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Rajesh Daniel

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Tamils and the Haunting of Justice: History and Recognition in Malaysia's Plantations

ANDREW C. WILLFORD

Singapore: NUS Press, 2015, 336p.

In *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice*, Andrew Willford explores the questions of justice and retribution confronting Malaysian Tamils as they face eviction from their homes and the demolition of their community structures in the former plantation districts in Kuala Lumpur by real estate developers.

With urban development becoming hugely more profitable than rubber plantations in Malaysia's inner city districts, owners sold their plantation lands to lucrative housing developments. But these were lands in which thousands of Tamil residents have lived since the late nineteenth century, and where the British companies in colonial Malaya built their community-based model of rubber plantation production. Even as the Malay government razes the community structures of the Tamils—the schools, temples, churches, and community halls—it also views them as merely ex-laborers to be classified as “squatters” and evicted. Tamils feel compensation for their lands is insufficient and desire recognition for their longtime presence as important for achieving justice.

Willford's study of Tamil plantation workers shows them resisting resettlement before negotiating compensation with notions of compensatory justice grounded in a desire for recognition. In attempts to prevent demolition of their temples and community buildings and “the erasure of their associated memories,” “historiographic recognition” becomes a kind of compensatory justice (p. 5).

A key argument of the book is that the transformation of land usage in Malaysia cannot be separated from its inextricable links to religious-ethnic politics in nation-building, and the deliberately measured politicizing of Islam and Malay rights. The book makes substantive and lengthy use of the French philosopher Derrida's work to show that as a sense of victimization takes hold of an aggrieved minority, the Malaysian Tamils, the “force of law” that “marks and sustains such dissonance becomes more visible, indeed deconstructible” (p. 8). For Derrida, the logic of “haunting” is an important way of understanding justice (O'Riley 2007, 18). The spectral or haunting presence of past events, in this case the demolition of Tamil ancestral lands and religious structures, disrupts and brings into question present history and events.

Willford's extensive citing of Derrida's work forms the essential strands of the book's critique of Malaysian ethnic nationalism, the racialized landscape within which these events unfold, and how the seeking of justice by Tamils goes outside and beyond the juristic or civil order, and even exceeds reason or logic to cross over into the divine or sublime.

The Tamil Sense of Cultural Historicity and Justice

Based on 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork in plantation areas between 2003 and 2009, Willford shows how ideas of race and ethnicity are produced, imagined, and negated within a political, material, legal, and discursive field. As they struggle for compensation and ultimately justice, the book portrays the sense of hurt and betrayal felt by the Tamils as they are labeled as “squatters” despite their long community presence in the area.

The Tamil sense of justice goes beyond the law. The strength of the study is showing how the notions of justice as imagined by the marginalized and betrayed Tamils complicate legal demarcations of ethnic differences in post-colonial states (p. 6).

The book provides a critique of the development ideology of the state, with its quite implicit cultural, nationalist, ethnic, and religious face. Malaysia’s development politics have forced dramatic shifts in the ethnic composition of Malaysia’s industrial heartland, which as Willford notes “was the intended goal all along” (p. 34). As Willford says: “To develop the nation’s core identity, politically constructed around Malay ethnicity and Islam, the two being increasingly synonymous, Malays, it was argued, had to be united and strong—particularly at the center” (p. 35).

The book’s long-term value is that it does not stop at exploring economic or ethnic interests but dives into the complexities of the historiography of “victimhood within a matrix of power” (p. 10). The Tamils’ growing sense of historicity and their growing sense of resentment and anger grow from their knowledge that although the labor of the plantation communities contributed to the growth of the cities of Kuala Lumpur and Klang (along with Chinese tin mining and business), now they are facing resettlement and evictions from the twin pressures of urban development and ethnic policies (and politics).

There was no unified, homogenous Malay culture or polity across the peninsula in the nineteenth century, and what was self-identified as “Malay” were in fact a plurality of groups and the *peranakan* or mixed origins. The “Malay” ethnic category was constructed and reinforced by both Malay language and Islam.

Census figures show that Indians were a bigger population than Malays in many parts of the peninsula in the 1900s. For example, in 1911 in Selangor, a former plantation heartland and the industrial center of Malaysia today, Indians numbered 74,067, while Malays and Chinese were 65,062 and 150,908 respectively (p. 34). Demographic evidence also shows that a large percentage of “Malays” are recent immigrants from Indonesia or have married into the community.

The study argues that this growing Tamil historicity takes on a “victim’s narrative” (p. 34) among the Tamil poor and working class in its search for justice. The Tamils’ emergent sense of justice and compensation is grounded in an equally emergent historicity of cultural recognition, defined against the politics of ethnic exclusivity.

Archive Fever, Seeking Justice

Using Derrida, the book delves into the “fever for the archive” (pp. 12–13) among the Tamil communities. An archive fever, according to Derrida, materializes a hope for an authorized knowledge and truth claim. The Tamils succumb to this archive fever as they try to provide the documentary evidence to protect their lands against the developers. Once when the author visits a Tamil temple, he is shocked to find an entire community waiting for him, thinking he was a journalist and hoping he can help them in documenting the historical presence of their temples and schools. But as Willford notes in semi-despair, the hope they were investing in this documentary form of evidence “outweighed its legal fecundity in the Malaysian context” (p. 57). Willford says his study is inspired by the works of Derrida to probe into “archive” and “archive fever” to understand the production of knowledge that both authorizes the Law and those subject to it.

