’s movements: Women’s Network

↙ latest studies on Islamic law in Aceh. She does refer to one article he wrote on the issue, yet offers only a confusing reference (see p. 86).

2) In this regard, Srimulyani’s (2010) revisit of Acehese matrifocal tradition and its transition into “new matrifocality” in a contemporary context is worth looking at—especially as the author does not address the arguments of this article.

for Policy (Jaringan Perempuan untuk Kebijakan, JPUK) and Gender Working Group (GWG) in the fourth, and True Partner of Indonesian Women (Mitra Sejati Perempuan Indonesia, MISPI) exclusively in the fifth. The JPUK focuses on policies and legislations, and it has been successful in bringing in a few radical amendments to the drafts of Qanun. It has also worked towards ensuring that the women's gender interests are not ignored and they are not discriminated in the Qanuns. GWG has seemingly functioned as an "extension of bureaucracy," and a bureaucrat herself has casted doubts on "the level of commitment of women activists to the cause of women's movements when it was under the government apparatus" (p. 129). Nevertheless, GWG has been organizing quite a number of events while being "extra cautious" about the resistance they have had to face while disseminating ideas such as gender equality. The main resistance has been from the traditional scholars ('*ulamā*') and religious educational centers (*dayah*) which had more appeal among villagers in Aceh. Yet, its activists aim to show that terms like "gender" or "feminism" need not be controversial because of their Western-ness or foreign-ness; instead these are "no different to 'burgers,' 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' or 'Pizza Hut,' all Western products that have increasingly become popular in Aceh" (p. 134). On the other hand, MISPI's initiatives towards the promotion of gender equality and women's status have found almost no resistance from the traditional religious community. It has attained wider acceptability among both government officials and religious leaders due to the traditional notions of piety it maintains in its leaders' and members' activities and appearances.

The book, as the author herself admits, is very much centered on urban women activists hailing from the middle and upper classes of Banda Aceh. It hardly goes beyond the city, save for a few fleeting references. Many women working within the Islamic-legal frameworks, like the female '*ulamā*' and women sharia-police do not get due reference in the book. After reading this book, one might wonder if the academic focus on the lives of Muslim women is now moving from mosques (Mahmood 2005) to women's NGO offices. The everyday lives of Muslim women from lower classes and unprivileged backgrounds still await attention. Nevertheless, it is quite intriguing to see how the women activists work with, under, against, and for the implementation of an Islamic legal system in Aceh through a number of platforms. Their collective or individual initiatives to ensure gender equality and women's rights stand as an exemplary model for Muslim women elsewhere who are forced to live under patriarchal interpretations and implementations of Islamic law. In many such places, women are even prohibited from active participation in the public sphere and are not allowed to freely express themselves. Women's NGOs in Aceh thus offer many models for dealing with resistance from traditional religious realms. As such, this book stands out as a good read for all those who are interested in the anthropologies of NGOs, women's activism, Southeast Asia and Aceh, and everyday lives under Islamic law.

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Remembering the Samsui Women: Migration and Social Memory in Singapore and China

KELVIN E. Y. LOW

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014, xiv+252p.

The term “Samsui” refers to a specific location in the Pearl River Delta region in Guangdong province, the southern part of China, where many members of the Chinese diaspora trace their ancestral homelands. While the geographic benchmark is certain, the history of Samsui women is open to interpretation and representation from many angles. On the one hand, it is a matter of fact that a significant number of women migrated from that particular place to work in Singapore, largely in the construction industry and to a lesser extent in households and factories. On the other hand, this migration is a subject of imagination and deliberation as to who should be included under the category “Samsui Women” and the kinds of roles they have assumed in relations to Singapore and China. There were women, who hailed from elsewhere in China, taking advantage of the label of “Samsui” in order to gain access to job markers where “Samsui” was a niche. Also, there have been various state projects focusing on Samsui women and their contribution to shaping identities of Singapore as nation.

This book is laudable research on how issues and discourses have been revolving around Samsui women. The author, Kelvin E. Y. Low, is a sociologist at the National University of Singapore. He has succeeded in meeting the objective he sets in the book, revealing the experiences of Samsui women and arguing that “the many reconstructions of their past are utilized by the state, other institutions, and stakeholders towards achieving vested interests in the promotion and maintenance of a national identity” (p. 7).

The primary sources Low has collected are rich, including interviews with Samsui women,

documentaries, art works, and events. To uncover what forces determined the telling of stories and the representation of images concerning Samsui women, he has appropriated concepts of “history” and “memory” as social reconstruction, national identity, and personal narrative. The presentation of findings and discussions are soundly laid out in six chapters: “Chinese Migration and Entangled Histories,” “Politics of Memory Making,” “Local and Transnational Entanglements,” “From China to Singapore,” “Beyond Working Lives,” and “Samsui Women, *Ma Cheh*, and Other Foreign Workers.”

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the subject matter and argument, with a succinct account of the historical backdrop against which various waves and types of migrants made their way to Singapore. Low rightfully reveals the interconnectedness of different sets of networks as well as different spaces of locations spanning China and Southeast Asia, in what he argued as a stunning case of “entangled history.” The pictures are variegated and complicated, but Low makes it clear that at the intersections between British expansion and Chinese migration, the decline of silk industry and anti-marriage practices in Guangdong led to the migration of Samsui women to Singapore, thus adding a distinctive female layer to the political and social settings.

Chapters 2 to 6 are in-depth examinations of Samsui women from multiple angles. In Chapter 2, Low shows how Singapore as a new nation-state has crafted its reproduction of history and memory whereby Samsui women have been portrayed as “Chinese migrant women,” “pioneers,” “feminists,” and “elderly women” to meet both the national engineering and social imagination for what kind of heritage has been established in Singapore.

Chapter 3 draws on media reports to trace how identities and images have been formed of Samsui women in terms of both state and ground-level memories. The finding is that they are remembered the same way in both Singapore and China, through three motifs—pioneerhood, issues of longevity, and women retiring to elderly homes in China. Low sharply points out that “in instances (Singapore and China), the experiences and biographical trajectories of the women provide an apt source of history and memory from which the vocabulary of a moral meta-narrative has been generated and disseminated” (p. 106).

Chapters 4 and 5 are an account and examination of the lived experiences of Samsui women, drawing on interviews with them and their kin as well as oral histories and other media sources. In particular, Chapter 4 features personal narratives of Samsui women and focuses on their migration trajectories from China to Singapore. It is clear from these accounts that, in one way or another, Samsui women are different among themselves and also different from the official discourses in terms of migration trajectories, attachments to their fellows, and identification with hometowns and nations. Chapter 5 goes beyond the individual subjectivities of Samsui women to examine their kin networks and their own social circles. The purpose of these two chapters, in Low’s own words, is to argue that “whereas instances of hardship are useful memory materials that both carry and reproduce romanticized parts, the narratives here recount hardships are

personal struggles involving constant negotiation, contestation, perseverance . . . that often go unnoticed or become glorified as important historical issues” (p. 146).

Chapter 6 compares and contrasts Samsui women with other groups of immigrants in Singapore, such as *Ma Cheh*, who were female domestic workers who, like Samsui women disappeared over time, and present-day workers, who are largely male and originate from South Asia and China. There are good reasons for this comparative study as it provides a better understanding of how the boundaries have been redrawn constantly to include or exclude certain groups and members in order to achieve national goals and social norms.

In fact, everything and everyone in history are subject to rewriting for a gamut of reasons. Thus, it is just appropriate when Low in his “conclusion” asserts that “the social memory and historiography of the Samsui women are social constructions of the past in which memory and history undergo alteration, reappropriation, and instrumentalization by different social actors through a variety of means and through different goals. Such constructions are forms of knowledge that serve as an anchor for both individual and group identities in shaping belonging” (p. 207).

In short, this book is empirically rich and theoretically intriguing. It is worth recommending to those who are interested in gendered migration and social memory in national history.

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The Female Voice of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi

NILANJANA SENGUPTA

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 407p.

The female voice of the title of Nilanjana Sengupta’s book belongs to four twentieth century women writers and activists: Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar, Ma Thida, and Aung San Suu Kyi. *The Female Voice of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi* traces the course of each of these women’s lives and works, identifying the democracy movement of 1988 as the point at which their four stories converge. Sengupta’s juxtaposition of these four narratives illuminates the changing political landscape of twentieth century Myanmar from a specifically female perspective.

Sengupta opens her analysis with the story of Supaya-Lat, the last queen of independent Burma. Supaya-Lat was villainized by the generations who came after her as an ambitious and ruthless woman, blamed for the British conquest. She became a frequently invoked example of the catastrophic consequences of undue female influence. By placing this story at the start of her analysis, Sengupta emphasizes the gendered challenges that have existed for any woman in Myanmar who chooses to work actively for political change. The recurring question of how women can

negotiate the fraught realm of politics is one of the threads that Sengupta uses to bind together her narrative.

