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# Stories across Borders: Myths of Origin and Their Contestation in the Borderlands of South and Southeast Asia

## Borderland Narratives

Erik de Maaker* and Monica Janowski**

### Stories as Histories

Orally told stories, like human beings, can be said to have histories. In the telling, they morph and change, reflecting the concerns and interests of those who tell them and those who listen to them. As such, they can help to generate cohesion within communities, as well as trauma and schism. They also move from place to place, transported by their tellers. Where stories are taken across political borders, their histories can play an important part in maintaining a sense of common identity for those who tell them and those who listen to them. This is what Carola Lorea (this issue) demonstrates has happened in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. There, low-caste Matua migrants who fled from Bangladesh into India at the time of Partition were persuaded to settle by the Indian government. Lorea shows how, through the stories they brought with them, these migrants managed to maintain a sense of continuity with their place of origin. These stories helped in the establishment and "grounding" of a Bengali settler community on the islands.

The example of Matua settlers in the Andaman Islands demonstrates well how much the narrating of stories matters in the borderlands of South and Southeast Asia. The political borders that divide the Andaman Islands from Bangladesh, albeit oceanic and hence "liquid," have come into being as a result of modern state making. Elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia, borders are also recent, which more often than not renders

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them unstable and contested. Borders frequently divide ethnic communities, meaning, for example, that while some Lahu are Thai nationals, others are Burmese and yet others are Chinese (O'Morchoe, this issue). The creation of new political borders transforms people who move across them into foreign migrants, where such movement would earlier have amounted to internal mobility.

The four papers in this special issue deal with people living at the margins of the modern states that exist in South and Southeast Asia. Frances O'Morchoe analyzes the relevance of the stories of origin of the Lahu, who live along the borders of China, Myanmar, and Thailand. There is good reason for considering South and Southeast Asia in the same frame of reference here; while they are distinct areas, they are united by a shared history of colonial state making, decolonization, and consistent attempts at consolidation of the postcolonial states. Klemens Karlsson considers the narratives and performances of an upland Tai community living in the borderlands of Thailand and Myanmar. Valerie Mashman considers the significance of stories for Borneo highlanders who live in a politically comparable area: the borderlands of Sarawak (Malaysia) and Kalimantan (Indonesia). Lorea focuses on the Andaman Islands, an oceanic or "liquid" borderland that is geopolitically at the margins of India and Myanmar. Taken together, the four papers provide important new insights on how stories, legends, and myths shape, transform, and reflect place attachment and ethnicity across the margins of the modern states of the region.

The papers intersect along three analytical axes. First, they all focus on subaltern communities, whose stories, legends, and myths provide histories that are alternatives to the hegemonic discourses that dominate the state contexts in which the communities are included. Subaltern narratives can, at least in some contexts, challenge dominant narratives that take the centrality of the modern postcolonial state for granted. Second, while narratives that have a bearing on ethnicity more or less routinely become embedded in "national" referential frameworks, these four papers all take a "borderland" approach which creates a different perspective, one which is conducive to revealing and to some degree challenging such national referential frameworks. This means that they present takes on ethnicity and interethnic relationships that do not take the postcolonial states of South and Southeast Asia for granted. Third, the narratives presented and analyzed in the papers all provide approaches to "place" that differ from—even challenge—the territorial claims made by modern states. Focusing on people, their mobility, and the alliances they sustain, these narratives present alternatives to place as fixed and coherent, instead privileging flows and exchanges. We will elaborate on these three themes in the sections below.

## Orality, Performance, and Eclectic Histories

The papers included in this special issue explore how stories, legends, and myths illustrate, substantiate, and challenge the ways in which people living in Asia's borderland areas imagine, live out, and narrate their relationships with places of residence, origin, or longing. The narratives analyzed are vernacular and derive their impact from orality and performance. They present a different version of reality from that presented in more standard histories of national states, which are usually grounded in "official" archives or other government records, which almost invariably marginalize the people of the borderlands (Baud and van Schendel 1997). Narratives that are primarily "local" connect in complex ways to regional, national, and international levels. This is particularly relevant in borderland contexts, where the historical relationship between local people and the state to which they belong has typically been distant.

