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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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Narrating Loss and Differentiation: Lahu Origin Stories on the Margins of Burma, China, and Siam

Frances O'Morchoe*

This article examines variations in Lahu oral tradition across time and space in order to understand the continuities as well as changes in how people express what it means to be Lahu. By comparing stories of ethnic origins collected in Burma in the 1890s and 1930s, in Northern Thailand and Yunnan in the 1960s, in Yunnan in the 2000s, and in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma) today, this article helps us to assess the influence that past political projects of ethnic classification, regional conflicts, and ongoing Lahu experiences of migration have had on Lahu people's self-identification over time. This article combines insights from the fields of borderlands history and folklore studies to understand ethnic identity and experience across the colonial-imposed borders which characterize this diverse region. In contexts varying from British and Chinese state encroachment in the late nineteenth century to the Baptist conversion experiences in the twentieth century, this comparative transnational analysis of Lahu stories helps us to understand the uneasy fit between nations and states in much of Southeast Asia today. Examining stories of the origins of ethnic divisions can thus show the influence of Southeast Asia's complex borderland politics on the self-conceptions of borderland inhabitants in this region riven by conflict and territorial disputes.

Keywords: Lahu, stories, borderlands, identity, migration, ethnicity

Introduction: The Uses of Stories

“‘Puij’ comes from the sound of a white bird falling out of a tree when shot with a cross-bow. ‘Kye’ means fell down.” Peter, a seminary student in Yangon, explained to me that “Puijkye,” the name for the original home of the Lahu, is today known as Beijing. He told me how, after a period of wandering away from Puijkye, the Lahu founded their own state in southwest China. The Chinese attacked many times but were always shot. The Chinese eventually managed to trick the Lahu out of their land. The land was called

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Mvuh Meh Mi Meh, which means “horse-cultivated soil.” There are 54 different groups of Lahu today, Peter explained, but they all once came from this state in China.

Stories of how the Lahu people came to live in the highlands at the borders of China, Myanmar, and Thailand are numerous, and they bear similarities whether collected in Mong Hka (today Ximeng) in the 1890s, in Keng Tung in the 1930s, in Yunnan in the 1960s, or in Yangon in 2016.¹⁾ Comparing stories of ethnic origins across space and time can help scholars to understand how identities are, and become, meaningful to people over time. This transnational comparative method also allows scholars to examine the differences in the historical experiences of people divided by borders during the eras of colonialism and the formation of postcolonial nation-states. Central to this method is the need to pay attention to the voices of narrators, which allows historians to examine the effects of divergent historical experiences on how some people express what it means to be Lahu. Stories are necessarily refracted through the people who tell and record them, and as a method they offer a way for scholars to approach the history of people who lack indigenous-language written historical documents. Studying stories is a way to show how identification shifted over time in a space of complex borderland interactions, connected by transnational religious movements, the globalization of upland economies, and colonial and nation-state penetration. This article compares Lahu stories told at different times and in different places across the region, in order to understand how the complex borderland politics of the region has influenced the experience of what it means to be Lahu. Comparing stories of Lahu origins over time helps us to see the influence that past political projects of ethnic classification, regional conflicts, and ongoing Lahu experiences of migration have had on Lahu people's self-identification over time.

This comparative historical method builds on the work of scholars who analyze shifting categories of ethnic identification over time. Among the most prominent scholars to have worked in this field was Edmund Leach. In his work on Kachin people, Leach argued that groups of Kachin people oscillated between the political models “gumsa” and “gumlao” (Leach 1954). A problem with Leach's analysis is that he assumed that the meanings of concepts such as gumsa and gumlao were stable across time. Leach aimed to challenge structuralism—the orthodoxy among anthropologists at the time—but his mechanical explanation is problematic (Robinne and Sadan 2007). Michael Moerman takes this analysis further, providing tools for resolving some of these problems. He gives insight into how, when “objective ethnical characteristics” fail to define entities, scholars can still use “attitudes of identification and classification” (Moerman 1965). The anthropologist's job is thus to discover what features are locally significant for deter-

1) I use the term “Burma” to refer to the country before the name was changed in 1989, and “Myanmar” to refer to the country after that time.

mining difference. Yves Conrad (1989) likewise shows the inaccuracy of descriptions of ethnic groups as living in “splendid isolation,” with distinctive and unique languages and cultures. Strategies of identification can change as circumstances change. Charles Keyes (1995) has shown how state building and national identity formation can influence ethnic identification, while Deborah Tooker (1992) has shown how the Akha notion of exteriorized tradition enables ethnic and religious change. This article will focus on the temporal and spatial contingencies of these complex questions of ethnicity and identity. This paper aims to trace the causes of some of these changes, by studying stories told at different times and in different places by peoples who call themselves Lahu. Continuities of migration motifs reflect the continuing salience of migration to Lahu people’s self-identification, whereas changes in the central motifs of stories regarding ethnic difference point to the influence on identity of events in the twentieth century. State projects in 1950s China, Vietnam, and Thailand aimed to “scientifically” classify populations by race or ethnicity (Keyes 2002). The Ethnic Classification Project, which took place in southwest China in the early Communist period and in which ethnologists and linguists set out to demarcate the complex ethnic landscape into a precise number of ethnic categories, was one such project (Mullaney 2010). This article, by tracing changes in Lahu stories over time, argues that this twentieth-century context influenced the changing experience and expression of Lahu identity.

There are two recurring motifs in the stories told by Lahu people. The first concerns the loss of the Lahu’s original homeland in Yunnan, and the second concerns the origins of ethnic difference. The changes and continuities evident in the different iterations of these two motifs over time reflect the continuity as well as change in what it means to be Lahu, in contexts varying from British and Chinese state encroachment in the late nineteenth century through to the influence of Baptist conversion experiences in the twentieth century. Stories of the first motif, telling of the Lahu’s historic homeland in China, can be found dating from the present day back to the 1890s. Narrators, when they tell these stories of a former Lahu homeland in Yunnan, recount them sometimes as legend and sometimes as history. Despite the differences in framing, the meaning of the stories to Lahu people, as well as their mobilizing power, has been stable over time. The stories highlight the Lahu’s pride in their former state in Yunnan, where they governed themselves for many years before being defeated by the Chinese and forced to flee. The second motif concerns the origins of ethnic difference. Stories with this motif vary across time and place. Before the twentieth century, stories of this type focused on explaining the origins of the divisions within the Lahu people and the differences between Lahu and Shan people. From the mid-twentieth century, stories include a wider variety of ethnic categories and recount how God granted to all of the different groups different types of

land and different skills. Both types of story hark back to an age of Lahu superiority, either when the Lahu ruled over their own kingdom (but were tricked out of it and defeated by the Chinese) or when all ethnic groups were equal until the Lahu, despite being God's favorites, made bad decisions when God was dividing the world between the different ethnic nations.

Scholars such as Anthony D. Smith and Bruce Cauthen have noted how narrative tropes like those discussed here are universal, and how they help to unite people within a common ethnic identity. The idea of a historic golden age recurs particularly frequently. It can give consolation in times of hardship. Memories of a golden age also stimulate a sense of regeneration, through which the special origins of the ethnic group or nation have the potential to be recreated one day by the descendants of its founders (Smith 1996; Cauthen 2004). Smith and Cauthen see the presence of this type of myth, a myth of "ethnic election," of being God's chosen people, as one of the most important factors explaining how an ethnic community can be reproduced down the generations (Smith 1992; Cauthen 2004).

Nishimoto Yoichi, in his study of Lahu narratives of inferiority, identified this type of theme running through Lahu stories, which recount how the Lahu were once God's favorite people but were unlucky in the loss of their kingdom (Nishimoto 2000). The Lahu's narratives of inferiority explain their current hardship and tribulations as being a result of bad luck, despite God helping them as much as he could. This paper furthers Nishimoto's analysis to show how the Lahu narratives changed in the context of complex border politics, reflecting the experience of living in a febrile borderland context. Nishimoto analyzes Lahu narratives as the product of a long history of ethnic relations and argues that the negative Lahu self-definition is made in binary opposition to lowlanders. This article adds to this analysis by understanding that the stories reference multiple ethnic divisions of the hills—e.g., tops and middles of hills—as well as ethnic divisions by occupation—e.g., farmers and traders—rather than just a binary of upland and lowland groups. Nishimoto studies narratives as a reflection of people's social experience. This article deepens this analysis by comparing stories against each other to understand changes across time and space.

This paper undertakes a transnational historical study of storytelling and identity, showing how people can use myths to express their sense of an enduring identity as well as to mobilize unity among groups living dispersed across diverse borderlands. For scholars making historical comparisons, tracing changes in stories over time can explain how people have adapted to their changing environment. Examining local conceptions of ethnic divisions, contestation, and conquest of territory can show the influence of Southeast Asia's complex borderland politics on the self-conceptions of borderland inhab-

itants in this region riven by conflict and territorial disputes.

Being Lahu in the Contest for the Borderlands

Looking across this border zone at a group that has confronted many different state realities—different levels and kinds of state penetration—the stories they tell show how the Lahu have negotiated what it is to be Lahu, and how they have positioned themselves in relation to lowland states. Like all the people living in this historic border zone, the Lahu have lived in different relationships with the multitude of overlapping lowland states they have encountered. The nature of center-periphery relations has long been an object of study for specialists in this region. O. W. Wolters (1968) borrowed the concept of the mandala—implying concentric circles of royal influence—from South Asian historiography to describe Ayudhya. Stanley Tambiah (1976) and Aidan Southall (1988) used the concepts of “galactic polity” and “segmentary state” respectively to denote the relations between central leaders and the populations on the periphery of their influence. Mandy Sadan (2013) preferred the term “borderworld” to connote a zone where local people were aware of the existence of multiple neighboring geographies. The emphasis on the fuzzy nature of highland governance employed by historians of Southeast Asia contrasts with the descriptions found in the historiography of the Chinese Qing Empire’s frontiers. The formalized nature of many of the types of Ming and Qing governance (such as the *tusi*, or “native chieftain,” system) in these borderlands means that historians of China are more likely to describe systems of tribute as indirect rule (Crossley *et al.* 2006). On the ground, local actors such as the Lahu had to negotiate these multiple relationships in real time (Giersch 2006).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the multiplicity of types of relationships between the Lahu and external states, and the hugely varied levels of state penetration, continued; the modern era has changed but not ended the ambiguous state position of the Lahu. After independence many parts of Burma’s Shan State were governmental gray areas, neither completely in nor completely out of the central Burmese government’s control. Some places passed between the control of the Burmese army and the control of armed ethnic groups and militias, all wielding state-like powers such as extraction, the exercise of coercive power, and the ability to manipulate the local economy (Callahan 2007). One such group was the remnants of Kuomintang (KMT) troops who fled from China to Burma during World War II. Many Christian Lahu refugees also fled over the border into Burma after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Meehan 2015). In China, Yunnan was the last bastion of resistance for the KMT, the

last province to be taken over by the Communists in the 1950s. Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, supposedly Lahu-majority and Lahu-run but in reality a Han enterprise, was established in 1953, and the policy of “direct transition into socialism” was begun (Ma 2007). In Thailand over the same period many parts of the mountain border areas remained until the 1970s and 1980s outside central government control. Chinese Nationalist KMT troops, Burmese rebel groups, Thai Communists, and American CIA operatives all lived, and fought, scattered across Thailand’s northern borderland through the mid-twentieth century (Chang 2001). The multitude of Lahu endo- and exonyms hints at the plurality of their relations with lowland states. They are commonly called Luohei by Chinese, and Mussur by Thai and Shan (from whence Muhso by British colonial officials). Luohei means “black beasts” or “black savages,” while the Shan name, Mussur, means “hunter” (Walker 1977; Ma 2007; Thein Tun Oo 2013). A Lahu informant in Yangon told me that the name Lahu to them means “tiger (Lă) breeder (Hy).” As he said proudly, “Everyone is afraid of tigers except the Lahu who breed them.”

There is incredible diversity among Lahu people, along lines of language, religion, livelihood, and location. James Matisoff, the foremost scholar of Lahu linguistics, identifies a “bewildering profusion” of names for various subgroups of Lahu, although he notes that most of the distinctions between subgroups are primarily cultural rather than linguistic (Matisoff 1992, 133). Anthony Walker (1974) refers to more than 20 different subgroups of Lahu people. One interlocutor of mine estimated the number of subgroups at 54. Estimates of the number of Lahu dialects also vary widely (Walker 1974). Noel Kya Heh, a Lahu linguist, has made a comparative study of 36 different Lahu dialects (Kya Heh, personal correspondence). The Lahu Na (Black Lahu) are the most numerous in terms of population, and Lahu Na is the most commonly understood dialect (Bradley 1979). Other dialects are relatively mutually unintelligible, with some in addition being heavily influenced by the languages of the various countries in which their speakers live. Such diversity reflects in part that the region is a vast ethnic “shatter zone” (Scott 2009). Diversity is also partly a function of the environment of the highlands. Jean Michaud argues that in Zomia, “people and space always intersect, especially when geographical remoteness equates to economic and political isolation” (Michaud 2010, 199). The poor soil of the hills has necessitated living dispersed in small groups across the region and moving frequently. Historical circumstance—being caught in the middle of this politically febrile border landscape—has also scattered the Lahu. Political and economic turmoil has long caused waves of refugees and other migrants to move across the borderlands in this region (Kataoka 2011). For Lahu people the trend of migration has been broadly southward, first on the part of rebels escaping the extension of Qing administration in Yunnan, and later on the part of Christian Lahu escaping the People’s Republic of

China (PRC). Other groups later moved south from Burma into Northern Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century, seeking a better life away from Ne Win's socialist government in Burma. Economic circumstance, at first a function of eking out a living as swidden farmers in the mountains, has long caused Lahu people to lead a life on the move.

The Lahu are also subdivided along religious lines. Some are Christian, some animist, and some Buddhist. Mahayana Buddhism has a long history among the Lahu in Yunnan, influencing a series of Lahu "Buddha kings" as well as anti-Han Lahu rebellions in the late nineteenth century (Ma 2007; Kataoka 2013). Many Lahu were animist before American missionaries brought Christianity to the region. Missionaries moved to both Keng Tung in Shan State, where Baptists arrived in 1900, and Chiang Mai, where Presbyterians started proselytizing in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, Lahu today are starkly divided by economic circumstance. Some continue to live in the mountains as swidden farmers, while others live and work in towns such as Keng Tung, Chiang Mai, and Yangon. Mapping onto this last difference, the majority of the Lahu today have very low levels of education, but there is also a highly educated minority who despair over the lack of interest in education shown by most Lahu. Despite this diversity of dialects, religions, locations, and lifestyles, it will become clear that shared histories, myths, and stories are a way through which some people express what being Lahu means.

A Former Lahu State in China

A narrative of exile and banishment from a historic homeland is a theme running through many of the stories told by Lahu people. Versions of a story of the loss of the Lahu's lowland state in Yunnan and their subsequent migration to their mountain villages have been collected across the region, from Burma in the 1890s to Northern Thailand and Yunnan in the 1960s, Yunnan in the 2000s, and Thailand and Myanmar (Burma) today (Scott 1893; Jones 1967; Walker 1995; Pun and Lewis 2002; Ma 2007; Young 2013). The story goes that an original Lahu homeland, today known as Mvuh Meh Mi Meh, was a valley kingdom in China that the Lahu used to rule. Eventually the Chinese managed to defeat them, and the Lahu were forced to scatter. Many Lahu use these myths to identify themselves as a mobile mountain people, and to differentiate their history from those of their many neighboring ethnic groups. This story of historic migration from a vanquished former state reflects the centrality of the experience of migration in Lahu history. Migration was for a long time, and for many continues to be, a part of life for the Lahu (Kataoka 2011). A deep sense of pride in the former Lahu state, where the Lahu ruled

themselves independently of neighboring powers, is central to all the stories studied here. Nishimoto (2000) has studied these myths of the Lahu country told in Thailand, analyzing their contemporary relevance in the context of Christian millennialism and the twentieth-century Lahu independence movement. This article analyzes historic changes and continuities in these stories across the region, to emphasize the effect of migration on how different people express what it means to be Lahu.

A narrative regarding the original homeland of the Lahu was passed down as oral history at least until the 1890s. Indeed, a Lahu valley state in Yunnan and the subsequent migration of the Lahu out of it are mentioned in British colonial records in 1893, not long after the first documented mass southward migrations of Lahu people from Yunnan. The Lahu chief of Mong Hka (today Ximeng), in a meeting with a British official, told a history of the Lahu in which they used to live in a valley kingdom called Mong Meu in Yunnan. A couple of centuries or more ago, he said, they were driven out by the Chinese and left in three large groups, one going down the Mekong and settling as far south as Chiang Mai, another going west and scattering themselves over the western Shan states, and the third settling at Nan Cha, whence they spread northward to Mong Lem (Scott 1893). The chief, known as the Ta Fu Ye, told the British that he was the last Lahu Fu (Buddha king) still living, and that he was acknowledged as such by all the Lahu. Telling the British the story of the Lahu's historic kingdom in China was part of the chief's attempt to position himself as a ruler of a unified people, and to maximize his negotiating position in the face of British and Chinese state penetration. Chinese accounts record that the Lahu chief at Mong Hka had in 1891 submitted to the imperial Chinese authorities, and that in 1891 the Qing had created a subprefecture called Chen-pien (also transcribed as Zhenbian, today Lancang), under a Chinese magistrate, out of several Lahu, Wa, and Shan states near Mong Hka (Davies 1909; Barton 1933; Fiskesjö 2000, 21). Until a few years before, Chinese rule had been only nominal and these small states had been practically independent. The extension of Qing administration into these areas, while rapid, did not completely displace pre-existing structures of authority. The Mong Hka chief in 1893, by telling the British the story of the Lahu historic kingdom in Yunnan, was trying to leverage the unity of the Lahu as a nation, as part of an attempt to preserve his autonomy in a time of accelerating state encroachment.

The historical record corroborates this chief's story of the Lahu being expelled from their home in China. An anthropologist of the Lahu, Anthony Walker, has described some of the Lahu rebellions in Yunnan in the eighteenth century, and the beginning of the southward migration of the Lahu from Yunnan. In 1799 there was a particularly massive rebellion in Mengmeng (modern Shuangjiang County), led by a Lahu, Li Wenming, against the local Tai ruler of Mengmeng. The rebellion was defeated in 1800, and the Lahu leader

was put to death. As part of the Qing policy at that time of *yi yi zhi yi* (“ruling the barbarian through the barbarian”), the Han monk co-leader Zhang Fuguo voluntarily derobed and was given control of three *meng* (*muang*, referring to Tai-inhabited plains) and five *quan* (Lahu “circles,” referring to smaller statelets in the mountains), and a title under the Qing’s *tusi* system. In 1883 Zhang Fuguo’s son and grandson attacked Mengmeng, were defeated, and lost the *tusi*-ship. The region was subsequently placed under direct Qing administration (Kataoka 2013). The severity of the Qing response was likely occasioned by fears of British interference to the south (Walker 2003). A Baptist missionary to the Lahu, William Marcus Young, in 1932 concurred in this description of the Chinese “pacification” of the Lahu rebels causing large-scale migration out of Yunnan. Young asserted that the Chinese method of subduing the Lahu was to “prune” their leaders:

In the long run the method has been effective in reducing them; by constantly pruning their leaders the Chinese gradually broke down the spirit of the Lahus, who were formerly as turbulent as the present wild Was; now those who have not emigrated are if anything to be reckoned amongst the mildest and, until we brought Christianity to them, spiritually the most depressed. (Barton 1933, 98)

What had probably reflected historical fact came in time to be blended with legend, incorporated into a story about finding the location of God’s home. In 1912 Baptist missionaries recorded a story relating to the Lahu’s original home in China, in which a place, Mun Mehn, is mentioned as a point on the journey to God’s house. This was just one year after missionaries—mostly Americans and Karen—had begun the work of committing the Lahu language to writing. Rev. Ba Te, a Karen Christian missionary, wrote in 1912 that the story was spread across the region where the Lahu were to be found (Antisdell 1911). It is a story of following the trail of God’s bees and flies in order to find and make offerings to God. Part of it goes as follows:

Going up farther and farther,
We pass over rocks and stones.
Going up farther and farther,
We come to the land where the Chinese dwell.
The large empire covering half the earth,
Taking up half the sky,
All covered with mist.
The track of the bee is almost lost,
And the trace of the green fly.
I make my eyes those of the wild cat,
The eyes of the hawk I make mine.
The trace of the bee trends eastward,
So trends the track of the green fly.

Having passed the land of the Chinese,
 Having crossed their sky,
 We pass onward and forward.
 We come to the land Mun Mehn,
 We come to her plain.
 Having passed the plain of the Mun Mehn,
 We pass on further forward.
 [...]

And we find that God resides in the East,
 God abides in the Land of the East.
 [...] (Ba Te 1912)

This same place—below spelled Mvuh Me Mi Me, reflecting the variation in Lahu orthographic systems in use at the time—is also at the center of a story of banishment and exile which Saya (later Rev.) Ai Pun, an early Lahu convert to Baptist Protestantism, collected in Shan State in the 1930s. This version tells the story like a history once again and uses the idea of a Lahu original homeland to constantly emphasize the essential unity of the Lahu, even while using the idea of a historic defeat by the Chinese to explain why the Lahu are so dispersed today:

It is not known how long the Lahu people lived at Mvuh Me Mi Me. They had their own country and their own rulers. After they had lived there a long time the Chinese fought them and defeated them. The Lahu then scattered to many places. Because they scattered around like this, they could not defeat the Chinese.

But the Lahu do not like to live under anyone. So the Lahu left the country of Mvuh Me Mi Me and moved to Sha K'ai Shi (the land of the free). But not all of them went down to the country of Sha K'ai Shi. Some of them went and lived wherever they wanted to. Those who moved to the country of Sha K'ai Shi were very numerous. But they were still under the Chinese and wore earrings to show this.

Later when the English came and fought in Burma, the Chinese came and fought the Lahu. Since they defeated the Lahu, there were no more Lahu rulers. With no Lahu rulers to govern them, the Lahu people could not live together. So some of them went to the north, some to the south, some to the east, and some to the west. (Ai Pun 1939)

Rev. Ai Pun first published this version of the story in 1939 in a collection of stories, titled *Lāhū Kǎ pui kǎ lao*, with the American Baptist Mission Press. His daughter, Angela Pun, together with an American missionary, Paul Lewis, translated the same collection of stories into English in 2002 and published the collection with White Lotus Press in Bangkok. In 2007 Rev. Ai Pun republished the English translation in Chiang Mai. This publication history, involving the same stories being recycled verbatim down through the generations, sometimes published jointly with American missionaries, reminds us to pay attention to the narrators and recorders of stories, and what audience they might

have had in mind.

Lahu people and missionaries in the 1900s might have been both attentive to evidence of a unified Lahu people and interested in demonstrating the geographical reach of a mutually intelligible Lahu language. Missionaries often sought to find and demarcate territories containing linguistically homogenous groups (Errington 2001). This search for linguistically defined territories was especially at the forefront of the minds of the Baptists working out of Keng Tung in the early 1900s. Their interest in collecting stories of past Lahu kingdoms would have been energized by a decades-long embittered feud over territory with the Presbyterians based in Chiang Mai, in which the two sets of missionaries debated furiously as to how to divide between them the “fertile” Lahu hills (Young 1905; Kelly *et al.* 1913). The close collaboration between Rev. Ai Pun and Protestant missionaries in collecting Lahu stories is evident also in other stories the former recorded. Some of his stories hark directly to the Old Testament. A Lahu story about original sin is a near identical copy of the story in Genesis, complete with snakes, gendered temptation, and forbidden fruit, differing only in that the first two humans are called Ca Ti and Na Ti and the devil is a shape-shifting giant, Ca Nu Ca Peh (Ai Pun 1939, 19).

In a similar collaboration mixing Lahu legend and Baptist mission, Lahu elders who were translating the New Testament with the American missionary Lewis in the 1950s suggested the term *G’ui sha mvuh mih* to translate “Kingdom of God.” In an oral history interview recording, Lewis described his frustration over the Lahu translators insisting on using this translation, which implied “Country” rather than “Kingdom” of God. The Lahu elders preferred the term, they said, because it fitted in with their legends about walking to find the country of God (Lewis and Lewis n.d.). *G’ui sha* is the name of the principal Lahu deity, creator of the world, whom Lahu worshipped before the arrival of Buddhism or Christianity (Samuel 1998). Walker has argued that in the eighteenth-century conversion movement, concepts of Mahayana Buddhahood were blended into the Lahu’s *G’ui sha*, “to the extent that *G’ui sha* and *fo* [Buddha] became virtually identical in the minds of most Lahu” (Walker 2009, 325). The above episode further evidences how Lahu elders explicitly merged the concept of the Christian deity with pre-existing concepts of a creator god.

A deep pride in being Lahu, expressed through stories of former glory and historic defeat, infuses tellings of these myths today. The historical reality of the vanquished Lahu kingdom of *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh* is interpreted differently by Lahu people I speak to today. Some accept the story as historical, others as legend. One Lahu Baptist pastor described to me how he had just recently traveled to Yunnan and had met tens of Lahu Christian leaders and elderly persons who knew the history of the Lahu. While in Yunnan,

he was able to visit villages near “the ancient Lahu state.” “Actually,” he said, “I passed by Lincang, which is Mvuh Meh Mi Meh, the Lahu state.”²⁾ Different people have translated the term to me variously as “God-given soil” and “horse-cultivated soil.” The symbolism of an original Lahu homeland, where the Lahu people lived together under their own ruler, gives this phrase a deeper meaning. Whether the story is recounted as myth or history, it is interpreted as depicting the former superiority of the Lahu, as rulers in their own land, and their subsequent downfall at the hands of the Chinese. Stories of banishment and exile from a common homeland enable people to express a unified “Lahu” identity because of, rather than despite, a long history of migration and dispersal.

Origin Stories and Ethnic Divisions of the Hills

While the stories of migration reflect a motif which stayed constant over time, stories explaining the origins of ethnic difference changed over time and space. This section argues that upheavals in the mid-twentieth century are reflected in the changing motifs of these stories. Ethnic classification projects in China in the 1950s, together with regional migration spurred by conflict, affected ethnic identification. The stories described below see a shift in the core motif, from explaining the origins of differences among Lahu people—such as between the Lahu Na and Lahu Shi—to explaining the origins of differences between groups such as the Han, Wa, Shan, and Lahu. Ethnic categories gain more specific characteristics over time, as the Han begin to be characterized as traders and the Shan as paddy farmers wielding ploughs, in comparison to the Lahu as tillers of mountain fields. Where the migration motif of previous stories stayed constant because it retained explanatory power, these stories reflect historic changes in what it meant to be Lahu in the borderlands between China, Burma, and Thailand during the twentieth century.

Soon after the independence of the PRC in 1949, an unprecedented project of ethnic classification took place in Yunnan. Teams of ethnologists were sent into the countryside to conduct censuses and impose order on the immense complexity of the ethnographic landscape of southwest China. The Lahu were among the larger of the ethnic groups identified at the time. In the 1953–54 inaugural Yunnan census, 134,854 people self-reported as Lahu. They were one of 14 groups with over one hundred thousand self-reporting members in Yunnan (Mullaney 2010). The effect of this classification project on ethnicity in China has been immense. Thomas Mullaney has described how, since the classification, the 56 categories have become increasingly reified and ubiquitous.

2) Shuangjiang County, previously known as Meng Meng, in Lincang was the location of a massive Lahu revolt in 1799, which was defeated by the Qing (Walker 2003).

China has seen concerted attempts to bring the quotidian experience of ethnicity into line with the 56 *minzu* model. Policy making, cultural production, and artistic production have all been co-opted to realize this model.

The effects of this 1950s classification project continue to be felt in the experience of being Lahu, even today in Myanmar. A booklet about the Lahu, written recently in Burmese by Maung Maung Tun, a Lahu Christian from Keng Tung, describes the history of the PRC classification as a crucial moment (Maung Maung Tun 2017). In a summary of key dates in Lahu history, including the date of the first converts to Christianity, and the date “Lahu” first appeared in the Burmese census (as Lolo-Muhso), Maung Maung Tun explains the arrival of Chinese researchers in Yunnan and their classification of Lahu as a “national race” in China (translated as *taingyintha* in Burmese).

The twentieth-century history of Lahu migration can explain how the reified and unified models of ethnicity instituted in China and Burma came to be felt across the region. Kataoka Tatsuki (2011) has described Lahu migration patterns, including the migration of Lahu people from Burma to Thailand due to the fighting in Shan State between the KMT and the Burmese army. He emphasizes that migration was not unidirectional, from north to south, but that people sometimes returned to their original homes. Similarly, in 1949, PRC persecution spurred an efflux of Lahu Christians from Yunnan, yet connections persist today between Lahu Christian churches in Myanmar and China. Continuing movement across the region characterizes the history of Lahu people. Mapping the changes in explanations of ethnic difference across the region can thus reveal the influence of events in Yunnan in the mid-twentieth century on how people have experienced ethnicity.

Comparing stories of the origins of ethnic difference from before and after these events of the mid-twentieth century can highlight the impact these events had on people’s experience of ethnicity. In a story Rev. Ai Pun recorded in the 1930s, Ca Ti and Na Ti, the first humans, were born from a gourd. This story of the gourd is a theme common to the origin stories of many different peoples in the region (Proschan 2001). Soon after God created the first humans, he created the Lahu people. Rev. Ai Pun’s 1939 narrative first explains the Lahu people’s division into Lahu Na and Lahu Shi, and second describes how the Lahu and Akha came to lose writing, and how God divided the mountains and valleys between the Shan and the Lahu:

Not long after Ca Ti and Na Ti disobeyed God, Na Ti became pregnant, and gave birth to a child. The child was not like a human baby, however. It was like a bag, with strips of cloth on it. When the mother and father saw this child they were frightened, and so they threw it away in the jungle. . . . God took the child to Ca Ti and Na Ti, and cut the cloth strips off. When he cut off one of the strips it became a baby boy, and cutting off another strip it became a baby girl. The animals all

came together and took care of the two babies. . . . Because the Lahu Na group was nursed by a black dog, they are called the Lahu Na (Black Lahu). And because the Lahu Shi group was nursed by a yellow dog, they are called the Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu). (Ai Pun 1939)

Soon after creating the Lahu, God divided the land between the different nations:

As people increased in number there were also many different nations, and arguments and fights quite often broke out among them. Therefore God came back down, and in order that each nation would have a place to farm, divided the land up among them.

Now the Lahu people say that God loves them more than any other group. So God gave the Lahu people the first choice to pick the place they wanted to live and farm. They looked up at the mountains and ravines, and since they were so beautiful they chose those places. The Shan chose the level places.

God was not yet satisfied. Because he wanted to give the Lahu people the level places this is what he did. He brought fire and water before the Lahu and the Shan and got them to choose again. The Lahu people looked very carefully and chose the fire. . . .

God was not satisfied yet. Because of his great love for the Lahu people he wanted to help them. . . . So he brought a sambar deer and a horse, and he asked the Lahu people to make the first choice. . . . they chose the deer.

. . . At this time God said to them, "Look carefully and remember this. The place where the sambar deer lives and where fire burns is the land of the Lahu. Where water gathers and where it is level, that is the land of the Shan. Oh you Lahu, this is as much as I can help you. Since this is all the luck you have, you must live on the mountains and in the ravines. So until the end of time, live on the mountains." (Ai Pun 1939)

In stories collected after the classification projects in Yunnan, however, the emergence of ethnic groups is explained differently. In a story collected in Yunnan in the 1960s, the Lahu who emerged from the gourd were a single homogenous group. This story, recorded by Professor Liu Huihao, a Chinese folklorist, and published in 1995 by the anthropologist Walker, retains some similarities to Rev. Ai Pun's myth from 1930s Burma. G'ui sha created the world, and the first people—Ca Ti and Na Ti—came out of a gourd (Walker 1995). Na Ti bore 18 children, each of whom was nursed by a different animal. These nine pairs of children each had a hundred children, and these nine hundred children hunted a tiger together. In this story the origins of the different ethnic groups lay in how the tiger was cooked, and where G'ui sha told each group to live. The children of Ca Ti and Na Ti were Lahu, Wa, Aini (a local name for Akha in Lancang), Han, Laomian, and Tai. (In this story the number nine simply indicates "many.") God then divided the land between the Tai (Shan), Han, Wa, and Lahu:

G'ui-sha came to divide their habitations.
G'ui-sha called the ducks and the magpies,
He called the silver pheasant and the camel bird.