Dividing her work into four main chapters, each devoted to one woman, Sengupta draws extensively on each of these women's published writings in English and Burmese. Writing about women whose life stories at times overlapped in time and space, she also identifies parallels and connections in the way that these women wrote about and experienced gender politics and national politics. This work is a hybrid: literary biography and political analysis. While the title may suggest that this work is a broad survey of twentieth century Burmese women's writing, this is not the case. Sengupta's exploration is finely focused and richly detailed.

The first chapter focuses on Khin Myo Chit, born in 1915 when Burma was still under British rule. In her description of Khin Myo Chit's childhood, Sengupta introduces one of the themes that will recur throughout the book: the challenges facing women who deviated from prescribed feminine expectations. Khin Myo Chit is described as a girl who "picked up boyish habits to survive in a male-dominated world" (p. 17). She was driven to seek a secondary education, leaving her family's home near Mandalay for Rangoon University in 1933. There she joined the emerging student nationalist movement, and carved out a niche for herself writing for various magazines and papers, though she found her choice of subject matter somewhat constrained by her gender. Khin Myo Chit's involvement with nationalist politics continued during the Second World War and the Japanese occupation of Burma. Her literary career straddled the colonial and postcolonial eras, and after the military coup of 1962, she wrote for the government paper *Working People's Daily*, walking what Sengupta describes as a "tightrope" in the face of enhanced government press scrutiny. Khin Myo Chit deployed wit and irony to indirectly express her criticism of an increasingly repressive government regime. When her association with *Working People's Daily* ended in 1968, she continued to write, exploring Burmese history and culture in fiction and non-fiction. She was particularly interested in the role of women in society: she translated a selection of English-language essays on the subject that would be published posthumously in 2006. Khin Myo Chit advocated for democracy in the revolution of 1988, and in the last decade of her life her path intersected with Aung San Suu Kyi, whom she hosted after her first release from house arrest.

Born in the same year as Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar also attended Rangoon University, and joined the nationalist movement. Her husband, U Hlaw, founded the *Ludu Paper* in 1946 to represent the viewpoint of the unified voice of the Burmese nationalist movement—the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. The paper survived the fracturing of the AFPFL, and would remain an independent, critical voice in the political tumult that succeeded independence. When her husband was imprisoned for sedition in 1953, Ludu Daw Amar kept the paper going, writing the editorials. She succeeded in keeping the paper alive until 1967, upon which time she was forced to write increasingly apolitical pieces in the face of government surveillance. Like Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar addressed issues of gender in her later writings, grappling with the changes that

modernity was bringing to norms of feminine behavior in Myanmar. In 1988 she once again turned to political writing, founding the short-lived *8888 Paper*, to serve as the voice of the revitalized Burmese nationalist movement.

There is a generational gap between Khin Myo Chit and Ludu Daw Amar and the next subject of Sengupta's book, Ma Thida, who was born in 1966 after the military coup. From a family of mixed Chinese, Burman or Bamar, Mon, and Shan descent, Sengupta describes Ma Thida's life as being "a series of conscious and subliminal attempts at finding her true self" (p. 162). The sense of alienation that Ma Thida felt growing up "trapped in surroundings which induced ethical compromise" found at first oblique expression in her short fiction (p. 177), and direct expression in her political activism. Ma Thida participated in demonstrations for the democracy movement in 1988, and campaigned with Aung San Suu Kyi in the fall of that year. She was imprisoned for her political activism in 1993, and not released until 1999. She continues to work actively for democracy in Myanmar.

The last chapter of Sengupta's book is devoted to Aung San Suu Kyi. Sengupta frames the chapter by discussing Aung San Suu Kyi's controversial 2013 decision to support the Letpadaung copper mine, and uses it as the starting point for a portraying her as a pragmatic leader in many different ways. In this section, Sengupta interweaves the development of Aung San Suu Kyi's political thought, analyzing the importance of her connection to her father Aung San, with a biographical narrative. Sengupta is particularly interested in the parallels and connections between the political philosophies of Aung San Suu Kyi and Gandhi. As with each of the other women she writes about, Sengupta analyzes the significance of gender in delineating the territory of Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership. The opposition portrayed her as "a sort of new-age Supaya-Lat" (p. 323), while, Sengupta writes Aung San Suu Kyi's image is also "tethered to one of the most powerful female stereotypes of Burmese cultural tradition—*amay* or mother" (p. 324).

Sengupta's blend of literary, biographical, and political analysis is often fascinating, and the research that supports her analysis is thorough. If this book has a weakness, it is in the organization, which is not always clear. In the first chapter for example, Sengupta narrates Khin Myo Chit's youth in the 1920s and entrance into nationalist politics in the 1930s, setting her involvement in historical context. She brings the narrative up to the Second World War, and the abruptly returns to the 1920s in the next section, to discuss Gandhi's influence on Burmese politics. Overall, however, this is a minor flaw, and this book is a significant scholarly achievement that will be of interest to scholars of Myanmar and of gender in twentieth century Southeast Asia.

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Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos

SIMON CREAK

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, xvi+337p.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature on an under-studied country, Laos, on an also under-studied topic, sport in relation to nationalism and masculinity.

Before looking at the evolution of sport and masculinity from a chronological perspective, Simon Creak reviews in the Introduction numerous theories and concepts related to physicality and masculinity—from Ana Maria Alonso's idea that physical practice strengthens national consciousness to Clifford Geertz's view of power in a theatre state exercised through spectacle, for instance—as a means to present his overall argument that sport is the most significant “means of substantializing notions of the body, masculinity, and the nation in modern societies” (p. 12), since at the center of the book is empire building, nation making, and socialist construction.

The first chapter discusses the case study of the indigenous game *tikki*, which resembles field hockey, and how French travelers' accounts transformed the game into a crucial element of what it meant to be “truly” Lao. Such accounts served the French colonial state's aim to differentiate the Lao territories and people from Siam and the Siamese. Indeed, the traveler-writers, young Lao researchers, and École française d'Extrême-Orient scholars Paul Lévy and Charles Archiambault, by writing about *tikki* as a tradition and ritual, helped in creating “an idea of Laos, justifying its constitution as a French colony and later as a distinct and independent nation” (p. 50).

Advancing through the French colonial period, chapter 2 presents the Vichy-era Lao Nhay cultural renovation movement (1941–45). While reading this chapter I discovered that it was built as a critique of my own work on the Lao Nhay movement and sports in Laos during the Vichy era (Raffin, 2005). The author contests my argument that sport development was secondary to the promotion of the Lao Nhay movement, whose function was to nurture a cultural and linguistic nationalism in response to the threat of Thai irredentism in Laos. Creak contends that both were important and “complemented one another” (p. 53). Although rightfully underlining that I did not look at Lao-language sources, his own argument is based mostly on French sources. Adding a few examples from Lao-language sources on sport, a Lao-language novel by P. S. Nginn (who was a Lao Nhay member), a short excerpt of the memoir of Governor Jean Decoux stating that “I decided to rely on Sports-Youth activities in this country to launch ‘*le mouvement lao*’” (p. 66), and mentioning the creation of sport clubs without talking about their activities, membership, etc. does not provide enough evidence to convince me that the colonial state's politics at the time promoted both sport and the Lao Nhay movement on an equal footing and that subsequently the Lao Nhay movement was “as much a physical awakening as it was a mental or cultural one in Laos, too” (p. 64).

Overall, through this chapter the author stresses how the male body was the primary agent of Philippe Pétain's National Revolution in the metropole and in Indochina, and how racial and

right-wing ideologies as well as militarism shaped sport policies in Indochina. Such a militarization of society was carried out in the 1950s, with the National Youth and Physical Education Cadre School, or ENCJEP, being molded after the Vichy-era schools in Phan Thiet and Vientiane (p. 95).

This leads to chapter 3, which discusses the militarization of masculinity in independent Laos during the 1950s. Projects are usually not carried out in a vacuum; hence, the sport policies of the 1950s show quite a few continuities with the World War II period, from the military-style choreography of human bodies to adapted Vichy-era uniforms for ENCJEP instructors and trainees and the use of the “natural method” for trainee parachutists. At the same time, the rapid militarization of Lao society not only offered many new career opportunities for males but also produced new ideas of what it meant to be a Lao man. The masculine ideal of the body was defined around “its size, strength, and solidarity with others” and in opposition to the female body as the “preserver of customs and culture” (p. 87). Moreover, the militarized male body was depicted as a positive symbol of modernity.

Chapter 4 provides a snapshot of the 1960s National Games, which ended in 1964 with Major General Phoumi Nosavan’s loss of power. The National Games in Laos are analyzed using the concept of theatrics of power as a means to show how the Games were a tool for Phoumi Nosavan to display his power. Despite political divisions, national unity was the principal theme of the Games, which were intended “to assemble the nation in the National Stadium, a metaphor of national desire, the nation-in-miniature, and to project an image of Phoumi as national statesman *par excellence*” (p. 126).