The four papers focus on groups that are not only geographically remote from state centers but also marginal to the social hierarchies that dominate these states (Scott 2009). The stories told by these groups both present histories and, in their telling, put forward claims—particularly claims to land, or to place in a more general sense. The stories lay out alternative histories and social categorizations that present, explain, and justify subaltern perspectives. Emphasizing oral and vernacular histories, the papers presented here provide new knowledge that can contribute to the development of theoretical models that are not self-evidently state-centric but do justice to the sociological realities in which subaltern peoples live.

## Borderland Dynamics

Most studies of society, culture, and history in Asia continue to accept national territories as the natural building blocks of academic enquiry, perpetuating notions such as "Indonesian society," the "Chinese economy," or "Bangladeshi culture." They imply that borders between states are not only of a political and administrative nature but also create separate social, economic, and cultural realms. This is why analytical approaches to ethnicity have more or less routinely become embedded in "national" referential frameworks. States are delineated by borders but also create conceptual realms that have inspired dedicated approaches to ethnicity, community, and nation. To counter such "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), scholarship on Asia is moving in new directions, and the emerging interest in borderland perspectives is one of the results.

Borders and borderlands come into existence as a result of political processes. Most of Asia's borders owe their existence to colonial state making and the violent histories this involved. Even the borders of states that were never formally colonized, such as China, Thailand, and Nepal, are the outcome of interactions with colonial border making. Decolonization, often carried out in the form of a hasty retreat, created many borders that divide linguistic and cultural communities while restricting migrations and mobilities that were historically a given. While many borders in Asia are very recent, not having been demarcated until the second half of the twentieth century, nation-states today treat them as givens, and increasingly they invest in the policing and general hardening of their national borders (van Schendel and de Maaker 2014).

Border studies focus not only on how borders are imposed by national states, but also on how people who are confronted with the imposition of a political border engage with it. Research on borders as geopolitical boundaries has long been rooted primarily in social geography, political science, and international relations (Wastl-Walter 2012). More recent is the proliferation of border studies among many more disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including anthropology (Wilson and Donnan 2012).[1)] Anthropological studies of borders and borderlands can reveal how borderlands are "lived spaces challenged and inspired" by international boundaries (Dean 2012).

Border studies have so far focused primarily on how borders delineate, and less on the larger political and conceptual realms that these create. Moreover, with a few exceptions (Horstmann and Wadley 2006), border studies have focused primarily on the movement of people, goods, and ideas, neglecting the impact of the creation of political borders on cultural or religious realities. The papers included in this special issue explore these latter angles, as the stories they explore explicate and express the cultural and religious dynamics within which people actually live, and how border zones shape and transform these narratives, while at the same time orienting local actors within a broader sphere that extends beyond the border.

1) There are several research centers focusing on borderlands, including the Centre for International Borders Research at Queens University Belfast and IBRU: Centre for Borders Research at the University of Durham, both in the UK, and the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research at Radboud University in the Netherlands. There is an Association for Borderlands Studies as well as a network focusing specifically on Asian borderlands, the Asian Borderlands Research Network, which holds a biennial conference. There is a journal focusing on borderlands, the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*.

## Narratives and Storytelling

In recent years storytelling and narrative has developed rapidly as a research area, both as a discipline in itself and within sociology, anthropology, international development, and health sciences.[2] While modern approaches to the analysis of narratives and stories began a century ago with Vladimir Propp's book *Morphology of the Folktale*, first published in Russian in 1928 (Propp 1958 [1928]), interest in the importance of narrative and storytelling has increased greatly in the past couple of decades, with what has been described as the "narrative turn" within the social sciences. A key author in this field is J. Bruner, who in his work in the late 1980s and 1990s contrasted a "narrative way of knowing" with a "logico-scientific mode" and emphasized the value of the former as a way of understanding how people perceive their own personal histories as well as histories shared with others (Bruner 1991). In recent years scholars have emphasized the enormous power and potential of stories in effecting change (Haven 2007; Grace and Kaufman 2013).

The importance of stories as ways of resisting authority and creating alternative histories by non-dominant peoples in marginal positions within broader societies was emphasized by Eric Selbin in his book *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story* (Selbin 2010), while Sujatha Fernandes highlighted both the enormous power of stories and the potential for their misuse in her book *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling* (Fernandes 2017). While there has been some research recently on the power of stories and the ways in which stories and narratives are used to express counter-narratives to the dominant narrative within societies in some parts of the world (Musliu and Orbie 2016), this has yet to be explored as an explicit area of inquiry in relation to the borderlands of South and Southeast Asia. This small collection of papers begins to address this deficit.