He told the birds to lead the people.
 G'ui-sha said to the birds,
 "You good-looking ducks, go live by the river.
 You silver pheasants, go live on the mountain tops.
 You colourful magpies, go live in the mid-ranges of the mountains.
 You camel birds, go live on the mountain ridges."

The Tai followed the ducks,
 So the Tai live by the water.
 The Han followed the magpies,
 So the Han live in the middle ranges of the mountains.
 The Wa followed the silver pheasants,
 So the Wa live on the mountain tops.
 The Lahu followed the camel birds,
 So the Lahu live on the mountain ridges.
 Every ethnic group was given a settlement.
 Everybody was happy.
 There were no boundaries between them,
 They were all like brothers and sisters. (Walker 1995, 81)

At the same time in Thailand, the Chinese also feature among the ethnic groups created from the gourd. In stories collected by Delmos Jones, an American anthropologist, in Northern Thailand in 1967, Lahu informants told him that multiple other ethnic groups were created at the same time as the Lahu (Jones 1967). In these stories, recorded in villages near Chiang Rai and Me Sai in the 1960s, the Chinese, the Shan, the Red Lahu, and the Black Lahu all came from the gourd at the same time. Each was allowed to ask God for one thing. The Han man went to God and asked for writing, "and from that day the Chinese have known how to read and write, and they have had the knowledge to trade." Then the Shan went to see God and told him his troubles. God gave him the tip of a plough, "and from that day the Shans have ploughed their paddy fields in the plains." The Red Lahu man bowed and asked for nothing, but God gave him literature written on paper. The Red Lahu carried the paper in an old basket, and the paper fell through the holes in the basket and was lost. Then the Black Lahu went to see God. He told God he was a mountain dweller, and God gave him a hoe to till his mountain fields (Jones 1967, 86). The same themes—the Lahu's lack of writing, their mountain dwelling place—are visible in these stories in Thailand, but the ethnic categories have stronger identifying features. The focus on Chinese as traders, Shans as paddy farmers, and Lahu as tillers of mountain fields is new.

Comparing the Lahu stories over time suggests a shift in emphasis from explaining the origins of divisions within the Lahu to explaining the division of the highlands among all the various ethnic groups. Stories highlighting the fact that the Lahu made bad choices

and were unlucky at the time when God was dividing the land help to explain why the Lahu live in the mountains and have such a hard lifestyle, despite being God's favorite people. These stories help to explain why Lahu people living in the hills are proud to live there, even though life is much harder than for Lahu living in towns. Some Lahu people in Myanmar expressed to me the idea that Lahu in Thailand are rich and lead an easy life (a common stereotype which elides the experiences of the many city-dwelling Lahu in Myanmar and mountain-dwelling Lahu in Thailand). Yet these stories show that even Lahu living in cities have a sense of Lahu identity which is centered on their people being destined to lead a tough life in the mountains. Wherever Lahu live today, stories relating the importance of their highland origins, and explaining their bad luck despite being God's favorites, continue to be meaningful. Lahu people use common narratives of origin to maintain and continually recreate what it means to be Lahu, despite living in communities widely dispersed across the region.

Conclusion

Comparing stories across borders can show changes as well as continuities in people's self-identification over time. Events of the twentieth century; the liminal and precarious situation of Lahu people living between Burma, Thailand, and China; and experiences of mass migration across the region's developing international borders all undoubtedly had an influence on the formation of Lahu identity. Similarities between a story recorded in the late nineteenth century, which a chief used to rally people for a political cause, and stories told today about *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh* indicate an understanding of a common Lahu identity which draws on history, told through stories, to unify people with pride in being Lahu despite historic adversity. Nishimoto's study of Lahu narratives of inferiority is borne out by this historical comparison. Lahu stories dating from the 1890s through the twentieth century to the present day contain a motif of the loss of a former Lahu state in China. The stories all highlight the Lahu's benighted history and resulting marginalization. By contrast, stories about the origins of ethnic groups have evolved over the period studied here. Comparing stories collected in the 1930s with those collected later in the twentieth century reflects how the experience of ethnicity was influenced by events of the twentieth century. Over the period, Lahu is increasingly unified as a category, while attributes such as occupation are increasingly applied to describe the differences between groups. Ethnic classification projects in post-independence Yunnan marked the start of ongoing efforts in China to reify the 56 *minzu* ethnicities. PRC persecution of Christian minorities in the years following independence caused outward migration of the Lahu,

among others, while in Burma in the same period, conflict between the KMT and the Burmese army spurred southward migration of the Lahu to Thailand. Changes in origin stories reflect the effect of these borderland upheavals on the experience of ethnicity across the region.

There are several avenues for future research. It is possible that stories of Lahu ownership of the mountains, given to the Lahu by God at the beginning of the world, grew in salience as the Lahu were denied access to their traditional swidden-farming livelihood in the twentieth century. The linked problems of natural population growth, unsustainable deforestation by logging companies in Northern Thailand, and forced migration carried out by the Burmese army have prevented many Lahu from carrying on with shifting cultivation. Lahu stories of ethnic origins, and particularly the allocation of land to ethnic groups, can perhaps be understood as alternative narratives describing subversive claims (vis-à-vis the dominant political entities) to space and territory.

Today, as the Lahu's land has come to be at the periphery of multiple states, and even while other markers of ethnic identity have morphed over the last century and continue to differ across the region, a Lahu sense of identity continues to be based on memories of a historic homeland in China. At the same time, this article has shown how the complex events of the twentieth century, and the Lahu's precarious liminal position at the margins of southwest China and upland Southeast Asia, are experienced and expressed in stories of ethnic difference.

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A Place of Belonging in Myths and Memories: The Origin and Early History of the Imagined Tai Khuen Nation (Chiang Tung/Kyaingtong, Myanmar)

Klemens Karlsson*

This study is about a borderland between three dominant cultures: the Burmese, the Chinese, and the Siamese/Thai, i.e., the former Shan State of Chiang Tung. The region of Chiang Tung (also transcribed Keng Tung, Kyaingtong) lies in the Eastern Shan State of Myanmar/Burma in Upper Southeast Asia and borders on Thailand, China, and Laos. The majority of the people living in Chiang Tung are called Tai Khuen. This paper explores the origin and early history of the imagined Tai Khuen nation in Chiang Tung through myths and memories recorded in the *Chiang Tung Chronicle* (CTC). Myths and memories may be used to tell us something of what a people has held and holds to be of lasting value. Important for a common imagined community is a myth of common ancestry. The CTC narrates the way in which the Khuen people understand the origin and early history of the place where they live—the “imagined Khuen nation.” The myths and memories recorded in the CTC express a sense of place and belonging for the Tai Khuen people.

Keywords: borderland, narratives, Chiang Tung, Kyaingtong, Myanmar, imagined nation, Tai Khuen, Upper Southeast Asia

Introduction

The region of Chiang Tung (also transcribed Keng Tung or Kyaingtong; its classical names in Sanskrit are Khemarātṭha and Tuṅgapūri) lies in the Eastern Shan State of Myanmar/Burma in Upper Southeast Asia, between the two great rivers Salween and Mekong, and bordering on Thailand, China, and Laos. Considering its exposed situation in a borderland between larger and more powerful nations, it is no surprise that myths and memories of the origin and early history of Chiang Tung evoke a sense of place and belonging for the Khuen people. Legend is a powerful force for binding people together in a sense of shared origins. Myths and legends may give an indication of what a people has held and holds

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to be of lasting value. A sense of belonging to a specific geographic place, the place of domicile or place of birth, and the sense of belonging to a group of people who have something in common are essential for many people in engendering a sense of their own unique identity. Central in this paper is a specific geographic place, and the people who consider it to be their place of belonging.

Following the influential writings of Benedict Anderson (2006) and others, we can see a nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of that group: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 2006, 6). There is reason to consider Chiang Tung to be such an imagined nation in the minds of the Khuen people. Central to an imagined community is, arguably, a myth of common ancestry. Therefore, this paper will focus on the myths and memories that narrate the origin and early history of Chiang Tung, which the Khuen people consider to be their place of belonging.

The myths, legends, stories, and historical narratives¹⁾ we will use in this study are taken from a Tai-language chronicle, the *Chiang Tung Chronicle* (CTC), translated by Sao Saimong Mangrai into English and called by him the *Jengtung State Chronicle* (Sāimǒng Mangrāi 1981, 208–279).²⁾ Tai chronicles (*tamnan*) are of two general kinds: a secular *mueang* chronicle, which is primarily about the history of a royal line, dynasty, or kingdom; and a more sacred narrative, which concentrates on the history of Buddhism or local Buddhist temples or sculptures (Sarassawadee 2005, 3–5). The CTC is a *mueang* chronicle about the history of the city-state of Chiang Tung, but it includes a number of mythological, sacred, and Buddhist elements, especially in the first half of the text, which deals with origins and early history.

1) In this article these will be described as “myths and memories” for the sake of simplicity.

2) This translated version is only one of several preserved versions of the CTC. There are at least two more versions that have been transcribed into the Thai script, but not translated. They are published as: *Tamnan Meuang Chiang Tung*, transcribed by Thawi Sawangpanyankun (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, 1984); and *Tamnan Mangrai Chiang Mai Chiang Tung* (Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute, 1993). Only the English translation by Sao Saimong Mangrai has been used in this study. He translates the name of the document as *Jengtung State Chronicle*, but in conformity with recent literature I will instead refer to it as *Chiang Tung Chronicle* (CTC). The extracts follow the English translation by Sao Saimong Mangrai but have undergone stylistic revision to make the text more readable.

A Borderland

In the map from 1918 pictured in Fig. 1, the exposed location of Chiang Tung, lying between the powerful cultures of the Burmese, Chinese, and Siamese/Thai, is evident. This location, in between more powerful empires, has made the whole Chiang Tung area a borderland from a historical point of view. Since ancient times, it has been a crossroads for trade connecting Yunnan/Chiang Rung in the north, Taunggyi/Ava/Mandalay in the west, Luang Prabang in the east, and Chiang Rai/Chiang Mai in the south. The ethnic majority living in Chiang Tung are called Tai Khuen and consider themselves to be an ethnic group comparable to the Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, Tai Dam, and others within the larger group of Tai-speaking peoples.³⁾

The principality of Chiang Tung was established during the late thirteenth century, when King Mangrai of Chiang Rai/Chiang Mai conquered the area from the Lua ethnic group and populated it with Tai-speaking people. The defeat of the Lua people and the establishing of Chiang Tung by Mangrai is a myth of Khuen common ancestry, a myth that has been repeated during its long history and is still repeated today in oral and written narrations.

It is clear that the Khuen people in Chiang Tung have always been aware of its exposed situation in a borderland between larger and more powerful nations. Their vulnerable, exposed location, with major powers on all sides, makes the whole area a borderland with frontiers with China, Laos, and Thailand as well as a natural frontier—high mountains and the Salween River—with the rest of the Shan States in Myanmar. This study is therefore not a study of borders between nation-states. It is instead about a borderland between three dominant cultures: the Burmese, the Chinese, and the Siamese/Thai, i.e., the former Shan State of Chiang Tung.

The History of Chiang Tung and Its Position vis-à-vis Larger States

During its long history of being situated between the more dominant cultures of the Burmese, the Chinese, and the Siamese/Thai—and, from the nineteenth century, the colonial powers—the Tai Khuen of Chiang Tung have experienced both cultural highs and disasters. Ever since its origin in the thirteenth century, Chiang Tung has been part

3) They use the name Khuen for themselves, but the Burmese call them Shan, grouping them together with all Tai-speaking peoples in Myanmar. Thai people call them and all Tai-speaking groups outside Thailand Tai Yai (Big Tai). The Shan in Myanmar, including the Tai Khuen, often call themselves simply Tai.

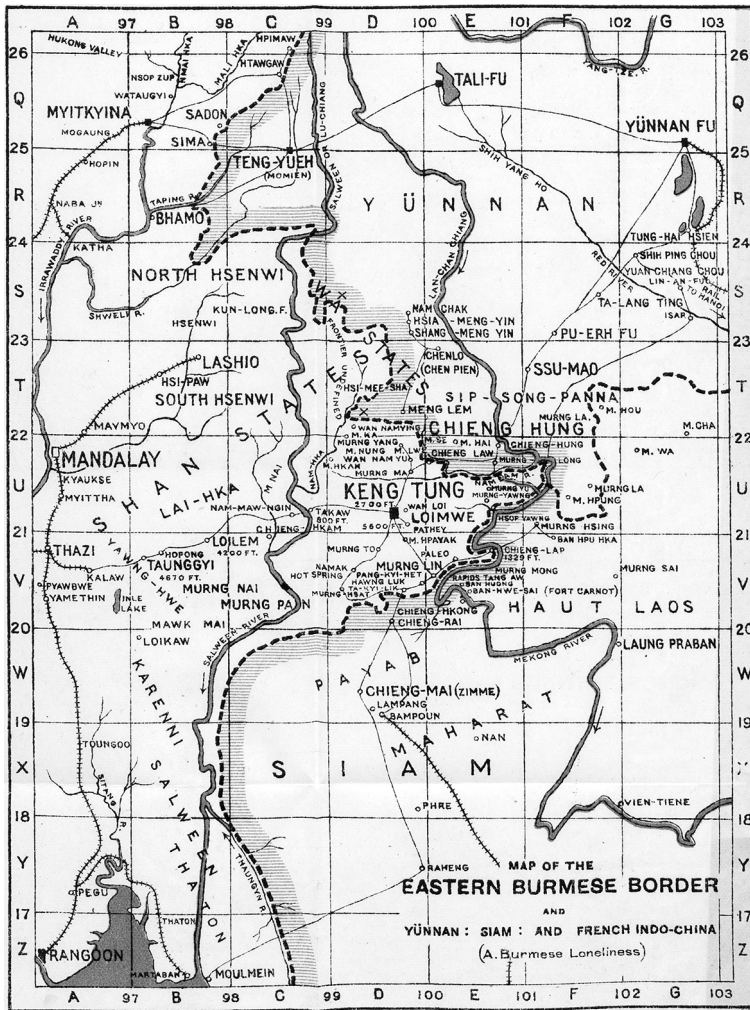


Fig. 1 Map of the Eastern Burmese Border and Yunnan, Siam, and French Indo-China
Source: Enriquez (1918)

of a political power game.

The aim of the Tai people in establishing Chiang Tung in the north was to create a buffer against China (Sarassawadee 2005, 100). From the thirteenth century onward, Chiang Tung was part of the northern Tai cultural area called Lan Na, which consisted of a few large and many smaller autonomous or semi-autonomous principalities or city-states (*mueang*). These ancient *mueang* were, of course, not the same as a modern “nation-state,” nor was Lan Na itself a nation-state. They were connected via intricately

knitted relationships with one another and with the central and most important city-state, Chiang Mai. Two or more *mueang* could overlap with one another and possessed multiple loyalties and identities. For more details about the historical characteristics of these city-states, see Grabowsky (2004, 31–40). Thongchai Winichakul calls the border between different *mueang* a “border without boundary line,” and he also points out that small city-states paid tribute to bigger ones, and that it was not uncommon to pay tribute to two competing ones (Thongchai 1994, 75, 97). The borders between nation-states in Upper Southeast Asia today owe much of their existence to colonial state making and have divided people who share much of the same culture and language. The toponym Lan Na is today often used by Thai scholars to refer only to the eight provinces of what is today Northern Thailand, namely, Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Phayao, Phrae, Nan, and Mae Hong Son. But the term Lan Na can also be used to refer to a larger area, Greater Lan Na, comprising not only the eight northern provinces but also the whole region east of the Salween River, including Chiang Tung. Sometimes Chiang Rung in Sipsong Panna, Yunnan, and part of northwestern Laos are included in Lan Na.

From the beginning, relations between Chiang Mai and Chiang Tung were very close; and the ruler in Chiang Mai sent princes to rule the area, although later on the rulers of Chiang Tung established a succession of their own (Sarassawadee 2005, 100–101). The connection with Chiang Mai was never totally broken, even when the whole of Lan Na fell to the Burmese in 1558. Lan Na was under Burmese rule for more than two hundred years before it swore allegiance to Siam in 1774. However, it was not obvious that Chiang Tung should be included in the nation-state of Burma/Myanmar as it is today. Several times in the course of Chiang Tung’s history, its future was affected by political decisions or accidental occurrences. The reason why Chiang Tung was neither recognized as an independent state nor incorporated into a neighboring state can be seen as having depended on a number of political decisions during the last two hundred years.

One of these political decisions was made by the ruler Sao Mahakhanan in the early nineteenth century, when he decided to flee from the Siamese invaders and received help from the Burmese to rebuild and repopulate Chiang Tung. The conflict with Siam started in 1802 with an invasion by forces from Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang, and nearly all the members of the ruling family of Chiang Tung were relocated to Chiang Mai. The only one who escaped was a prince of the ruling family, later known as Sao Mahakhanan. He fled north to Mueang Yang and years later got help from the Burmese to drive away the Siamese and rebuild and repopulate Chiang Tung. The conflict with Siam escalated in the middle of the nineteenth century when Siamese forces from Bangkok besieged the fortified city wall of Chiang Tung several times. The attacks failed, and during the 40-year-long reign of Sao Mahakhanan Chiang Tung gradually recovered

(Ratanaporn 1988, 308–311; Grabowsky 1999, 55–59, 68; Smith 2013).

Later, another political decision that had crucial significance for the future of Chiang Tung was the British decision to conquer the area in 1890. This was a decision the British made after several years of uncertainty. When they conquered Upper Burma and the Shan State in 1886, they did not at first cross the Salween River and enter Chiang Tung. Instead, they considered the Salween to be a natural border and halted at it. The Salween was a natural and cultural border between the more Burmanized Shan states in the west—Western Shan, as J. George Scott called this area (1900–1)—and the more Tai-ized Shan state east of the Salween, i.e., Chiang Tung. Northern Tai chronicles mention Salween as the western and Mekong as the eastern border of Lan Na (Grabowsky 2005, 3–4). The reasons for not annexing the trans-Salween Shan State were military, administrative, and political (Sāimōng Mangrāi 1965, 217). The ruler (*saopha*) of Chiang Tung, Sao Kawng Tai, had already broken away from Burmese control in 1881 and had executed King Thibaw's envoy. The British knew that the ruler was feared, and that may have been one reason why they waited before they dared to enter the trans-Salween area.

Instead of annexing the trans-Salween Shan State, the British sent Lieutenant G.J. Younghusband as a spy to Chiang Tung. Upon his return, he recommended that the British Empire not be extended across the river:

The Kiang Tung province in the hands of the British can never be anything but a source of weakness to the integrity of the Burmese kingdom. . . . The soundest policy would appear to be to hand over the province to the Chinese; not as a possession, but as a tributary State, making certain stipulations, for trade and defence against aggression, favourable to British interests. (Younghusband 2005 [1888], 13–14)

On his recommendation the British toyed with the idea of letting China take over all rights over Chiang Tung. But, as we know, they changed their minds. And when the ruler Kawng Tai died, the British decided, for fear of the French who had settled on the other side of the Mekong, to overrun Chiang Tung and integrate it into the rest of the Shan States and the British Empire.

Another political decision that affected the future of Chiang Tung was made as late as 1947, during the negotiations for Burmese independence from the British. During the negotiations between ethnic leaders and the Burmese at the Panglong Conference, Sao Zing Zai was sent as the representative of Chiang Tung's ruler (*saopha*). During the Evidence of Witnesses at Maymyo on April 21, 1947, he had the option to choose whether Chiang Tung wished to remain in the Shan States Federation or be annexed as a part of Siam/Thailand. Documents from this hearing testify that he chose the more successful Burma (Aung Tun 2009, 252–254). This decision must also be seen in the context of

recent history: during the Second World War Siamese aircraft had dropped bombs on Chiang Tung, and Thai troops ruled the city from 1942. Chiang Tung became a province of Thailand as Saharat Thai Doem until the end of the war.

Myths and Memories: The *Chiang Tung Chronicle*

Chronicles like the CTC were inscribed by hand on palm leaves and tied into bundles, or were folded manuscripts written on paper produced from the bark of the *sa* tree. They were often copies of earlier manuscripts, and many versions of a given manuscript can therefore exist. The historiographic importance of these chronicles is controversial. They were not composed for purely historiographical purposes. They were recopied many times over long periods, and several were probably handed down orally over many generations. Political chronicles (*tamnan mueang*) like CTC have a strong hagiographic character, imagining the golden history of a specific dynasty. To separate myth from reality is often impossible, and for this study it would also be pointless.

The CTC does not deal only with the Khuen; other ethnic groups are also important in the CTC, including the Chinese, the Lua/Wa/Loi, and the Tai Yuan from Chiang Rai/Chiang Mai. Another important focus of the CTC is the way in which Chiang Tung was established as a future Buddhist center through a visit by the Buddha himself.

The main theme in the first half of the CTC is the place itself and how it became a place to live in for the Tai Khuen ethnic group. It covers the origin and early history of Chiang Tung. This theme—the origins of the place and of the Khuen people—is not only the focus of oral and written legends. It is also a central focus in the annual Songkran festival in April. In this festival, not only Khuen but also the remaining members of the original ethnic group inhabiting the area, Tai Loi people, play an important role. I will return to this later.

We should not consider the CTC to be a written literary work. It is, rather, a compilation of myths, legends, and historical events, with many parts of the chronicle probably having very ancient oral roots. The version of the CTC which we are considering here begins in ancient times and covers the period down to 1935. As Saimong Mangrai (1981, 204) points out, events before paragraph 99 are interlaced with legends and supernatural happenings. It is these myths and memories that are of central interest to us here. Donald K. Swearer holds that “myths and legends may be used to tell us something about the history of a people, but, more significantly, they give a commentary on what a people has held and holds to be of lasting value” (Swearer 1976, 4). The myths and legends in the CTC tell us what the Khuen people understand and believe about the

origin and early history of the place where they live—the “imagined Khuen nation.” As Yuval Noah Harari puts it, “Every person is born into a pre-existing imagined order, and his or her desires are shaped from birth by its dominant myths” (Harari 2014, 128). The imagined order of the Khuen people is a Buddhist worldview including myths and memories of the origin of the Khuen people and their place of belonging, i.e., Chiang Tung.

The myths and memories written down in the CTC do represent a living tradition, revealing a definite self-awareness on the part of the Khuen people. We should note that some rudimentary pamphlets were also produced recounting these myths. One, titled “The Four Hermits & Naung Tung Lake,” was produced and distributed by the Khuen Cultural and Literature Society of Kengtung in 1997. However, this living tradition of the origin and early history of Chiang Tung is, as far as I know, preserved and transmitted only by a number of elderly men with a particular interest in history and tradition. These are more or less the same individuals who organize the annual Songkran festival in Chiang Tung.

Should these elderly men be seen as representative? Both interest in the stories and the ability to remember and transmit them may depend on class, education, gender, and age. The fact that it is mainly older males who transmit these myths and memories does not mean that the younger generation does not have any knowledge of them, but I believe that these myths and memories are losing their importance.

Another imagined community—a Shan imagined community—now seems to be increasingly significant among the Khuen people of Chiang Tung. In recent times, due to the long struggle over more than 70 years for an independent or federal Shan State, the imagined nation of a united Shan State has had an increasing profile. Modern media and popular culture (Ferguson 2008; Amporn 2011) form a basis for such a Shan imagined community. The Shan New Year celebration in November, with Shan flags, long drums, dance performances, and traditional sporting competitions, has increased in importance since the beginning of the 1990s. This has already affected the people in Chiang Tung, and I believe that it will continue to do so even more in the future. The myths and memories of the origin and early history of Chiang Tung and the imagined Khuen nation may belong to the past and present, but maybe not the future.

It should be borne in mind, however, that an imagined Shan nation is a relatively recent concept. It has its origin in colonial times, as the “Frontier Areas” that were administered separately from “Burma proper,” but it was not until 1922, when the British administration created a federated system with a Northern and a Southern Shan State, that the concept of a united Shan State was born (Aung Tun 2009, 167–185). Before that time the administration was decentralized and diverse, without any notion of unification of the different Shan States. Therefore, the new federation was not popular among the

local *saopha* rulers, as it reduced the traditional hereditary rights which allowed them to rule their states. This British-generated federation was the first time the different Shan States were united, and it was a step toward an imagined united Shan nation. Thus, the Khuen people in Chiang Tung have access to different and sometimes competing myths and memories and different sets of loyalties, which may change over time.

A Buddhist Sacred Place

The CTC connects Chiang Tung with the Buddhist world through an alleged visit by the Buddha himself to the region. Justin McDaniel (2002), Swearer (1987), and others have demonstrated that local historical chronicles have been used in other places to connect territory with the lifetime of the historical Buddha. According to the CTC, the place where Chiang Tung was later established was for a long time uninhabited and consisted of a huge lake with several islands that today are hilltops within the town. The Buddha is said to have stood on a hilltop in the lake and to have made a prophecy that a sacred Buddhist city would be established there:

After the Tathagata has attained Nibbana there will be a hermit coming from the north who will drain away the water of the Dammilap Lake. Six hundred and twenty-nine years after the Nibbana of the Tathagata a king will bring the Sasana and establish it in this state. (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §12)

This prophecy made by the Buddha makes the place a sacred landscape, with Buddhist sites as symbolic markers of authority for the local rulers. It is also stated in the CTC that the Buddha left eight hairs of his head, which were later enshrined in the golden stupa of Wat Chom Kham on one of the hills in Chiang Tung: “Lord Buddha together with forty-nine disciples (*arahant*) came to the Subhasudebba Hill. There he left behind eight hairs of his head. Ananda Thera took the Lord’s iron staff and planted it in the ground” (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §12).

This Buddhist geography, with a sacred relic from the Buddha himself planted in the ground and enshrined in a sacred stupa, establishes an association between the Buddha, the place of Chiang Tung, and the Khuen nation. This sacralization of the place legitimizes Chiang Tung as a Buddhist center and predicts that it will become a Buddhist sacred place—a Buddha-land (Buddhadesa).

The Chinese Impact

Following this Buddhist prophecy, the CTC establishes a connection between the place and the Chinese Empire. The CTC describes how the place was made habitable by the Chinese. It relates how 150 years after the nirvana of the Buddha, four Chinese princes came to the area and emptied most of the water out of the huge lake. It is related in the CTC that the four princes were also hermits, practiced meditation, and attained supernatural powers. The legend relates that when the four princes said farewell to the emperor, he asked them to let him know if they found suitable places for settlement. After the four princes had been to several different places, they came, it is related, to Comsak Hill,⁴⁾ where they saw the writing and the mark of the staff that Lord Buddha had planted into the ground. The CTC states that a hermit was predicted to come from the north and to drain the lake dry, and that a new kingdom would arise: “Truly, in time to come, a hermit named Candasikkhatunga Rasi will come from the north and drain this lake dry, and a future kingdom will arise bearing the name of that hermit” (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §22).

The legend relates that the four hermits stayed for seven years and dried out the lake. Only enough water was left for a small lake, which still exists in the middle of the town. The hermits realized that the place was suitable for the construction of a city and returned home to their father, the emperor, and told him this. The emperor gave orders to one of his chiefs to relocate and build a city there. The chief took a large number of families with him, and they started to grow rice. However, the Chinese had difficulty cultivating the soil. The rice plants produced no grain, and the Chinese people starved and many died. After three years, the guardian spirits of the place were not pleased with the Chinese people and told them to leave, which they did: “After three complete years the state’s guardian spirits were not pleased . . . saying, ‘We do not like the Chinese and are opposed to the construction of the city by them; we shall construct one ourselves in the future’” (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §31).

As we have seen, this legend about how the area was made habitable includes the acts of the Chinese emperor and his princes. But it also tells us that the place was not suitable for Chinese to live. The CTC notes that the spirits of the area did not want the Chinese to settle down in the place where the Tai Khuen would later live.

The CTC (§82–86) returns later to the relationship with the Chinese and tells of an attempted and unsuccessful invasion from China. Not long after the establishment of Chiang Tung as the home of the Tai Khuen people, the Chinese emperor became aware

4) Comsak Hill is the hill in Chiang Tung where the Roman Catholic church and the big Buddha statue stand today.

of the new settlements. He maintained that he had instructed his son to drain the lake to establish villages and towns. He therefore asked for tribute in the form of rice and elephant tusks:

The emperor deputed a Chinese man named Yu Ve-ya to come down [to Jengtung] to demand tribute, saying, "You must give 1,000 carrier poles of rice and 1,000 elephant tusks. If that is not possible, give 10 elephants and 100,000 silver [coins]." (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §82)

The CTC relates how the ruler of Chiang Tung, Namthum, ordered the elders to negotiate with the Chinese. The negotiation failed, and the Chinese besieged the town and started to dig a tunnel with the purpose of forcing an entry. However, the Chinese commander was shot dead by a crossbow. The Chinese changed tactics and started to dam up the river "to create a lake as of old" (CTC §83) and flood the people out. The Chinese, who had made the Chiang Tung valley habitable by emptying most of the water from the huge lake, were now in the process of filling the whole valley with water again. Namthum responded by sending a raft floating down the river to the place where the Chinese were damming the river. The raft (presumably through supernatural means) caused several Chinese soldiers to be struck by lightning, and many died. The rest fled. The story of the attempted invasion from the Chinese ends with a victory for the defenders. This story conveys a sense of pride for the ancient past with Chiang Tung's successful defense against the powerful nation in the north:

At that time the *braya* gave orders for a raft to be made . . . and, after an invitation to the *deva*, the raft was floated down the river until it stopped at the place where they [the Chinese] were damming the river. Lightning struck that place, and many Chinese died; [the rest] could not stay and all fled. Henceforth the state became happy, prosperous, and stable without a break. (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §86)

The CTC also tells shortly thereafter of a further attempt to make Chiang Tung a vassal of the Chinese. The emperor ordered an army to come down to defeat the kingdom. But in Chiang Tung there was a renowned warrior, Saengto, who had discovered a jewel in a hornets' nest. He became famous because he fought with the help of an army of hornets and defeated the Chinese invaders. He chased the Chinese army all the way to the emperor, and the palace filled with hornets. The emperor was terrified. Saengto was invited to stay at the palace and marry the emperor's daughter, and he succeeded the emperor. The legend continues that Prince Saengto and his Chinese wife had three sons who became rulers of Alawi (Chiang Rung), Bolaem (Mueang Laem), and Chiang Tung. This legend, told in CTC §89–98, narrated by Scott (1901: II, 1, 398–399), and communicated orally to me, ends with the formation of an alliance between these three city-

states, in Sipsong Panna, Yunnan, and Chiang Tung. The third son became the ruler of Chiang Tung, succeeding King Mangrai and his son. In this way, power in Chiang Tung originates partly from China.

From the Chinese perspective, Lan Na (of which Chiang Tung formed part) was considered to be a vassal state called Babai-Xifu—later Babai-Dadian, abbreviated to Babai—and Chiang Tung was called Menggen (Liew-Herres and Grabowsky 2008, xiii, 20–21; Grabowsky 2010, 205). It is interesting to note that important Lan Na chronicles mention the Chinese only sporadically (Liew-Herres and Grabowsky 2008, 23), but that in the CTC the Chinese play an important role. It is, however, likely that there were many folk stories about the Chinese in the past, but that most of these stories were removed from the official histories of Lan Na in later times. When Captain William C. McLeod visited Chiang Mai in 1837, he was told by local people about a Chinese invasion and how the people of Chiang Mai had tricked the Chinese in a competition to build pagodas. Local people had, he was told, built a high mound of earth with some brickwork on the top, to make the Chinese believe that the people of Chiang Mai were very numerous (Grabowsky and Turton 2003, 317–318; Grabowsky 2010, 201–202).

The contradictory role of the Chinese is particularly worthy of note, both as creators of the place where the Khuen people came to live and as an enemy who tried to use the same procedure in reverse as a weapon to defeat the Khuen, i.e., to fill the whole valley with water again. This is an important part of the myth and memories of the imagined Khuen nation. We have seen here how myths and memories about the defeat of and emancipation from a powerful ancient empire—whose importance is increased further by its role in the founding of the city itself—can play a potent role in constructing an imagined community and nation.