Within the context of the Cold War, not only internal but also regional divisions impacted the sporting scene in Laos. Chapter 5 argues that the sporting relations established by the Communist and non-Communist cliques underlined how regional dynamics influenced the globalized sporting culture in Laos. Laos’s participation in the South East Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games from 1959 to 1975 was shaped by regional politics, as both geographical and ideological criteria were conditions of membership. What constituted the authentic Lao nation was at stake as the Royal Lao Government viewed Communism and Northern Vietnam as a threat to Laos and its culture and subsequently supported the SEAP Games’ principles of non-Communist solidarity. In contrast, the Communist Neo Lao Hak Sat, also claiming to represent the authentic Laos, participated in a competing regional sporting club, the GANEFO (Game of the New Emerging Forces), which professed a position of non-alignment and was welcomed by many Communist-bloc countries.

Another important historical turning point was the creation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in December 1975. Chapters 6 and 7 present the heavy involvement of Communist countries when it came to physical education in Laos under the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. With Laos being a typical socialist country, the state’s rhetoric was focused on building a “new socialist person” through, among other measures, building a mass sport and physical culture. Looking also at the performative dimension of mass mobilization, Creak stresses how enjoyment

was the key component of spectator sports for propping socialism. The press and various reports from the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Religious Affairs were full of language emphasizing a “lively,” “enjoyable,” “fun” atmosphere as a means to build a positive attitude toward the revolution and the Party in the context of poverty and hardship. Sport was not only a means to increase domestic legitimacy and international prestige but also a way to boost socialist friendships, such as by Laos participating for the first time in the Olympic Games held in Moscow in 1980.

The book ends with the Vientiane Games in 2009—the 25th Southeast Asian Games—and the glory and outburst of national pride they fostered. Still, success on the field did not change reality, since in the end one of the big winners was the authoritarian regime of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, which tolerated no dissent. In parallel, the author brings up the issue of Laos’s financial dependence on China for help with hosting the event, what he calls “Lao-style development” (p. 235)—depending on foreign donors and investment—and how sports provided an avenue for Laos to express its love-hate relationship with Thailand and its complex relationship with Vietnam.

While Creak’s work is commendable for offering more than a historical account of the development of sport in Laos by using various theoretical frameworks in order to grasp this evolution, some of the theoretical analyses could be more fully developed through the use of examples. For instance, underlining Jan Gross’ point regarding propaganda under socialist regimes where the distinction between “naming and judging” is erased (p.171), a precise example within the Laotian context to support this point would have benefited his analysis.

Notwithstanding the above, Creak has collected many sources, which allows him to present a rich account of various issues in relation to sport in Laos. Thus, this is an important book for people interested in ideologies and state building in Laos over time from the vantage point of sport and physical education.

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Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam
1968

NHA CA. Translated with an Introduction by OLGA DROR
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, 378p.

Literary fiction has long provided some of the most evocative images of warfare, and the struggle for Vietnam is no exception. Indeed, many of the more lasting popular impressions of the Vietnam conflict have been shaped by successive iconic novels. The emergence of a Vietnam War literary canon has echoed trends in English-language scholarship on the war, with early classics like Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) or Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1978) sharing contemporaneous scholars' focus on American policies and experiences. A more recent historical interest in exploring the communist so-called "other side" of the conflict has seen such works increasingly accompanied on Vietnam War syllabi by translated Vietnamese novels like Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1993) or Dương Thu Hương's *Novel without a Name* (1995). Notably under-represented in both English-language fiction and scholarship, however, are voices from the non-communist South. Indeed, for all the dozens of volumes published each year on the Vietnam War, there is still no basic political history of South Vietnam after American escalation in 1965.

All of which makes Olga Dror's translation of Nhã Ca's 1968 *Mourning Headband for Hue* such an important and welcome contribution. Combining memoir, journalism, vivid anecdotes, and incisive analysis, Nhã Ca's novel illuminates non-partisan civilian experiences of the conflict, recounting the enormous suffering imposed by all warring parties on the city of Huế during the 1968 Tet Offensive. The author's riveting and relentless account is propelled by her considerable literary skill. Adroit employment of modernist techniques, from multiple interwoven perspectives to a non-linear timeline, creates a deliberately jarring and disjointed narrative, animating the sense of uncertainty and utter panic among the city's desperate inhabitants. Adding to the intensity is the translator's use of the original 1969 edition, written when emotions and memories were more immediate and raw. Beyond merely an informative first-hand account of a critical if still relatively obscure episode in the Vietnam War, *Mourning Headband for Hue* is an impressive literary achievement, holding its own in the pantheon of classic wartime literature.

Trần Thị Thu Vân, better known to readers by the pen name Nhã Ca, is one of South Vietnam's more accomplished authors, acclaimed for her novels, poetry, and journalism. She contributed to a burgeoning Saigon print media scene, which flourished despite recurring if inept censorship, and whose insights are still largely neglected in English-language studies of the war. *Mourning Headband for Hue*, her most celebrated work, begins shortly before Tết, the Vietnamese lunar New Year, when Nhã Ca returns to the Central Vietnamese city of Huế to attend her father's funeral. Her homecoming is interrupted in the middle of the night by the first sounds of gunfire from approaching communist troops, and after a grenade detonates on the roof of her ancestral home,

the family is forced to flee. What follows is a desperate, harrowing scramble for cover from both the advancing communists and the indiscriminate American firepower that accompanies their progress. Arriving at a nearby church, the family takes shelter with hundreds of starving, panicked refugees, including, unforgettably, a woman unable to acknowledge that child she cares for has died until after the stench grows overwhelming.

When the church is engulfed in the crossfire, *Nhã Ca* and her family make another narrow escape. Exhausted, hungry, and under constant fire, they traverse the city for sanctuary before approaching a nearby American airbase, where they finally find respite from the relentless bombardment at its source. Later, returning home to a city strewn with corpses, where the traditional white headbands worn by grieving Vietnamese have become ubiquitous, the author reflects on the futility of the violence: "I am surprised when I think why all the artillery from America, from Russia, from Czechoslovakia suddenly lands in the hands of North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese to pour down on a small city that is as good-natured as is the city of Hue . . . tearing into pieces its innocent flesh . . . oh life . . . why must life still go on?" (p. 233).

All the while, news from communist-occupied quarters trickles through in the form of speculation and rumor, reinforcing a sense of confusion and upheaval for the novel's protagonists and readers alike. Having escaped to the relative safety of an American-controlled zone, *Nhã Ca* here adopts the perspective of eyewitnesses to what devolved into one of the more deplorable events in a vicious war—the 1968 communist massacre at Huế. Encountering communist forces for the first time, the reader may be struck by their organization and discipline, a marked contrast to the novel's trigger-happy Americans and brutish South Vietnamese militia, who desert at the first hint of combat and return only to loot traumatized civilians of their belongings. Equally notable is the prominence of female cadres, who go door-to-door assuring frightened homeowners that "we certainly are people's friends" (p. 113). Taking care to extend the scant courtesy of euphemism, the communists solicit "contributions," "temporarily borrowing" scarce provisions in exchange for notes of credit, and recruiting youth "volunteers." Residents, meanwhile, are introduced to communist ideology and interpretations of the war at neighborhood study sessions.

Initially, the communists' orderly comportment comes as welcome relief from the turbulence. "The first several days," one observer recalls, "are very joyful" (p. 194). But before long, rumors of hastily-arranged show trials followed by on-the-spot executions begin to surface. Local children are marched into the mountains for training, never to return, while long-vanished townspeople suddenly reappear, transformed into vengeful zealots. One-time street-vendors, taxi-drivers, and even town drunks are revealed as sleeper agents eager to settle old scores. Ultimately, it is precisely their ruthless efficacy which *Nhã Ca*'s contemporaries come to fear most about the communist forces. And as their enemies slowly but surely advance, the communists' discipline breaks down, with arrests and executions becoming more frequent, arbitrary, and wanton. Only gradually does the enormity of the horror become apparent to *Nhã Ca* and her readers. By late 1969, some

2,800 thousand bodies had been exhumed from mass graves (p. xxxi).

Although central to energetic if not particularly effective South Vietnamese propaganda campaigns, events in Huế made little impact in the United States, overshadowed by the broader impact of the Tet Offensive, President Johnson's shock withdrawal from re-election, a series of high-profile assassinations, and, not least of all, the American Mỹ Lai massacre. Nonetheless, the carnage in Huế saw debates erupt between pro- and anti-war camps over the scope and purpose of massacre. Here the introduction provided by translator Olga Dror, a history professor at Texas A&M University, proves especially insightful. Dror provides a lucid and concise overview of the ensuing controversy, both in the United States, and, notably, among pro- and anti-communist Vietnamese-language commenters. A valuable scholarly contribution in its own right, the piece also details the political fallout of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, adding context which heightens the novel's historical significance. While virtually all South Vietnamese cities and towns were subject to communist attack, the destruction of Huế, a former capital, was especially poignant given its unique historical and cultural importance as a locus of scholarship, arts, and cuisine. The shock of the Tet Offensive also had an unprecedented if fleeting rallying effect on anti-communist South Vietnamese, who suspended political, regional, and religious animosities for the sake of unity, only to resume their quarreling after the spectre of impending violence waned. A substantial military failure, the Tet Offensive also exposed tensions between its Hanoi-based architects and the southern cadres who bore the brunt of the casualties. Forced to regroup, the Vietnamese communists opted to prioritise political organization ahead of military confrontation, helping the Saigon government stage a qualified recovery in the countryside. Less appreciated but equally decisive, the Huế massacre forever disabused the insurgent Central Vietnamese Ấn Quang Buddhist movement of the notion that it could prosper under communist rule.