The growing focus on narrative, particularly in the context of exploring voices which have not been heard in the past, in order to generate change has highlighted the importance of an open-ended anthropological approach, one which uses an iterative approach

2) There are now a number of centers focusing on research into storytelling and narrative. These include the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative at St. Thomas University in Canada; Narrare: Centre for Interdisciplinary Narrative Studies at the University of Tampere, Finland; the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology at the University of Hamburg in Germany; the Center for the Study of Narrative and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University in the United States; the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling at the University of South Wales; the Interdisciplinary Centre for Narrative Studies at the University of York; and the Centre for Research in Memory, Narrative and Histories at the University of Brighton. There are a number of journals focusing on storytelling and narrative, including *StoryTelling*; *Storytelling, Self, Society*; *Narrative*; *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*; and *Storyworlds*.

to exploring research questions, guided by the stories and narratives which emerge from the research process (Shekedi 2005; Mølbjerg Jørgensen and Largacha-Martinez 2014). The contributions in this special issue foreground an ethnographic method deriving from anthropology: they all take as a starting point stories as told and performed. As the papers in this collection show, the impact and communicative value of narratives, stories, legends, and myths depend on the contexts in which they are told, how they are mediated, and in what ways they reach their audiences. This draws attention to trajectories of generation, communication, dissemination, and circulation.

Stories, legends, and myths can involve claims to place, creating and legitimizing locatedness, and this is a major focus of the papers included in this collection. This is often in terms of kin networks, but it can also relate back to a place of origin, while at the same time connecting people to a place of arrival. Since stories travel with people, they are integral to a migratory or diasporic identity. Questions which arise in relation to the ways in which stories fit into stories of migration and across borders include the following: What exactly is the significance of stories on an emotional, political, and social level for different peoples and groups? How are stories subject to processes of authorization? What kind of agency is attributed to these stories? And how are these processes influenced by people's location in borderlands, and by their being divided across several states? The contributions to this collection draw on these questions to query the data they present.

## Narratives of Border Zones

The paper presented here by O'Morchoe focuses on origin stories told by the Lahu people of the border zone shared by China, Myanmar (Burma), and Thailand (Siam). Lahu have a rich tradition of myths and stories that narrate their origin, their forced migration, as well as the origin of the ethnic differences that exist within the group. Earlier historians focused primarily on the importance of these myths in the Chinese context; the majority of Lahu currently reside in China. O'Morchoe widens the scope of the discussion by comparing Lahu origin stories and Lahu stories of migration collected in British Burma in the late nineteenth century to the versions of those stories told by the Lahu of Yunnan. She shows how, over time, origin stories have evolved with the changing needs of people to locate themselves, differentiate themselves from their new neighbors, and claim the historicity of their way of life. Within the nation-states in which they live, Lahu are in what historically were considered backward tracts (in British Burma) or outside the *muang* or civilized valleys (in Thailand); in China they were regarded as "raw" barbarians.

O'Morchoe shows, however, that Lahu do not perceive themselves to be hill people (as opposed to valley people); their perception of ethnic differences does not refer to this dichotomy. An analysis of Lahu stories of origin, in short, reveals social categories that otherwise remain invisible.

Lorea analyzes the traveling archive of stories of a Bengali community living on the Andaman Islands of India. At the time of the Partition of India, in 1947, millions of Hindu Bengalis from what was then East Pakistan migrated into India. Thousands of these migrants, low-caste families, were resettled by the Indian government on the Andaman Islands, at the periphery of the Indian subcontinent, in the middle of the Bay of Bengal. Now, more than 70 years later, through oral traditions and verbal arts, many of these low-caste Bengalis continue to identify themselves as part of a Bengali diaspora. Lorea focuses on people belonging to the Matua sect, whose songs and musical practices bridge the emotional distance between the islands and the homeland, and she examines the ways in which transnational flows of pilgrims, preachers, and religious literature facilitate trans-regional and transnational connectivity within the Bengali diaspora. She also shows how sacred lyrics have gained new interpretations and meanings in the diasporic context. Borrowing, subverting, and accommodating elements from common Hindu epics, Matua performers engage in what Lorea calls diasporic "bricolage-thinking," which allows them to subvert caste-based prejudices and to seek disconnection from those. In foregrounding narratives conveyed through Matua songs and music, she challenges and subverts the popular imagination of the Andamans as a homogeneous, casteless, multicultural whole.