Lua: The “Earthborn” People

As early as the third paragraph of the CTC, Chiang Tung is described, among other things, as Dammilap, the land of the Damilas. “Damila” derives from the Pali language and refers to the Tamils of South India or Sri Lanka. The original inhabitants of the Chiang Tung valley were an ethnic group of Mon-Khmer origin called Lua or Lawa by the chronicles.⁵⁾ They seem to be compared to the Tamils because of their darker skin and because they

5) Lua, or Lawa, people speak a Palaungic Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) language. Sao Saimong Mangrai spells the name Lva in his translation of the CTC. Other names for them used in different chronicles and inscriptions are Damila, Milakkha, and Kha (slave). The Wa people living on both sides of the Myanmar/China border have their origin in the Lua people who escaped from the Tai conquerors.

were not Buddhists. The CTC describes the Lua people as being autochthonous: born from the soil of Chiang Tung. They are described as the original inhabitants of the place and as having been born out of a gourd. Many years after the Chinese had left the place, the legend relates, the seed of a striped gourd took root and bore many fruits, and then:

The [seeds of the gourds] scattered and fell into the footprints of oxen, buffaloes, elephants and rhinoceroses and [from them] were born the Lvas who inhabit the country. . . . They built villages and towns and from among them came village heads and regional chiefs. The person whom they chose as their leader was called Mangyoy, and [he] came and lived at Jengkaeu as their overlord for the whole state. (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §32)

The CTC relates how the Lua people constructed villages and towns all over the region and chose Mangyoy as their leader. He settled in Jengkaeu, at the place which is now Chiang Tung.

The CTC (§60–69) continues by describing how the Tai people came to power in Jengkaeu town, where the Lua people were living. It relates how one day King Mangrai, the founder of Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, chased a golden deer, a stag. The stag had been created by the gods, and it lured the king into the wilderness in the north. The story narrates how the king was close to catching the stag but failed again and again. Every time the king failed to catch the stag, the place where this happened was given a name. This legend establishes names for places that would become the homeland of the Khuen people:

The stag acted as if it was lame in the leg, and the *braya* [ruler] chased it for seven days. . . . He reached a place where he thought he had caught up with the stag and dived to seize it, but failed. That region is now known as Mongnom. (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §61)

The golden stag finally disappeared, and the king had to go back home, but he found that the places he had been to were good locations in which to settle:⁶⁾

Braya Mangrai collected his forces and returned home. There Braya Mangrai spoke to the gathering of ministers and officials, saying, “I went to hunt a golden stag and saw a country in the north inhabited by the Lvas where we can build our settlements. We shall take our forces to fight [the Lvas] and drive them all away and will create villages and towns.” (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §62)

King Mangrai therefore started to fight against the original inhabitants. The legend goes that he established himself as the ruler of Chiang Rai. In order to capture Chiang Tung,

6) A similar story is told about Prince Chao Luang Kham Daeng from Phayao, who chased a golden deer and came to the mountain of Chiang Dao, north of Chiang Mai. That legend establishes the names of places where the Tai people would live in the future (see Swearer *et al.* 2004, 63–67).

he sent infiltrators to bring division to the Lua court of Mangyoy. First, Mangrai sent his two sons with armies against the Lua chief, but this attempt failed. He then chose two Lua leaders loyal to him and sent them to conspire in the Lua court. After three years they were ready to assist in Mangrai's invasion, for by then they had come to be trusted and had been promoted to important positions at the court. They sent a message to Mangrai that it was time for him to act, and so he sent an army north to the Lua city. Mangyoy, who trusted the two spies, was persuaded that the Chiang Rai army was huge and impossible to fight. He therefore tried to escape but was captured.

The CTC thus relates how King Mangrai defeated the Lua people and established the principality (*mueang*) of Chiang Tung. After the Tai ruler conquered Chiang Tung, the Lua people in the region were displaced and most of them moved northward and westward. Those who escaped are today called the Wa and live farther north on both sides of the border between China and Myanmar. The CTC relates that Mangrai commanded his son Namthum to go and rule the state which was on the same spot where the Lua ruler had had his palace.

Namthum brought with him two monks and four Buddha images from Lan Na, from the old Mon (Haripuñjaya) Buddhist tradition, in order to establish Buddhism in the new city and embody the prophecy made by the Buddha. The *Padaeng Chronicle* (Sāimōng Mangrāi 1981, 99–147) describes in more detail how the Flower Garden (Suan Dok or Puppharam) Buddhist tradition and the Red Forest (Padaeng) Buddhist tradition later reached Chiang Tung from Lanka through Ayuthaya and Chiang Mai. Today, the monastic order in Chiang Tung is proud of its ancient heritage, with an old local Buddhist calendar and a unique tradition of Pali recitation. The Khuen monastic order has so far resisted pressure from Burmese authorities to abandon local traditions in favor of Burmese monastic traditions.

It is interesting to note that the Burmese and the rest of the Shan States are of less importance in the CTC in relation to Chiang Tung's origin and early history. The Burmese King Bayinnaung's military actions in the Shan States and Lan Na during the sixteenth century are obviously mentioned, but before that time the Burmese are not mentioned at all. In the CTC there is no connection made between the Bagan Dynasty and Chiang Tung. Despite this, the modern Burmese military has made great efforts to Burmanize the region and to convince the inhabitants, through art and architecture, that Buddhism was established in Chiang Tung by the Pagan Dynasty.⁷⁾

7) For details, see Karlsson (2012).

Tai Khuen and Tai Loi

The CTC continues with a story about the origin of the Tai Khuen ethnic group. Issues of confrontation and coexistence between two ethnic groups in Southeast Asian myths and legends are often resolved with a marriage between the two groups, for example, when a Tai prince married an indigenous (Mon-Khmer) woman and a new political entity came into being grounded in this marriage (Évrard and Chanthaphilith 2013, 65–66). But in our case, there was no coexistence, only a confrontation, with the victors settling down in the same place—Chiang Tung—from which the indigenous Mon-Khmer people had fled. The victors did not fuse with the indigenous people. Instead, a new group of inhabitants for Chiang Tung was formed through a political decision to populate the area with a loyal people on the part of the victors from Chiang Rai. A neighboring Tai people were persuaded to settle down in Chiang Tung, together with a group of soldiers from Chiang Rai. King Mangrai, or his son Namthum, had to populate the newly conquered town as most of the Lua people had fled. As a replacement population, they selected a group of Tai villagers called Khuen who were living south of the town. The CTC describes them as dressed in special clothes and as having their hair cut in a special way. They were given cowrie shells as payment to persuade them to move to the new town. At the same time, soldiers from Chiang Rai were commanded to settle down together with the Khuen people. The CTC relates that they had to change their clothes and hairstyle in order to integrate: “Thereupon, the *braya* had the gong sounded amongst the people, urging them to give up Yon dress and to cut their hair in the manner of the great Khuens” (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §81).

It is interesting that the CTC mentions that the new inhabitants were to use similar ethnic markers in clothing and hairstyle. This must have been intended as a way of speeding up the integration of the two peoples, necessary because the Chinese were not far away and it was important to fortify the town quickly before Chinese troops entered from the north.

People from the autochthonous Lua ethnic group who could not escape apparently “begged to be the humble subjects of the kingdom’s hills” (CTC §69) and moved up into the mountains around Chiang Tung. They are today called Tai Loi, meaning Tai people living in the hills. They have, over a long period living in the periphery of the Khuen people, changed their cultural, religious, and ethnic identity in such a way that they are now a Tai subgroup and members of the same political-economic system as the majority Tai Khuen. During their long relations with the Tai Khuen they have also adopted Buddhism and speak a Tai language, but with a lot of substrate linguistic material from the Lua (Palaung Mon-Khmer) language. Tai Loi are called Wa Kut by Scott (1900: I, 1,

517–518), meaning “those Wa who were left behind.”

The relationship of dependence and loyalty between the Tai Khuen and the Tai Loi was established historically through symbolic actions connected with the Chiang Tung royal court and relating to rights to the land. One of these was the integration of the displaced Lua/Tai Loi into the ceremony to install a new Khuen ruler (*saopha*). The coronation ceremony in the Chiang Tung palace (*haw*) included a symbolic banishing of the Loi people. A group of Tai Loi chiefs were called down from the mountains to the palace and placed on the throne to symbolize the previous rulers. They were given a meal, but before they could finish it they were carried away from the throne. Thereupon the new Tai Khuen ruler ascended the throne and finished the meal. Thus, during the coronation ceremony the old inhabitants were symbolically driven out of the land and banished. The CTC narrates the first symbolic takeover with the following words:

... when the golden palace had been built, the Lva living in Bangung and Bangham were brought down [from their hills] to sit and eat their food on the gem-studded throne in the palace. While they were eating, the Lva were driven out and the *braya* took their place. (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §80)

It would appear that this symbolic banishing was carried out during every installation of a new ruler (*saopha*) from the thirteenth century until the late nineteenth. The last of these symbolic takeovers occurred when Sao Kawn Kiao Intaleng was installed as *saopha* in 1897 at Chiang Tung palace (Sāimǒng Mangrāi 1981, 284n45). Interesting similarities can be recognized in ancient Luang Prabang in the relationship between the Lao people and another “earthborn” Mon-Khmer-speaking group called the Khamu/Kasak. The opposition there was played out in an annual ritual game like hockey, which the Lao always won against the autochthonous people (Stuart-Fox 1998, 51).

The connection between the Khuen and the original inhabitants said to have been born from the soil of Chiang Tung, the Tai Loi, did not end when the coronation ritual ceased. Just as the displaced Tai Loi were made part of the ceremony to install a new Khuen ruler (*saopha*), the Tai Loi people were brought into the Songkran festival, and they remain part of this festival until today.⁸⁾ It seems likely that Intraleng wanted to maintain a direct connection with the people of the soil of Chiang Tung living in the mountains outside the city. He chose a group of Tai Loi from a village north of Chiang Tung to perform a drumming ceremony at the Songkran festival. This was intended to increase the prosperity of the Khuen nation, and Scott wrote, “it is considered essential to the public welfare that this ceremony shall be performed every year” (Scott 1901: II, 1, 440).

8) For a more detailed study of the Songkran festival in Chiang Tung, see Karlsson (2013).

The Songkran Festival

The Songkran festival in Chiang Tung is a celebration of the New Year, with clear fertility symbolism and offerings to the spirit of the town (Sao Mueang). There are also traditional recitations (known locally as Mat-recitations) to the spirit by a group of elderly Khuen men. We know that Songkran was certainly celebrated as a fertility ritual in the late nineteenth century. It is generally believed among local people that in earlier times a crafted phallus was brought to the river, a ritual which was believed to generate prosperity for the Khuen nation. Scott writes about the Songkran procession. Under the heading "Phallic Ritual," he states that an "indecent figure is paraded and obscene antics indulged in all along the route" (Scott 1901: II, 1, 440). I have been told that the procession that today accompanies the drum to the river was once called "sending the phallus" instead of "sending the drum." Scott also mentions that a spirit in the shape of a frog was thrown into the river and that the feast was held every year because it was believed to be essential to public welfare.⁹

The reason for celebrating Songkran is laid out in the CTC. The chronicle states that the festival has its origin in preventing a serious drought that occurred more than six hundred years ago:

That year the Khuen state had a great drought and the *braya* asked astrologers concerning the drought and absence of rainfall. The astrologers revered the *braya*, saying, "This Khuen state is a state with the Moon *nam*. It is meet that a representation of Rahu with the Moon in its mouth be made, sand *cetiya* be constructed on the Sangkhan's day of departure, and then men, elephants, and horses be readied to go in procession to pay reverence on the bank of the Khuen River." (*Chiang Tung Chronicle* §112)

Tai Khuen believe that the festival has been celebrated every year since the great drought of 1410 CE. A group of Tai Loi people, the remains of the defeated indigenous people, are engaged in the festival, in which they play an important though subordinate role, drumming in a 24-hour-long performance during which water is splashed endlessly, believed to ensure prosperity and wealth for Chiang Tung and the imagined Khuen nation. Tai Khuen say that when the original role of Tai Loi in the coronation ceremony came to an end, Tai Loi acquired a role in the annual New Year Songkran festival. All this was probably invented by the ruler Intraleng and is believed to ensure the survival and con-

9) According to this legend, astrologers advised the ruler to fashion a frog, Rahu, and to build *cetiya* (stupas) in order to prevent droughts. I have witnessed how people from Chiang Tung, on the second day of the festival, make a frog out of mud and clay by the river and put a paper moon in its mouth. The master of ceremonies also invites a spirit from the mountain to install itself in the frog. During the last days of the Songkran festival, people make sand stupas and venerate these.

tinued existence of the nation. A performed drama about an imagined community, the Songkran festival links local people to their collective past and to their place of belonging.

Two of the main themes during the festival are fertility and the nation's well-being. These two themes are actually one and the same, as fertility is the basis for the prosperity of the imagined Khuen nation. This is expressed when two Tai Khuen men sitting face to face at a table in front of the drum read aloud a dialogue in the Khuen language. They read questions and answers about the drum and the reason for the drumming. The dialogue makes clear, in seven points, that the drumming is performed so that the bad luck of the old year will disappear, and to welcome the New Year, bringing good luck, water for the farmers, and prosperity for the nation. The dialogue then continues by stating that the drum is beaten also to ensure good luck, good health, and the strength to fight any enemies for the ruler. In sum, the dialogue states that the Songkran festival, with its drumming by the Tai Loi people, is intended to establish fertility, sovereignty, and power for the Tai Khuen nation.¹⁰⁾

The Songkran festival is a performed narrative about the history of Chiang Tung and the imagined Tai Khuen nation. It is celebrated as a special local traditional event, deeply embedded in the old history of Chiang Tung and the Tai Khuen people. It is a cultural performance of sovereignty, power, and national identity but also of dependence and loyalty between Tai Khuen and Tai Loi, the original inhabitants of the place.

Conclusion

Myths and memories can tell us a good deal about what a people has held and holds to be of lasting value. Important for an imagined community is a myth of common ancestry. Chiang Tung, today part of Myanmar, has long been a borderland between important empires. Myths and memories about the origin and early history of Chiang Tung that incorporate its relationship with these empires therefore have an important place in the mind of the Khuen people, as we can see in the CTC.

It is possible to distinguish at least three key themes in the myths and memories of the origin and early history of Chiang Tung expressed in the CTC. First, the connection between Buddhism and Chiang Tung is recognized in the CTC when it narrates the visit by the Buddha to the site and his prophecy that a sacred Buddhist city would one day be established there. As the Khuen people see it, they have fulfilled this mission. They are today proud of the ancient Buddhist tradition they practice and believe that it is much

10) I witnessed this dialogue in 2011, 2013, and 2016. I was also given an oral translation of the dialogue.

more original than those of their neighbors, the Burmese and the Thai.

Second, the place where Chiang Tung came to be established is described in the CTC as a borderland and a buffer between the Chinese and the Tai people from Chiang Mai/Chiang Rai. The Chinese were important in making the place habitable, but they were not allowed to settle down. The Khuen people turned back an attempted invasion by the Chinese. It is believed that the Chinese failed to take over Chiang Tung because the local guardian spirits did not want them on their soil.

The third central theme in the CTC is the role in the origin and early history of Chiang Tung of the original inhabitants, the Lua/Tai Loi, born from the local soil. Both the coronation ceremony installing a new Khuen ruler (*saopha*), which took place up to the nineteenth century, and the Songkran festival, still practiced today, express memories of domination and dependence between the Tai Khuen and the defeated Lua/Tai Loi. They express a struggle for the rights over the land—a struggle for an imagined Khuen nation.

The myths and memories written down in the CTC today constitute a living tradition that reveals the self-awareness of the Khuen people. The CTC tells us about the way in which the Khuen people imagine the origin and early history of the place where they live—what can be described as the “imagined Khuen nation.” These myths and memories express a sense of place and belonging for the Tai Khuen people. However, it is not certain that the myths and memories of the origin and early history of Chiang Tung have a future. As discussed above, the myths and memories are preserved mainly by elderly people. It is myths and memories about a united Shan nation which may be the future. The predominant “imagined community” for the people of Chiang Tung appears to be increasingly the wider Shan community rather than the local Khuen community.

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The Story of *Lun Tauh*, “Our People”: Narrating Identity on the Borders in the Kelabit Highlands*

Valerie Mashman**

This article shows, through a historical narrative set in precolonial times in Sarawak, Borneo, how people think of themselves in two contrasting ways, one fluid and one more fixed. The first is *lun tauh*, which means “our people.” This presents a fluid, inclusive identity through the course of warfare, alliances, and migrations across watersheds and borders. It differs from the second way in which the narrative presents people as thinking of themselves—with the ethnic label “Kelabit,” which came into use with the colonial state. The article goes on to investigate how the relational concept of *lun tauh* and the reified notion of “being Kelabit” coexist with and interrogate one another and contribute to the identities of peoples who transcend national borders and undergo processes of division and separation across natural boundaries, be they rivers, rapids, or ridges. The notion of *lun tauh* shows that alternatives to bounded exclusive ethnic identities are particularly evident in the borderlands, demonstrating that cultural identities transcend ethnic constructs and territorial borders. This leads to a different way of looking at ethnicity, which is focused less on discrete groups and more on the construction of social identities on the basis of context. The two forms of identity—the fixed reified notion of “being Kelabit” and the wider inclusivity of *lun tauh*—coexist as strategies for survival for a marginal people, operating at different levels. The narrative demonstrates how local perceptions of ethnicities and identities are bound up with ways for creating larger groups, creating allies, remembering kin across borders, and struggles to claim territory.

Keywords: borders, ethnic identity, Sarawak, Kelabit, historical narrative

* I have been associated with this village and the Kelabit community for over 30 years through marriage. Fieldwork took place through participant observation and unstructured interviews during visits to the Long Peluan area and related settlements from 1998 to 2000 and from 2010 to 2016.

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Introduction

The Kelabit are about to forget their history. This is because they have made a “break with the past” (Lian-Saging 1976/77, 211) and are reluctant to talk about warfare and belief systems from the time prior to their embracing Christianity in the late 1930s. So it was a great surprise when, in 2006, I was offered—and accepted—three narratives about the past which included details of warfare, by Malian Tepun, the headman of the longhouse of Long Peluan in the borderlands of Sarawak. Here I will examine the first of these narratives.

The narrative, set in precolonial times, shows how people think of themselves in two contrasting ways, one fluid and one more fixed. The first is as *lun tauh*, which means “our people,” rather than in terms of component ethnic groups, such as being Kelabit, Ngurek, and Sa’ban. In terms of the meaning of identity and ethnicity, this contrasts with the second way in which the narrative presents people as thinking of themselves—with the apparently primordial ethnic label “Kelabit.” This is a term that came into use with the colonial state. A label such as Kelabit defines and reifies ethnicity, while the idea of *lun tauh* is much more fluid, relational, and inclusive.

This article will investigate how the relational concept of *lun tauh* and the reified notion of “being Kelabit” coexist with and interrogate one another and contribute to the identities of peoples who transcend national borders yet undergo processes of division and separation across natural boundaries, be they rivers, rapids, or ridges. The concept of *lun tauh* demonstrates that, in the context of a borderland, alternatives to bounded exclusive ethnic identities are particularly evident. This fits in with the discourse of the deconstruction of the nation-state, particularly through the subdiscipline of borderland studies. As Alexander Horstmann and Reed Wadley (2006, 16) note from the perspective of borderland studies in Southeast Asia, “the border concept serves to question the very notion of a bounded culture.” Taking the idea further, Rozanna Lilley highlights the need to redefine ethnicity as “a changing alignment of social groups with neither fixed boundaries nor stable internal constitutions” (Lilley 1990, 176). This process of redefinition should override any preconceptions regarding cohesion and boundedness, because cultural identities transcend ethnic constructs and territorial borders and consist of “a choice of identifications and affiliations that are picked up upon because they seem advantageous.” This leads to a different way of looking at ethnicity, which is focused less on discrete groups than on the construction of social identities on the basis of contexts (Lilley 1990, 176).

Narratives on Borders

This article fills a gap by utilizing indigenous historical narratives to provide local insights into perceptions of identities across borders. The demand for this is highlighted by Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel (1997, 238), who call for oral history to be used as a conceptual tool and as a means to explore new sources of knowledge to redress the balance away from the dominant view located at the center—often taken from the documented archives on one side of the border which deny an active role to borderland populations—to the periphery. This is particularly pertinent in Southeast Asia, where in many cases language groups and ethnic identities are shared across borders. As this article illustrates, peoples have long memories of histories of political alliances, trading partners, shared farmlands, and family networks that existed across their own territories, before political borders were imposed with the emergence of the nation-state, when peoples living within the locality of borders came to be split up and marginalized (van Schendel and de Maaker 2014).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey in detail the literature on Asian borderlands, which is richly interdisciplinary, encompassing political geography (Newman and Paasi 1998), international relations (Migdal 2004), history (Baud and van Schendel 1997; Thongchai 2003; Tagliacozzo 2005; 2013; Scott 2009; Aung-Thwin 2013, 94), and anthropology (Horstmann and Wadley 2006) and including cross-disciplinary anthologies such as those edited by Doris Wastl-Walter (2012) and Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan (2012). Van Schendel and de Maaker (2014, 4), in reviewing the subdiscipline, note, however, that ethnographic studies have been scarce—although Borneo is probably something of an exception here, as the implications of porosity of borders in Borneo have been explored in the work of a number of anthropologists. This includes the work of Ishikawa Noboru (2010), Reed Wadley (2000; 2001; 2004), and Michael Eilenberg (2012; 2014) for West Borneo; I Ketut Ardhana, Jayl Langub, and Daniel Chew (2004) for the Lun Bawang-Kerayan highlands; and Poline Bala (2000; 2001; 2002) and Mathew Amster (2005; 2006) for the Kelabit-Kerayan highlands.

Two themes relevant to this article emerge from studies based in the Kelabit highlands. First, the Kelabit borderlands is a place where local agency can shape and articulate local meanings of “stateness” and forms of “governmentality,” as the Kelabit have managed to utilize the power of the state to assert their own dominance in interactions with their neighbors (Amster 2006, 224). This is linked to the way in which the Kelabit use their reified ethnic construct of “being Kelabit.” Second, Bala (2002, 26) identifies mobility and hybridity of populations as crucial factors in the context of Borneo. I will explore these topics more fully when I go on to analyze the Long Peluan narrative. However, it

is first necessary to contextualize the setting, to review local notions of ethnicity and identity, and to set the background for the narrator who related the narratives.

Long Peluan and the People of the Kelapang River

The basis for this article, a narrative which provides a window into shifting views of ethnicity, comes from the longhouse of Long Peluan in Sarawak, a state belonging to the federation of Malaysia, situated on the island of Borneo. Long Peluan is remote; the area is served by a twice-weekly rural air service from the coastal city of Miri. The alternative is to hazard an eight-hour journey along a logging road. Before the road was constructed, the journey involved a three-day hike across mountainous country and a six-day journey by motorized longboat down the Baram River.

Long Peluan is located by the Kelapang River, and the people from the longhouses in the Kelapang area call themselves Lun Kelapang ("people of the Kelapang"). The people of Long Peluan recall another place, Long Di'it, far up the Di'it River (Pa Di'it), as a former village of origin, although no one lives there anymore. The identification with the Kelapang River echoes the importance of rivers in generating identity in the interior of Borneo. Both Long Di'it and Long Peluan are located close to the political border with Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo, and genealogies originating from Long Di'it recall kinship ties through marriage with both the Sa'ban and the Ngurek who used to live on the Bahau River and with the Lundayeh or Lun Krayan along the Krayan River in Kalimantan.

There are other groups which are historically related to the longhouse of Long Peluan in the same river system: the Penan, who are settled upriver at Long Beruang on land that was cultivated by ancestors of the village of Long Peluan; and the Sa'ban and Lepo' Ke', who live at Long Banga, over the hills on the Puak and Balong Rivers. Farther downriver, the Ngurek live at Long Semeyang.

Long Peluan, then, is surrounded by diverse neighbors with whom in many cases its inhabitants share kinship ties (see Fig. 1). The effects of this on the longhouse are discussed in the next section.

Heterogeneity in Long Peluan and Beyond

The Long Peluan community is, in fact, heterogenous; it does not consist only of Kelabit, despite the primary identification of the community as Kelabit. This is reflected in the use of numerous languages within the longhouse, something that is typical of central



Fig. 2 Kelabit Women from Long Peluan; Sina Eo (center) Has Sa'ban Tattoos (photo by Valerie Mashman)

concluded that people in Sarawak “cannot think of themselves as named, tabbed, static, classified groups” (Harrisson 1958, 295).

Ethnicity and the Malaysian State

The flexible concept of ethnicity in Borneo is similar to other parts of the Malay world, where populations are continuously shifting, with new migrants coming into communities (Carsten 1995). In the past, people “were at home in a diversity of places at different times in their lives. And particular localities were either impermanent or flexible, continually being made and remade” (Kahn 2012, 64). This changed with the politics of colonialism and the administration of the census, which had the “capacity to erase and deny the legacy of cultural borrowing and cross fertilization that had taken place” (Noor 2010, 78).

An example of the way in which perceptions of identity became more fixed is the way in which the idea of “Malayness” changed: “Malayness is purged of a migratory history and is portrayed with a sedentary settler imagery describing those who own and live on Malay land (*tanah Melayu*)” (Hoffstaedter 2011, 39). Thus, Malayness has become a fixed ethnic category relating to identity, territory, and the Islamic religion. For Malays,

this was linked to the idea that they were *bumiputera*, or sons of the soil, a category which provided for affirmative action for their benefit under the New Economic Policy (1971), intended to remedy the perceived poverty and "backwardness" of Malays. Malays were "assigned a more or less fixed, stable modern identity anchored in a particular territory through the suppression of the *possibility* of alternative narratives" (Kahn 2012, xxiii). The "authority-defined" concept of Malayness masked their mixed ancestry and migrations and gave them advantages over the Chinese and Indians, who were perceived as *pendatang* or newcomers. Thus, a newspaper in 1941 stated in response to other groups lobbying for Malay political rights, "Malays have rights not because they were born here but because they belong to the Malay *bangsa* and are the first *bangsa* that own the land" (Ariffin 1993, 18, quoted in Reid 2004, 17). A similar dynamic can be observed within the narrative, as will be seen below, in relation to the definition of Kelabit ethnicity and Kelabit's occupation of the highlands.

At this point, it is useful to ponder what is meant by ethnicity, and to consider how it contrasts with the notion of cultural identity. Ethnic classification, which can be defined in the Malaysian context as "authority-defined ethnicity" (Shamsul 2004, 147), is rooted in the colonial census (Anderson 2006, 184) and is imposed by the state for the purpose of governance. This is set against the "everyday defined reality," which is how people experience the processes of cross-ethnic interaction on a daily basis (Shamsul 2004, 148). The importance of this "everyday defined reality," of the fact that on an everyday level people live in a situation where their identities are not fixed but fluid, can be seen regularly in studies of ethnicity in Sarawak. For example, the concept of moving in and out of identities is further investigated with subtle exegetical nuances by Liana Chua (2007) as "fixity and flux" with reference to the Bidayuh in Sarawak. Similarly, Shanthi Thambiah highlights the importance of inclusivity in a concept of identity which embraces diversity, among a very small ethnic minority of close to four hundred people, the Bhuket. Yet this is set against the ethnic category of "Bhuket" bestowed by the state, which is based on exclusiveness and boundaries (Thambiah 2009, 339–340). These examples show that a notion of bounded ethnicity contrasts with a broader reality of fluid cultural identity. Victor King's definition of cultural identity is useful here:

[P]rocesses of cultural construction and transformation and the various forms and levels of identity can never be taken to be complete and firmly established. They are always in the process of "becoming" . . . (King 2012, 17)

Here, cultural identity is seen as the fluid processual way that people actually identify themselves on an everyday basis, which is linked to the performative actions of shared experience.

Both the concepts of cultural identity epitomized by the idea of “our people” and a fixed notion of ethnicity, “the Kelabit,” interrogate each other through an analysis of the Long Peluan narrative. However, before going on to this, it is important to understand the history of “the Kelabit” as an ethnic category.

Kelabit Ethnicity and the Kelabit Highlands

The Kelabit came to be so called, supposedly, through a misunderstanding on the part of Charles Hose, a Brooke administrator, who was told through an interpreter that they were “Lun Pa Labid,” and he heard “Kalabit.” Thus, they came to be labeled and classified as Kalabit, in line with the Brooke administration’s policy of identifying the tribes under its jurisdiction by name (Lian-Saging 1976/77, 4). When Kelabit leaders came to Marudi to seek allegiance to the Brooke government in the interests of security, they accepted a common identification as Kelabit. However, they actually represented groups speaking a common language with mutually intelligible dialects from different river systems flowing out of the highland plateau, some of which were in what was then Dutch Borneo. This common identity was a convenient way for them to come together in larger groups to negotiate terms of peace with the Brooke government. They inherited from Brooke-era cartography the convenient equation of being Kelabit with occupying the highlands. This began when the term “Kalabit Country” appeared on the first map of the area by R. S. Douglas (1912) and the phrase “the Kelabit Highlands” became a legacy. This meant that being Kelabit was synonymous with living in the highlands as their territory.

In the same way that within Malaysia “Malayness” has become a fixed category, equated with owning and living on Malay land and enshrining preferential rights as *bumiputera* or sons of the soil, the Kelabit’s relationship with their territory, the “highlands,” is synonymous with their identity. Today, Kelabit differentiate themselves and their territory from their neighbors, the Lun Bawang in Sarawak and their Brian and Krayan cousins over the Indonesian border, all of whom speak dialects of the same mutually intelligible language. This differentiation is illustrated in narratives by educated Kelabit, who describe their history in terms of isolation and confinement to their ecological niche. Together with the notion of inaccessibility and separation from their neighbors is an emphasis on “their exclusive occupation of their ancestral territory” (Bulan 2003, 19) and the idea “that they have roamed the highlands from time immemorial” (Talla 1979, 13). The claim is that only the Kelabit have lived in the highlands since the beginning of time. Thus, the Kelabit now see themselves as a bounded ethnic group,

defined against the outside world and their neighbors. Historically, this notion of being Kelabit was consolidated as disparate longhouses came together with the Australian forces during the Japanese occupation to fight to expel the Japanese from the highlands within Sarawak and the river systems beyond the border in Dutch Borneo. Subsequently, through their association with military leader and museum curator Harrison, the first Kelabit trained as teachers, museum staff, and health assistants, and their identity as Kelabit came to be known to the outside world.

Being Kelabit as a Strategy, Conflict, and the Headman-Narrator

The next generation of Kelabit are said to have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit during the revival of Christianity in the 1970s, when they were students in Bario. Many went on to obtain tertiary qualifications and created a legacy of success, which had previously been measured in terms of size of padi harvests. This success is measured today by the number of Kelabit of this generation who have attained prominent positions in the fields of education, government, the oil and gas industry, and corporate affairs. Some urban Kelabit have petitioned for the gazettement of remnants of virgin and partially logged forest as a national park, the Pulong Tau National Park, which covers about one-tenth of the highland area. The name of the national park, Pulong Tau, means “our forest” in Kelabit. This is in line with the Kelabit perception that all land in the so-called Kelabit highlands belongs to the Kelabit. Megalithic graves and other cultural sites have been documented through recent archaeological and anthropological research projects (Barker *et al.* 2008; 2009; Hitchner 2009; Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2010; Lloyd-Smith 2012; Lloyd-Smith *et al.* 2013). This research has recently been drawn on to reinforce the notion of the ancient occupation of the highlands by the ancestors of the Kelabit.

Logging in the highlands, which began in the 1990s, provided the impetus for action on the part of the Kelabit to prevent outsiders from gaining possession of the land and resources, although logging was also regarded as a means of gaining greater access to metropolitan centers through the use of logging roads and the building of strategic bridges. Conflicts did, of course, come about within and between communities in the wake of the allocation of logging licenses and the assertion on the part of the state that the land in the highlands did not belong to those who lived there but was state land. While in the central part of the Kelabit highlands, inhabited only by people who considered themselves Kelabit, conflicts arose among Kelabit, things were more complex in the Long Peluan area. Here, the community negotiated together with the local Sa’ban and Penan and with logging companies to strategize the best route for the road to optimize

access to their villages and to install new water supplies due to the lack of reach of the state to this frontier area. The logging company provided jobs and opportunities to sell farm produce in the logging camp. However, access to bulldozers meant that individuals could grab parcels of land to farm without going about the traditional consultation with the elders. This created considerable conflict within the community, which was heightened by the disparities that came about through cash coming into the village. These new sources of tension were beyond the capacity of Malian Tepun, the headman-narrator, to dissipate. This is the background to Malian Tepun relating the three narratives to me.