But for all the political import of the events she describes, Nhã Ca takes a decidedly non-partisan stance on the proceedings. Instead, *Mourning Headband for Hue* elegizes the city and its people, set upon by successive indifferent aggressors, Vietnamese and foreign. Võ Thành Minh, a renowned anti-colonialist poet, is one of the novel's more symbolic characters, targeted by communist cadres for refusing to attend their neighbourhood gatherings. "I am against both Americans and Communists," he declares, defiantly if quixotically encamped in his cellar writing letters to Hồ Chí Minh and President Johnson demanding that they stop the war (p. 126). Nhã Ca's sister Oanh explains that Võ Thành Minh also "decided to appeal to young people and students to go down to sit under the bridge on a hunger strike to oppose." "Oppose who?" someone inquires. "Oppose the war, which is inhuman and atrocious," Oanh replies; "There is no justice in war whatsoever" (p. 128). An avatar of decency and the transcendence of dialogue above partisan violence, Võ Thành Minh, we learn from Dror's footnotes, was later killed while assisting civilian victims. Elsewhere, the book describes a stray dog wounded by American gunfire and knocked into a river by the blow. The soldiers torment it by firing into the water, preventing it from swimming to the shore. Amid

much laughter, the exhausted animal eventually succumbs to the current. Contemplating the metaphorical significance of their cruelty, Nhã Ca considers hurling at stone at the soldiers. “But no,” she finally decides; “what will the stone achieve?” (p. 268).

A paean to the common humanity that the war seemed destined to destroy, Nhã Ca’s plea for peace and mutual compassion challenged the crude binary platforms that both rival combatants sought to instill. Accordingly, like many fellow South Vietnamese intellectuals, she suffered the unfortunate fate of political imprisonment at the hands of both the South Vietnamese military government and its communist successors. A 1973 film adaptation of *Mourning Headband for Hue* was likewise banned on both sides of the North-South demarcation line. With the war’s belligerent parties all worthy of censure for outrages in Huế and beyond, the book shows little interest in reductive moralizing or apportioning specific blame. Instead, Nhã Ca writes, “our generation, the generation that likes to use the most beautiful and showy words: not only must we tie a mourning headband for Huế and for our homeland, which are being destroyed, but we must also take responsibility for Huế and our homeland” (p. 10). This, Dror explains, proved a controversial proposition among Nhã Ca’s contemporaries, to say the least, with many South Vietnamese readers disappointed by her reluctance to single out the communists. But it is precisely this audacious restraint which makes the novel so remarkable, both during the heat of the war and for readers of any background today. A work of great historical and literary value ideal for use in the classroom, *Mourning Headband for Hue* highlights overlooked voices and facets of the Vietnam War, meriting inclusion among the classics of wartime fiction.

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The Barefoot Anthropologist: The Highlands of Champa and Vietnam in the Words of Jacques Dournes

ANDREW HARDY

Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2015, 160p.

The Barefoot Anthropologist follows the footprints left by the unconventional priest-turned-anthropologist Jacques Dournes. This is an excellent book about this unusual scholar *haut en couleurs* who spent a large part—indeed, the best part—of his life in the highlands of central Vietnam.

The first section of the book is an exploration of *Pötao, une théorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois jörai* written by Dournes in 1977. This is a seminal text in our understanding of the ways the Jarai organized themselves politically, but it also gives a greater insight into how the political is enmeshed with the cultural, the social, and the religious, without which the *Pötao* would have no *raison d'être*. The text is complex in its form because Dournes's writing style in some ways is a mimicry of how the Jarai world is configured. As Hardy notes, Dournes's writing is "circular" and for good reason, since the Jarai world is made up of multiple spheres. The economic, the political, the judiciary, the religious, the profane, and the social create a sophisticated system that overlaps and intersects in the middle where the anthropologist stands barefoot in the mud. This point of intersection is also where he can best make sense of all these interconnections that define the Jarai's way of thinking. As Dournes explains in *Florilège jörai* (1987), the Jarai world and its myths work like a piece of interwoven fabric, made of "repetitions, redundancies, rhythms and symbolisms" that explain one another in a vastly rich system of associations (*ibid.*, 168). However, Dournes also warns us, sometimes it is better not to try to interpret (as with dreams): "you just take them the way they are" (p. 131).

Hardy's rereading of Dournes brings in interesting new analyses of the meanings, roles, and responsibilities of the *Pötao*. As explained on page 41, *Pötao*, evoking the "Cham word for lord and master," has been translated by various scholars such as Charles Meyer as "king" and "prince." The word is also interpreted by Grégory Mikaelian as "nephews" of the Khmer king, who at the end of the nineteenth century used them to consolidate his political power. With their complex yet complementary powers, the *Pötao* of fire, the *Pötao* of wind, and the *Pötao* of water harmonized the relationships linking man with man, and man with nature (p. 40). Yet this harmonizing power extended well beyond the frontiers of the Jarai territory in Vietnam and Cambodia and served to maintain peace, stability, and the viability of commerce along specific trade routes that wound their way through the highlands.

Hardy's exploration of the Jarai-Cham connection raises important lines of inquiry about the historicity, physical borders, and cultural exchanges between the two groups. The argument is not forcefully made so as to leave enough room for the reader to ponder the limits of such powerful interactions and undertake his/her own investigation on the subject.

The second section is an attempt to portray Dournes through his own words by means of English translation. No professional translator would say that this is an easy task, especially for such a person who was not only answering questions but was also “performing.” This is where the limits of the English translation are in the lack of rendition of “Dournes the comedian,” who is more forcefully visible and audible in the appendix. For those who can read French, the original text is worth trying. It enlightens the reader by giving unique insights into Dournes’s exceptional personality and way of thinking.

The afterword by the anthropologist Oscar Salemink takes a few steps back so as to effectively recontextualize Jacques Dournes. The descriptions of key moments in his life, his attachment to the highlands of Vietnam, the richness of the work produced while “exiled in France,” the criticisms he received from his peers, as well as his vitriolic responses to them help create yet another dimension in our attempt to comprehend the barefoot anthropologist.

This section also emphasizes how Dournes never felt that he belonged to France, hence his urge to leave the country after being ordained at a relatively young age and the enduring feeling of *déracinement* (being uprooted) toward the end of his life as a scholar in Paris. This hybrid identity blossomed in the fertile ground of the highlands under the green fingers of his friends: “They are the ones who cultivated me” (p. 121); “I’ve learnt everything over there” (p. 124).

His belonging to different worlds, or none at the same time, as in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo sacer*, is better illustrated in the ways Jarai women would come to him in the morning to “get rid of their dreams” and for him to “set them free” (p. 131). This is, as Dournes pointed out, a privileged situation for an anthropologist whose informants (especially female ones) allowed him into the deepest recesses of their consciousness, whether motivated by trust or anxiety. For Dournes, “theoretically I was stronger” (p. 131), but for the women he was also endowed with the power to take over their burden. This is even more significant given the most beautiful and poetic book he dedicated to the Jarai woman in 1993: *Forêt, femme, folie: Une traversée de l’imaginaire jarai*. In this, she is the one with the magical power to transcend both the world of the living and the abode of the spirits.

The appendix is a series of original conversations between the author and Dournes. It is probably the best section of the book, and it fully brings Dournes to life. Again, French speakers will agree that it is difficult to properly render the verve of Dournes’s discourse. It is full of humor, sarcasm, and poetry at the same time. This unique snippet of conversation enables us to witness Dournes not only as an anthropologist but also as a magnificent comedian and Jarai storyteller. Dournes himself repeats it many times during his conversation with Hardy: “I am a comedian” (pp. 103, 120, 123–124); “It comes back to me and I could say it again but differently, in another way, in other circumstances” (p. 125); “I’ve learnt how to tell stories” (pp. 135–136).

It is most interesting to see how Dournes brushes off topics he is not interested in talking about. As he mentions, his main interest lies in “the culture, the techniques, the oral literature”

(p. 118) and “the poetic” (p. 119). This is where meanings come from. The various short conversations about the war between 1946 and 1954, which pitted the Vietnamese against the French, are barely touched upon and considered mere “comedy” (p. 101). The word “comedy” here may not only be understood literally, that is, as a performance that intends to be humorous, but also in the sense that there is something profoundly absurd in it since there are more important things to care about such as the Jarai culture, techniques, oral literature, and poetic legends.