Karlsson focuses on the content and interpretation of the *Jengtung (Chiang Tung) State Chronicle*, which consists of a collection of myths, legends, stories, and historical narratives. One of the main events described in this chronicle is the Songkran New Year festival, performed annually in the Eastern Shan State of Myanmar. This area is part of a border zone that spreads into Thailand, China, and Laos and was once part of the Tai cultural area of Lan Na, the land of "a million rice fields." The Songkran festival, which still takes place, encompasses performances that narrate the history of the city-state (*muang*) Chiang Tung and its people (Tai Khun). In the festival, the Tai Loi (Hill Tai) act out the way in which their defeat by the Tai Khun resulted in their amalgamation into an encompassing Khun nation. Karlsson shows how performances of the festival are subject to sustained reformulation, which allows it to act as a manifestation of place, belonging, and ethnic identity. Songkran performances serve not only to remember the past but also to create the present.

Mashman analyzes the importance of narratives relating to ethnicity in the highlands of Borneo. Analyzing an oral narrative delivered in a Kelabit longhouse in Sarawak,

Malaysian Borneo, her paper discusses two distinct ways of understanding ethnicity. The narrative refers on the one hand to a fluid and inclusive notion of "our people" (*lun tauh*), the significance of which is rooted in historical alliances and migrations that were significant before the advent of the national border between Indonesian and Malaysian parts of the island of Borneo. On the other hand, the narrative also refers to a reified, exclusive ethnic construct of "the Kelabit," confined to an ethno-culturally homogeneous population associated with a bounded territory that is located only in Sarawak, which is part of Malaysia. Whereas the earlier relational conceptualization of "being a group" and identity has a long history, the latter is much more recent, and Mashman's paper discusses these two contrasting but coexisting notions of ethnicity in the light of past and present political concerns and conditions. In the border zone in which the Kelabit live, the state is gradually gaining more of a presence. This results in a growing emphasis on reified ethnicity, gradually reducing the importance of *lun tauh* and the encompassing networks that go beyond rigid ethnic and state boundaries. As the modern state becomes more important for the Kelabit, people adopt an approach to ethnicity and territory which is meaningful within a context where national borders have become more and more significant.

## Conclusion

Stories have enormous communicative power, particularly when they are told orally. They communicate messages effectively because they draw listeners in through empathy. They elicit emotions: sympathy, fear, expectation, anger, love. Stories such as those analyzed here, which relate to the history and place (of origin and of current belonging) of those listening, have particular power because there is no significant imaginative gap to cross—listeners are immediately able to enter into the stories told.

It is not therefore at all surprising that people who live in borderlands such as those in the margins of Southeast and South Asia's postcolonial states, who also live between national cultures, tell stories, remember stories, and turn to stories to help them generate a sense of who they are, where they have come from, and where they belong. While it is arguable that all humans use stories to generate meaning and identity, those who find themselves marginalized are particularly likely to do so. While mainstream Thai or Myanmar peoples can turn to narratives provided by the states to which they now belong, minority, subaltern peoples living in borderland areas cannot do this. They need alternative narratives, and these they find in oral narratives and performances. This collection of papers presents and discusses some of the ways in which they do this.

We hope that this small collection of essays will stimulate and encourage more research on the relevance of storytelling and oral performance of narratives among peoples living at and across the borders of Southeast and South Asia's postcolonial states—not only the geographical borderlands which are the focus of this collection but also the psychological and emotional borderlands in which many subaltern peoples live. While in some cases this may mean people who live also in geographical borderlands—as do the Matua on which Lorea focuses in her paper in this collection—it does not exclude those who live in the heartland of the nation-state. Such people are often left out of national imaginations, and it is very likely that many of them have narratives in which they attempt to create a sense of origin, belonging, and place for themselves. Researching and analyzing such narratives can provide important new insights into the consolidation and transformation of communities that otherwise remain at the margins of nation-states.

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