Borders, Longhouses, and Oral Narratives

In the same way that longhouse populations are dynamic and fluid, with migrations and intermarriage, oral narratives change as they are retold, depending on the context and audience. As a genre, in Borneo, they often describe the origins of a group and major episodes which relate to their earliest times. These relate to customary laws, the institution of leadership, and the history of migrations and territory and are part of the collective identity of the community at the core of the very existence of a longhouse. Moreover, even as they comment on the present and are shaped by this, Borneo narratives typically contain “the system of traditional values that are often expressed in the conceptualizations, which the group has about its own past” (Maxwell 1989, 168).

The narrative analyzed here works on two levels. First, it tells of origins, migrations, and events in the history of the group; and second, it outlines the group’s conceptualization of this, how the community makes sense of the past, and what gives meaning to them in the present. Often such meanings relate to tenure of land, just as they do among the Punan Bah: “the oral tradition is seen as ‘the truth’, as a proof of the legitimacy of their claims on a number of traditional rights within their territory and is by them described as a weapon” (Nicolaisen 1976, 91). Thus, the significance of a narrative set in the past is often related to claims to land, demonstrating its potentially partial and political nature. Implicit in this is the paradox that ethnic groups can often live side by side, each with differing and conflicting narratives regarding origins and rights to territory that can be described as “oral ways of knowing” (Tuhiwai Smith 2004, 33). Discussion and contestation of narratives in everyday life are often muted, given the need for peoples and their histories to coexist side by side.

Thus, the way in which the Kelabit of Long Peluan see the history of their area at any moment is quite different from the version of that same period of history of their Penan, Sa’ban, or Ngurek neighbors. However, people get on with their daily lives, work

on one another’s farms, trade game and fish among themselves, and rely on each other for labor, cash, and food supplies in order to survive. The longhouse has endured as a consequence of such interactions, and this is because in everyday life ethnicity is not an issue.

This alternative, everyday identity is expressed using the term *lun tauh*, “our people.” This term is extremely important. Kelabit use this term so much that at one point it was considered an alternative name for them (Amster 1998, 30). However, it is notable in that it does not refer only to the Kelabit themselves; it can refer to related groups over the border, political groupings along a river, or even the broad concept of the unity of church district (*daerah*) which embraces multiple ethnic categories. Its core meaning can be said to be “to have a unity, to be different from people who are not *lun tauh*” (Janowski 1991, 212). I will consider the way in which this *lun tauh* identity is expressed at different stages in the historical narrative.

The Long Peluan Narrative: The History of *Lun Tauh*, “Our People”

The narrative I am exploring here is set in the era of warfare and headhunting, and describes the alliance between the Ngurek, Sa’ban, and Kelabit at a place called Long Moyo, during a conflict with another group called the Lepo’ Tepu. The coming together, separation, and dispersal of these communities to thwart their enemies is recounted in the narrative. The narrative also describes the feats of an ancestral hero, Telen Sang, who was endowed with supernatural charisma (*inan lalud*) and led *lun tauh* to migrate upriver. The community then separated—some went to the Bahau River, in Dutch Borneo, and some stayed at Long Di’it, the place of origin for the Kelapang people. “Marks” (*edtu*) on the landscape, including in particular megaliths, are identified in the narrative; these offer tangible evidence of the presence of Ngurek and Kelabit in the area of the Baram around Long Peluan. The narrative concludes, however—paradoxically—that menhirs, dolmens, and stone mounds on the landscape are the exclusive work of Kelabit ancestors.

A Summary of the Long Peluan Narrative: Understanding *Lun Tauh*

The story laid out in the narrative suggests a more dynamic and heterogeneous history of population in the Kelabit highlands than indicated in the narratives of contemporary Kelabit cited previously (Lian-Saging 1976/77; Bulan and Labang 1979; Talla 1979; Bulan

2003). A time is recalled when there was a close and dynamic relationship, a unity, between the people on the Kelapang River, which is now in Sarawak, and those on the Bahau, which is now in Kalimantan, due to the absence of territorial borders; the inclusive idea of *lun tauh* denotes this unity. An example of this dynamism is that Belawing Tungang, a Lun Kelapang from Long Di'it, the community of origin of Long Peluan, became paramount chief of several predominantly Sa'ban longhouses on the Bahau River at Pei Atang in Dutch Borneo in the late nineteenth century. Thus, the community of Long Di'it was multiethnic in the same way as Long Peluan, and this is supported by genealogies from both Ngurek and Sa'ban ancestors.

The narrative opens: "We want to know our relationship, our history of being together with the Ngurek" (*Tauh la' kali' idih atur tauh, sejarah tauh, peruyung ngan Ngurek*). The emphasis is on inclusion, through the use of the word *tauh*, referring to *our* history. The formulation *peruyung ngan*, "together with" the Ngurek, suggests a shared history. The narrative explains that there is Ngurek ancestry in many households in Long Peluan through a Ngurek ancestor, Bilong Salo', and his son, Araya Ajin, who was one of the founders of Long Peluan together with his three sisters. The story then recounts the migrations of the Ngurek from Bawang Ipong to Long Upun on the Bahau in Dutch Borneo, where they lived with the Sa'ban of Pa' Nar, who, according to the narrative, "are considered as 'our people' (*lun tauh*)."*Lun tauh* is thus an inclusive term that conveys the idea of "us"—Kelabit, Ngurek, and Sa'ban—as a group of people made up of subgroups, each with its own identity but related to the others. The Kelabit term *lun tauh* is used today in everyday life by Kelabit themselves to denote relationships not just within the Kelabit community and with their immediate neighbors but extending, depending on context, to include people on the same river system and others regarded as kin (*lun ruyong*) who are related not only through blood ties but also through ties created by marriage or adoption. The context for the use of the term is relational, and its features are fluid and flexible.

The flexible relationships denoted by the term *lun tauh* come about because kinship is recognized cognatically. When a couple marry, the parents of the two spouses are regarded as *iban*, a title which indicates their status in relation to the new family—regardless of their ethnicity. The new web of family relationships, *lun ruyong*, through marriage stretches to *ruai* (aunts and uncles of the married couple) and *lango'* (brothers, sisters, and first cousins of the married couple). The adoption of children is a further way kinship is extended. In Long Peluan Kelabit children have been adopted into Sa'ban households and vice versa. For instance, the Long Peluan headman's daughter Remat Murang was adopted by Tama Lalo and her cousin Ngalap Ayu by Tama Apoi, both in Long Banga. Such adoptions are made if there is illness in the family, or inauspicious omens are

observed, or to give children to childless couples to provide an heir to the family’s land and property. The child, in turn, provides extra hands for the sustenance of the household and security for the adoptive couple’s old age. In some cases, the children move in and live and eat with their adoptive families, and in other cases they stay with their natal families. This extension of the family group provides support for labor exchange in padi fields, and reciprocity of assistance for celebrations and funerals.

Thus, there is the historical precedent of a fluid, inclusive attitude to kinship in the form of *lun ruyung* as outlined above, which is based on intermarriage and adoption. This can permeate to the wider grouping of *lun tauh*, which consists of whoever should be included at the time of speaking. It is a quintessentially relational term, which can relate at the first level to the longhouse, at the next level to Kelabit, and at higher levels to speakers of other related languages, to Sa’ban neighbors, or to the Lun Bawang or the Kerayan and Brian over the Indonesian border—or even to the Orang Ulu groups, which are dominated by the Kayan and Kenyah.

This inclusive concept of identity, *lun tauh*, denotes an outlook that has been passed down from a time when Kelabit, Ngurek, and Sa’ban were small groups forming alliances against common enemies on a river system, when they intermarried and shared resources, culture, and languages. They formed work parties, hunting groups, and trading groups utilizing resources within their territory (Fig. 3). Such openness was necessary because they needed to keep their population at a viable level for shifting cultivation, warfare, and trading journeys. Longhouses survived over time through these open relationships.



Fig. 3 Work Group Harvesting at Long Peluan (photo by Valerie Mashman)

Thus, *lun tauh* refers to “our people” as people who have come together in multiethnic villages and settled with heterogeneous families and relatives as *lun ruyung*, “people together”—kin.

The Long Peluan Narrative: Creating a People, Alliances, and Conquests

There is an episode in the narrative which describes the attack on the Lepo' Tepu, which is a good example of how alliances in warfare reinforce group bonds and of how loyalty works to create a common identity, of a people united against their enemies. The Lepo' Tepu were thwarted because they were betrayed by the Sa'ban, who alerted the Ngurek and Kelabit to the real nature of their purportedly friendly visit. Thus, each allied group on the river played its part in defending itself and its territory against a common enemy. The identity of *lun tauh* is reinforced by their allegiance to each other against the common enemy of the Lepo' Tepu. The Lepo' Tepu are distinguished from *lun tauh* by the use of feathers in their headdresses, and the carriage of their leader above the group by his followers, emphasizing a cultural difference which creates a boundary between “us” and “them” (Barth 1969, 14).

This kind of loyalty was grounded in the fact that survival depended on each longhouse defending its locality and its river system, and its allies could be of mixed ethnicities, often strengthened by marriage ties. Allegiance was not mandatory for people who spoke the same language. For example, the Kelabit went in two separate groups to the Marudi peacemaking in April 1898, and care was taken to keep them apart lest antagonisms surface (Hose 1898, 122). This suggests that the longhouse was the primary source of loyalty, rather than the wider group speaking the same language, who might live quite far from each other. Locality-based alliances were stronger than ethnic allegiances:

Despite ethnic differences, the members of a central Borneo river-based grouping have a consciousness of kind: they are not simply neighbours, but a people . . . proximity is the basis of commonality. Throughout Borneo, river-based groupings theoretically avoided headhunting amongst themselves. (Rousseau 1990, 117)

Thus, the alliance of Ngurek, Kelabit, and Sa'ban enabled them to be more than neighbors: they were “a people,” *lun tauh*. The identity of *lun tauh* is best understood in terms of a “consciousness of kind” as described above.

The Long Peluan Narrative: How Communities Change

In the aftermath of the attack by the Lepo’ Tepu which is part of the narrative, mentioned above, it became clear that the allied groups of “our people” had to move from Long Moyo, as the Lepo’ Tepu had threatened to return to attack again:

So the Ngurek suggested, “Let us all move downriver.” But the Kelabit said, “We cannot go downriver. We are not used to handling boats, so we shall go up into the headwaters.” They were unable to agree. . . . And so they went their separate ways. The Ngurek went downriver, and the Kelabit went up into the mountainous country of the headwaters. That is how we have Ngurek ancestry. (Extract from Long Peluan narrative)

In response to the threat of a retaliatory attack, Southeast Asian upland groups have often split up and “moved out of the way” (Scott 2009, 209). The episode recounted above accounts for the separation of the Ngurek and Kelabit based on their aptitudes for different terrain, and how they went in different directions, highlighting different cultural attributes, no longer neighbors, yet having at some point in the past common ancestors. The split came about because the Kelabit were unable to handle boats but had the strength and physique to negotiate the rugged mountainous country of the interior, beyond the reach of navigable rivers. Their lack of proficiency in using boats is, in fact, reported by Douglas (1907, 53), who says they had no idea how to paddle boats and that they started crying at the sight of the volume of the Baram River at Marudi. This illustrates how Kelabit came to be identified as highlanders, occupying the niche of the highlands in the narrative, and how their identity came to be shaped by this territory. The rapids of the upper Baram provided a protective boundary for them, creating difficulty in access for outsiders from lowland and coastal centers. By contrast, the mountains between Sarawak and Dutch Borneo were not a barrier, because Kelabit were adept at negotiating the mountainous terrain. This would account for their ready alliances in the Bahau area, to which they could retreat if necessary.

The alliance between the Ngurek and the Kelabit continued down the generations, with Ngurek transporting Kelabit by boat to the administrative center of Marudi or on trading expeditions to the Bahau. There were reports that Kelabit was spoken as a second language in Ngurek longhouses on the Baram River in the 1940s (Bolang and Harrisson 1949). Such networks were crucial for trade, ritual, and the maintenance of local cosmologies, as prestige items such as jars, beads, and commodities were sent upriver and exchanged for forest products. This was typical of social ties deriving from migration patterns in Central Borneo, where relationships continued between families still connected across vast distances. What this episode demonstrates is that Ngurek

and Kelabit had lived together as one community, allied against a common enemy, yet they made a decision to split and separate according to their own aptitudes and survival skills in different types of terrain. This was, according to the narrative, determined by their own agency, an example of how “Kelabit have been active agents and subjects of their own history” (Bala 2008, 83). The decisions about whether to stay put or move on, retreat to the hills or go downriver, are all presented in the narrative as examples of choices that Kelabit made, in important measure out of a desire to maintain their autonomy.

In the narrative, the Kelabit communities are said to have later split further and come to be identified with two separate territories—in the upper Baram in Long Peluan and at Long Di’t on the Kelapang River. This exemplifies the continuously changing nature of longhouse communities, which are often rebuilt by ethnically diverse populations, as described by Peter Metcalf: “Whatever categories colonialists thought they had discovered, longhouse communities were founded, grew, went into decline, and dispersed, in a process of formation and reformation that paid no attention to ethnic ‘boundaries’” (Metcalf 2010, 313).

The alliance between Ngurek and Kelabit is similar to partnerships in Burma between Pa’O and Burmese. Here, as in Borneo, relations are not based on ethno-linguistic allegiances “but [are] between villagers and partners, whose exchanges and networks contribute to the establishment of social cohesion, albeit an unstable cohesion, in a multi-ethnic landscape” (Robinne and Sadan 2007, 304). At this point the Long Peluan narrative presents a focus which is less on cultural difference and more on the dynamics of political networks and social interaction, which are continually reshaped in creating the stability necessary to forge the identity of *lun tauh*.

The Long Peluan Narrative: A Further Separation

People were on the move at this time to avoid enemy attack and had to build houses in defensive locations, as well as in areas where land was fertile.¹⁾ Longhouses were built to be easily dismantled so that communities could move quickly and easily; roofs were made of leaf thatch; walls and floors were of bamboo. One part of the narrative, which is told in many versions in the highlands,²⁾ explains why Kelabit have relatives among Bahau:

1) Another reason for moving in the nineteenth century was the frequency of epidemics (Lian-Saging 1976/77, 46).

2) See Lian-Saging (1976/77, 27). This story was also told to Monica Janowski by the people of Pa’ Dalih, near Pa’ Diit (Janowski, pers. comm.).

They couldn't decide where to go. They were on the move against enemies. Some people wanted to go back to the Bahau River. They went out and dug a ceremonial ditch on a ridge. They split into two groups, one on each side of the ditch. A piece of rattan was laid across the ditch. Those who wanted to stay grasped the rattan from one end while those who wanted to go to the Bahau grasped the rattan on the other end. The people on the lower part of the ridge couldn't be seen and those on the higher side were more numerous, so the leaders asked those on the higher side to join the people on the lower side. When the groups had split up and those in the valley left for the Bahau, the Kelabit realized they had been tricked, as they were fewer in number. (Extract from Long Peluan narrative)

From this it may be concluded that Kelabit in the highlands have a tradition of mixed ancestry with the Ngurek and Sa'ban of the Bahau and that there was a movement of people who migrated out of the highlands to the Bahau. Some of the Bahau population went to Pa Ibang and eventually to Tang La'an in the Krayan. The story is retold within the community so that bonds are maintained among kin on each side of the border, reinforcing the porous nature of this division. It is in the interests of people on each side to keep up with each other for the purposes of maintaining kinship ties and trade contacts, as Jerome Rousseau points out: "After migration to another river basin, relations are kept for a long time with relatives remaining in the original area, especially if visits are an opportunity to trade" (Rousseau 1990, 119). In Long Peluan, contacts have been maintained across the numerous paths and tracks which provide access across the border, through mountain passes and across watersheds. Relatives from the Krayan left marks on the landscape around Long Peluan during extended visits. There is a rock called Batu Bayo' in the middle of the Bale River which commemorates the place where a Krayan named Bayo'³⁾ capsized. Moreover, it is said in Long Peluan that padi bunds and fields for farming wet rice in *lati baa'* were perfected by Yakup Pangot and Titus Paran, cousins from the Krayan who came to give technical help when people started to diversify to wet-padi cultivation in the 1970s. Then, there is a type of durian with a fleshy fruit, the seeds of which were originally brought over from Kalimantan by the people of Pa Sing, who brought baskets full of fruit for sale.

These bonds between communities as *lun tauh* are present on the landscape and in conversations and are recreated through narratives in people's imaginations on each side of the border. They are reinforced through the sending over of gifts and invitations to feasts, as tokens of value. For instance, when I gave birth in Kuching to my son Joel Jallong, whose father is from Long Peluan, a cockerel and a hen were delivered to our house from a cousin, Sina Somo,⁴⁾ who lived in Long Layu on the Krayan River, Kalimantan.

3) Bayo' actually was by birth a Long Di'it Kelabit who married into a Krayan household at Pa Sing.

4) Her father was named Paran Jalong. At the time we named our son we did not realize that both her father and our son were named after the same ancestor, Jalong.

In the past, in pre-Christian times, such gifts would have been used at the ceremony to initiate a child. A few years later, I received a string of heirloom beads, again from Sina Somo, delivered through an intermediary to our Kuching house. Eventually we managed to visit her and reciprocate her kindness.

At a wider, more public level, *lun tauh* were brought together in the past at the major feasts, *irau*, marking deaths and sometimes, in the case of high-status families, at the ritual initiation of a child. Nowadays, *irau* are held to commemorate the adoption of new names by parents and grandparents at the birth of children, and at Easter. As Monica Janowski notes, “This overarching community of *lun tauh* is represented and generated at *irau*” (Janowski 1991, 212).

The Long Peluan Narrative: Signs on the Landscape—Location, Territory, and Ethnicity

The narrative describes places within the territory of Long Peluan and Pa Di’it, creating for listeners a common identity relating to place as the narrator shares his knowledge, thus indicating his authority and standing. A chronology of movement evoking, for example, the name of the site of a previous longhouse in both the Ngurek and Kelabit languages—Lulau Terong (Ngurek) or Long Moyo (Kelabit)—demonstrates the hybridity of populations living side by side in the same area.

Within the Long Peluan narrative there are references to “marks” (*edtu*) that are evidence of previous occupation of the landscape:

As our people moved upriver, one can see stone mounds and standing stones that they built along the river, and stone graves at Long Nonar. These are the signs (*edtu*) left by them. Another example is the row of trees on the bank of the Kelapang downriver from the Ramudu River. These trees are still there today. They were harvesting and as they sat down to rest in a row they planted the seeds from the fruit they ate. (Extract from Long Peluan narrative)

The identification of places as signs or *edtu* on the landscape informs the audience that their ancestors are believed to have ceremonially buried their dead in megalithic cemeteries, indicated by stone graves (Fig. 4), and that their ancestors previously cleared land and planted fruit trees, which could be claimed by the descendants of those who planted them (see Janowski and Langub 2011). It follows that the process of Malian Tepun’s telling the narrative in 2006, recalling places of occupation, trees, and cemeteries, transmits to listeners crucial knowledge of the land and becomes a vehicle for the mapping of territory for the community, at a time when this has become particularly



Fig. 4 Stone Graves at Long Peluan (photo by Valerie Mashman)

urgent as elders are unable to take younger members of the community out to show them the significant features of their land because of changes in the landscape, or because the younger members of the community are away earning money offshore or in coastal cities.

It is noteworthy that Malian Tepun stresses Kelabit occupation of the land. The cemeteries and stone mounds in the area are regarded as signs of previous Kelabit settlement: “In every place where the Kelabit have lived, there are standing stones and stone graves where human bones are buried . . . this land in the headwaters of Kelapang belongs to . . . the Kelabit people” (Extract from Long Peluan narrative). Thus, the narrative is not simply about Kelabit and Ngurek, who, together with Sa’ban, shared the *sejarah* (story) of the *lun tauh*; it is also about the land in the headwaters of the Kelapang River, and it emphatically functions as a declaration that this is the territory of Kelabit, although it also, somewhat contradictorily, states that Ngurek were the first people in the area, even before Kelabit.

Significantly, what the narrative does not consider is the association of the Ngurek with the stone culture of the area; nor does it allude to Ngurek narratives about the stones (which I have touched on elsewhere [Mashman 2017]) and which state that it was the Ngurek who placed the stones. In the 1980s, when I first visited Long Peluan, people said that the stone sites were linked to the Ngurek, who had previously lived in the area. People now say they do not know who created the stone graves. They forget that one

of the ancestors of their founder, Araya Ajin, was Bilong Salo', a Ngurek. Ngurek leaders from Sarawak readily recognize these stone monuments, which feature in Ngurek oral history as places where they lived as they migrated to the main Baram River (Jalong 1989), and visit such sites associated with their ancestors in Indonesia, which have been systematically excavated and documented (Arifin and Sellato 2003). Thus, parallel narratives by Ngurek exist alongside the declaration by Kelabit that their ancestors built the stone monuments. There seems to be little discussion of the existence of these differing narratives because circumstances have not caused them to be evoked alongside each other. This is characteristic of the "oral ways of knowing" of indigenous communities mentioned earlier (Tuhivai Smith 2004, 33).

The Long Peluan Narrative: Inclusion and Exclusion

Within the narrative there is both a history of an inclusive group, "our people"—*lun tauh*—set in a period of alliances in warfare, and at the same time an assertion of sole tenure of land in the present. The land is defined as belonging to the Kelabit, and this is explicitly an exclusive notion. Thus, there are two models of identity which come through in the narrative. The first is set in the past and consists of the inclusive fluid "everyday reality" of the heterogeneous *lun tauh*, who had shared histories, were interrelated across borders, and had an inclusive mixed identity; and the second is "the Kelabit," the fixed "authority-defined" ethnic group, which derived its identity through the classification of peoples by the Brooke administration, with an exclusive claim to territory. This recalls and indeed echoes the exclusive notion of identity, related to tenure of land, which is narrated by Kelabit elsewhere: "These cultural landmarks are revisited as indications and proof of the occupation of the highlands by the Kelabit . . . Quite clearly they lived and exclusively occupied the highlands as part of their ancestral homeland for generations from time immemorial" (Bulan 2003, 45).

These claims assert Kelabit sovereignty over the land, to the exclusion of their neighbors, but overlook histories of neighbors such as the Sa'ban and Ngurek who also have narratives which relate to building stone monuments, as well as overlooking the time they spent together as *lun tauh* with the Sa'ban and Ngurek. This argument for Kelabit sovereignty over the land implies that no one else could have lived in the highlands before them. It also ignores the fact that their ancestors in a previous time may have assimilated a people who were there earlier.

This is part of a process that is recognized in mainland Southeast Asia by James Scott: "Those who successfully stake a claim to resources on this basis acquire a power-

ful reason for embracing the new identity. By the same token, they exclude others from access to these same resources" (Scott 2009, 263). Scott has noted that ethnicity is embraced and reinforced with exclusive claims to resources, something which is very relevant to the statement in the narrative that the land of the upper Kelapang belongs to the Kelabit people. This comes at a time when land available for forest resources is very much reduced to a limited area of community forest, due to forest fires in 1997 and logging activities in the area. Further to this, the people of Long Peluan are facing conflicting claims with their Penan neighbors at Long Beruang. When the Penan settled in 1961 they did so with the consent of the Long Peluan community. Gradually, they started to farm on land that had been previously cleared by Long Peluan, on the understanding that this land was being loaned. However, memory of this agreement has been lost in time, and in Long Peluan there is resentment that the younger generation of Penan and new migrants to Long Beruang do not acknowledge the previous history of the land. Consequently, Kelabit feel insecure regarding their sovereignty over what they regard as their own territory, a common feeling throughout the highlands, due to issues similar to those experienced at Long Peluan. It is arguable that this may be one reason why the narrative concludes with an exclusive model of Kelabit identity, reinforcing their relationship with the land through the stone culture, distinguishing themselves from their neighbors.

Conclusion

The Long Peluan narrative presents the oral history of people whose history spans the border, providing very relevant insights into the social cohesion created by the acceptance of mixed fluid identities of *lun tauh*, which has enabled multiethnic communities to survive in Borneo across the difficult mountainous terrain which now forms political borders. *Lun tauh* as a form of cultural identity is reinforced by the act of performing of the narrative, as listeners become united through shared histories of alliances across river systems and across borders and survival in warfare against enemies, with migratory journeys across the landscape. Association with marks on the landscape becomes part of the process of recognizing and memorizing territorial boundaries, which define the cultural identity of "our people," as people remember their ancestors' migrations and dramatic separations in the precolonial era. This demonstrates a form of common identity based on past alliances, across borders, which contributed to the endurance of longhouses. This fluid concept is used today contextually to embrace inclusive groupings, be they at the kinship, longhouse, or wider multiethnic levels necessary for small minority

groups in a district. These and other forms of socialities create heterogeneous identities which can be embraced by *lun tauh*. The term creates a unity for a group, and its fluidity accommodates the necessary expansion in numbers to make the group viable. It is a relational concept and part of the “everyday-defined” reality of daily life, based on inclusion which enables day-to-day transactions to take place.

Simultaneously, a more fixed model of homogenous ethnicity—“the Kelabit”—comes out of the narrative, a category originating with the Brooke state but taken up by the people who have taken on this label and used it to assert exclusive ownership of land and resources. This comes together with the message that the land in the Kelapang belongs to the Kelabit people, despite the parallel history, given in that same narrative, of coexistence with the Ngurek and the fact that the Ngurek had the stone culture which led to the monuments which the Kelabit claim as their own. This fixed notion of Kelabit identity excludes other people with whom identity and allegiances were shared in the past (and still are in the present). The fact that Kelabit themselves in Long Peluan and indeed elsewhere have taken up this identity can be understood as a response to contestation of their territory by logging companies and neighboring groups.

The ethnic construct of “the Kelabit” has become a bounded common identity aspired to by people who wish to be politically represented by their own leaders, like other ethnic groups in the nation-state. As stated earlier, the Malays have gone through the same process, leading to a forgetting of earlier histories of migrations.

Scott, in his analysis of state making in mainland Southeast Asia, discusses this taking on of an ethnic identity and denying past identities in terms of “the standard mode of claim-making by stateless people who interact with states.” He recognizes this process as the interaction between stateless people and states, as they make claims to resources and territory. This leads to stateless people forming new identities for themselves and excluding others (Scott 2009, 263). In a similar manner, Kelabit have begun to claim their land, their history, and their resources to the exclusion of their neighbors. This has led to the creation of the Kelabit highlands; and Kelabit maintain its physical and metaphorical borders. Kelabit identity can, in fact, be seen as carrying the seed of nationalism. As Scott says:

The point is, once created, an institutional identity acquires its own history. The longer and deeper this history is, the more it will resemble the mythmaking and forgetting of nationalism. Over time such an identity, however fabricated its origin, will take on essentialist features and may well inspire passionate loyalty. (Scott 2009, 265)

“Being Kelabit” has been embraced out of a desire for recognition to create a niche for themselves as a minority group within the Malaysian state (Amster 1998, 28) and has

“grown to a sort of patriotism to the tribe” (Lian-Saging 1976/77, 10). “Being Kelabit” is a source of pride associated with success, due to the early educational success of a number of young Kelabit in the 1960s and 1970s, and this identity is utilized to negotiate contemporary government policy which does not readily acknowledge the existence of customary lands.

Both forms of identity—the fixed exclusive notion of “being Kelabit” and the wider inclusivity of *lun tauh*—coexist as differing strategies for survival for a marginal people, operating at different levels. How this complexity works beyond the longhouse in the multi-sited settings of communities, schools, workplaces, and housing areas and across the border merits further attention. The Long Peluan narrative demonstrates how local perceptions of ethnicities and identities are bound up with strategies for creating larger groups, creating allies, remembering kin across borders, and struggles to claim territory.

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Contesting Multiple Borders: Bricolage Thinking and Matua Narratives on the Andaman Islands

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In the liquid borderlands between South and Southeast Asia, where refugees from East Bengal were resettled after the massive Partition-induced displacement, the god Ram is narrated as a great model of filial piety but also as the murderer of a low-caste ascetic. The Vaishnava saint Chaitanya is a divine character but also a reproachable renunciate who abandoned his mother and forced her to beg from door to door. The crocodile is an ideal devotee who caught fish to bring as offering for the religious congregation, justifying the introduction of an otherwise forbidden substance on the altar. Drawing on both ethnographic and literary sources, I use recurrent “bundles of stories” such as these, transmitted and performed by the Matua community on the Andaman Islands, to discuss narratives as a way of knowing and to describe “bricolage thinking” in borderland selves. I interpret the aesthetics and the literary devices used in these narratives as strategies to shape borderland community values. These rely upon past memories and provide for present articulations of resistance. This article suggests that Matua narratives contest political borders by traveling between and connecting fragmented sections of the displaced community through the voices of itinerant preachers, performers, and pilgrims. At the same time, they trespass onto other kinds of borderlands, such as those created by unequal positions of socioeconomic power and those marking the center and periphery of religious hegemony.

Keywords: Bengali, refugee, Dalit, Vaishnava, Chaitanya, avatar/incarnation, gender, resistance

Introduction

The stories discussed in this article, which I collected during fieldwork in the Andaman Islands in early 2017 and December 2018–January 2019, derive from a community known as Matua (Matuṃyā) which originated in rural East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in the nine-

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teenth century. They are shared regularly as oral narratives among Bengali-speaking Matua communities in India and Bangladesh. They are also performed as sacred songs, recited during ritual gatherings, as well as printed in canonical scriptures and affordable vernacular magazines. They operate on both a religious and a social level, consolidating both a religious identity and a politically active caste-based movement.¹⁾ They represent a traveling archive of shared knowledge for a large part of the Bengali community of post-Partition settlers on the archipelago.

Located at the junction of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, in the eastern Indian Ocean, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands constitute a union territory under the Republic of India, although they are geographically much closer to Burma and Thailand.²⁾ The capital city of Port Blair is separated from the Indian mainland by 1,300 kilometers of water. An oceanic borderland between South and Southeast Asia, in a crucial node of maritime trade (legal and illegal—see GOI 2011; Allana 2015) and transport, the Andamans are home to a mosaic of people occupying, with various degrees of legitimacy, spaces in and between towns, marketplaces, coasts, outskirts, and dense forests (Mukhopadhyay 2016). Descendants of convicts from different parts of the British Empire today live side by side with repatriated Sri Lankan Tamils, old communities of indentured and contract laborers from Burma and North India, indigenous people pushed increasingly to the margins of a shrinking forest, and post-Independence refugee settlers from East Bengal. This last group is the main repository of the stories across borders presented in this article.

After Independence and the Partition of India (1947), the Andamans were identified, together with other regions of the subcontinent, as a strategic location to rehabilitate a portion of the overwhelming and continuous flow of refugees from East Bengal (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2000; Biswas 2009; Sen 2011; 2018). Chosen mainly on the basis of their caste and traditional occupation, the agriculturist refugee families selected for resettlement on the Andamans were mostly Namashudra, a low caste that constitutes almost in

1) Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has written on the early history and institutionalization of the Matua movement (Bandyopadhyay 1997). The caste-based religious movement formed an influential political entity—namely, the Matua Mahasangha—that has represented, particularly for the last 10 years, the strongest aspect of Dalit politics in West Bengal (Sinharay 2016). In the Bengali language, significant work has been authored by Manosanta Biswas (2016). Practitioners and participants refer to Matua as a religion (*dharma*), a sect or community (*sampradāy*), as well as a movement (*āndolan*). The term “Matua” (related to *matta* and *mātoyārā* in standard Bengali) means intoxicated, inebriated, beside oneself. Although it was once a derogatory name used by outsiders, practitioners have claimed this epithet and use it to define themselves as those drunk and maddened by divine love (*nāme preme mātoyārā*).

2) Two edited volumes on the history and society of the Andaman Islands have recently been published (Anderson *et al.* 2016; and Heidemann and Zehmisch 2016).

its entirety the social composition of the Matua religious movement. Namashudra refugees from East Bengal migrated to the Andamans bringing along Matua rituals, ethics, and myths. The Matua religion has enjoyed consistent and increasing popularity on the Andaman Islands—as well as in many other regions where low-caste refugees from East Bengal were rehabilitated. At the same time, Matua practitioners became borderland dwellers because of a long and often violent history of displacement, which compelled them to shift from the riverine plains of (present-day) southern Bangladesh to other regions of the neighboring, Hindu-majority, Republic of India. While these migrants constitute a gradually larger share of the Andaman population, their presence, after the end of the British colonial regime, has contributed to the demographic consolidation of the Andamans as an Indian territory.