In the same way, Dournes teases out what is important and what is less important when pondering the Jarai economy. This is less about money than about storytellers, artists, and musicians for whom money has no place (p. 123). Some of the logic and beauty of the reasoning may strike one as overtly ideological and full of romanticism. But Dournes would probably argue that this is an ontological part of the Jarai world and Drit, its Jarai hero, is the epitome of eternal hope and romance. As a result, the economy of the local practice of slash and burn is remarkable in the simplicity of its logic and rationale (p. 125).

In unique ways some of Dournes’s arguments demonstrate his anarchic views on politics and economics, even while they simultaneously show how his way of reasoning is also deeply anarchic. As the anthropologist puts it when referring to the *Quête du Saint Graale*, the *Chanson de Roland*, and *Tristan and Iseult*, “It is pure creation and creation is free by definition” (p. 119) and “I am anti-economist the same way as I am an anarchist” (p. 120). (It should be noted that the sentence at the bottom of page 121 has a verb missing; the sentence should read: “on *est libre*.”)

This book brings together different vistas that help us comprehend the complex personality of Jacques Dournes, from his seminal text *Pötao, une théorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois jörai* to his scholarly place within the more mainstream ethnographic milieu in France, and to a live performance showcasing his comedic skills and the extent of his creative, improvising, and lyrical mind. Dournes was a man deeply charmed by Jarai culture. His vast and prolific corpus, ranging from the linguistic to the botanical, remains unique in the anthropology of the highlands. His books reveal a mind that is rigorous yet imaginative, rational yet poetic, possessing a writing style that makes him one of the best storytellers, poets, and linguistic musicians of the Jarai. There is no other way to better understand Dournes and the people he worked with than to roll up one’s trousers and follow him on the muddy trail of this ethnographic journey.

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Unequal Thailand: Aspects of Income, Wealth and Power

PASUK PHONGPAICHIT and CHRIS BAKER, eds.

Singapore: NUS Press, 2015, 216p.

Does Thailand have an Oligarchy? If so, how do we define it for the national case of Thailand? And most importantly for this collection of essays, what is the empirical proof of this oligarchy in contemporary Thailand? These are some of the main questions which pervade *Unequal Thailand: Aspects of Income, Wealth and Power*, edited by Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker. Translated and reworked from a Thai-language edition, *Su sangkom Thai samoe na* (Toward a more equitable Thailand) published in 2014 by Matichon, this volume is a timely and useful review of some of the political economy issues facing Thailand today.

With nine chapters by Thai scholars and technocrats, the aim of the book is to provide contemporary data and analysis on those material foundations which have fostered a growth in inequality and a strengthening in oligarchy in recent years. Some chapters do this better than others, but all provide insight into these issues. In terms of raw empirical analysis all of the research essays are a success, particularly the second chapter on land distribution as an indicator of both inequality and oligarchy. For those interested in the possible material foundations of recent turmoil in Thai political society, this volume is an absolute gem and is more than worth adding to one's library.

Theoretically speaking, the introductory chapter by the editors utilizes very recent publications on inequality and oligarchy to frame the research-based chapters which follow. Noteworthy out of this list are Thomas Piketty's bestselling *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) and Jeffrey A. Winters' comparative political economy treatise *Oligarchy* (2011). Those familiar with either of Piketty's or Winters' ideation on these topics will find evidence for both within the volume. In terms of the latter's theory on oligarchy, however, the editors seemed to have disvalued the analytic nuance of Winters' repositioning of oligarchy toward its original Aristotelian meaning—one which highlights the unique power position of agential material wealth without falling into the structural (or teleological) constraints of Marxist historical materialism. In its place, the editors create the moniker "flexible oligarchy" to mean any kind of group of elites (whether they be military, political, bureaucratic, royal, business, or so on) which network in order to "rule" the nation. This is somewhat frustrating, because the insights on how wealth is defended, why oligarchs fight, and what this means for a political society are lost. At best oligarchy then means any "network" of individuals that are somehow more powerful or more influential than the average Thai person. Networks there are in Thailand, but to elide the difference between an oligarch and an elite is to misunderstand the challenge which inequality and oligarchy in Thailand pose.

Yet to be fair, Winters' conceptualization of oligarchy has been challenged—most directly in a collection of essays edited by Michele Ford and Thomas Pepinsky (2013, 8) on oligarchy's power within the Indonesian context. This critique has four areas of contestation against oligarchy as a

political force: “explanatory capacity,” political “ontology,” “methodological orientation,” and “level of attention paid to non-material sources.” And, indeed, within the discussion of oligarchy theory itself, not everyone agrees on what oligarchy means. For example, scholars like Richard Robison and Vedi Hadiz (2004) are more than willing to allow oligarchy to stay within the boundaries of a Marxist understanding of materialism. Yet, the most direct application of Winters’ approach to political society in Thailand, at least on the national-level, is by T. F. Rhoden (2015) in the journal article “Oligarchy in Thailand?” Here, Rhoden argues that Thailand does have an oligarchy, not in the sense of a “regime” or even as a “class” that rules everything within the country, but rather in the sense of an empirical fact of Thailand’s political economy, which cannot be ignored. In short, the two most recent coups in Thailand were not downstream from any exigency between classes—that of a rich few versus that of the poor masses—but instead between the wealthy themselves. In this sense, utilizing oligarchic analysis as a starting point to understand recent events in Thailand on the national level fits unnervingly well.

More can be said about oligarchic theory, but this would take us beyond the scope of this specific book review. In short, despite Pasuk and Baker’s distancing themselves from the above example of oligarchy, this edited volume cannot but help lend additional empirics to both Winters’ conceptualization and Rhoden’s application of oligarchy to Thailand.

Misgivings on theory aside, all of the follow-up chapters can easily be read for the new and very important research they present. The most startling for the volume is the initial analysis by Duangmanee Laovakul in the second chapter on land title documents (*chanot*) provided by the Land Department. This has never been done before in a private publication. Traditionally, the Land Department does not publish this information for those outside of the government. The results are as fascinating as they are somewhat depressing. Whichever Gini Index number one reads for Thailand in terms of yearly income, these numbers hovering around 0.50 for the last decade pale in comparison to the Gini Index number at 0.89 for inequality in nationwide titled land distribution. The landholding analysis is also broken down by region via Thai *rai* (14.4 million hectare) and by MPs via declared value.

In the past, the best resource a researcher had for measuring a Thai oligarch’s net worth were the annual *Forbes* “Thailand 50 Richest” articles. With the addition of landholding data, one has a more complete picture of the distribution of assets beyond that of just publically traded companies. The greatest strength in this analysis—and the reason it was likely trusted to the scholar in the first place—is also its greatest weakness: the landholding data are completely anonymous. Granted, one can make educated guesses about who some of these owners are, but for a political economy analysis in a nation where over a third of the population work in agriculture, knowing who owns what parcel of land is of utmost consequence. The reviewer is still waiting for a day when one can see a map of Thailand, or at least of Bangkok, colored in delimiting who owns what exactly. Factor into this the complication of how much land the Crown Property Bureau of the Thai monarch does

or does not own and these seemingly economic issues of inequality take on a decidedly more political tone of oligarchy. Hence the importance of a theoretically robust theory of oligarchy beyond that of just “network” becomes ever more significant.

The third chapter by Dilaka Lathapipat extends the meaning of inequality beyond that of material goods to investigate its effect on education. New data is presented for the current growing inequality in tertiary education in connection with national wages, as well as some possible reforms. This is followed by Sarinee Achavanuntakul, Nathasit Rakkiattiwong, and Wanicha Direkudomsak’s fourth chapter where they take a direct look at the Thai capital market. They argue that the inequality found within Thailand’s monopoly securities exchange arises mainly from a mixture of both legal operations and illegal practices. Their case study of “political stocks” and their increased value and volume of trading in election years is insightful. With this focus on the stock market, the authors are able to deepen the theoretical discussion of oligarchy begun by the editors.

Another compelling research article from this important volume is the fifth chapter by Nualnoi Treerat and Parkpume Vanichaka on elite networking via special executive courses. The interviews that the scholars were able to get with attendees of these elite executive courses are of great value for understanding how it is that specific policies which could benefit the oligarchy come to fruition. The inclusion of members from “billion families” into the courses bring to light some of the behind-the-scene mechanics of how an oligarch is able to connect with those in parliament, military, bureaucracy, university, or the media. Public-sector courses have been offered by the National Security Academy for Government and Private Sector (Po Ro Or), the Office of the Judiciary, the King Prajadhipok Institute, and the Election Commission. Two private-sector courses include the Capital Market Academy by the Stock Exchange of Thailand and one by the Chamber of Commerce. In a political society where scholars have argued there is limited social capital, these executive courses take on a greater meaning.