Justice as expressed in Tamil Hindu terms, says Willford, “is possessive, perhaps punitive, and at the edge of reason and order” (p. 58). As the book shows, it is the defilement of the Tamil goddess within her sacred landscape of the temple that produces the haunting call for justice. Derrida’s notion of justice is its function of both melancholy and mourning, a haunting that leads to a striving for some practical and redistributive justice (O’Riley 2007, 17–19).

The book narrates how this haunting is the compelling force for the Tamils as they seek justice for their dispossession, struggling against all odds to fend off the violence of the development state and its overtly Malay ethnic agenda.

The book needs some wading into and grappling with terms like archive fever in its initial chapters. It certainly helps if the reader has some knowledge of the French philosopher and of continental literary and psychoanalytic theory. The frequent and lengthy citations of Derrida’s works and words may add literary heft to the book’s foundations, but more often become an impediment to the reading of this compelling story of the Tamil plantation communities in Malaysia. In fact, some editorial intervention to move some of the philosophical references and musings to footnotes would have made for a smoother read.

The author shows how the Tamils employ a variety of strategies and collaborate with many advisors and nongovernmental groups to understand and fight Malaysia’s legal system and its racialized landscape. Often enough, these strategies spill over beyond the law as religious symbols and symbolism as well as Tamil Hindu rituals become part of their weapons for seeking justice and recognition. It would have been interesting to also know how the other religions among the Tamils (Catholic/Christian, Muslim) deal with these challenges, since the book focuses solely on the Tamil Hindus.

Conclusion: Pinned against a Landscape of Ethnic and Religious Tension

The developments and evictions in the former plantation areas take place in a landscape of Malay-Islamic cultural nationalism and the Tamil-Hindu community faces cultural and existential barriers to political recognition even as their difficulties are compounded within a legal system where they do not have permanent land titles to plantation areas or community and residential structures.

In the eyes of Malaysian law, former land use is not a significant rights-based claim, and despite their ancestral presence in the lands as lifelong contract laborers, the Tamils have no legal claim to their home, land, or community structures and even 100-year old temples and schools, and are viewed as merely (ex-) laborers. Willford's study situated in the early 2000s provides an inner look at how Malaysia's development "of the prime industrial and subsequent residential heartlands . . . have taken on an ethnonationalistic urgency, given the politics of identity in the nation" (pp. 11, 123–124, 235).

Given Islamic identity's structured dominance, the most visible aspect of marginalization of the Tamils is in their struggles to protect the sacredness of their own religious spaces. The author narrates the case of a 100-year old plantation temple in the Bukit Jalil Estate, a temple that was the focal point of the community identity—that the Tamils feared would be razed down, and the community tells that it is keen to document the temple's historical presence.

Malaysia's nation building was deliberately structured with separateness and differences in rights and privileges accorded to Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others. Even though the citizenship rights of all Malaysians regardless of ethnic origin is given recognition, the law has enshrined special provisions protecting ethnic Malay political supremacy as "identities were created and rendered through the law and supplemented through archival measurements of race and culture" (p. 266). Willford writes that: "Malaysian nationalism was built out of negative and dissonant discourses of the other that had to be held—indeed reinforced—by legal means and supplemented by a racialized political and cultural landscape" (p. 8).

The combined effects of postindustrialism, postmodernism, and globalization are generating a "crisis of integration" in contemporary societies (Richmond 2003, 90–92). In polyethnic Malaysia, we can add post-colonialism to the mix.

By looking at ethnicity as social construct, we can regard it for what it is: essentially a work in progress that is not yet done, and so focus on the processes of the production especially the cultural content of ethnicity in particular where it joins religion.

The book offers important insights into the production and emergence of ethnic politics and the heightening of ethnic and religious tensions in Malaysia. The book is of critical relevance in our present time as growing resentment and dissatisfaction against the anti-democratic nature of economic development is manifesting in rising currents of ethnic and religious tensions and conflicts.

Rajesh Daniel

*Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Asia, Bangkok***References**

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Beyond Oligarchy: Wealth, Power and Contemporary Indonesian Politics

MICHELE FORD and THOMAS B. PEPINSKY, eds.

Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014, x+178p.

The end of the Suharto regime in 1998 liberated Indonesia's population in a variety of ways: it opened the door to democratic governance and the development of a critical and outspoken civil society, and saw a new government retract the strong grip the state held on numerous aspects of civil, political, and economic life. The regime's end also "liberated" a small group of extremely rich and well-connected individuals. These individuals, risen to wealth and influence under Suharto's protection but not having gone down with him, applied their capital to setting themselves up in the leaderships of the nations' new political parties, to expanding their grasp on resources and industries, and to building a public image sustaining these activities through the television channels and newspapers they owned. The rise of these oligarchs in democratic post-Suharto Indonesia has been worrying and intriguing observers, particularly regarding their influence on democracy, rule of law, and the protection of Indonesia's market to foreign competition. It also raises numerous questions regarding their strategies and *modus operandi*. Should we understand them as a mutually-supportive class with shared interests, or as individual actors with shared characteristics? How are they placed *vis-à-vis* other power holders, how do they obtain popular support?

While research and publications on the role and influence of oligarchy in Indonesia has been undertaken, most notably the works of Robison and Hadiz (2004) and Winters (2011), the number of publications remains limited and contains but little debate. *Beyond Oligarchy* is making an important difference here. The contributors seek to start a discussion between proponents of the "oligarchy framework" (see below) and scholars drawing on other theoretical traditions, exchanging views on starting points and emphases in understanding and explaining the role of oligarchs in Indonesian politics. This discussion has strengthened the debate and avoided the specter of a "collection of inward-looking scholarly camps" (p. x) with a weak collective capacity for understand-