Drawing on both ethnographic and literary sources, I use Matua stories to discuss narratives as a way of knowing and to envisage a process of “bricolage thinking” in borderland selves. Although the *longue durée* of the term “bricolage” in anthropological literature dates as far back as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962), later critically revised by Jacques Derrida (1967), I build particularly on Jean Comaroff’s (1985) usage of the term in the anthropology of religion. In this context, the literal meaning of bricolage as a creation from a diverse range of available things, achieved by using whatever comes to hand, is applied to religious creativity during colonialism, in order to explain appropriation and subversion of cultural elements borrowed from the oppressors’ repertory of symbols. Hence, far from signifying something amateurish, playful, or half-baked, bricolage has come to represent ontologies and creative patterns which are critical of a dominant culture.³⁾

In this article, I use concepts and frameworks developed in the literature on South Asian borderlands (van Schendel 2005; Gellner 2013; de Maaker and van Schendel 2014; among others) and within narrative theory applied to social movements (Davis 2002; Selbin 2010). Drawing on the former, I contextualize the Andaman Islands as an epicenter of liquid borderlands, and I adopt a perspective privileging flows and exchanges of people and cultural expressions in a transnational manner to rethink the “local,” rather than sanctioning fixed geopolitical entities and the indisputability of the nation-state. Drawing on the latter, I interpret the aesthetics and the literary devices used in the narratives as strategies to shape borderland community values. These rely upon past memories and provide for present articulations of resistance.

I focus on oral narratives as richly complex, multivocal phenomena that are reflective of culture, adjustive responses, expressions of social needs and pressures within a social structure, as well as models for mediating unwelcome contradictions (Blackburn 1975,

3) A theoretical analysis of the term and its usage can be found in Mary (2005, 284–286).

xx). Narratives, as Richard Bauman has pointed out, are doubly anchored in human experience: they are keyed both to the events that are told and to the events that they recount (Bauman 1986, 2). This enables them to be a privileged source allowing us to study the way in which people create alternative histories, as well as their politics of cultural representation. My interlocutors for the ethnographic material presented in this paper are mainly Matua practitioners and performers, village gurus—often seen as pivotal storytellers and human repositories of folk narratives in the Indian context (Narayan 1989)—and disciples. These are story-keepers “who know the local tales and memories and make it their task to remember and recite” (Singer 1997, xii).

Matua narratives reflect the community’s beliefs about the body, the family, a theology of salvation, and a social theology of liberation from oppression on the part of its low-caste members.⁴⁾ Matua stories from the Andaman Islands result from a tension between preserving unchanged stories perceived as coming from the ancestral homeland, from “back there” and “back then,” and adapting these stories to the requirements of a new society and a different environment. This article suggests that Matua narratives contest political borders by traveling between and connecting fragmented sections of the community through the voices of itinerant preachers, performers, and pilgrims. At the same time, they trespass onto other kinds of borderlands, such as those created by unequal positions of socioeconomic power and those marking the center and periphery of religious hegemony.

The ethnographic material used for this article is the result of two fieldwork periods (winter 2016–17 and winter 2018–19). Non-directive, unstructured interviews and group conversations were recorded on a voice recorder, on a sound recording device, or in fieldwork notes, depending on the sonic environment and the medium that would make my interlocutors most comfortable. My fieldwork area was predominantly North Andaman (especially the villages around Diglipur, Kalipur, Radhanagar, Ramnagar, Gandhinagar, and Paschim Sagar), which can be reached by a painfully bumpy 12-hour bus journey from the capital, Port Blair, or by ferry, with an 18-hour journey via Mayabunder. In South Andaman, I worked with Matua preachers and performers around Wandoor (Ghumai and Hasmatabad) and on Havelock Island. Apart from Havelock Island and Diglipur, which are fairly well equipped for tourists, accommodation facilities were not available. I stayed most of my time in the huts and homes of local Matua families, leaving donations for their annual festivals or sweets and food items as repayment, when this was considered acceptable, for their time and overwhelming hospitality.

4) Little attention has been given by scholarly literature to the cultural productions of Matua practitioners. An extensive corpus of verbal arts, performative traditions, and literature has been composed by Matua gurus and devotees. For an overview, in Bengali, see Bairagya (1999).

Liquid Borders and Islands as Borderlands

The borders conventionally dividing South and Southeast Asia owe much of their existence to colonial state making and to a rapid, often violent, decolonization, which left people fragmented and territories disputed (de Maaker and van Schendel 2014). The end of the British Empire, the Partition of India (1947), and the newly imposed—and often hastily drawn—borders in the second half of the twentieth century triggered massive flows of forced migration and transformed “centers” into state “peripheries.” Since such peripheries are strategically important for the maintenance and consolidation of the state, South Asian borderlands became increasingly militarized. Mobility became restricted and heavily monitored.

Recent studies of Asian borderlands have pointed out that the sovereign power of the postcolonial state is in its most manifest form at its borders (van Schendel 2005; Gainsborough 2009). Much of the related academic work concerning South Asia has been concentrated on mainland borders (especially between India and Pakistan) and on high-level politics regulating borders, focusing on state actors, border officials, and formal authorities. There is still relatively little knowledge of local perspectives on borderland discourse (Baud and van Schendel 1997) or of how borderland peoples cope with and resist borders. This article responds to this lack of balance. It focuses on borderland people surrounded by maritime borders, physically distanced by the barbed-wire borders of the mainland. It offers a reflection of borderland voices from below and of their strategies to contest political borders and consolidate cultural identity across borders by maintaining cross-border linkages and connections.

People inhabiting the borderlands of South Asia are often viewed with suspicion from the perspective of those inhabiting geographical and social centers of power. In mainstream narratives borderland peoples represent threatening and subversive “others,” readily conspiring against the state, its unity and integrity (van Schendel 2005; Evans 2010). Those inhabiting the peripheries are often the object of subtle—or even open—accusations of being less civilized, less proper, less “citizens” than members of the dominant culture (Scott 2009; Bonnin *et al.* 2015; Andělová 2017). Thus, the inhabitants of the Andaman Islands, distant enough from the Indian peninsula to justify exotic accounts and stereotyped descriptions of “the locals,” have been subject to a range of accusations, applied not only to indigenous people but also to later settlers. Premodern sources maliciously inform us of the existence of wolf-headed man-eating natives (Vaidik 2010, 18–20). Post-Independence accusations are, by contrast, more subtly crafted. Reports and popular media depict the Andamans as a pluralistic and multireligious “melting pot” which challenges the moral and cultural caste-based structures of the mainland,

especially in terms of connubial and commensal restrictions (Biswas 2009, viii; Zehmisch 2012; Abraham 2018). These descriptions tend to represent a homogeneous “island culture” where different ethnicities coexist peacefully, disregarding caste-based differentiations, freely intermarrying, and happily participating in each other’s cultural and religious festivals. Such depictions serve the purpose of “Indianizing” the public image of the Andaman Islands by representing the islands as the mosaic miniature of a modernized, egalitarian, and secular mainland India (Abraham 2018). This responds to anxieties and suspicions awakened by the islands’ borderland-ness, the presence of potentially dangerous “foreign” elements—be they Bangladeshi infiltrators or Burmese poachers—and the increasing Chinese presence in the Bay of Bengal.⁵⁾ The romantic and nationalist tone of the homogeneous-casteless-progressive mini-India narrative truly applies only to a very small part of the urban inhabitants of South Andaman, where higher education and the infrastructures of modernity are concentrated.⁶⁾ Recent empirical research on the contemporary communities inhabiting the Andamans has started to deconstruct the myth of the Andaman Islands as a casteless “Mini India” (e.g., Zehmisch 2012; 2017), revealing instead the presence of tensions and competition among communities.

Presenting the oral narratives of a Bengali religious community in the Andaman Islands, this article contributes to the ongoing conversation by adding specificity and contextualization to an otherwise flattening description of Andamanese society as a single, though multicultural, cauldron. The histories shared in this article, by contrast, present a community that resists “melting in the pot” and instead holds on to past values, rituals, and traditions. Tenaciously preserving and performing an imagined homeland

5) While this article was being written, the Indian Army operated a simulation on a massive scale: a military exercise to recapture and “liberate” the Andamans in the event that they were seized and claimed by China (Sudhi Ranjan Sen, *India Today*, November 24, 2017).

6) The portrait of a multicultural society is exploited not only for nationalistic goals (Abraham 2018) but also for commercial purposes. The Andaman and Nicobar administration organizes an Island Tourism Festival every year. According to the official website for the festival: “This festival attracts participation from people belonging to different religious groups and cultures. A vivid reflection of the cosmopolitan culture of the region . . .” (Andaman Tourism 2017). In an online article, the local teacher Raisuddin Gayen states:

Andamanese society is different. Andamanese culture does not pay heed to castes and religious differences. Here we celebrate Christmas, Eid, Pongal, and everybody is welcome. In North Andaman there is a community of Bengali Christians; they pray to Jesus in the church and they sing praises to Hari participating in the Harisabha [the Matua religious congregation]. (Gayen 2016)

This statement was written in response to the book *Āndāmāne Bāñālī* (Bengalis in the Andamans) by Bandana Gupta (which I was not able to locate), in which the author apparently says that the Andamans come across as a sort of Bangladesh recreated by numerous settlers from untouchable groups; however, because of the lack of high-caste Hindus, Gupta argues that they have not been able to create a healthy and “decorous” society.

through the use of the Bengali language and the reproduction of soundscapes and religious narratives, the Bengali community of low-caste Matuas on the Andaman Islands⁷ questions dominant representations of society on the islands. Inhabiting mainly remote and isolated areas of the archipelago, the Matuas are looked down upon and despised by other communities as well as by educated urban Bengalis. I remember vividly my surprise when an older member of the Bengali community in the capital city of Port Blair, a well-traveled retired music teacher and himself a successful folk-music performer, referred to Matua devotees as *ek murkher dal*—a band of idiots. A similar contempt was implied when a professor of Bengali language at the main college of Port Blair, with whom I was tentatively discussing the richness of Matua literature, emphatically said that he would never participate in any Matua festival, because “they are not *bhadralok*.”⁸ It is in such situations that the homogeneous-casteless-secular paradigm shatters, opening a space where a critical investigation of the segregation and marginalization of subaltern communities on the Andaman Islands becomes clearly necessary.⁹ At the same time, Matua narratives from the borderlands tell us how subaltern communities create their (hi)stories in a dialogic response to criticism from the dominant culture, constructing low-caste myths and reshaping memories of subjugation and displacement in order to challenge their supposed deficiencies: their being “less *bhadralok*,” less Bengali, less Indian.

Critically considering spaces in between the macro regions which have been described as South and Southeast Asia, inspired by recent innovative articulations of such areas,¹⁰ I take the Bay of Bengal and its liquid, maritime borders as a fulcrum, rather than considering the area as being at the margins of both South and Southeast Asia. In doing this, I look at the Andaman Islands as a borderland of South Asia but also as a center and

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- 7) As far as I am aware, there is only one previous study of the Matuas on the Andaman Islands, authored by Madhumita Mazumdar (2016). Focused on oral histories from South and Middle Andaman, the chapter brilliantly underlines the role of Matua moral order, singing sessions, and shared religious values as crucial place-making devices for these Bengali settlers.
 - 8) The *bhadralok* in colonial Bengal represented a class of urban educated Hindus, mainly upper caste, serving professionally in the British colonial system as lawyers, higher civil servants, doctors, etc. Literally meaning “gentleman” or well-mannered person, the term is still widely used to communicate the notion of a person who has *bhadratā*, the perceived quality of gentleness and of being “cultivated,” inextricably related to the dimensions of class and caste.
 - 9) Recent anthropological work has uncovered in a remarkable way the histories and negotiations of one such community, the so-called Ranchi, who arrived on the islands as contract laborers and are infamously known for encroaching on forestland and providing cheap manual work. See Zehmisch (2017).
 - 10) Particularly important for my area of study is Sunil Amrith’s work on colonial migration, economies, and environment across the Bay of Bengal (Amrith 2013). An interesting formulation has been proposed by Itty Abraham, who envisages the Andaman and Nicobar Islands union territory as a “sea of islands” that have long-standing relations with the coastlines and communities of both Southeast Asia and South Asia (Abraham 2018, 5).

cultural hub from which people, items, and ideas flow and seasonally circulate. Privileging liquid borderlands as opposed to solid borders in a political, social, and also religious context provides a vantage point from which to question reified demarcation lines, such as those drawn by the politics of cartography or by modern religious institutions (Kassam and Kent 2013), while taking into serious consideration interactions, porousness, and contradictions across borders. It is in these multiple and liquid borderland trajectories that the narratives laid out in this article are situated, taking on a role as traveling archives crossing, connecting, and challenging binary notions—of homeland and diaspora, of mainland Bengal and insular Bengaliness, of high-caste Hindu narratives and Matua mythopoiesis.

The Andaman Islands are absent from most discussions on South Asian borderlands, where mainland borderlands are given more space and emphasis while the isolated islands remain at the margins of academic thought. Scattered exceptions can be found in adventurous travelogues (for example, Damodaran 2017) and in political studies of military history, Indian borderlands, and the Sino-Indian maritime competition (e.g., Upadhyay 2009; Orton 2010; Ward 2017). Despite being at the margins of scholarly literature, because of their strategic position in terms of access to the Malacca Strait, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have not been at the margins of military thought; they have been heavily militarized and inscribed in a strong and insistent nationalist rhetoric.

With the islands being geologically part of the extended mountain range of mainland Myanmar, their political status after the independence of India was heavily debated. Under the British Raj the islands were developed as a dreaded penal settlement and were a mine for natural resources at the expense of the aboriginal people (Sen 2000; Vaidik 2010; Udit Sen 2017). When the islands became part of independent India, a popular idea envisaged them merging with the state of West Bengal (Biswas 2009, 72). Finally, in 1956, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were redesignated as a union territory of India (Higgins 2016). They are proudly acknowledged as the first Indian land liberated from British rule, as the place where the anticolonial leader Subhas Chandra Bose planted the first independent flag of India; but nevertheless, the Andamans are geographically closer to Burma than to Indian shores. They are within reach by boat from Burma, Thailand, and Aceh (Indonesia), and until 1986 the maritime borders between South and Southeast Asia remained blurred, with Burma claiming sovereignty over some of the peripheral islands, although these were later annexed and came under India (Charney and Alexander 1998, 2372). The majority of the prisoners detained in the jail outside of Port Blair—the urban capital in South Andaman—are not Indian: fishermen and “poachers” of Thai and Burmese origin are often detained after entering into Indian waters. It is not uncommon to hear about stranded Bengali fishermen from the Andamans rescued on Myanmar

shores, waiting for complex bureaucratic processes to be completed so that they can eventually be repatriated (Roy, *Indian Express*, October 2, 2018), or about boatloads of Rohingya refugees seeking shelter on the Andamans (*The Hindu*, February 11, 2011). The Andaman Islands' liquid borders are trespassed and challenged by a multiplicity of ethnicities and nationalities. This, however, is not the only dimension that explains the borderland-ness of Bengali Matua residents and how their stories contest a larger and more nuanced understanding of borderland self.

Multiple Borderlands: Refugee Settlers and the Matua Community

In this section, I will discuss how the Matua community came to inhabit Asian borderlands and how we can consider Matua practitioners on the Andaman Islands as inhabiting multi-layered and overlapping notions of borderland-ness in between the physical, the social, and the religious. First, I will give some historical background to explain how and since when Matua devotees have been dwelling in these remotest borderlands of India. Second, I will locate Matua practitioners as borderlanders within the society of the Andaman Islands, where they constitute a rural population, between the sea and the cultivated fields on the one hand and between the village and the dense forest on the other. Third, I will explain how Matua people on the Andaman Islands perceive themselves as inhabiting a borderland of the Matua faith, being located at the margins of a Matua cultural world, whose authenticity is seen as firmly anchored to mainland Bengal, where the descendants of the founding guru Harichand Thakur live.

After Independence, in order to sustain the new state apparatus and an increasingly heavy military infrastructure, the Andaman Islands needed to be developed and to produce increasing quantities of food. The expense to be borne by the central government to cover subsidies and imported goods would otherwise have become unsustainable. The administration struggled to find laborers willing to settle on the remote, jungle-covered islands, infamous for their dreaded prison and "savage" natives. A solution was found in exploiting India's post-Partition refugee crisis (Uditi Sen 2017, 952). After the 1947 Partition, millions of Bengali migrants from East Pakistan crossed the border and entered the small and overcrowded state of West Bengal as refugees. The Indian state opted for a "policy of dispersal" (Chatterji 2007, 1012), aiming to scatter them far from the political center of Kolkata to contain the potential for dangerous political mobilization. Low-caste and economically disadvantaged refugees were persuaded to accept rehabilitation and resettlement in distant and unfamiliar areas, such as the Dandakaranya region and the Andaman Islands (Kudaisya 1997; Mallick 1999; Mandal 2011). Refugee camp officers,

unsurprisingly, found thousands of low-caste agriculturist families willing to enlist in “Colonization Schemes,” which after 1949 offered a plot of land, manure, cattle, construction material, and other benefits to settle on the Andaman Islands (Biswas 2009; Sen 2011). The Andamans thus became a postcolonial dumping ground for some of the unwanted citizens of independent India. This community and their descendants are known to the islands’ administration as “Bengali settlers.” Bengali-speaking inhabitants, whether legitimate or contested “encroachers,” represent the largest linguistic group inhabiting the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.¹¹⁾ After their arrival, many more people, connected to those who had already settled by relations of kinship, district of origin, guru-disciple circles, and other networks, migrated independently from East and West Bengal to the Andaman Islands, neither approved of nor assisted by the government. These people, a large proportion of whom make up the Matua community, often settled on squatted land; they are known in the local parlance as people “without.”

Governmental plans for the resettlement of refugees were based on discriminatory caste lines (Sen 2014). The families selected for resettlement on the islands were mostly Namashudra (*namahśūdra*), a formerly untouchable group with a long history of oppression and exploitation from high-caste Hindu landlords (Bandyopadhyay 1997, 20–25). They were landless farmers and fishermen in East Pakistan who for complex historical and political reasons became borderland people. Namashudra people, who fled East Pakistan as “riot-refugees” (Rahman and van Schendel 2003, 566–569), are now scattered around many borderlands of India: not only the Andamans but also West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, with major “branches” of the Matua Mahasangha extending as far as Odisha, Maharashtra, and Uttarkhand. On the Andamans they represent, according to unofficial estimates, 80–85 percent of the Bengali population (Mazumdar 2016, 173).

The Dalit¹²⁾ novelist Manoranjan Byapari writes:

11) According to the Census of India 2001, out of a total population of 356,152, Bengali speakers amounted to 91,582, representing the largest linguistic community (almost 26 percent), followed by Hindi speakers (18.23 percent) and Tamil speakers (17.68 percent) (see GOI 2014, 138).

12) The word “Dalit” means, in a number of Indian languages derived from Sanskrit, “broken” or “oppressed.” It refers to formerly untouchable communities that were seen as impure and polluting by high-caste Hindus because of their traditional occupations. Dalits remain significantly disadvantaged in relation to the rest of the Indian population and are, moreover, routinely subject to violence, sometimes of extreme forms (Sikka 2012, 45–46). Not all “untouchable” groups refer to themselves as Dalit, which is a loaded term, emerging from a precise political context. Members of the Matua community on the Andaman Islands with whom I interacted never referred to their group as Dalit. Their caste awareness and its related struggle, based on shared memories and religious narratives, resists the pan-Indian Dalit formation constituted through the Ambedkarite discourse. Some well-educated urban Matua members of West Bengal employ the term for self-ascription. However, scholars have often written about Namashudras in general, and Matuas in particular, as the Dalits of West Bengal (e.g., Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2016; Sinharay 2016).

Prior to 1947 almost 90% of them [Namashudras] lived in East Bengal in the districts of Khulna, Faridpur, Jessore and Barishal. . . . The fear of communal violence drove them away from their villages. In the darkness of night they crossed the border, leaving behind their land, houses and all material possessions. Year after year they lived under trees, on pavements, on railway platforms, in refugee camps—existing at a subsistence level. In the name of rehabilitation, some were sent to uninhabited islands in the Andaman region, some were packed off to the forests and the unproductive terrain of Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh and other barren pockets of the country. Thus an organized and cohesive community got fragmented and lost its strength. (Byapari and Mukherjee 2007, 4116)

Byapari's last statement underlines the fact that the cohesiveness of the Matua community was disrupted by Partition and the creation of new nation-states. But the fragmented pieces of the Matua whole have created a strong and interconnected network of sacred places, stories, and songs, and their unity is maintained by cross-border flows of pilgrims, preachers, singers, and their tales. From the second half of the nineteenth century the Namashudras of East Bengal united around the charismatic figure of Harichand Thakur (1812–78) and his son Guruchand Thakur (1847–1937) and created a distinctive religious as well as social identity, the Matua sect (*Matuṃyā sampradāya*).¹³ The Matua leaders Harichand and Guruchand Thakur proposed a religion akin to other unorthodox lineages of Bengali Vaiṣṇava devotionism, while stressing the need for literacy, education, social advancement, and equality. While the gurus' ancestral home is located in Orakandi, now in Bangladesh, the most powerful Matua headquarters is situated in the newly created refugee town of Thakurnagar, in West Bengal, which functions as the Matua cultural capital (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2016, 75–78), providing a model shaping religious consistency between the scattered branches of the sect. The Matua community is possibly the strongest Dalit movement in West Bengal, where it has consolidated into a powerful political institution called Matua Mahasangha (Sinharay 2016). On the Andaman Islands, as well as in other borderlands, the religious and cultural identity provided by Matua doctrines, rituals, and narrative repertoires has united Bengali refugees and their descendants, offering a source of dignity, status, and symbolic capital (Mazumdar 2016; Lorea 2018).

According to the Matua Mahasangha's estimate (although this may be exaggerated), there are 50 million followers of the Matua sect, about 12 million of them residing in West Bengal (Chowdhury 2014, 188). When the revered Matua leader Gopal Maharaj, a displaced East Bengali guru resettled in Uttarkhand, goes to visit his disciples on the Andamans, enormous gatherings of devotees assemble to listen to his speeches, and

13) On the Matua community's literary production and institutionalization, see Mukherjee (2014; 2016) and Sinharay (2016).

local politicians offer him garlands, publicly seeking his blessings (*Andaman Sheekha*, December 5, 2012; December 10, 2012). The major Matua festival of the year (Bāruṇī) celebrated on the Andaman Islands, at Tugapur, is the “prime folk festival of the Andamans” (Roy Chowdhury 2004, 152). However, a newspaper article covering the event in 2017 reported that despite the incredible number of people, the local authorities did not provide any facilities—such as special transportation services, sanitation, or drinking water—apart from basic traffic management (*Andaman Sheekha*, March 26, 2017). This reflects the lack of visibility of the Namashudras and the Matua sect on the Andaman Islands; while a majority, they perceive themselves to be both marginalized and silenced.

The borderland inhabited by Matua devotees is not only physically and politically an Indian borderland, representing a strong Indian state presence in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, but also a social and a religious borderland. In this social borderland, Bengali practitioners negotiate their lives with neighboring linguistic and ethnic communities with different degrees of visibility and power: urban educated elites, Tamil entrepreneurs and businessmen, Ranchi laborers, illegal migrants, indigenous Jarawas, and other groups. As members of a depressed caste previously marked by the stigma of untouchability,¹⁴ they carry the double burden of being outcastes and also refugees. Time and distance have set them apart from their imagined communities, who have largely forgotten about the outcomes of the “policy of dispersal.” In mainland Bengal and Bangladesh it is now largely unknown that more than one-fourth of the Andaman Islands’ population is Bengali. The flattening effect of popular media, portraying a romantic and monolithic unity in diversity in Andaman society, cancels the separate voices of marginal identities, subsuming the Bengali Matua community under the homologating violence of the “melting pot.” A similar discourse has affected low-caste selves both on the mainland and at its borders. Distinct and polyphonic cultural autonomies belonging to diverse low-caste groups in South Asia have been subsumed under the flattening effect of Dalit identity scholarship, portraying a distinct and singular “untouchable mode of thought” (Deliège 1993, 534) and reducing the multiplicity and creativity of low-caste narratives to a monolithic “untouchable myth of origin” (Deliège 1989, 110).

In local society, Matua devotees are seen by other communities—but also by other

14) Notwithstanding their caste background, Bengali settlers on the Andaman Islands are not categorized in the local administration as Scheduled Caste (whereas the Namashudras of West Bengal can access affirmative action programs and the corresponding reserved quotas as Scheduled Castes). Since 2011, they have been able to compete in the reservation system as Other Backward Classes, a category that they share with four other communities residing on the Andamans: Local Born, Bhantu, Karen, and Moplah. The low-caste Bengali community has interpreted this decision as an injustice (Biswas 2013).

Bengalis who are well educated and have salaried jobs in the city—as living at the borders of civilization (Lorea 2018). Especially in the villages of North Andaman, where I conducted most of my research, Matua practitioners have lived in dramatic isolation and lacking basic facilities for decades since their migration. Settled in remote rural areas, apart from a few educated members of the community who found governmental employment, the people I worked with are agriculturists, farmers, vegetable sellers, fishermen, conch-shell divers, deer and wild pig hunters, and itinerant singers. Some families have rights over the land that they cultivate; some have illegally cleared a piece of land in the jungle and occupy a space from which they could be evicted at any point in time. The latter, living in “forest encroachments” (Biswas 2009, 22), have started to receive access to basic facilities—drinking water, transportation, health care, education, and so on—only in recent years. Several settlements of Bengali refugees, particularly those established in 1952–56 around Rangat and Kadamtala in Middle Andaman, have been placed at the edge of the forest inhabited by the indigenous Jarawa population, provoking competition for use of the same natural resources, a series of violent encounters, and ultimately the forced displacement of the Jarawa people (Uditi Sen 2017). Later resettlements in Little Andaman have compelled the indigenous Onge community to share local resources with the new population of displaced Bengali as well as Sri Lankan Tamil settlers (Heidemann 2016). None of this displacement of indigenous people occurred in the areas of the Indian archipelago where I worked. Here, Bengali Matua settlers are located in culturally homogeneous areas, relatively far from the political and physical border that runs through Andamanese society, dividing settlers from indigenous people (Pandya 2010; Uditi Sen 2017). For my participants, knowledge about indigenous people dwelling in reserved tribal areas is indirect and inferential. The common opinion is that Jarawa people are wild (*jangli*) and non-human until “we” have civilized them (*amra manus karechi*). Most Bengali settlers concur with the mainstream racist attitude that deprives the aboriginal people of the qualities that make a cultured human being (*manus*). Some informants described Jarawas as having venomous saliva just like wild snakes, because they do not add salt to their food; hence, they can make their arrows lethally poisonous just by licking them before shooting.¹⁵ Whereas in mainland Bengal the Matua religion has spread beyond the ethnic community of low-caste refugees to include tribal groups,¹⁶ on the Andaman Islands interaction between these groups is minimal and mainly takes the form of an unequal competition for natural resources, or of straightforward exploitation. While Matua myths include many legendary encounters with the wilderness in the forests and

15) Fieldwork recordings, N. Karmakar, Subhash Gram, Diglipur, North Andaman, December 18, 2018.

16) In my last fieldwork trip in interior West Bengal I met Santal families initiated into the Matua religion and skilled in the practice of Matua religious songs (*kīrtan*).

rivers of East Bengal, the uncomfortable border between indigene and settler is absent from local Matua narratives.

The religious borderland which Matua followers inhabit both separates them from the other religious communities living on the Andamans—mainly orthodox Vaiṣṇava, neo-Hindu and Hinduizing forces, Muslim minorities, and proselytizing Christian missions—and places them in a peripheral position in relation to the imagined powerful core of the Matua movement. This split, transnational core is constituted by an imagined homeland—the birthplace of the Matua founders Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, in Orakandi; and a displaced cultural capital and administrative center, located in Thakurnagar, West Bengal, just on the Indian side of the India-Bangladesh border, where one of the descendants of the Thakur family migrated right after Partition (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2016). After I presented my paper at a conference in Dhaka, one attendee commented that a study of the Matua community had no value unless it was based on research in Orakandi or Thakurnagar. Matua devotees on the Andaman Islands constitute a small and distant fraction of the larger and highly scattered Matua religion, which gravitates around the two poles of Orakandi and Thakurnagar. It is perhaps because of such distance and perceived marginality that local practitioners cherish Matua myths, rituals, and cultural expressions with particular tenacity.

The stories across borders shared and performed among the Matua followers of the Andaman Islands have to be contextualized in this “multiple borderland” scenario. These stories fulfill manifold purposes in the diasporic and borderland consciousness of their tellers and listeners as social coagulants of diasporic identities, as religious stories of ethics and faith, and as narratives of contestation and social mobility.

“Local” Narratives

The bundles of narratives¹⁷ that I use for this article are “local” only in a very limited sense of the term. While they were collected in a particular site within the Andamans, they are far from being exclusively pertinent to this locality. They are shared in various regions of South Asia, among all Matua followers, with local variants and adaptations. Some of the narratives are part of a larger set of beliefs and systems of knowledge recurrent throughout rural Bengal and shared among many esoteric lineages. They can be seen as “local” although they come from the opposite shore of the ocean, from East

17) Gary Alan Fine proposed conceiving of a social movement as a “bundle of narratives” (Fine 1995, 128) that, when expressed within an interactional arena by participants, strengthens the commitment of members to shared goals and status-based identities.

Bengal, and perhaps from somewhere else before that. They are traveling archives of stories which have become local, in the Andaman Islands, and yet remain extremely mobile, fluid, and itinerant: using as vehicles a regular transnational and trans-regional circulation of devotees, singers, preachers, books, VCDs, and magazines, they move between the Andamans and many other borderlands, at times settling down and at other times disappearing. Preservation and reiteration of such pan-Indian Matua narratives on the Andamans attests to a strong desire for unity and consistency with the larger, widely scattered Matua faith and a desire to connect diasporic lives to Matua cultural capitals and ancestral places of worship on the mainland. On a collective level, they are “movement narratives” (Benford 2002, 54), the collectively constructed stories and myths that participants tell about the movement itself and the domains of the world it seeks to affect. Yet on a broader level they may represent what James Hunter and Joshua Yates call “world-historical narratives” (Hunter and Yates 2002, 128, 146): myths and legends that interpret and configure overarching historical transformations and developments, and contest competing sociohistorical narratives on the same scale.

The borderland location of the Andaman Islands, where Bengali refugees have been living for 70 years, and its environment and social structure profoundly inform the ways in which Matua participants have created, consumed, and reproduced pan-Indian Matua narratives. A mechanism of familiarization (Honko 1981, 19–29) has permeated recurrent myths and tales and the manner in which they are selected, expanded, invented, or totally removed. Some stories are told only on the Andaman Islands.¹⁸⁾ For example, the recurrent story of a pious crocodile, which I have transcribed in several variants, justifies why on the third and last day of Matua festivals (*mahotsab*) fish is cooked and served to all devotees, whereas the first two days are strictly vegetarian.¹⁹⁾ On the other hand, stories

18) At least I have never heard (nor read) such stories in other places where Matuas live. Apart from the Andaman Islands, I have conducted fieldwork with the Matua community mainly in West Bengal and southern Bangladesh.

19) It is believed that at the time of Harichand Thakur a disciple traveled from village to village to invite devotees to gather at the *mahotsab*. When he had to cross a river at night, he sat on a crocodile, which he mistook for a tree log, and the crocodile, also a pious devotee of Harichand, transported the disciple safely to the other side. When he understood what had just happened, the disciple extended the invitation to the crocodile. Every participant brought to the *mahotsab* the best produce or the most precious thing that they could provide as an offering: rice, fresh vegetables, expensive sweets, and so on. The crocodile was concerned that it would not be able to offer a prestigious donation. After much thought, it caught a very big fish and decided to bring that as an offering. But by the time the crocodile arrived at the festival, it was already the third and final day. Harichand reassured all the participants, who were terrified by the arrival of the enormous crocodile carrying a huge fish in its mouth. Together with all the other customary donations offered by the devotees, that day the fish was also cooked, sanctified as a divine offering, and then shared by all devotees. Since then, on the third day of the festival the final and most important meal has included fish. The

and visual representations which connect Harichand Thakur to the Buddha are completely absent on the Andamans.²⁰ The stories I present in the following sections are not found exclusively on the Andaman Islands; these are narratives that are particularly stressed, valued, or related as most important by Matua devotees in the Andamanese frontier, as compared with other areas densely populated by Matua members, where they feel less—or differently—peripheral.