The sixth chapter by Nopanut Wannathepsakul does well by exploring how inequality is maintained in Thailand’s energy sector. This intriguing analysis posits a “network bureaucracy” to help explain how particular policies are implemented. Attention is rightfully paid to the odd situation where it is not illegal in Thailand for a cabinet minister to create energy policies whilst at the same time continue to sit on the board of a semi-private energy company, collecting a salary.

The seventh chapter by Chaiyon Praditsil and Chainarong Khruenuan is also insightful since it brings the discussion of inequality and oligarchy down from the national to the provincial level. They present evidence that the overall structure of provincial oligarchy has evolved since the 1997 Financial Crisis. These local data exhibited next to the eighth chapter by Ukrist Pathmanand on “Network Thaksin” allows the reader to cogitate on oligarchy, not just in a horizontal way, but also as a vertical machination pervading Thailand’s political economy. The argument here is that the composition of Thaksin’s network of supporters and allies, both nationally and locally, has changed since he left the premiership. We would do well to remember that, along with a cleavage between

wealthy Thai oligarchs, a semi-independent mobilization of political conscious participants has emerged. They, too, have a voice—one that does not always align with an oligarch like Thaksin. Some solutions to the challenge of inequality and oligarchy are proffered in the final chapter by Pan Ananapibut. This last chapter is much valued, because it allows some space for thinking through some of the options the citizens of Thailand do have, at least in terms of tax policy, for combating the economic side of inequality. Proposals are made in terms of inequality in both income and wealth.

Overall, this is an engaging and well-crafted volume that delivers much-needed new empirical research on the challenges of inequality and oligarchy in Thailand. This book represents some of the best minds from Thailand on the state of country's current political economy. This volume will be of interest to scholars and students of Southeast Asian political economy as well as researchers into how inequality and oligarchy can vary across the globe.

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Potent Landscapes: Place and Mobility in Eastern Indonesia

CATHERINE ALLERTON

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013, xi+221p.

Potent Landscapes, by Catherine Allerton, is an engagingly written anthropological study of place and culture in Southeast Asia. Its ethnographic focus is a two-placed, partly resettled village (p. 5) in the Manggarai region of eastern Indonesia, with ancestral settlement Wae-Rebo in the highlands, and its lowland offshoot Kombo developed in the 1960s as part of a wider governmental resettle-

ment drive. To differentiate itself from the structuralist Leiden School that identifies eastern Indonesia as a field of study and pursues a cosmological coherence within the field, this book takes a “phenomenological” (p. 4) approach that puts bodily experience at the center of analysis, including those messy and contradictory aspects of people’s life. Allerton presents a “multisensory” (p. 15) picture of how landscapes gain potency through place- and path-making out of the entanglement between people and place. Meanwhile, by examining the influence of Catholic conversion, state development, resettlement, and migration on this eastern Indonesian village, Allerton also ties the work to contemporary issues.

Three recurring themes are key to master the core of the book. First, equal prominence is given both to the taken-for-granted, often unspoken aspects of everyday life and “the extraordinary, the ritual or the ancestral” (p. 9) aspects of life. Allerton argues that place- and path-making happens both through the explicit creation of presence in ritual performances and through everyday practices that do not consciously aim to create values. Readers can easily see the close entwinement of mundane and ritual life is repeatedly brought out throughout the chapters.

Second, landscapes, a rather encompassing concept in the book, include not only mountains or fields, but also—rooms, houses, and paths—and combine both material and immaterial aspects. Human activities take place in the concrete materiality of landscapes whose characteristics also shape people’s social life. Beyond this, Allerton places more emphases on the immateriality of landscapes, which refers that landscapes have agency, evoke human memories and emotions, and have their own concerns and desires.

Last but not least, the Manggarai landscape is defined by mobility along several dimensions. As the chapters expand outwards in ever-widening “concentric circles” (p. 15), different kinds of places, from the smallest and most intimate household rooms to larger scales of landscapes, are connected through daily movements between houses, to fields, up and down mountains, and the more poignant journeys along marriage paths or to outside realms. Closely related to Allerton’s strategy of personifying landscapes, is her attempt to illustrate the temporal dimension of mobile landscapes. Rooms, houses, and villages have their own course of social lives and need to undergo rites of passage as humans do so through the life cycle to realize identity transformation and reproduction.

The main contents of the book are organized in six chapters. Chapter one examines household rooms, which have not featured prominently in many writings on Southeast Asian houses. Allerton asserts rooms can be agents to connect with ancestors, gather up souls, and transmit mysterious blood spirits. By showing the entanglement of rooms with their occupants’ bodies and souls during key phrases in the human life cycle, Allerton argues that rooms emerge as different kinds of entities in the context of different practices and how particular rituals create the presence of the room as agents. In this way, the important social relationship among Manggarai people can be learnt from the narrative of the social life of a Manggarai room. However, when doing so, Allerton

emphasizes that we should not objectify rooms but understand it as “an ongoing dynamics in a room-household’s developmental cycle” (p. 41).

Chapter two looks at houses. Instead of seeing houses as an architectural or symbolic object, Allerton treats houses as a particular kind of place characterized by permeability and liveliness, which helps establish the significance of Manggarai houses in both daily and ritual practices. On one hand, an ordinary house is a place for numerous lively events, partly relying on its permeability to “sounds, smells, livestock, and the movements of the personnel” (p. 15). On the other hand, ritual liveliness ensures that a house is permeable to the right kinds of souls and spirits. In the meantime, distinct from the practices of fixing or fetishizing houses in the literature on house-based societies, Allerton suggests that easy and frequent movements of people among dwellings make houses alive and able to connect to broader landscapes of pathways and fields.

Chapter three attempts to challenge the hegemony of the Leiden-derived traditions of analysis. This tradition sees eastern Indonesian marriage alliances as constituted only by rules and classifications and argues that traveling paths are produced by kinship and marriage. Drawing on women’s experiences and memories of their marriage paths, Allerton argues that marriage, “as a sequence of place-based, practical actions” (p. 74), connects and transforms both people and places. On one hand, traveling along physical trails through the landscape reinforces and renews the historical connections between families. On the other hand, people enact kinship in this form of travel, especially women who grow from an outsider bride to a mother central to the figuration of alliance groups.

Chapter four shifts attention to “what the land wants” (p. 15). While believing that an animate landscape is a concrete form of particular agricultural animism, rituals are, according to Allerton, ways that Manggarai people communicate with “the environment as an animate realm of multiple agents” (p. 122). The strong presence of agricultural animism and the desirability of offering sacrifice explains villagers’ reassertion of ritual procedures in the face of Catholic syncretic attempts and state-sponsored resettlement when church and state simply view rituals “as a matter of traditional culture” (p. 125). Another aspect that Allerton stresses of agricultural animism is Manggarai engagements with ancestral spirits, in which the idea of “ancestors of the land” (p. 100) is quite pertinent to the problem of the drum house in the next chapter.

Chapter five illustrates the ways which place is made by examining the relationship between resettlement and drum houses. Villagers view drum houses as “most closely associated with ancestors” (p. 131) and thus still take Kombo without such ancestral links as “a monkey-hut” (p. 128). However, state-sponsored rebuilding projects highlight the authenticity of highlands in cultural terms and instead honor the isolation of Wae-Rebo in this sense. Both notions have sustained the division of the two places. However, Allerton also argues that the difference between Wae Rebo and Kombo, despite the ritual inequality, has been normalized by incorporating travels between two sites and movements of goods and personnel into daily life. Moreover, the inhabitants

of this two-placed village indeed benefit greatly from diversified economic opportunities due to partial resettlement.

Chapter six details everyday, extraordinary, and mythical movements within the landscape and describes “the moments of stillness” (p. 152) or “apparently stable places” (p. 176) that constitute what Allerton calls “rooting.” She asserts that the notion of rooting does not contrast with the core idea of the book “mobility.” Instead, mobility relies on a form of rooting. Only by rooting one’s travel in a place of origin through ritual events, can one possibly travel safely. In this context, Allerton provides us with a different lens to look at migrants’ travel to towns or faraway cities and children undertaking many journeys to attend schools. The expanding mobility of people has led to neither the loss of roots nor the erosion of culture. On the contrary, travel and movement are essential in the making of place and culture in this remote Indonesian village.

In conclusion, the rich ethnographic description along with great clarity in theoretical discussion makes the book a pleasure to read. However, I find some of the author’s claims on methodological innovation a little strained. Either emphasis on taken-for-granted everyday life or critique of the structuralist Leiden scholarship is not novel in anthropological works on eastern Indonesia. In addition, the cultural and social uniqueness of Manggarai people does not quite stand out of the writing. Readers may find a lot of similarities with village life in other regions of Indonesia. But it may also suggest a possibility for other comparative studies. The book offers a wealth of ideas and is a toolkit for comparison. Scholars who are working on place and culture of landscapes in other parts of Southeast Asian may find it especially useful. Aside from these minor weaknesses, it is an important contribution to the conceptualization of landscapes and would be interest to scholars and students of Indonesian studies, Southeast Asian studies, and Anthropology in general.