In order to select significant bundles of narratives, I chose the most commonly told stories which I heard, noted down, and/or recorded during my last two fieldwork periods on the Andamans. I also looked at the distribution of these oral narratives in printed texts, in the corpus of Matua literature, as well as in Matua periodicals, magazines, and booklets for religious practice, found throughout the Andamans and in many other areas.

We Come from a Mother and a Father

The first narratives on which I focus here are a set of stories which will sound familiar to any reader acquainted with the doctrines of esoteric Bengali Tantric lineages. They relate to a local knowledge system called *mātāpitātattva*, which refers to “the truth or the doctrine of the mother and the father.” When I enquired about the *sādhana* (practice for self-realization, both spiritual and body-centered) of Matua practitioners, the first thing that my interlocutors talked about was the necessity to know about “the mother and the father.” Ideas about the mother and father are not only linked to parenthood: they are about conception and offspring, reproduction and ontogenesis; but more broadly, they are inextricably part of a sophisticated understanding of cosmogony, anatomy, sexuality, and soteriology, translated into ethical norms. It is maintained in these narratives that at the first stage of practice, a person should learn how to answer the questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? The answers to these questions suggest that we come from the union of a mother with a father. As a myth of origin, this sounds strikingly

↘ use of fish on a ritual occasion is scorned by orthodox Hindus and Bengali Vaishnavas. They view it as an unsophisticated practice which violates norms of ritual purity. On the Andamans, the story of the pious crocodile responds to these contemptuous statements and stresses shared values of inclusivity and equality.

20) These are fairly common among educated urban Matuas living in West Bengal, where some have joined the pan-Indian Dalit trend of reconstructing an exalted history of Buddhism for the low castes. In their homes and temples Buddha images abound, either alone or in posters side by side with Harichand Thakur, who is said to be a reincarnation of the Buddha. Parallels of Harichand and the Buddha are sparsely present in the oldest Matua scriptures (Sarkar 1916, 15), but they assume a particular importance in contemporary Matua narratives and politics within urban West Bengal.

straightforward. But this apparently banal statement is enclosed within a wider ontology. The mother and the father are not only our biological parents; they are a principle, a fundamental couple, a husband and a wife, sexual types, as well as cosmogonic opposites. They represent two principles that underlie the entire creation, and they stand for their essential properties, which are called *pitrdhan* (literally the wealth of the father, patrimony) and *mātrdhan* (the wealth of the mother). The essence of *pitrdhan* is semen, but it also stands for the bodily constituents that are inherited from the father: bone, marrow, brain, and seed. The fundamental substance of *mātrdhan* is uterine blood, but the wealth of the mother can also represent the four substances of the body that are given by the mother: flesh, blood, skin, and hair.

The substances of *pitrdhan* and *mātrdhan* are part of a doctrine of the body, relating to the “subtle” body and to health, known as *dehatattva*.²¹ According to the basic tenets of *dehatattva*, men are dominated by six vices (*chay ripu*), particularly by the king of the six, which is *kām* (a multilayered concept meaning lust, passion, or sensual and selfish desire). To conduct a happy life in a happy household (*samsār*), men (and women, to a lesser extent) should learn how to restrain *kām* and bring the vices under control, and they should worship and respect their mothers and fathers, who are regarded as being, simultaneously, their bodies, their essential substances, and their gurus, which are first and foremost represented by one’s biological parents. Sexual desire is to be restrained not through abstinence and renunciation, but through a regulated and disciplined sexual life with one single partner of the opposite sex, recreating the fundamental pair of opposites represented by the mother and the father. Therefore, *mātāpitātattva* is also the

21) *Dehatattva*—the doctrine of the body—operates on the premise that liberation is achieved with and through the body. Based on the assumption that the body works as a microcosm that contains and mirrors the macrocosm, *dehatattva* songs and teachings reflect a Bengali esoteric stream which has been referred to as “sacred biology” (McDaniel 1989) as well as “cosmophysiological soteriology” (Hayes 1989). Ethnographic insights relating to the set of beliefs on *mātāpitātattva* and *dehatattva* can be found in Cakrabarti (1990) and Jha (1999), both based in West Bengal. On the Andaman Islands, *dehatattva* practices and specific theories are restricted to initiated practitioners and are hard to find in printed literature. There are, however, explicit discussions of *dehatattva* and *mātāpitātattva* in some booklets distributed among practitioners and disciples. Songs in printed collections discuss *mātāpitātattva* with a typically metaphorical code language. In a song by the famous Matua saint-composer Tarakchandra Sarkar, for instance, the doctrine is expressed in the following verses: *pitrdhan mātrdhan dhani sabe sei dhane / pitrdhan sayatne rākhli nā man bholā / tor mātrdhan yatna yata / yadi pitrdhane kichu hato / tabe tor haye yeto / thāktō nā samsārer jvālā* (Sarkar 2009 [1900], 73). This translates as follows:

the wealth of the father, the wealth of the mother: all are wealthy because of those gifts. Reckless mind, you did not look after your father’s wealth with care! If you put as much care into your father’s wealth as you do into your mother’s—that would be the day! You wouldn’t be burning after worldly matters.

basis of Matua social structure. Matua religion is called *gārhashtya dharma*, the religion of conjugal life: a religion for married couples, presumably with children. Conjugal life is seen as the main characteristic of this social system, and it is systematically and sharply opposed to celibacy, asceticism, and renunciation, interpreted as negative ideals perpetrated by high-caste Hindus.²²⁾ Therefore, important prescriptions, attributed to the guru and sect founder Harichand Thakur, are often directed to the husband and wife, to be practiced by the couple, while other explicit instructions are addressed to both men and women alike.²³⁾

These narratives are perceived by Matua devotees to be extremely innovative and revolutionary, as they are diametrically opposed to the Hindu and orthodox Vaiṣṇava ideal of *sannyās*, renunciation, which in most cases means single male asceticism. Matua ethics is, instead, focused on the dignity of manual work,²⁴⁾ and it glorifies the sexually productive couple and their (controlled and limited) progeny. These regulations can be seen as providing a family structure and (heterosexual) normative discipline in a frontier space where sentiments of anxiety in relation to the loss of traditional structures of social control are often displayed. According to recurrent tropes and popular imaginaries—sometimes justified by academic research (Chakrabarty *et al.* 1998)—for Bengali settlers on the Andamans social taboos count less (Sen 2018, 149) and rules of endogamy are more relaxed, leading to more frequent intercaste and inter-community marriages (Zehmisch 2018, 77). Ubiquitous rumors, which also contribute to identity formation processes (Kalmre 2013), report that people could not “really” get married for the lack of Brahmins (high-caste officiating priests), and that Bengali women on the Andamans do not have any qualms about abandoning their husbands and children to run away with their lovers (Roy Chowdhury 2004, 173–174, 186). The emphasis on the mother and the father as the underlying foundation of *gārhashtya dharma* counteracts such anxieties and also reproduces and justifies, in a religious domain, the administrative criterion of providing rehabilitation and relief to post-Partition refugees on the basis of the patriarchal nuclear family as the fundamental social unit; this unit was, and still is, the recipient of allotted plots of land granted to Bengali settlers’ families by the Indian government.

22) The Bengali *bhadralok* reevaluation of asceticism in nineteenth-century Hindu reformist and institutionalizing endeavors left underprivileged working classes out of the modern religious discourse, largely inspired by neo-Vedantic perspectives (see Sardella 2013).

23) For example, *Nara nārī ye bā hao mityā balibe nā*, which translates as “Whether man or woman, you must not tell lies,” and *Patī patnī ek sāthe harigun gāo*, which translates as “Husband and wife, sing together the songs of praise of Hari” (Bairagya 1999, x).

24) *Hāte kām mukhe nām* is a persuasive and omnipresent proverb of the Matua community, which means “Work with your hands, chant the holy name with your lips.”

According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2004, 96–97), strict sexual discipline and family values are so insistently and overtly stressed because they are intended as a response to criticism from the dominant culture. Bandyopadhyay argues that social mobility and equal rights could only be achieved through respectability and by creating a distance from the allegations of sexual promiscuity and polygamy often leveled against Matua followers and other rural unorthodox sects. Without contesting the validity of this argument, I also interpret the Matua stress on conjugality as mirroring popular ideas on decency, marriage, and particularly companionate marriage, diffused in nineteenth-century Bengali print and in the public sphere as a result of a long and close relationship with Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century in Faridpur District (Bandyopadhyay 1997, 56; Sarkar 2002, 73–74),²⁵⁾ and as a coherent development of the emphasis on the cosmological as well as social importance of a male-female pair promoted in several low-caste Bengali lineages springing from a common Tantric Vaiṣṇava substratum. The soteriological dignity provided through the emphasis on family and manual work made the Matua faith particularly suitable in a “frontier” environment such as the Andaman Islands, where isolated farming families needed to transform uncultivated land into productive crops, and to recreate a home space, a sense of belonging, cultural identity, and solidarity, based on shared values and memories. This hypothesis would also explain why in several Matua temples in mainland Bengal, apart from the fundamental Harichand–Shanti Mata couple, many icons of (male) saints are displayed without their married partner, whereas on the Andaman Islands Harichand–Shanti Mata as well as Guruchand–Satyabhama are always displayed in pairs (see Fig. 1). Moreover, in several Matua congregations on the islands a different *guru bandanā* (praise to the founding gurus, the first song that opens a *kīrtan*

25) According to Eliza Kent, elite Indian Christians were the first group to actively appropriate companionate marriage as the conjugal ideal (Kent 2004, 180). The Christian missions of Faridpur have been living side by side with Matua followers for several decades. The suggestion that Matua leaders and disciples in East Bengal nurtured a lively dialogue with a strong nearby Christian community is justified by Matua scriptures (for instance, the name of the Baptist missionary Cecil S. Mead, who worked in Faridpur in the early twentieth century, appears extensively in *Śrīśrīgurucāṇḍacarita*) as well as by other practical considerations. Matua teachings and norms of behavior have been consolidated in the “Twelve Commandments” (*dvādaś ājñā*). It is legitimate to suspect that such systematization was inspired by the proximity of Christian missions. The 12 saint-composers of the Matua sect have similarly been systematized as “the 12 holy madmen,” *dvādaś pāgal*. One of the 12 commandments prescribes honoring one’s mother and father, a familiar biblical commandment that perfectly reflects local concerns for *mātāpitā* as parents as well as cosmo-physiological entities. One of the commandments prescribes treating another person’s wife as one’s mother, reminiscent of the Christian commandment not to covet a neighbor’s wife. Furthermore, Harichand as the father, Guruchand as the son, and Hari as the supreme and absolute godhead are supposed to be one and the same, reflecting a vernacular elaboration of the Christian concept of the Trinity that echoes familiar parallels in Vaiṣṇava theology.



Fig. 1 Harichand Thakur (Centre) Surrounded by Previous Incarnations of Vishnu

Source: Cover Image of the monthly Matua magazine *Yugadiśā* August-September issue 2006

session of congregational singing) is used. Instead of the more standard invocation (found in the holy book *Śrīśrīharilīlāmṛta*; Sarkar 1916), praising Harichand Thakur, his ancestors, and male disciples, the *guru bandanā* sung on the islands starts with praising Harichand's mother and father.

Among the many oral testimonies on the fundamental importance of *mātāpitātattva* which I collected during Matua gatherings, festivals, personal interviews, and group conversations on the Andaman Islands, I report and discuss here only a few sentences from a long exchange with Ambarish Biswas, a local practitioner in his 60s whom the other members of the community considered to be particularly knowledgeable, since he was able to read and discuss the scriptures of the Matua corpus proficiently. Chatting in the quiet morning after *adhibās*, the opening day of a Matua festival, characterized by the worship of Harichand, Guruchand, and their wives; communal feasting; ecstatic ritual dancing (*mātām*); and a whole-night music session (*kīrtan*), Ambarish Biswas said:

In the lowest stage of religious practice you have to learn *dehatattva*; you learn about your gross body. The guru you recognize and worship in this phase is your mother and father. This is the main teaching of the Ramayana: *pitṛbhakti* (filial piety). . . . Otherwise you try to climb a tree from halfway up! You have to start from the base.²⁶⁾

It is worth mentioning that the Ramayana provides the main motifs for the folk genre known as *rāmāyaṇ gān*, a theatrical singing of Ramayana stories. Many of the singers, gurus, and preachers of the Matua community are professional folk singers of this genre. Ambarish Biswas explained something obvious to those familiar with the main story of the epic poem: he stated that the whole plot of the famous Ramayana and its main events—he mentioned the exile in the forest, the abduction of Sita, and “the suffering she had to go through”—occurred only because Ram had to abide by his duty as the king’s son. Filial piety, obedience, and respect toward one’s parents are all that Ram can teach us from the point of view of correct behavior: all the rest is just a story.²⁷⁾ These values are the basics, like the roots of a tree. Though foundational, however, they can be surpassed and higher truths can be found. Open criticism of the values and models projected by the Ramayana and its orthodox readings are further explored in the other “bundles” of narratives discussed below.

A Genealogy of Incarnations: Subverting Familiar Tales

A second set of narratives on which I will focus here relates to the divine ancestry of the Matua gurus Harichand and Guruchand. This is a recurring theme among Matua devotees, recited orally during performative occasions as well as printed in books and periodicals published by Matua presses. Histories of the gurus, as suggested by Aditya Malik, cannot be separated from the actions and words of their devotees, whose deep concern for justice in their own lives or in their post-memory (Kabir 2004) is a mirror of the example set by their divine leaders, and the power that they possess (Malik 2016, 5). As clearly portrayed in Fig. 1, Harichand Thakur, who occupies the center, is inscribed in a frame of avatars (Bengali: *abatār*) of Vishnu. The saint Chaitanya, who popularized ecstatic devotionism toward the Radha–Krishna couple throughout Bengal

26) Fieldwork recordings, Krishnapur, North Andaman, February 8, 2017.

27) Studies of eastern Indian versions of the Ramayana seem to concur that Bengali and Oriya retellings of the epic are critical of Ram’s moral standards and are particularly concerned with Ram’s mistreatment of Sita (Bose 2004, 107–118). Ambivalence—if not outright subversion—has characterized the response to the Ramayana in Bengal since the nineteenth century. Matua preachers, who are very often also professional performers, trained and experienced in Kabigān (a genre of oral musical-rhetorical poetry) and *rāmāyaṇ gān*, openly discuss these concerns with their audiences.

in the sixteenth century (Kennedy 1925), stands above Harichand, closest to him, as the last divine descent recognized by orthodox Bengali Vaishnavism. On either side Harichand is flanked by Ram and Krishna, possibly the most popular incarnations of Hari (another name for Vishnu) as worshipped in devotional Hinduism. Giving authority and legitimacy to his sainthood and superhuman character, Harichand is depicted as the final incarnation of Vishnu—who has rightly been described as an “inclusivity tool” in South Asian religious literature (Appleton 2017, 83)—while Guruchand, his son, is described as an avatar of the god Shiva. Their epithet is *patita pāban*: saviors, messengers of freedom, for the oppressed and the downtrodden. A considerable part of the Matua scriptures is dedicated to explaining why the world needed another avatar and for what purpose God had to come back to Earth. This is clearly summarized by the narrator voice of Ambarish Biswas:

In *satya*, *dvāpara*, *tretā*, and *kali yuga* [the four cosmic eras] no avatar could do anything for us.²⁸⁾ Narayan [Vishnu] in *satya yuga* [the first cosmic era] did not do anything for those like us. Ram [the avatar of the second era] killed with his sword Śāmbuka, a Śūdra who was performing austerities, because the Brahmins were not happy and were not allowing this, so he had to punish him. In *kali yuga* [the fourth and ongoing cosmic era] Gaurāṅga [an epithet of Chaitanya] did not do anything for us. So he had to come back again, in the northeastern land,²⁹⁾ as Harichand Thakur. Harichand came for the low castes, for the powerless people. Brahmins divided the Śūdras in castes according to their occupation. . . . We were their slaves. We used to work for them, and they gave us food. We could not read their texts. If we tried to recite them, they would cut out our tongue. If we listened to them, they would pour lead in our ears.³⁰⁾ But Harichand and Guruchand gave us literacy and education. Since then, we can read.

Narratives of the succession of avatars unanimously emphasize the birth of Harichand as the culmination of the divine incarnations, accomplishing what the previous saviors could not:³¹⁾ empowering low-caste devotees and providing them with dignity and the instruments for not only spiritual but also social liberation, through literacy, education, awareness of their rights, and participation in political power. Much of the long biographic poem dedicated to Guruchand Thakur (Haldar 1943) is focused on Guruchand’s social

28) The definitions that Ambarish Biswas and other Matua followers use when they speak of their own people as “us” are *pichiye parā mānuṣ* (backward people), *nimna jāti* (low caste), and *choṭa mānuṣ* (literally little people, as opposed to the “big people,” *baṛolok*: important, affluent, and educated people occupying positions of power in society).

29) Matua participants state that in the orthodox Vaiṣṇava scriptures it is written that Chaitanya will be reincarnated and will appear again in the land of Isān (the cardinal direction of northeast). This land is interpreted as Bangladesh, where Harichand was born.

30) In Brahminical Hinduism, according to the doctrinal scriptures (*śāstras*), women and low-caste people are not allowed to read, learn, recite, or even listen to the Vedas.

31) For a history of the narrative concept of “avatar” and the theology of hierophany, see Jones (2015).

work and his ability to negotiate with government officers and Christian missionaries in order to provide schools and governmental jobs for members of the Namashudra community (Sarkar 2002, 34, 72, 236). The founding gurus are inserted in the cosmo-history of avatars: divine figures who provide the necessary guidance at critical points of time when divine intervention is needed in the human realm to restore *dharmā*. Matua myths, in this sense, can be regarded as conscious reproductions that replicate the shared narrative universe of Indic religious literatures. Similarly, in the history of Bengali literature, the Prophet Mohammad has been “translated” as an avatar of Vishnu,³² while Indian Christian theologians have employed the concept of avatar in their Christological explanations (e.g., Chakkarai 1926). Adopting the concept of avatar, in all these instances, also means that the new avatar can be presented as the ultimate and greatest one.

There is a dimension of dissent and innovation inscribed in the act of “reproduction” (Dumont 1970; Moffatt 1979). Borrowing and re-utilizing the Brahminical narrative model does not imply compliance or complicity with the system that it represents; rather, it expresses dissent toward the hegemonic narrative and assertion of an alternative one. The Dumontian idea that low castes do not have an autonomous culture and that they replicate the system (and stories) of the higher castes, thus tacitly accepting them, is strongly contested by Matua and other Dalit narratives. It is a common trait of several Dalit communities to create countermyths and reverse discourses based on the stories of the “big Hindus” (*baro hindurā*; Zene 2002, 38), especially building on the great epics, for example tracing their origins back to Ram (Narayan 2006, 19), claiming descent from Valmiki (the legendary composer of the Ramayana; Narayan 2006, 65), or transforming marginal figures into their central, iconoclastic heroes (Zecchini 2016, 66). This process of dialogic and narrative identity constitution (Benhabib 2002, 16) cannot be explained as a mere replication of the ideas or beliefs of the dominant castes. It is not “mimesis” simplistically interpreted as passive imitation and as an expressive form of submission. As other empirical studies of low-caste communities have clearly demonstrated (e.g., Karanth 2004), far from bearing witness to an acceptance of a subordinate status and consensus, these kinds of oral narratives and mythological reconstructions aim to express resistance. That the creation of a separate cultural identity for the low castes often relies upon characters and symbols borrowed from hegemonic narratives is perhaps due to the fact that the oppression of Dalits has resulted in a denial of cultural specificity and a lack of awareness of their own culture, as Kancha Ilaiah has famously argued (Ilaiah 1996). Or, in other words, it may be because, as a South Indian untouchable community informs

32) I am referring especially to the opus of Saiyid Sultan; in the sixteenth-century Nabī-Bamśa he identified the Islamic notion of prophet (*nabī*) with the Indian notion of avatar (Eaton 1993, 288).

us, “only Hindu Gods are available” (Moffatt 1979, 268).

Ambarish Biswas’s (hi)story-telling revolves around a memory of exploitation and slavery, a social memory that is transmitted through oral as well as printed sources among Matua followers. It forges a view of the past, and it provides for a vision of how the future ought to be. The necessity of Harichand as a final avatar is a pan-Indian Matua narrative provided and justified in detail in the earliest Matua poems (Sarkar 1916). However, the fact that the caste-based revolution initiated by Harichand figures so prominently on the Andaman Islands also serves more topical purposes. The promise of education and social upliftment brought forward by Harichand is still a significant story in a place where only low-caste refugees found resettlement, carefully selected from mainland refugee camps as young, illiterate, hard-working bodies. The memory of this reproduction of pre-Partition structural inequalities and caste-based discrimination is still vivid in second- and even third-generation Matua followers. Equally vivid is the memory of the hardships, intensive labor, physical exhaustion, and dramatic isolation that the Bengali refugees had to face for decades after their migration.

In Ambarish Biswas’s narrative, the fundamental values of equality, social awareness and mobilization, caste consciousness, and action are unfolded through a traditional Hindu narrative scheme and time line, which is the succession of avatars in the cosmic eras.³³⁾ This concept is a profoundly important literary topos in Matua oral as well as written narratives. It follows a well-established marketing strategy: introducing a new religious leader as an old and famous divine character who has returned to Earth. Chaitanya himself came to be known as the incarnation of the divine couple of Radha and Krishna together, in one single body, so that they could finally enjoy love in union. Following the same narrative stratagem, the mysterious fakir who founded the Kartābhajā movement, Aul Chand, is none other than Chaitanya himself: according to legendary accounts (Cakrabarti 1989, 60; Banerjee 1995), Chaitanya did not die in Puri but simply disappeared. Afterward, he came back and reappeared as the fakir Aul Chand, because the high-caste religious leaders in charge of leading the community of Chaitanya’s Vaiṣṇavism had replicated caste-based inequalities and placed too much importance on the ideal of *sannyās* (renunciation). In a very similar manner, in Matua poetry it is said that the Lord had to come back as Harichand because of the decadence of *dharma* among the *Vaiṣṇavas*

33) The narrative logic of karmic causality, cyclical time, and the periodic restoration of *dharma* (religion, cosmic order) through the intervention of divine incarnations are not confined to Hindu mythology. As a narrative scheme and as a set of cosmo-historical patterns, they are widely shared with Jain and Buddhist literature (characters and mythical episodes are also shared between Brahminic, Jain, and Buddhist mythological literatures; see Appleton 2017). In the case under analysis, though, storytellers have consciously borrowed, and critically addressed, Hindu mythological characters and their deeds.

and because their ideal of devotion to pure love (*prem bhakti*) had deteriorated.³⁴⁾

Matua hagiographies and oral narratives create a parallel and alternative mythological universe where the Hindu narratives of the so-called Great Tradition³⁵⁾ are adopted and subverted: they are accepted and appropriated as suppliers of authority and prestige, but then they are also surpassed and creatively expanded. At times they are overtly criticized, as is the case with the story of the low-caste renunciate Śāmbuka, a Dalit martyr in the reconstruction of Hindu epics from the borders (Narayan 2006, 65–66). Together with Eklavya, the low-caste archer of the Mahabharata, they are emblems of Dalit “political orality” (Narayan 2006, 50). In the Matua case, this reiteration of Hindu mythology as a “shared narrative universe” (Appleton 2017, 18) with a Dalit twist is applied not only to Harichand and Guruchand, but also to all the major figures of the Matua religious sphere. For instance, the saint-composer Tarakchandra Sarkar (1847–1914), who composed an important part of Matua sacred songs (1900) and the versified hagiography of Harichand Thakur (1916), is said in his previous lives through earlier cosmic eras to have been none other than Vyasa, the legendary sage who compiled the Mahabharata, and then Valmiki, the sage who is said to have authored the Ramayana.³⁶⁾

Aswini Kumar Sarkar, known as Aswini Gosain, a disciple of Tarakchandra and himself a revered saint-composer of Matua sacred songs (Sarkar 1915), was blind in one

34) In the initial section of the hagiography of Harichand Thakur, composed by Tarakchandra Sarkar and published long after the guru’s demise, we read: *Kṛṣṇabhakta śauca ācāraṇ kḥuṇṇināṭi / śuddha prem bhakti baiṣṇabete pare truṭi*, which translates as “Krishna devotees being very particular about purity norms / devotion to divine love in Vaiṣṇavas declines” (Sarkar 1916, 8).

35) The controversial categories of “Great Tradition” and “little traditions” have been used by many anthropologists of South Asia. Introduced by Robert Redfield (1956), they are meant to distinguish between the major, continuing components of a Sanskritic religious tradition developed by high-caste elites regarded as more prestigious, and the plethora of popular religious practices and their narrative foundation at the local or village level.

36) Tarakchandra Sarkar’s divine genealogy of previous lives also appears in some songs, according to the verses of the composer Prafulla Gosain from Jessore: *Kabi rasarāj Tārakcāṇḍare / śatakoṭi praṇām jānāi āj tomāre [. . .] / tumi Bālmiki chile tretāy, Rāmāyaṇ likhile amar bhāṣāy / tumi dvāparete Bedbyās, sudhījaner biśvās, kabi rasarāj ebāre* (Bairagya 1999, 156), which translates as follows:

Oh Poet Tarakchandra king of *rasa* / let me offer you hundreds of salutations [. . .] / you were Valmiki in the Third Era, in the immortal language you wrote the Ramayana / in the Second you were Ved Vyasa, faith of the erudite ones, and this time you’re our king of *rasa*.

While some low castes trace their myths of origin back to Valmiki (Narayan 2006, 65), other Dalit spokespersons and activists sharply criticize the casteist narratives of the Ramayana by addressing its legendary composer, as is the case in Daya Pawar’s poem:

Oh Valmiki [. . .] One Shambuk of your own blood / Caught fire, rose in anger. / [. . .] Singing the praises of Ramrajya / Even there the icy cliff of inhumanity towered up / [. . .] How then should we call you a great poet? (Jaideva and Paswan 2002, 63)

eye.³⁷⁾ Fascinating oral (hi)stories from Matua singers on South Andaman recount that he was, in his previous life, none other than Jaimini, the world's most ardent devotee of Krishna, who offered both his eyes to his Lord when he heard that the latter had an eye illness.³⁸⁾ Krishna, who was merely testing the human world to see who deserved his grace, gave back one of his eyes to Jaimini, while he kept the other so that Jaimini could gain supernatural vision and partake in the spectacle of Radha and Krishna's divine play whenever he wanted to. There are many parallel examples of the main motif of this story in the Bengali repertoire of religious tales as well as in other Indian myths. Offering one's eyes as a sign of great devotion is a topos often found in South Asian devotional literature. For example, in the Bengali retelling of the Ramayana depicted on nineteenth-century painted scrolls (*paṭ*), Ram counts all the blue lotus flowers that he is going to offer the Goddess Durga; since one flower is missing—another trick of the deity to test the devotee's fervor—he zealously takes his arrow and plucks out one eye in order to complete the offering of 108 flowers (Ghosh 2003).³⁹⁾ Familiar motifs and recognizable tales are borrowed, adopted, and creatively reinterpreted in order to formulate new and persuasive stories. Thus, the one-eyed saint-composer of the subversive Matua movement is directly linked to his more ancient, famous, and orthodox saintly antecedents (Jaimini and Ram). This is one of the stratagems by which, through narratives and (hi) story-telling, political, social, and religious borderland voices get closer to the center, capturing previously elaborated and well-known stories, reshaping them for revolution-ary purposes, and feeding them out to the peripheries.

Coming back to Earth to Respect Women: A Gendered Agenda for Reincarnation

The third set of narratives on which I want to focus relates to the position of women. Democratizing devotional Vaiṣṇavism and uplifting depressed classes was not the only purpose of Harichand's return to the mortal realm. The other reason why a new avatar of Vishnu was needed after Chaitanya is closely related to a specific Matua stance on

37) A folk theater (*pālā kīrtan*) troupe staged the miraculous life story of Aswini Gosain; the *pālā kīrtan* rendition is available on YouTube, and the physical appearance of the saint-composer is explicitly represented (Lifeline4u 2017).

38) This may have a folk etymology explained by the fact that one of Krishna's affectionate epithets in Bengali is *Kānāi*; *kānā* means one-eyed, or blind in one eye.

39) Similarly, according to the legendary life of the saint Kannappa (Hudson 1989, 383), the saint, when he saw that the eyes painted on top of a Shiva-linga stone were bleeding, plucked out both of his eyes to place them on the stone.

religion and gender. The Matua discourse on gender is elaborated in juxtaposition to what is perceived as high-caste patriarchy and is shaped in response to derogatory caste stereotypes and criticism from the hegemonic culture. However, Matua ideas on the position of women can also be understood in the context of a certain reformist discourse on modernity linked to the emergence of new gender roles. Influenced by British colonialism and Christianity, in the nineteenth century Indian elites and social reformers started to disseminate ideas on the education and emancipation of women, companionate marriage, and conjugality (Walsh 2004, 51–60), which were widespread in early-twentieth-century popular culture and entered, in a reinterpreted and often subversive manner, into Dalit discourse on gender.

As already noted, Matua ethos is centered around family and conjugal life (*gārhasṭha dharma*). Unsurprisingly, in the Hari Mandir, the shrine located within a household, Harichand and Guruchand are worshipped with their wives, as couples: Hari–Shanti and Guruchand–Satyabama (see Fig. 2). Like the divine couple of Shiva and Durga, equally popular among Bengali Hindus, they represent the ideal of a married couple with children. However, in the collective imagery, Shiva is both the ideal husband and the irresponsible ganja-addicted ascetic who neglects the family and related duties. Revolving around this



Fig. 2 Radharani Shil Performs the Evening Worship in the Hari Mandir of Pahargaon, South Andaman
Source: Photo taken by the author (February 2, 2017)

tension between (re)productive engagement in *samsāra* and an ascetic detachment from it, traditional narratives of cosmic eras and reincarnations adopted and reinterpreted by Matua devotees become counter-narratives.

In the outskirts of Wandoor, South Andaman, an old singer of Matua songs and *rāmāyaṇ gān* lives on squatted revenue land. Although non-literate, Paresh Mondal regularly travels, together with his stories and countless songs, to perform for diverse festivals. His wandering narratives are performed in various corners of the islands; seasonally in West Bengal, where part of his family settled after Partition; and in Bangladesh, his homeland, which became to him a foreign country for which he now requires a visa. To suit his itinerant lifestyle, he used his ingenuity to devise a portable, deconstructable *ektārā*, a traditional single-stringed instrument normally made of gourd and bamboo (see Fig. 3). He explained the origin of his sect as follows:



Fig. 3 The Talented Singer Paresh Mandal and His Ingenious Deconstructable *Ektārā*, Sitting in His Veranda in North Wandoor, South Andaman

Source: Photo taken by the author (January 30, 2017)

Harichand is an avatar of our dark age: first Ram, then Gaurāṅga. Ram's mother reincarnated as Gaurāṅga's mother. Because of her, Ram had to leave the kingdom and was exiled to the forest. So in her next life, as Chaitanya's mother, she was left alone. Her only son became a renunciate and left home, and she had to beg from house to house. Next came Harichand and Shanti Devi! He had to come back, because Chaitanya had hurt his mother too much.⁴⁰⁾

It is not only important leaders who have famous personalities as their previous incarnations; their mothers, too, are inserted in the revised history of metempsychosis. In the opening section of the rhymed hagiography of Harichand Thakur, a dialogue between Chaitanya and his mother, Śacī, expresses the sorrow of a mother left alone by her son when he opts for solitary renunciation: "If you leave me now, who will ever respect mothers?" Chaitanya replies that for this reason he will have to come back to earth again.⁴¹⁾ The talented storyteller thus framed the appearance of the first Matua leader as an inevitable result of karmic deeds accumulated by his predecessors era after era: Ram's stepmother forcing the king's son into exile, which resulted in Chaitanya's mother being left miserably alone, without the economic support of a working son, and finally the coming of Harichand, whose choice of a holy life within the household structure repaid the emotional debt of the previous avatars. The motif of maternal grief emerges as a recurrent topic in religious literature across South Asian traditions (Appleton 2017, 129). Its emotive value is grounded in the tension between the feelings and responsibilities associated with the life of the family and the household, on the one hand, and the lure of renunciation on the other. This is an underlying dichotomy—characteristic of much Indian religious literature—which Matua narratives systematically address, with an obvious standpoint in favor of the first way of life, *saṃsār*. Local perspectives on Matua historiography reinforce core values and beliefs by framing them in a cyclical time frame and an etiology based on *karma*. Similar notions emerge from another narrative on avatar genealogy and gender. The local guru Manik Gosain, a long-white-bearded man in his 70s, narrated the following during a gathering in Radhanagar, at the extreme tip of

40) Fieldwork recordings, Wandoor, South Andaman, January 30, 2017.

41) The verses from *Śrīśrīharilīlāmṛta* relate:

Śacī bale tumi yadi more chere yābe / e brahmāṇḍe tabe āṛ mātā ke mānibe / e samay Gaurāṅga karilo aṅgikār / tomāke chārite mātā śakti ki āmār / śodhite nāribo mātā taba ṛṇ dhār / janme janme taba garbhe ha'ba abatār / [. . .] āṛ ek janma bāki Prabhūr / ei sei abatār Śrī Hari Ṭhākur (Sarkar 1916, 3)

which translates as:

Śacī says, if you go and leave me alone / who will ever respect mothers again on this earth? / At this point Gaurāṅga promised / Do I have the power to leave you, mother? / Incapable of repaying my debt toward you, mother / Birth after birth I will descend again into your womb / [. . .] And one more birth was left to the Lord / That is this avatar, Harichand the God.

North Andaman:

They [Vaiṣṇavas] follow Chaitanya; we follow Harichand Thakur. It is the same, the One is just one, Bhagavān [God]. But Harichand had to come to Earth because of something his previous incarnations could not do. Mainly, because . . . they could not honor (*sammān deoyā*) the woman. . . . Women have been abused and mistreated in a way that cannot be expressed through words. So Harichand came. In *dvāpara yuga*, Ram could not respect Sita. In the next *yuga*, Krishna could not respect Radha: look what he did with all the cowherd girls! All that pain in separation! Chaitanya left his wife Vishnupriya alone, to become an ascetic. Then Harichand came to teach us religion within family and worldly life (*saṃsārer dharma*).⁴²⁾

It is not my intention in this article to analyze gender roles within Matua society, nor to judge the kind of empowerment that is offered as a solution to a cosmic history of female subordination. However, it is worth pointing out that honoring and respecting women obviously means, according to the oral narratives discussed in this section, giving them a happy life as married women and mothers, in other words, a “new patriarchy” (Chatterjee 1989). This teaching, addressed to men,⁴³⁾ reminds them that mothers should not be abandoned and women should not be left alone and without financial support, as prestigious saints of the past left their own mothers. The point that I wish to remark upon is that these narratives are crucial for identity making and community building, creating distinctions between the Matuas and others, as well as a certain sense of superiority on the part of the Matuas vis-à-vis surrounding communities. Matua values include (a certain) independence for women, in comparison with high-caste and neo-Hindu institutionalized valorization of *sannyās*. Among several Dalit groups, sympathetic narratives expressing pity for the condition of women among high-caste Hindus, in order to assert the superiority of one’s outcaste community, are often underlined through countermyths: for instance, by glorifying paramount enemies within the high-caste tradition. The demon Ravana, in these kinds of stories, is presented as a virtuous king who treated Sita with respect, in contrast with Ram, who repudiated her unjustly (Jaoul 2007, 185).

In Matua narratives, this sense of distinction, permeated by views on gender, relates first and foremost to an opposition between themselves and the Vaiṣṇavas (Chaitanya left his wife and his mother in desolation and misery), and between themselves and orthodox Hindus (Ram mistreated his pious wife, Sita). These two groups inhabit adjacent and overlapping social and territorial areas in the Matua borderlands. This open

42) Fieldwork recordings, Radhanagar, North Andaman, February 11, 2017.

43) There are also separate teachings for women, called *nārītattva*, and a spiritual practice (*sādhana*) addressed to women, which revolves around the control and discipline of sexual life and devotion to one’s husband.

criticism clearly emerges from an article titled “*Matuṃyā dharme nārīr sthān*” (The position of women in the Matua religion), which appeared in one of the inexpensive Matua periodicals, circulated widely:⁴⁴⁾

The Matua religion takes shelter in conjugal life. It is built on the husband-wife relationship. Their effort makes life happy. And that happiness is the aim of life. . . . In Hinduism, women are described as a gateway to hell (*nārī naraker dvār*), a thorn on the path of devotion. This is a great offense. . . . Lord Gaurāṅga got married, but did not create a *samsāra* [a household]. He rejected his mother and his wife, and pursued spiritual realization for himself, preaching the name of god. Ramakrishna got married and stayed far away from his wife. . . . There are only two castes among humans: men and women. Among the two, there is no bigger one or lower one. . . . The Matua religion, which is the refined *sanātan dharma*,⁴⁵⁾ has given to women utmost respect and dignity. The Matua cult does not only recognize women as Mothers, but also as inspiring, empowering, glorious figures. . . . In the Matua religion, polygamy and child marriage is forbidden. . . . During singing sessions of sacred music [*nām samkīrtan*], men and women both, together, meld in the ecstasy of love. This is a proof of women’s independence. . . . In Hinduism, women are merely slaves: they cook, serve and raise children. They have to obey whatever the husband says: they are not given the opportunity to contribute their opinion. They are only fit to be objects of enjoyment. . . . On the contrary, among Matuas the authority of women is of utmost importance. (Bagchi 2008, 19–20)

This counter-narrative, opposing the position of women in conservative Hinduism and asserting the superiority of the role of women among the Matuas, is articulated by retracing the (hi)story of incarnations and reminiscing about a past of injustice and disrespect: Chaitanya got married and then selfishly abandoned his family; the well-known Śākta saint Ramakrishna abhorred women and their sexuality.⁴⁶⁾ Hence, in the present *yuga*, Harichand had to bring back justice and restore to women the right to participate in family life and religious practices. Narratives on Harichand’s and Guruchand’s social and miraculous deeds, simplistically discarded by some as personality cult stories (Das 2014, 173), establish these Dalit leaders as counter-elite idols encompassing both *bhadralok*-dominated politics and the Ambedkarite discourse on low-caste struggle.

44) Produced in the mainland, such periodicals have one or more offices on the Andaman Islands: for example, *Matuṃyā Darpan*, published in Burdwan (West Bengal), with one branch on the Andamans, in Neil Island; and *Yugadiśā*, published in Kharagpur (West Bengal), with two offices on the Andamans, one in Port Blair and the other on Little Andaman.

45) Whereas Hinduism is referred to as the eternal order, or *sanātan dharma*, Matua followers refer to their creed as *sūkṣma sanātan dharma*, where *sūkṣma* means primarily “subtle” but also sharp, refined, appropriate, just, in juxtaposition to the “gross” (*sthūl*) religious order of the Hindus. With this formulation, Matua believers can justify their connections with the ancient and prestigious Hindu past, while rejecting it as surpassed and unrefined. In this ambiguous and negotiable relationship with Hinduism, the new *dharma* of the Matuas is presented as a superior, more evolved form of the same, perennial (*sanātan*) *dharma*.

46) This is at least what most critical writers have related about the personal life of Ramakrishna (see Kripal 1995).

Parameters of modernity and development are not confined to the awakening of caste and class consciousness. Highlighting the intersectionality of caste and gender, Matua myths relate very significantly to women's roles, advocating for the value of (a certain) independence for women. Such narratives are present in many Dalit contexts throughout South Asia, finding echoes in the construction of the image of the Dalit woman orally and in print. Such an image paints Dalit women and wives as enjoying greater freedom and dignity compared to their caste Hindu counterparts (Ilaiah 1996, 27; Ucko 2002, 103; Nubile 2003, 78). This trope represents the flip side of a coin, the coin of colonial reformist and Indian upper-class narratives portraying Dalit women as sexually promiscuous, moving suspiciously freely, and accused without fail of having a dubious sense of morality (Gupta 2016, 28–42; Christy 2017, 25). The criticism of Dalit women from the viewpoint of high-caste morality and aesthetics has resulted in contrasting reactions from the Dalits themselves. Some Dalit communities purportedly adopted the moral system of the dominant castes in order to secure a better status, while others appropriated part of the slanderous attacks and converted them into a matter of pride and superiority. Matua codes of behavior and myths of origin perfectly reflect this complexity, as they demonstrate a situationally appropriate adoption of both types of reaction. Like the Matua author of the above-mentioned article (Bagchi 2008), Ilaiah reports that a Dalit woman in his South Indian village in Telangana is “very much a political being, a social being and an economic being. Whereas a Brahmin woman is not,” because “their [Hindu women's] existence is subsumed into their husbands' existence” (Ilaiah 1996, 27). It should be noted, however, that a large proportion of these criticisms of “patriarchal sexist” Hindu Gods and customs (Ilaiah 1996, 33), advocating that “we” Dalits treat our women much better, are written by men. Women's voices often contradict such cultural representations, highlighting a Dalit woman's “triple burden” of caste discrimination, economic deprivation, and gender bias (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015, 46).

The complex discourses around gender, caste, and class and their reflection in low-caste myths become particularly complex in the oceanic borderlands where the Andaman Islands are situated. The karmic plot culminating with the final Matua incarnations bears a gendered agenda: imbibing modern notions on women's empowerment, it supports dignity and respect toward women. This assumes a more radical rationale, relevant to the borderland context of the Andaman Islands. Where nuclear families were the unit of measurement for governmental plans of resettlement, and the male workforce was not large enough to fruitfully put under cultivation large and distant plots of land, women needed to contribute with arduous manual labor, and they needed to find an ethical and religious foundation for their roles. When they first arrived on the Andaman Islands, Bengali refugee families suffered from a lack of manpower in a context where a good deal

of labor was required in order to clear vast, distant plots of land of stumps and bushes to build huts, to protect the crops from wild animals, to hike for entire days through the forest in order to access basic facilities and provisions. Women would normally contribute, taking responsibility for tasks that were not necessarily part of their gender role “back home.” Apart from husking, boiling, and drying rice, women started helping in the fields, protecting the crops, fishing in ponds and on the seashore, watering vegetable gardens, and harvesting vegetables in thick, frightening forests. Most of these activities are still carried out by Matua women on the Andaman Islands—together with the numerous activities linked to farming of the ubiquitous *supari* (betel nuts), a more recent and most remunerative cash crop—while in their ancestral homeland, in southern Bangladesh, the role of women is relegated to a much more conservative position and confined to the realm of domesticity. The composition of the Bengali diaspora on the islands led to more relaxed rules for marriage between members of families belonging to different subcastes and districts of origin (Singh *et al.* 1994, 35–38), as well as a simplification of marriage rituals. The distance from traditional patriarchal structures loosened the patterns regulating marriage unions and gave ample space for semi-arranged, companionate marriage (Zehmis 2017, 101). This is mirrored in local gossip and malicious literature maintaining that Bengali women on the Andaman Islands are prone to eloping with lovers, and to adulterous relationships, and that due to the lack of Brahmins on the islands—especially in the early days after the resettlement of refugees—Bengalis did not “really” marry (this is on the basis of the assumption that a wedding’s authority and authenticity can be guaranteed only by an orthodox Hindu ritual officiated by a Brahmin). In this scenario, it becomes even more evident why the conjugality-centered *gārhasṭha dharma* of the primordial Matua gurus, their emphasis on sexual control, and the centrality of the father-mother doctrine (*mātāpitātattva*) found a prominent place in the oral narratives of the Andaman Islands. Retracing the mythological (hi)story of avatars, avatars’ female partners, and avatars’ mothers, Matua narratives at the borders address these composite dimensions, responding to old and new challenges, justifying claims of gender equality, and encouraging action, both “at home and in the world,”⁴⁷ under the aegis of Harichand’s grace.

47) The quote refers to the title of a famous novel by Rabindranath Tagore (1941), often used as an allegory for domesticity and political engagement, and more broadly as encapsulating the polarity between the private and public spheres.

Stories of Change: The Narrative Foundation of Resistance⁴⁸⁾

In one of the limited number of academic articles available on the Matua movement, Abhishek Das writes that the Matua faith, which emerged as a reformist movement against inequalities, ritualism, and superstitions grounded in religion, is now “stuck in the quagmire of superstitions” (Das 2014, 173) and that the religious texts of the Matuas

became mere books of myths, legends and claims of mythic antecedence was [*sic*] disconnected from the new realities whereby the erstwhile *namashudras* from predominantly rural Bengal were struggling in the alien and alienating urban culture. . . . [S]ectarianism further weakened the movement along with their later insistence on perpetuating a personality cult. (Das 2014, 173)

This very secularist and rationalist understanding of myth, invoking terms like modernity, reality, and struggle, implies that myths and legends are seen as opposed to, and totally detached from, the real struggle of low-caste practitioners. Envisaging mythmaking as an innocuous, apolitical process, this view fails to take the political implications of myths seriously. However, the rationalist attitude toward myth has been systematically dismantled in several studies that portray the transition from “being Untouchable to becoming Dalit” (Zene 2007, 260) as a mythopoeic process.

This secularist bias explains why Matua cultural expressions, which started to be disseminated in print as early as 1900, have failed to be considered in the larger field of Dalit literature.⁴⁹⁾ It is only quite recently that the sharp divide between religious texts and South Asian literature, deeply entrenched in the approach of literary scholars and critics, has started to be debated as questionable, and new perspectives on a post-secular methodology in literature have begun to be embraced.⁵⁰⁾ In her book chapter, Sipra

48) Resistance as a concept is something that has preoccupied anthropologists since the 1970s. Critiques have been addressed at social scientists’ obsession with finding and celebrating resistance wherever it is palpable. Some have argued that scholars have a tendency to romanticize and fetishize any form of resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990). In the case analyzed in this article, the vocabulary of resistance is consistent with the vernacular expressions of the people that I have worked with. Local terms that translate as “revolution,” “opposition,” and “protest” (*biplab*, *pratibād*) are interspersed in oral as well as written accounts of Matua spokespersons. For example, a particularly eloquent statement by one of my interlocutors emphasized the fact that Guruchand Thakur paved the way for the community’s access to education because “without literacy there can be no movement, no protest, no revolution!” (Fieldwork recordings, Joydeb, January 16, 2017).

49) Regarding Dalit literature in Bengali, the contribution of Matua literature has been acknowledged in the writings of Manoranjan Byapari. As he rightly pointed out: “Before talking about Bangla Dalit literature today, we need to look back to a phenomenon called *Matua sahitya* [Matua literature]” (Byapari and Mukherjee 2007, 4118).

50) Post-secular views affected a number of disciplines, including international relations and political sciences. On the “post-secular turn” in literature, see Paul Corrigan’s exhaustive article (2015).

Mukherjee (2016) has revised the secularist bias of literary scholars of Dalit literature and advocated that this kind of religious literature should be given the recognition it deserves. She argues that the aesthetics of Dalit literature have often been criticized for being self-pitying, overtly ideological, narrowly propagandistic, closer to “testimonies rather than works of imagination” (Kannan and Gros 2002, 24, cited in Mukherjee 2016), representing “material more suited to the study of anthropology rather than the renewal of the literature” (Kannan and Gros 2002, 24, cited in Mukherjee 2016). Implicitly accusing subaltern narratives of lacking creativity and artistic value, such statements reinforce the hiatus between two scholarly fields that could have a lot to say to each other, as well as misrecognizing local aesthetics and culture-specific rhetoric devices that shape the narratives of resistance. Dalit literary criticism has contributed a deep understanding of a kind of “alternative aesthetics” which cannot continue to be ignored by the canons of literary scholars (Paniker 1994).

As is the case for many subaltern groups in South Asia,⁵¹⁾ a clear-cut separation between the religious and the social cannot represent an appropriate premise to study the Matua community and its narratives. If we embrace local categories as more suitable analytical tools, and take into serious consideration local exegeses and oral literary criticism (Dundes 1966), the struggle for liberation emerges as simultaneously twofold: inward and outward, soteriological as well as social. As explored earlier, Matua “bundles of narratives” present human beings as enslaved by the six vices and dominated by *kām*; the resolution of this condition is to be realized through knowledge of the gross body (*sthūla deha*), its “mother” and “father”: we come from a male-female couple, we are made of male-female substances, and we achieve freedom from desire and liberation from the vices through the spiritual and embodied path for self-realization (*sādhana*). Simultaneously, humans are exploited on a socioeconomic level by oppressors and unfair power relationships. The origins of this condition are explored in Matua narratives through a (hi)story-telling of past oppression perpetrated by high-caste landlords and religiously justified by Brahminical tyranny over the downtrodden and backward castes (*patita*, *pichiye paṛā mānuṣ*). Liberation from such conditions means freedom from powerful exploiters, through literacy, education, and social mobility. For both conditions—inner slavery and outer marginalization—the key is liberation from ignorance. It starts from one’s own gross body and continues by rectifying the social unit of the family, all the way up to the larger political structure. The social movement and the religious movement,

51) The approach sustained by Subaltern Studies has highlighted the way in which the rebellions of peasants, tribal people, or forest-dwellers in India have frequently been expressed in a religious idiom. For instance, Ranajit Guha (1988, 78–79) argued that religiosity was central to the Santal rebellion.

the inward fight for liberation and the outward struggle of social awareness and mobilization, necessarily go hand in hand. Both find their place in the myths, sacred songs, and genealogies of the Matua community and should not be dismissed as an apolitical “quagmire of superstition.” As Guruchand Thakur eloquently declared, according to one of the “books of myth” (Haldar 1943), “there is no strength unless there is a united group” (or party: *yār dal nāi tār bal nāi*) and “there is no upliftment without political power” (*rājsakti binā keha baṛa nāhi hay*).

Traveling stories and cross-border narratives of the Matua community cannot be understood simply using the top-to-bottom notion of Sanskritization⁵²⁾ or acculturation, focusing on the ways in which elements from the dominant Hindu culture are accommodated. Some elite members of the mainland Matua community have begun to reject some of the traditional narratives as irrational and contaminated by Brahminization.⁵³⁾ Taking into account the broader use of narratives for resistance and social mobilization, it is clear that the borrowing of plot elements, of familiar terminologies, and of prestigious characters associated with higher status is a very common subaltern strategy to build community and to articulate resistance.

The idea that popular repertoires of stories sustain conscious political action was admirably developed by Joseph Davis in *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements* (2002) and taken up later by Eric Selbin in *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story* (2010). I build on some of their reflections to argue that Matua counter-narratives do not imitate familiar stories and narrative patterns borrowed from the so-called Great Tradition because of a lack of creativity, acculturation, or an essential Indian carelessness for originality.⁵⁴⁾ To recycle old stories and to build upon a familiar set of images, symbols, and worldviews in order to create new stories is not something

52) The term “Sanskritization,” introduced by M. N. Srinivas in his study on the Coorgs of South India in 1952, has been adopted by various anthropologists to describe social phenomena within and beyond the tribal, low-caste, and subaltern context. For an analysis of the concept and its legitimacy, see Simon Charsley’s article “Sanskritization: The Career of an Anthropological Theory” (1998).

53) Sudhir Ranjan Haldar, a Dalit writer who also authored several works on Matua history and doctrines, stated:

A greater number of diseases were cured . . . by Harichand Thakur and mostly for that reason he gained a good standing as a deliverer of the poor and the Patit [downtrodden] people. So, superstitious people of that time, influenced by the Vedic religion regarded him as an Avatar of so-called God. (Haldar 2015)

54) Orientalist writers and Indologists have often lamented, using Eurocentric paradigms, what they believe to be a lack of originality on the part of Indian authors. According to this perspective, in the absence of the idea of individual creativity and authorship there is no new work which departs completely from past tradition. An example of this attitude can be found in Allardyce and Allardyce’s “The Calcutta Natives” (1874, 447). Echoing the same orientalist discourse, some literary critics deny originality or any innovative contribution to Dalit literature.

peculiar to South Asian subaltern narratives. We all copy and imitate familiar stories, because mimesis is a fundamental way of knowing (Selbin 2010, 68). Cultural emulation and replication in Dalit oral traditions have often been seen as the product of a subaltern fascination with powerful others, or the sign of a lack of cultural authenticity, sincerity, or charisma. The Matua adaptation, incorporation, and transformation of Hindu mythological and epic episodes into their own narratives of resistance and upliftment can be better understood by rehabilitating the power of mimesis and by considering Matua composers and storytellers' agency in a process of "cultural re-editing"⁵⁵⁾ across borderlands. Like the Puerto Rican witch healers discussed by Raquel Romberg (2016), through the imitation of hegemonic symbols and gestures on the margins Matua composers have resisted the exclusionary power of such symbols. Like Comaroff's South African *bricoleurs*,⁵⁶⁾ they take the available material—a toolbox of symbols, characters, conceptualizations of time—and creatively use all this equipment to produce a new cultural expression that responds to contextual needs. This helps us to navigate through the ambiguous Matua approach toward powerful religious establishments in their environment—Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam⁵⁷⁾—from which it has consciously included some things and rejected others, adopting elements and subverting them. Deploying cultural loans for specific purposes, Matua mythopoiesis actualizes a creative process of subversive bricolage-thinking. In Matua narratives, Ram and Krishna, the orthodox incarnations of God, do not appear as honored special guests projecting dignity upon a Dalit group from their high heavenly seats. Rather, they are kidnapped and showcased as captured bearers of an alien power (Comaroff 1985, 197) which is constantly debated and contested. Charismatic characters of "the big people" (*barolok*), such as the same

55) Cultural re-editing has been discussed as referring to one culture's integration of another's story or symbol into its own (Selbin 2010, 37). I prefer this expression as opposed to more hierarchical terms, such as "Sanskritization" and "acculturation," because it still allows us to discuss issues of legitimacy, authority, and authenticity without presuming a one-way movement between cultural material of high and low status.

56) Studying the postcolonial South African Zionist movement, Comaroff suggested that colonized societies deploy and deform imperial institutions; they actively appropriate, transform, and turn to their own advantage a number of key symbols drawn from the dominant culture. The result is a kind of "subversive bricolage" which adapts strategic elements of colonialist discourse as "captured bearers of alien power" (Comaroff 1985, 197).

57) Islam is often interpreted by Matua interlocutors as the quintessential "other." In southern Bangladesh, where the Matua community is surrounded by a Muslim majority, narratives of the Matua faith in relation to Islam abound, while these are missing in other areas where the Matua community lives in a predominantly Hindu environment. Stories about the Muslim devotees of Harichand Thakur, their offerings of beef—which gets miraculously transformed into *sandesh* (traditional sweets)—and the Hindu-Muslim marriage celebrated by Guruchand Thakur are recurrent in Bangladesh but are not common in other Matua diasporic contexts where there is little contact with Muslims.

Ram who killed the low-caste ascetic Śāmbuka, are appropriated and reproduced without asking for permission, engaging in a form of cultural piracy (Romberg 2005), subverting the same symbols of power which had been intended to exclude and vilify the practices of people at the margins.

Conclusion

I have presented a limited and selected set of extracts from stories collected on the Andaman Islands from the extensive oral and written production of the Matua community. Through an analysis of narratives of the cosmological mother and father, the king of vices, the ultimate godly incarnations and their gendered agenda, I have underlined how these stories are shared, preserved, and valued in order to shape an alternative Bengali identity in a diasporic context and in a borderland environment where uprooted Namashudra people from a culturally more homogeneous rural East Bengal have been living adjacent to other communities for 70 years. These stories have served the purpose of generating cohesion and building community in an extremely isolated place, both when the first batches of refugees were working hostages on remote islands, and more recently when mainstreaming forces with tremendous social and economic power, such as neo-Hindu institutions and Christian missions, have a strong presence (Zehmisch 2017, 214, 278). Stories have a powerful and pervasive role in articulating the past into collective memories. Accordingly, they forge a collective image of the future, providing the tools to imagine transformation and conceive of how the community ought to be; therefore, they also provide a structure to take decisions and actions in the present.

With their power of trans-regional and transnational connectivity, Matua myths and legends contest the rigidity of postcolonial borders: they maintain unity and bind communities scattered around the Bay of Bengal and in different corners of the subcontinent through governmental policies of “dispersal,” “rehabilitation,” and “colonization,” which drew subaltern agricultural castes and contracted laborers into new forms of exploitation. They are a traveling “archive of feelings” (Cvetkovich 2003, 7), and they constitute the basis of people’s conscious resistance and social mobilization aimed at overcoming other kinds of borders, such as those marking out the territory of religious and social marginality which they inhabit.

The stories I have explored are bricolage narratives that expand on familiar characters, worldviews, and sets of beliefs in order to assert a distinct cultural consciousness, imagining a new world order and a distinct sense of righteousness. Through ethnography and literary studies in the borders between South and Southeast Asia, such bricolage

narratives emerge not just as a finished cultural item but as a process of bricolage-thinking in borderland ontologies, by which narrators retrospectively frame the past and mobilize present action. In the multiple borderland in which Matua history makers are located, bricolage is an eclectic process of creation and restoration. On the one hand it employs, recycles, and rereads old material; and it uses familiar tools to create a new cultural identity at the margins, often in response to criticism and accusations put forward by the dominant culture. On the other hand, it expressly employs the tools it has at hand for restoration, in order to repair and bring back to life a fallen institution of pre-existing cultural and religious importance. Hence, the new and distinct religious identity asserted to be “Matua” is at times overtly non-Hindu or anti-Hindu, while on other occasions it is presented as a refined and superior version (*sūkṣma sanātan dharma*) of a deteriorated, unjust, and chauvinistic Hinduism (*sthūl sanātan dharma*). In this sense, the idea of bricolage-thinking as an epistemological and compositional tool is reflected in the local discourse on *dharma* and its restoration: as our storytellers recounted, and as the general repertoire of Indic mythology tells us, *dharma* is a transient and dynamic order; its religious institutions’ adherence to truth and righteousness periodically reaches the brink of collapse and needs avatars who periodically return as champions to restore it.

As a confluence of myth, memory, and mimesis shaping the everyday art of resistance (Selbin 2010, 48–73), Bengali Matua stories from the heart of the Bay of Bengal mirror an overlapping borderland and diasporic self, characterized by multiple, ambiguous, and situational identities. They provide, for their tellers and listeners, a symbolic capital enabling them to trespass borders, to connect with imaginary homelands, and to link up with imaginary fellow countrymen and countrywomen who share a similar, ever-changing, itinerant reservoir of stories, in many distant borderlands of South Asia.

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Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear

JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT

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John Holt's latest publication is a most welcome addition to the body of research on the Rakhine State crisis, which has lasted for decades in the shadow of other more exposed ethno-political issues in Myanmar. The unending cycle of violence was pushed to the forefront of global attention with the communal riots soon after the country opened in 2011, the Rohingya boat crisis in 2015, and most strongly with the mass flight of hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingyas to Bangladesh in 2016–17. Masterfully organized and richly informative, this is an audacious book, both scholarly and personal, mindful and challenging, deeply engaging yet unsettling. At its core, it contains extracts from series of interviews Holt managed to conduct between 2015 and 2018 with 15 people at various locations in Myanmar (Yangon, Rakhine State, and Mandalay). Holt's conversations, showing utmost patience, progress in many-sided dialogues flowing between the oppressive past and the ongoing Rohingya conflict, Buddhist-Muslim relations, critical events within the country (such as the 2015 elections), and individual life stories. They illustrate immutable self-perceptions and disputed interpretations, and, crucially, exhibit moral challenges and political tensions raised between the population within the country and audiences abroad, set apart by an abysmal gap in communicating and interpreting conflict and violence in Rakhine State (as elsewhere in Myanmar), where Muslims have formed the majority of victims. Presented with both empathy and scholarly rigor, the various dialogues invite critical reflections on Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim conundrum, the status of Buddhism as a cultural and mind-setting system, and ultimately the role of education.

Holt starts by noting, "this has been a very difficult book project, perhaps the most challenging I have undertaken as a professional academician, because of the heart-wrenching nature of the tragedy that forms a focal point of the book" (p. ix). Emphasizing the situatedness of his own role as a senior field researcher and expert grounded in religious studies, he expresses more than once the pervasive emotional as well as cooperative dimensions of his scholarly work. Such a self-reflective stance does not only convey transparency and respect; it also speaks to the reader. The

present reviewer, a historian of Rakhine mentioned several times in the book, gladly acknowledges links of friendship and ongoing exchanges with the author. Inevitably my own experiences within the region form an inextricable part of the valuations that follow. While the present review cannot summarize each dialogue, it provides an overview, assesses the book's contribution to forthcoming enquiries, and points to a few critical topics emerging from or reaching beyond the frame of the dialogues.

A substantial preface explains the author's motives and outlines the theoretical, practical, and methodological challenges of the project. Insidious attempts to undermine Holt's position as a respected academic in Sri Lanka pushed his interest in Buddhist nationalist militancy. In Myanmar, there was a sudden deterioration of relations after 2011 between communities of the Buddhist majority and Muslim minorities, quite different—though not entirely dissimilar—from the Sri Lankan conflicts but raising the same questions about Theravada Buddhist cultures, conflicts driven by ethnic identity formations, and conflicts' inherent politicization via rivaling contextualization. In academic terms, the underlying quest was to flesh out the thesis that “social, political and economic changes impact the evolving nature and character of religious culture so that a reflexive relation obtains between the two” (p. ix).

The 15 people whose conversations are presented in the book include five Muslim men and women (four of them Rohingyas), a Bengali Hindu-Buddhist family, and seven male Myanmar Buddhists (three of them monks). The interest of Holt's book derives less from the mix of relatively well educated, socially active, and open-minded profiles than the outcome of the author's project as a whole: a persistent and fruitful effort to engage in friendly relations over several years, remaining serene when confronting obstacles to meet and converse, and letting conversations develop a life of their own. Readers discover throughout the volume the challenges of taking forward a scholarly agenda built on listening and interacting in a positive way while facing “a total lack of conceptual apparatus” (p. xiv). This lack denotes an incapability to discuss social and political issues outside the constraints of the “Buddhist conceptual canopy,” forbidding a level ground to field dialectic arguments. In fact, as Holt shares occasionally with the reader his rhetoric strategies and question setups, it is he himself who arrests the reader's attention and gains their sympathy with his tenacity, hesitations, setbacks, and ultimately longing for closure.

The book's excellent introduction, titled “Problems, Narratives, and Backgrounds,” offers a clear analytical and readable overview of the complicated contexts and timelines of conflict in Buddhist Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar. After decades of marginalization following 1962, the Muslim minority of North Arakan (Rakhine State after 1989), concentrated along the border with Bangladesh, were systematically deprived of their civic rights starting with the 1982 citizenship laws, with oppression pushing thousands out of the country. Their cause was picked up by international human rights organizations voicing Rohingya griefs. The 2012 communal riots led to the unprecedented creation of camps with tens of thousands of displaced people. The ethnic Rakhine

Buddhist majority population failed to get an international hearing of their own economic and political griefs as they were widely perceived as being the perpetrators. Holt provides a neatly balanced account of the narratives of siege and fear gripping both population groups as they remained entrenched in their hostile feelings toward each other. The legal issue of Rohingya Muslim citizenship and the denial of the self-identification of Muslims as Rohingyas are two threads running through the conversations, posing two unsolved points of contestation. Officially referred to as “Bengalis,” denoting their foreign origins, Rohingyas are required to accept a verification process to make sure about their identity. Accepting the name “Rohingya” could only comfort them in the wrong belief that they are an indigenous ethnic minority. With this approach, Myanmar’s authorities found themselves in opposition to international norms and world opinion. The Rohingyas’ hopes linked to the accession to power of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition’s leader, in 2015 faded when her party—the National League for Democracy (NLD)—did not support fundamental change. Her administration was henceforth viewed by many as perpetuating the dismal record of human rights violations in collusion with the army. Simultaneously, the rise of the monk Wirathu made the alleged threat of a Muslim takeover in Myanmar a common domestic belief, while his appropriation of the Rohingya issue in Rakhine State promoted his Islamophobic agenda in tune with MaBaTha, a Buddhist nationalist outfit.

The first three dialogues provide “classic” Rohingya accounts of victimization through the voices of Abu Tahay, a politically active businessman; U Kyaw Min, a party leader, elected parliamentarian, former political prisoner, and trained teacher; and his daughter Wai Wai Nu, an activist—all three based in Yangon. Wai Moe, a veteran journalist, appears as an indispensable guide and commentator for Holt, but like the “Commentator” in the subsequent chapter, his reiterated condemnations of leading political actors demonstrate the limits of convincingly carving out a Myanmar position that can stand up to Western legal-cum-analytical attacks. Khin Zaw Win, a widely traveled activist, the founder of Tambadipa Institute—which promotes seminars on conflict analysis—and a political prisoner, comes across as a more mature partner in a dialogue about pluralism, tolerance, and ethnic nationalism. Surely one of the book’s gems, the experience of an elderly Kaman Muslim teacher from Thandwe highlights Muslim lives in South Rakhine and enlightens little-known local history and Rakhine Muslim diversity. Her personal story is a poignant testimony to the growing humiliation of Muslims in a Myanmar outback. Holt’s encounter with a Bengali Hindu-Buddhist family in Yangon offers further insights into the city’s simmering xenophobia.