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Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Practices: Explorations through Java

ALBERTUS BAGUS LAKSANA

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Albertus Bagus Laksana’s *Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Practices: Explorations through Java* is a rich, intricately textured comparative ethnography of Muslim and Catholic pilgrimage traditions in south central Java. The empirical data—derived from participant observation, direct-interview, discourse analysis, and archival research—is organized into two balanced sections, while a concluding analysis discusses the culturally-specific aspects that condition religious pluralism in Java. What is most interesting is that Laksana confronts the reality of this pluralism through a methodology

of “double visiting,” moving “back and forth between my own tradition of Catholic Christianity and the tradition I visit, Islam” (p. 191). In tackling multiple sites of investigation, Laksana’s work demonstrates a remarkable kind of empirical cavalier not commonly seen in a single piece of in-depth ethnographic work.

There would still be many in the social sciences who would harbor some misgivings about this multi-sited methodology, which carries with it the inherent risk of compromising ethnographic depth, attenuating the empirical potency of fieldwork, and undervaluing the voices of the subaltern. Laksana’s rationale for comparison, however, is not analytic breadth per se, but his own theological formation in which multi-sited research is “a real religious pilgrimage to God and His saints where on various levels I learn more about God, my own self, and my religious tradition, from the richness of the Muslim tradition . . .” (p. 191). This work is a deliberate and explicit deployment of the new comparative theology, promulgated by Francis X. Clooney (2010), in which the close exposure to and study of the religious other is coterminous with the pursuit of personal theological edification. In this way, the multi-sidedness of Laksana’s empirical purview cannot be evaluated solely by the standards set in the social science academy.

The main argument of this book resonates strongly with its author’s personal theological journey: that “complex religious identity” in Java is characterized by an intimate embrace of religious alterity, one that occurs through the medium of indigenous, sub-religious concepts. The persuasiveness of this argument is contingent upon the acceptance of two assumptions: firstly, that there is a largely unproblematic fluidity between culture and religion, and secondly, that there exists an autochthonous, inclusive Javanese religio-cultural sensibility that remains as the basis of intersubjective Javanese humanness, regardless of centuries of religious formation. Each of the two main sections that frame the analysis explore the theological and empirical elasticity of this central theme.

Part I, which comprises of three chapters, draws momentum from an examination of how Javano-Muslim “sacred history” is animated by the Arabic concept of *ziarah*, which denotes the pious visits to the tombs of the nine Holy men (*wali songo*) who facilitated the Islamization of Java. In this vein, Laksana provides details of the pilgrimage to the shrines of Tembayat, Gunungpring, and Mawlana Maghribi. In Chapter 2, Laksana focuses on one such saint, Sunan Kalijaga, the quintessential Javanese Muslim saint in the late fifteenth century. Like the other Javanese “religio-cultural brokers,” Kalijaga struck a thoughtful and workable balance between Islam and Javaneness, the latter with its own history of incorporating a legacy of Indic inheritances. For Laksana, what is crucial is not Kalijaga’s hybridity, but rather his personification of a complex religio-cultural identity in which inclusivity was achieved without forsaking one’s theological commitments as an “authentic” Muslim.

These kinds of complex religio-cultural identities are buttressed by a conducive political infrastructure in the form of the support and patronage of the sultanates of Yogyakarta and Solo.

The Mataram court itself is considered the highest paragon of Javanese cultural capital, encapsulating the legacy and grandeur of the pre-Islamic Indianized culture through ritual, art, and Kraton regalia. To this can be added the supportive political influence of the traditionalist Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, which encouraged and celebrated the Muslim saints, including their mystical practices, and corresponding devotion to paradigmatic ancestors.

Part II is a corollary of the first both in terms of structure and content. Three chapters in this section paint a portrait of Javano-Catholics as minorities who do not live in fear of persecution in a Muslim dominated state but are, like their Javano-Muslim counterparts, channeling the same core Javaneseness, absorbing and finding fulfillment in the encounter with the religious other. Laksana demonstrates how Javano-Catholics were likewise able to “negotiate their hybrid identities with Hindu-Buddhist past and Islamic present” in a process manifested in the phenomenological experience of pilgrimage to three Roman Catholic shrines: the Sendangsono grotto, the Sacred Heart shrine at Ganjuran, the Mausoleum of Muntilan. That Javaneseness and Christianity meet in self-edifying modes of intersubjectivity is not only seen in the shrine’s objects and statuary, but also in the commemoration of paradigmatic Catholic pioneers in Java like Father van Lith and Father Sanjaya. Even more profoundly, this encounter is possible through a particular kind of communal hermeneutic, a *communio sanctorum* (communion of saints and the Holy), that underlies how the Catholic community “looks forward to having the presence and participation of their Muslim neighbors” (p. 134). Pilgrimage is an occasion where Muslims and Catholics come to “know the fuller scope of the inclusiveness of Divine grace, the grace of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that flows through Mary, the saints, and their own local pious ancestors . . .” (p. 134).

Taking the empirical data from parts I and II, Laksana’s Java is not simply a Muslim-dominated realm, but a “supernaturally charged cosmos”—a *mandala* space in which pilgrimage sites (whether tombs of *wali songo* or graves of Catholic pioneers) are nodes of geo-spiritual energy. To corroborate this, Laksana turns to the analysis of certain autochthonous religio-cultural concepts common to both Javanese Muslims and Catholics. The Sanskrit concept of *rasa*, for example, is taken as the dynamics of human interiority which becomes a way of experiencing the depth of religious experience, particularly in relation to shrines and tombs. By the same token, the pilgrims’ encounter can be characterized by *meneng* (emotional stability and spiritual purity), *wening* (clear mindfulness), and *dunung* (acceptance of one’s worldly place and mission)—crucial concepts in Javanese human philosophy, in which Muslims and Catholics “encounter each other” on a spiritual level and through which, in turn, they come to appreciate the goodness of the other’s core principles and traditions.

Laksana’s ideas about Javanese religious identity amounts to a post-secular commentary about syncretism and religious pluralism. Secularism, as conceived by popular Western philosophers such as Alain de Botton (2012), extols the individual prerogative of religious eclecticism in which “the best values of all religions” is channeled towards a modern secular humanism. The religious

subjectivities described by Laksana, however, disputes the prevalence of this dynamic in Java. Instead, he describes religious pluralism as an intimate embrace that nevertheless preserves and edifies discreetly bounded, and in that sense, “authentic” religious identities. The outcome of religious pluralism in Java, then, is not syncretism or eclecticism, but a deepening spiritual formation that preserves religious distinctions and the theological boundaries that separate them.

While anthropologists like Joel Robbins (2006) had once described the “awkward” relationship between theology and ethnography, scholars from both sides have been increasingly open to dialogue and collaboration. Although Laksana places himself firmly within the former camp, his work resonates with that of anthropologists such as Philip Fountain and Sin Wen Lau (2013), who have more recently called for the pursuit of “anthropological theologies.” In this book, Laksana offers a substantive response to this call by adding rich, empirical depth to an ongoing transdisciplinary conversation, the development of which offers good prospects for a more comparative and more nuanced account of religious dynamism in Southeast Asia.

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Javaphilia: American Love Affairs with Javanese Music and Dance

HENRY SPILLER

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In this monograph, Henry Spiller has critically examined the self-fashioning of four North American figures who positioned themselves as masters of Javanese dance and/or music to Western audiences throughout the twentieth century. In the process of this self-fashioning, these individuals appropriated specific facets of Javanese cultural production and then redeployed them in a new context, largely at home in the United States, to construct an unconventional or alternative identity and/or career for themselves, reifying problematic and essentializing tropes, and participating in

an Orientalist discourse along the way. However, I believe it is to the author's credit that he has described these individuals' personal and professional lives with kindness and humor, finding, and acknowledging, parallels with his own experience and involvement with the study and teaching of *gamelan*, as well as pointing out the cultural and academic contributions that these four figures have made to North American understandings of Javanese culture.

In his first chapter, Spiller lays out the thematic and theoretical structure of the book, providing brief overviews of the characters whose lives he will describe in what he calls "microhistories": Eva Gauthier (1885–1958), Hubert Stowitts (1892–1953), Mantle Hood (1918–2005), and Lou Harrison (1917–2003) (p. 24). He also spends some time situating his work within the context of recent research on Javanese culture and music (for example, that of Matthew Cohen) as well as tracing the lineage of orientalisms, American orientalisms in particular, in which these figures participate. In this, he is specifically working from Gina Marchetti's, L. S. Kim's, Erika Lee's, and Malini Johar Schueller's conceptualizations of orientalism within the United States. Taking North America's particular historical circumstances into account, including the United States' economic and military incursions and involvement in the Philippines, China, and Japan during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as a history of immigration by Asian communities to the West Coast, Schueller identifies two particular forms of American orientalism: first, the concept of Asia as a timeless, ancient place somehow simultaneously existing in contemporary world, and second, the concept of the "East" as a fundamentally spiritual Other. Furthermore, this history of immigration also created a space in which "American orientalisms reflected American approaches to situating one's self within larger communities and forging coherent self-understandings by articulating relationships to one's community and drawing boundaries with one's Others" (pp. 19–21). Therefore, Spiller argues that the four individuals he addresses in this volume were uniquely positioned, in terms of likelihood and methods, to appropriate Javanese cultural practices, as they understood them, to re-fashion their own identities (p. 22). Finally, the chapter itself, and indeed the book in its entirety, is framed by the juxtaposition of two expositions: the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, and Expo '86, held in Vancouver in 1986. The comparison serves first to provide a historical context for American imaginings of Javanese culture during the twentieth century, and second, to highlight the proliferation of perspectives, both Indonesian and non-Indonesian, on Javanese *gamelan* performance that were evident 100 years later.

The second chapter focuses in more detail on the 1893 Columbian exposition and its effect on American conceptions of Java from the nineteenth century on. Here, Spiller addresses the physical layout of the exposition, and the history of world's fairs, specifically noting how they were designed to justify the supposed superiority of the host country or culture, and further to that, the processes of industrialization and empire. In the case of the 1893 exposition, the ideological message was clearly stated in the division between the White City, a model for an American city of the future, and the Midway Plaisance, the segregated area in which various cultural groups, including

a Bedouin community, groups from Turkey and Algeria, and of course, the Javanese community were situated, living in specially-constructed villages. Drawing upon newspaper articles, personal recollections, as well as recordings of Javanese music performed at the Exposition and descriptions of the music and experience of the Javanese village by visitors, Spiller demonstrates how the Javanese pavilion helped to shape North American perceptions of the “exotic” Javanese other as “gentle, childlike creatures who spent their time crafting objects of exquisite beauty” and staging performances of music and dance (p. 27). Ultimately, using these imperialist misconceptions, Javanese exoticism could be co-opted by later North American individuals eager to reconstruct their own identity for their own ends, or to use Javanese cultural idioms, as they understood them, to reconcile unconventional or socially unacceptable parts of their own persons.

The first of the four microhistories Spiller describes is that of Eva Gauthier, whose early life, travels to Java, and reinterpretation of Javanese music and dance to further her career in Europe and United States is the subject of the third chapter. From Spiller’s research, it appears that Gauthier’s engagement with Javanese music and dance was not originally a planned encounter, but rather the result of her pursuing a Dutch audience for her vocal performances in colonial Java. While there, she came into contact with Paul Seelig, who helped her by arranging music for performances that gradually began to include “Indies-inspired” compositions (p. 64). Further, in early 1914 Gauthier had the opportunity to hear *gamelan* music accompanying the annual eight-day Sekaten festival in honor of the prophet Muhammed while in Solo. Upon returning to North America in late 1914, Gauthier embarked on both research concerning Java as well as lectures and performances involving costumes and her repertoire of Java-inspired music and dance. Relying on “dicent authority,” or Thomas Turino’s concept of the authority of “having-been-there” (p. 6), Gauthier positioned herself as an authority on Javanese music, dance, and culture, simultaneously carving out a socially-acceptable and financially viable position for herself as an independent female performer during the early twentieth century, and equating her interpretation of Javanese music with North American and European avant-garde music.

The fourth chapter focuses on Hubert J. Stowitts, a dancer as well as set and costume designer professionally active from 1915 on. As a man who deeply valued the aesthetics of dance practice, and as a gay man, Stowitts found himself in search of a subjectivity, which he found in the appropriation of Javanese dance practice, and later as a lecturer and self-styled anthropologist, again based on his dicent authority. Specifically drawn to Java through his own orientalist understanding of Java’s exotic culture and its emphasis on dance, Stowitts spent the years 1927–31 studying performances in Yogyakarta and Solo and executing very detailed portraits of various dancers, accurately depicting details of their costuming and poses. Upon his return to the United States (and later travels to Europe), he began to give lectures and perform examples of Javanese dance, as well as arranging exhibitions of his paintings. Furthermore, Stowitts’s elevation of Javanese dance was rooted in his orientalist view of Javanese dance: as solely an engagement with the

spiritual, reflecting the “pure” aesthetic nature of the not-yet-modernized Java. As Spiller describes it, “[Stowitts’s] emphasis on a Javanese regard for dance as a normal activity for ordinary men . . . was part of an attempt to persuade Americans to change their mappings of masculinity, femininity, body worship, and sexuality and to redeem his own countercultural predilections” (p. 123).

The fifth chapter is devoted to investigating Mantle Hood’s career spent researching *gamelan*, and well as his interest in the occult and spiritualism, an interest that he kept private for much of his life. Here, Spiller points to Hood’s interest in Javanese music as not only stemming from an American Cold War pivot toward area studies research, particularly pertaining to those countries seen as key strategic allies for the United States, but also from Hood’s perception that the study of Javanese performing arts could provide a gateway for further understanding of the spiritual potential of music. Of foundational importance to North American teaching and performance of Javanese and Sundanese *gamelan* music, Hood’s “gamelan study group” (p. 132), founded at UCLA in the early 1950s, was not only the first such group in United States, and provided the model for future performance and study groups across the country, but also embodied Hood’s teaching ethos of “bimusicality,” in which students participated in musical performance as a research methodology for learning about foreign musical traditions. Hood’s reasoning for his appropriation and interpretation of Javanese culture in order to further his career was similar in some ways to that of Gauthier and Stowitts: in Javanese musical compositions he found what he saw as a potential spiritual corrective to the lack of understanding of the occult in West, and accordingly interpreted (and composed) *gamelan* music to suit his (sometimes inaccurate) view.

Finally, the last of the four individuals that Spiller addresses is Lou Harrison, whose career in composition, and specifically *gamelan*-inspired compositions, is the subject of the sixth chapter. Here, Spiller discusses Harrison’s appropriation of *gamelan* music as part of the composer’s attempts (similarly to the other individuals we have now met) to construct an alternative identity, in this case, a “maverick” identity. As the author carefully notes, while Harrison’s compositions evolved from “aural imitations of the generalized sounds of the *gamelan*” (p. 154) to a later, sustained engagement with not only the performance of, but also construction of *gamelan* instruments, several themes, somewhat antithetical to Javanese music and musical performance, remained enshrined within his work. For example, Harrison was deeply attached to the Western conception of the individual (genius) composer, in whom all authority rested, while *gamelan* ensembles generally rely on one or two members of the group to relay information about number of repetitions of section, or a change in style or tempo, to the rest of the group as the performance is in progress. This tendency (among other characteristics of *gamelan*) leads to a more communally-shared “ownership” and investment in the work (p. 179). Furthermore, in his fabrication of *gamelan* instruments, Harrison specifically altered their generally-accepted forms in order to grant himself greater flexibility in tuning and in the performance of multiple octaves, rather than confining their performance to the usual one octave (*ibid.*). Ultimately, Harrison’s self-fashioning as a composer

of Javanese-inspired *gamelan* music rested, as it did for the others, in the selective appropriation, re-interpretation, and deployment of facets of Javanese culture and practice that conformed to either his conception of himself, or as a corrective for the mid-twentieth century North American society in which he found himself.

Rather than choosing to recount the lives of those individuals who identified with “affinity groups” as part of their study and absorption of Javanese culture, Spiller has instead chosen Gauthier, Stowitts, Hood, and Harrison as “solitary figures,” whose interest in and devotion to the study of Javanese music and performance resulted in personal appropriations in order to construct an identity that, in some cases, had ultimately very little to do with Javanese or Sundanese culture itself. In the last and seventh chapter, returning again to the 1986 Expo '86 held in Vancouver, the author describes the rich outpouring of creative collaboration and interpretation of *gamelan* music, on the part of both Western and Javanese and Sundanese researchers and performers. At the same time, however, he productively maps Timothy Taylor’s three “clusters” of Western domination of foreign or “exotic” cultures (colonialism, imperialism, and globalization) on top of the interests and activities of the four individuals whose lives he has explored in the previous chapters, clearly noting the deeply orientalist and culturally imperialist elements of their work. With *Javaphilia*, I believe Spiller has carefully walked the line of critical evaluation of these performers’ and composers’ contributions to North American understanding and practice of *gamelan* music and Javanese performance, while simultaneously acknowledging the unequal power structures at play in each individuals’ appropriations and redeployments of Javanese performance traditions within their own lives. Certainly in terms of the history of cultural reception of Javanese influence within North America, as well as the context for the historiography of Javanese *gamelan* music in both academic and popular contexts, this book is not only accessibly-written, but also a solid contribution to a growing body of work devoted to critical assessments of the power structures at play in the inter-cultural exchanges of musical and performance traditions.

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