In Sittway, a former lawyer, dubbed “The Senior Citizen,” became the voice of the local Rakhine nationalists, uttering their grievances about Muslim demographic pressure, the burden of the Burmese military, the “threat” of an Islamic state in North Rakhine, and an ongoing lack of understanding from the international community. The double minority complex of the Rakhine (versus the Muslims *and* versus the Burmese state) is reflected also in the highly controversial writings of Khin Maung Saw, an expatriate Rakhine. Khine Kaung Zan, a Rakhine social worker

of a younger generation, presents a striking contrast to these middle-aged radicals with his dedication to the poor and disadvantaged. Kya Hla Aung ("The Spokesman"), a Muslim lawyer, had a regular public career until the communal violence of 2012 forced him—along with tens of thousands of others—into one of the IDP (internally displaced person) camps north of Sittway. Readers learn about his bitterness as conditions of Rohingya IDPs worsened under the NLD government. His social work in the camp earned him international recognition. In Mandalay, Holt met three monks: Ashin Wirathu, hailed as the most virulent Islamophobic agitator in the country; Ashin Jotika, a progressive teacher keen to develop peace education; and Ashin Kumara, the rector of Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, exemplifying in his contrasted reactions to the crisis the impact of the national frames of communication. At certain moments, even the most liberal minds in Myanmar were ready to deny the evidence produced by international experts.

The central issue emerging from Holt's dialogues is clearly education for Buddhists and Muslims alike, knowledge building (thinking of "the dearth of fundamental factual information" [p. 239]), and the stimulation of intellectual curiosity. This is a problem seemingly well understood—"so much of the suffering occurring out of Arakan was the result of misconceptions that have inhibited an ability to generate concord" (p. 225)—but while it is obvious at the level of the masses and the younger generation, it still raises eyebrows when engaging with "educated" people conditioned by official narratives. Even the liberal monks did not care much to read Holt's book on Buddhist Islamophobia in Sri Lanka, and Wirathu knew very little about Sri Lanka's politically engaged monks. Similar experiences abound. From where should productive discussions emerge? The country has a culture of confrontational domestic viewpoints vying for a phagocytic unity, but not of debate striving toward respectful compromise.

An issue variously alluded to is leadership, or rather the perceived lack of it. This is a subject often limited to the paradigmatic army-government relations. Ashin Kumara asks, "Who is the real leader of the Rohingyas?" (p. 267), a question commonly faced in conversations with Western diplomats and echoed in the complaints of Abu Tahay concluding that "our own internal chief problem is that we have no leadership" (p. 67). Yet, the political strategy of the Rohingyas to bank on outside political support, their standard approach since the late 1940s, is nowhere questioned: "rather, U Kyaw Min believes that the fate of the Rohingyas lies with the 'international community'" (p. 74; see also p. 89), while despairing about Bangladesh, which "does not show concern for our suffering" (p. 97), and embittered that expectations about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's moral leadership ("our last hope" [p. 87]) failed to materialize.

While multiple aspects of the Buddhist-Muslim crisis are illustrated, it may be worthwhile to point to the frictions that erode relations within groups seemingly united by oppression, be it the discursive gap between Rohingyas of Yangon and North Rakhine State, between the activism of the Rohingya diaspora framed by INGO strategies and the domestic communities, or between Buddhist political factions of Rakhine's south and north. Or, for that matter, between Rakhine and

Burmese. Ashin Jotika, “The Anti-Nationalist,” who had never stepped into Rakhine State, maintained that “Rakhine leaders are very bad” and “have always hated Burma” (p. 236). Such divisive-ness should be underscored in the context of 2020, when the army is invested in its most important military campaign since 1948 against the ethnic Rakhine “Arakan Army” allegedly fighting for the region’s autonomy. One of the outstanding qualities of the book is that it succeeds in including an array of Rakhine viewpoints, too, “the least known and understood” (p. 153), making the volume a timely contribution in this latest phase of escalating violence.

The handy conflation of Buddhist-Muslim relations and the Rohingya question in Rakhine State, however, may suit Western media, international diplomats, and social scientists alike; it may even seem conclusive to casual observers, but unfortunately it continues to obscure distinctive though overlapping domestic conflict zones.

Holt’s panorama of field observations and analytical insights, curated in a scholarly manner, intersects with various areas. It is probably needless to point specifically to the anthropology of religion, ethnic and religious studies, as well as race and media studies. In the disconcertingly underdeveloped field of Myanmar studies, the book will stand out as an effort to document the sociopolitical realities of the last years and remain a treasure trove of easy-to-locate references. It surely illustrates the intellectual wastelands generated by decades of academic isolation, which have left the country deprived of the intellectual brainpower to address the demons of failed ethnic policies. Nonetheless, the embarrassment caused by rational self-confinement (“the Buddhist conceptual canopy”) should not lead observers to condescension or pessimism. Mind that Holt does not focus on interviewing young people. Against the odds, eagerly awaited educational improvements might pave the way toward a generational transition and incremental change.

Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis, offering an anthology of rich life-size profiles, provides much food for further thought and is warmly recommended. It is a must-read for scholars and students who take a serious interest in Theravada Buddhist societies and the diversity of their Muslim minorities.

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Scandal and Democracy: Media Politics in Indonesia

MARY E. MCCOY

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

Mary McCoy’s book contains an alternative way of viewing the role of the media in the Indonesian democratization process. Since its inception, the New Order regime had a hostile relationship with

the press. This relationship was driven mainly by the media's partisan views due to its political allegiance with elites. During the Suharto era, tight censorship did not allow the media to criticize government policies. However, some underground media—mainly student publications and online outlets—paved the way for democratization in Indonesia. The Indonesian media played an important role in supporting democracy after the fall of Suharto by, for instance, reporting on elite scandals such as corruption. McCoy employs Przeworski's uncertainty theory to figure out the democratic reversal in Indonesia (p. 5). Her main research question is what role the media played in Suharto's downfall. Specifically, she seeks to investigate the critical consolidation of the democratization process and the reversal of the undemocratic system. Furthermore, she argues that although the media consciously promoted reforms, transparency, and other democratic values, it also served as a political vehicle to create uncertainty and unpredictability through partisanism (p. 6).

The main research in this book is focused on the media partisanism that stalled the democratization process. The role of social media in attracting public political opinion is the newest issue in Indonesian media studies. Previously, media studies focused on the media's role in conveying democratic values to activists and students through offline and online channels. Another recent study (Tapsell 2017) focuses on media oligarchy under businessmen-turned-politicians. While earlier studies focused mostly on the pre-Suharto New Order regime, post-2004 studies pay attention to the use of media as a political weapon. McCoy seeks to connect these two periods, from the late-Sukarno era to the early years of the transition. Her findings surely connect with recent global studies examining media-backed populist leaders. However, McCoy does not follow the trends in recent media studies; without making connections with previous scholars, she studies the links between the political situation and media coverage.

She conducts content analysis for several Jakarta-based news publications from 1985, 1990, and 1999. McCoy examines different media stands. Obviously, she is more concerned with media from 1999 onwards, because that year was a turning point in media positions that supported or did not support democracy. In addition, the author draws on interviews with numerous activists and leading editors to provide inside views. Another strength of this method is that the researcher can discern the media's dynamic position through news headlines. However, the author's research method arguably also has limitations. For example, she does content analysis but not coding of media headlines. It is important to precisely understand the media position through news reporting, because analyzing headlines just gives a limited sense of the media reversal.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay the foundation of the book. McCoy provides theoretical as well as historical background of the Indonesian press during the transition from Sukarno to Suharto. An interesting point she makes is that guided democracy also meant a guided press (p. 19). Sukarno restricted media coverage by mandating news on respect for one God, public interests, and the nation's character. In this way, he used the media for his regime's political propaganda. Like his

predecessor, Suharto also used media for political propaganda. He was tougher than Sukarno in regulating freedom of the press. He banned 12 printing presses and magazines due to their coverage of elites' political scandals, particularly corruption. Suharto also established the Ministry of Information and the state-sponsored Indonesian Journalist Organization (Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia) to regulate freedom of expression. As a result, during the Suharto era the surviving media served as the regime's collaborator. This process was successful due to the absence of public debate. The important point in these two chapters is that the media was in a vulnerable position when it came to challenging the regime. This uncertainty and vulnerability eventually led to the media compromising. It usually did what the government wanted, but it also worked closely with democratic activists, especially toward the end of the Suharto era. In sum, the transition from authoritarianism to democracy provided the media with changing roles. In the 1970s the media was neutral with regard to the New Order regime, but the situation changed after the government revoked the printing licenses of media organizations that were critical of the regime. As a result, media organizations needed to be careful to report news that was pro-government.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide alternative insights into why Suharto fell from the media's view. McCoy argues that bans on media that were critical of the regime raised public awareness and led to the organization of anti-government strikes (p. 51). Chapter 3 focuses on the uncertainty of the transition between Suharto and the new democratic regime. In the early Reformasi period the media began to report on elite corruption scandals in order to attract more readers. During this period the Indonesian media were free to publish anything, with no state censorship. However, the honeymoon ended as democracy became more consolidated and media regulations were installed. The new regulations were themselves biased (p. 74). If media owners did not side with certain elites, it put journalists at risk. As a result, the media took their revenge with blatant coverage of political scandals in the early Reformasi era. The more the media published about scandals after 2004, the less critical the tone was since the media was more partisan than it had been earlier. The media often leaked secret information to make it available for public consumption. This surely exacerbated relations between the media and the democratic regime, although the media was still committed to democracy. This finding is similar to that of Krishna Sen and David Hill (2006), who noted that the media had an ambivalent role, whether supporting the regime or dissident camps. Consequently, while the Indonesian media mostly promoted fairness and transparency, journalists sometimes had to make compromises with the political elites (p. 86). These compromises encouraged the reversal of democratic promises.

The book focuses on media reversibility in Indonesia after the 2000s. There were several factors that led to partisanship in the media. First, biases on the part of media owners discouraged critical comments (p. 95). The media were politicized by their owners to publish and broadcast news on rivals' political scandals. Some elite-run TV channels such as RCTI and TVRI often competed with *Tempo*, *Gatra*, and the *Jakarta Post* in covering political issues. Media framing was

used to protect the media owners' interests. As a result, readers were sometimes unable to get balanced news coverage. Second, the media were frequently involved in political conspiracies that delegitimated elites (pp. 125–127). This created strained relationships between the media and some politicians. Third, the media used corruption scandals to make political attacks, in the process gaining political support and close relationships with certain elites (p. 137). Obviously, politicians often cited such media reportage to attract voters. This created a mutually beneficial relationship between politicians and the media. While politicians needed the media to reach out to potential voters, the media needed fresh money and protection from the elites in order to keep publishing and broadcasting their news. In this connection, the author discusses the Baligate and Buloggate scandals in the Abdurrahman Wahid administration.

McCoy's book arguably has some limitations. First, the author does not provide an in-depth explanation of biases in media ownership. Some media tycoons-turned-politicians had their own TV stations and newspapers to cover their political activity. In another media study, Ross Tapsell (2017) clearly defines the relationship between media oligarchs and their office-seeking motivation. It would be useful if McCoy provided a political connection map between elites and the media. Second, the book refers just tangentially to the role of social media in Indonesian democracy. This kind of media often performs as an alternative media for critical readers, particularly in urban areas. Overall, McCoy provides an alternative view of the Indonesian democratic process from the perspective of media.

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The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?

FRANCIS E. HUTCHINSON and LEE HWOK AUN, eds.

Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2019.

This book unpacks Malaysia's 14th general election (GE-14) of May 2018. Facing the long-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) administration, the freshly configured opposition bloc, Pakatan Harapan (PH), emerged triumphant, seemingly against all odds. It has been two years since that eventful day, but what do we make of the election? Bringing together ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute researchers

and a group of selected collaborators, this book presents 23 chapters covering four angles: campaign dynamics, important trends among key interest groups, local-level development in key states, and personal perspectives from a selection of GE-14 participants.

The core message of the book is the post-event unpacking of the chink in the armor of the mighty BN and how it manifested itself during GE-14. For instance, Chapter 2 (by Kai Ostwald) details how the electoral system was in favor of the incumbent, shedding light on electoral manipulations, mass media partiality, money politics, and ethnic slants. By extension, defeating the BN required a coalition that featured many of the former's key attributes, especially the Bumiputra-centric orientation. The importance of this requirement was reflected in the first Cabinet composition of PH. As astutely observed by Ostwald, parties that could attract Bumiputra, rural, and East Malaysian voters received over half of the Cabinet positions (14 of 27) despite securing only about one-quarter (32 of 121) of PH's total seats. Ostwald dampens the expectation that post-GE-14 reforms will be smooth sailing or linear, as many imprints of the old administration—more because of political expediency than moral considerations—will likely survive into the coming years of Malaysian politics.

Chapter 9 (by Geoffrey Pakiam) focuses on the voting patterns of Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlers. This study is important because of the settlers' disproportionately weighty presence in the electoral system: FELDA wards take up a much higher share of parliamentary seats than their voter numbers indicate, have a median of roughly 20,000 fewer registered voters when compared with Peninsular Malaysia's non-FELDA constituencies, and usually have higher proportions of ethnic Malay voters than non-FELDA wards in Peninsular Malaysia (see Figs. 9.2 and 9.3, pp. 212–213). Taking a long-term perspective, Pakiam shows that the FELDA vote bank, originally a BN fortress, was broken by both PH and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) in the most recent GE. However, this decline was probably at least a decade in the making. Pakiam demonstrates, using longitudinal voting data, that close to 80 percent of all FELDA parliamentary seats had gravitated away from BN since 2004. Like Ostwald, Pakiam sounds the sober note that if PAS and BN choose to not contest against each other in the same FELDA wards in future elections, PH might struggle in these areas.

The standout feature of this book is its attention to local-level dynamics in key states throughout the country. Praise goes to the editors for curating essays on five critical states—three in Peninsular Malaysia (Selangor, Johor, and Kelantan) and two in East Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah). Studies on Malaysian politics too often harp on events at the national level, without equivalent attention paid to events on the ground. Thus, it is heartening to see this attention to local politics. My personal favorite essay is Chapter 15 (by Lee Poh Onn), which analyzes developments in the hornbill state of Sarawak. It goes into considerable depth on historical issues such as the maneuvering of chief ministers that came before the long-ruling Taib Mahmud (1981–2014), weaving them into current developments such as GE-14. There is also participant observation covering

the three key constituencies of Bandar Kuching, Petra Jaya, and Mas Gading. Each of them was selected based on its ethnic composition, degree of urbanization, candidates, and parties. The choice of Bandar Kuching is lauded for it is the state's capital and oftentimes a bellwether for the rest of Sarawak, especially the urban areas. For similar reasons, Petra Jaya was chosen because it is urban but houses a predominantly Muslim Bumiputra population. Meanwhile, Mas Gading was selected because it is a semi-rural seat with a largely non-Muslim Bumiputra populace.

Overall, this book is well organized as it balances the intellectual demands of a multi-themed approach, analyzing how the proverbial David took on Goliath and won. It also does so with a fairly reasonable speed to market, which in itself is noteworthy. Befitting its ambitious title, the book is a valuable vault of information for both general and specialist readers interested in Malaysian and Southeast Asian politics. Notwithstanding its thickness, the book provides up-to-date empirical findings to policy makers, researchers, and business executives.

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Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party-Ruled Nation

BENEDICT J. TRIA KERKVLIET

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

This book divides Vietnamese people who have spoken out against the authorities in recent years into four categories and analyzes how the party-state “repressed” them. Through these categories, Benedict Kerkvliet looks at the governance of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and the future of democratization. The author, who has observed Vietnamese politics for nearly three decades, has over the years analyzed the relationship between society and the state. In 2005 Kerkvliet described how politics shaped by the peasants drove the state. In the current book, extending from rural to urban areas, he explores the relationship between Vietnamese society and the state through the “anti-China” movement and the democracy movement that appeared with the development of the Internet. For its sources, the book uses online content, newspapers and magazines, government reports and documents, as well as interviews with dissidents and regime critics.

A couple of decades earlier, one could plausibly claim that Vietnamese citizens voiced little criticism in public (p. 140). However, after the mid-1990s the dialogical aspect of state-society relations became visible (p. 145). The author describes Vietnam as a “responsive-repressive party-state” (p. 6) that responds to political criticism in both hard and soft ways.

In Chapter 1, movements such as strikes aimed at improving the working environment of workers are discussed. In 1995–2015 strikes were illegal, yet the party-state authorities tolerated and often defended workers; they were generally sympathetic toward them and even helped them persist with their collective struggles (p. 31). However, there were points at which the authorities' reactions became repressive. In the case of labor, that point came when workers tried to form their own unions (p. 141).

Chapter 2 deals with farmers' resistance to land confiscation. According to land laws since the late 1980s, farming households usually have the right to use land for 20 years, but not to own it. The party-state can cancel those use rights and retrieve the land for "national defense, security, national interest, public interest, and economic development" (p. 34). Such retrievals became frequent as the economy diversified, with more land required for urban and industrial purposes. By 2010, roughly 745,000 hectares had been retrieved, affecting some nine million farming people—about 10 percent of the country's population (p. 34). Due partly to demonstrations and people's criticism, the authorities revised regulations regarding land appropriation, compensation, and assistance to affected people (p. 55). However, the party-state authorities were repressive, even violent, toward villagers' protests (p. 56). They rarely used police or other repressive means against workers' strikes, but they did mobilize police to break up large demonstrations by villagers, even arresting some participants; and on numerous occasions they forcibly evicted villagers from their fields and harassed and intimidated those who refused to quit protesting (p. 56). This was because most workers' protests were aimed at the managers and owners of the enterprises where they worked. On the other hand, villagers' protests were usually directed at the party-state authorities (p. 58).

Chapter 3 deals with the criticism of the Vietnamese government by people trying to protect the country from China, which has taken a hardline stance on territorial issues. Students and other citizens marched in the cities to protest the plight of fishers and the Chinese authorities' violence against them. Chinese actions in Vietnam incited additional anti-China demonstrations and led bloggers, journalists, scholars, teachers, and others to criticize China and Vietnam-China relations. Thousands of citizens signed petitions, letters, and other public statements condemning Chinese aggression and urged party-state leaders to join the protesters in opposing China (p. 86). Officials approved several demonstrations and other forms of protest. But the authorities resorted to intimidation and force when demonstrations took place several weekends in a row and threatened to spread nationwide.

Chapter 4 clarifies the thoughts and actions of regime critics seeking democratization. The author discerns four approaches among the critics. The first stresses the importance of the VCP leadership's role in converting the present system into one leading to democracy. The second is the confrontation approach, which emphasizes building organizations to dismantle the VCP so as to quickly establish a democratic system before development can occur. The third approach urges

engagement with the party-state authorities at all levels in order to press for socioeconomic advancement; from there, democratization will follow. The fourth stresses democratizing society by expanding and strengthening civic, social, and community organization (p. 95). The authorities used intimidation, threats, and periodic detention, but not equally against all critics. Those who were senior citizens, had served in the military, had worked for government, had personal connections to regime officials, or advocated nonconfrontational approaches to democratization were less likely to be jailed (p. 142).

Chapter 5 reveals how the authorities responded to regime critics. Being a regime critic in Vietnam was risky. Even though the 68 dissidents mentioned by the author were neither violent nor favored armed struggle, the authorities' reactions were often heavy-handed. Officials messed up the lives of many regime critics—they took away their jobs, intimidated their relatives and friends, interfered with their daily lives, interrogated them, sometimes beat them, and frequently detained or imprisoned them. Nevertheless, the data show that the regime was somewhat tolerant of certain people who opposed the political system. It was even more tolerant of public critics who did not seek an overhaul of the political system. In the mid-1950s and late 1980s, the VCP government quickly and decisively silenced public political criticism with repressive measures ranging from denunciation to imprisonment. However, from the mid-1990s to 2015, the authorities used a similar array of measures but with much less effect, largely because the regime's control over society had abated as the market economy spread, communication technologies became widely accessible, and the authorities became sensitive to domestic and international perceptions of their treatment of dissent (p. 139). Based on available data, the author suggests that over half of the incarcerated regime critics were released from prison before serving their full sentences. And between 2012 and 2015, the number of dissidents imprisoned decreased substantially.

Chapter 6 summarizes the discussion and looks to the future. Kerkvliet predicts that the diversity and intensity of speaking out will likely continue and become more pronounced (p. 11). However, the dialogical aspect of Vietnam's political system does not mean the country is on the brink of having multiparty elections, freedom of the press and speech, and other institutions common in procedural democracies. Indeed, it does not even mean Vietnam is firmly on a path to democratization (p. 146). The author suggests that the political system may continue in the same direction it has been going in recent decades (p. 147), and also that it may not evolve into a massive movement aimed at replacing the party-state with a multiparty and election-based democratic system, particularly if the present regime effectively combines repression with toleration and responsiveness (p. 11).

Based on my own experiences while staying in Vietnam, I have made the following observations that are somewhat similar to the author's. First, the authorities do not seem to deal with activists in a completely repressive way to begin with. Initially they try to persuade them, and only when that does not work do they turn to repression. Second, elderly activists are not detained or

arrested. Third, repression is mild against former Communist Party members, military and police officials, and those who contributed to the anti-French or anti-American wars. Fourth, the party-state often turns a deaf ear to voices that are critical but do not reject or challenge the Communist Party's rule.

Another important point is that when a problem is at the local level and criticism is not aimed at the authorities, the authorities leave the matter to the local government. Though it is not mentioned in the book, in 2015 the Hanoi People's Committee planned to cut many trees on the city streets, which led to a citizens' protest movement lasting several months. In the end, the city was forced to cancel the cutting plan. Since the protests were directed at the Hanoi government, not the party-state authorities, the authorities did not put any pressure on the citizens.

Finally, I would like to raise some questions. First, the author notes, based on other scholars' works, that the ways of dealing with various citizens' movements were the same between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the VCP (pp. 5–6). I do not agree. China's dictatorship under Xi Jinping is more oppressive, for example, when it comes to land confiscation from farmers, oppression of regime critics, repression of ethnic minorities, and so on. Compared to the VCP, the CCP seems to have almost no dialogical interaction with citizens. Also, if my argument makes sense, though it is not the main theme of this book, I would like to know what caused the differences between the CCP and the VCP in dealing with society.

Further, the author writes that Vietnam, which has turned into an omnidirectional diplomacy after Doi Moi, cares about the opinion not only of Vietnamese citizens but also the rest of the world. For example, when human rights issues are taken seriously by international society, it damages Vietnam's international reputation and affects its economic development. I believe this sensitivity to world opinion is a differentiating feature from China. Is this because the Vietnamese authorities are aware that Vietnam is only a medium-sized country, unlike China, which is contending with the United States for world hegemony?

My intuitive perception of how the authorities dealt with democratic activists was confirmed through the author's statistical figures in Chapter 5. By categorizing critics, the author shows how much the Party tolerates. This book is valuable for showing the relationship between politics and society in modern Vietnam numerically and clearly.

Despite the large number of Japanese scholars researching Vietnam, in Japan we have not discussed details of the VCP's governance in the field of politics; Nakano Ari (2009) is one of the few exceptions. This is because the leading Japanese scholars became interested in Vietnamese studies during the Vietnam War. They tended to support the North, which was trying to achieve independence from US hegemony. This is probably why there have not been many studies revealing undemocratic governance in Vietnam and the reason a book like this has never appeared until now. I believe this book is indispensable when it comes to talking about contemporary Vietnam, covering the entire North and South, looking at the period from the Nhan Van Giai Pham incident

in the 1950s to the present, and depicting the evolution of the relationship between the Vietnamese people and the authorities.

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Beyond the Asylum: Mental Illness in French Colonial Vietnam

CLAIRE E. EDINGTON

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

Claire Edington's *Beyond the Asylum* is a welcome addition to the fields of the history of medicine in Southeast Asia and the global history of medicine. The author's research draws on recent work on the history of colonial psychiatry and the global history of medicine to emphasize how psychiatry as it developed in French Indochina was not hegemonically instituted by the colonial state but a process of negotiation between the layperson, medical experts, and the colonial state. Her study is valuable also to the growing literature in medical studies situated in the colony that break away from the colonial axis to examine how specialized knowledge was constituted within local, regional, and global scales and beyond the colonial dynamics of oppression and control.

The book consists of six main chapters along with an Introduction and Conclusion. Chapter 1 traces the emergence of the French legal category of the insane, first in metropolitan France and then in French colonial Indochina. Edington overlays this story with a discussion of the pre-existing indigenous Gia Long codes (decreed in 1812 in Nguyen territories) that codified madness as a legal category in the region. These codes, she observes, already defined certain aspects of madness as punitive, and officially designated family and community as the primary sites of both care and surveillance. The 1930 French colonial asylum law would be "adapted" to the conditions in Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina (but not, it is presumed, to Cambodian or Laotian conditions). Already, the chapter sketches how mental illness and jurisprudence were linked from the pre-colonial through to the colonial period, and how the study is focused on the "colonial career of the legal concept of the aliéné [mentally alienated]" (p. 29). While mental illness as a phenomenon that

operated outside the public sphere clearly existed, it is not captured in this first chapter as the focus is on mental illness relating to public safety and legal responsibility.

The second chapter details the opening of the first mental asylum in French Indochina in 1919, Biên Hòa in Cochinchina. Edington details operational and patient problems, which share many similarities with the other medical and social services of Indochina, including the underrepresentation of female patients, the problem that distance between the facility and home posed for family members, institutional understaffing, and financial shortfalls. The author spends some time on the problem that mental health practitioners had of attempting to define confinement in a mental asylum as something other than punishment, and patients as distinct from convicts. While she emphasizes that this problem was specific to mental health within the colonial medical domain, it bears noting that the issue was experienced also with leper villages contemporaneously being established in the five regions of Indochina. Psychiatric confinement, she argues, was framed less by “the prism of rational treatment than through the calculus of risk management” (p.90). Again, this observation could be expanded to colonial management policies for prostitutes, lepers, addicts, mendicants, and other marginal individuals. This chapter also provides an important window to the lived experiences of the mentally ill being treated under the colonial regime.

Chapter 3 interlaces the history of mental health policies in Indochina with other regional developments, interestingly connecting this history to the academic creation of “Southeast Asia” as a coherent region for study. The establishment of organizations such as the Far Eastern Association of Tropical Medicine—driven by colonial administrators’ attempts in the early twentieth century to compare regional administrative policies—was key to framing the region of Southeast Asia. Focusing on French study of the Dutch East Indies and its Buitenzorg asylum, Edington argues that from exchanges with their Dutch counterparts as well as their experiences in the hexagon, French mental health experts came to embrace the concept of physical labor as a wide panacea for mental health disorders, and thus organized their asylums by incorporating daily physical labor as part of the psychiatric reeducation of patients. In detailing how labor was incorporated into mental health treatment, the study gives the reader a flavor of life in the mental asylum.

The chapter that follows attempts to characterize the mobility of psychiatric patients in and out of the asylum, in part by focusing on how lay populations were key in shaping concepts of abnormality and negotiating the framework for acceptable confinement. The study also emphasizes how the family was central to treatment, and how this was distinct to the colony. However, the active role of community and family in delimiting the patient’s status and treatment has also been studied extensively in the medical anthropology of Africa as well as other parts of Asia. The continuing centrality of the family unit in defining both mental disease and treatment in non-Western contexts, and some of the issues arising from these family connections, continue to be part of the contemporary transcultural psychiatry debates revolving around the Movement for Global Mental Health of the last decade.

Chapter 5 is devoted to treatment advice in the popular press and the tension between the concept of modernity as pathologizing and modernity as liberating. This chapter tries to capture the lay view of mental health, but, as with many historical studies of popular media, it leaves the reader wondering how much Vietnamese elites' attempts to shape mental health knowledge in the popular press for their urban, educated audience can stand in for a true snapshot of the evolving view of mental illness for most of the population. While it is true that Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina had a much higher percentage of newspaper-reading public than many other colonies at the time, it would seem, even from the evidence presented by Edington, that the elite and middle-class indigenous population had a perspective on mental illness distinct from the lower classes. This chapter highlights another tension in the book: the mental health treatment options for poor and rich Vietnamese, and their perspectives on mental health, would seem quite divergent from each other. Such class issues in the development of psychiatry are discussed only in passing.

The final main chapter of the book discusses the relationship between psychiatry and the criminal justice system. This chapter provides an informative discussion on how psychiatric expertise was triangulated among the criminal, legislative, and medical systems. Edington posits that mental health experts in French Indochina were trying to unify the field of psychiatry in part by establishing the "universality of childhood between France and the colony" (p.200). Similar to Chapter 4 on patient movement in and out of the asylum, Edington argues that psychiatrists were making a claim to unique and expanding expertise over new domains, in this case proper childhood development. However, in neither case does the study fully explore the tension between the expert's desire to expand his role and draw in more patients, and the expert's administrative reality of overcrowding, understaffing, under-resourcing, and unmet patient needs. A partial solution for the expert would seem to be found in the argument that the lack of space, personnel, and resources encouraged the porous borders of the asylum and the dependence on family and community to surveil provisionally released patients. Thus, the author's analysis adds another layer to the continually vexed question in colonial medical studies of how medical expertise was constructed when medical provisioning could not be monopolized by the "expert."

As is common with many studies of colonial Indochina, this monograph folds Cambodia and Laos by default into a general discussion of the history of psychiatry in Indochina, even when some of these generalizations are applicable only to the three regions of present-day Vietnam. For example, patients from Laos and Cambodia are mentioned in passing, but only as part of the Vietnamese example. While a "colonial" Vietnam did not exist during this period, a history of "colonial Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina" is perhaps too cumbersome as a concept or title. This is not a critique unique to this book, but a commentary on how French administrative records and the colonial past continue to frame the possibilities of how we write "locally grounded" histories of the colonial period. A history of colonial Indochina is rarely a balanced history of the five regions of colonial Indochina.

Ultimately, the monograph lays bare the uneasy foundation of professional expertise in the colonial setting and begins to suggest some of the ways that the field of mental health continued to be fraught with contradictions interwoven among compromises. Overall, this study provides an important addition to our growing understanding of the dynamics of medical care and health behaviors beyond the Western context. This book makes a valuable contribution to the history of psychiatry as well as the growing body of social histories of “marginal” populations. Indeed, the richness of the stories told in this monograph provides proof that histories of the margins are vital to a better understanding of all aspects of the human condition.

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Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands

DAVID BRENNER

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

Rebel Politics explains the breakdown of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) ceasefire in 2011 and the gradual re-escalation of conflict in the territories of the Karen National Union (KNU) after that organization's signing of a 2012 ceasefire, culminating in the KNU's recusal from the 21st Century Panglong peace process in 2018, by focusing on the internal politics of these two politico-military movements.¹⁾ Through this analysis, David Brenner attempts to add a third plank to studies of (political) armed groups. Alongside the horizontal relationships between rebel leaders and their supposedly loyal factions, and the vertical governance relationships between rebels and local communities, he asks us to focus on the intramural politics of the rebel groups, arguing that (at least in these two cases) this struggle over power and leadership was decisive in shaping the trajectory of these movements.

Brenner argues that the co-optation of rebel leadership has been a core component of the Myanmar armed forces' (Tatmadaw) approach to counterinsurgency since the early 1990s. This co-optation strategy involves the collaborative exploitation of natural resources by Tatmadaw generals, rebel leaders, Tatmadaw-connected “crony” capitalists, and foreign (mostly Chinese) companies. In exchange for these rents, rebel leaders are expected to agree to ceasefires and permit the development of state infrastructure—including roads, bridges, and hydropower dams—

1) Both movements are made up of an armed and a political wing: the KIO and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) form one movement, and the KNU and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) form the other.

as well as resource extraction, land grabbing, and private development, in particular (in the case of the Kachin territory) Chinese tourism in the near-abroad, which is centered on gambling, hotels, and prostitution.

Leaders of the KIO and KNU were encouraged to accept ceasefires by a general state of exhaustion with the armed struggle (after more than 60 years in the case of the KNU). They faced increased pressure from the Tatmadaw, which had modernized, expanded, and adopted a largely successful divide-and-conquer approach to the country's many rebel movements in the 1990s and 2000s. In the case of the KNU, the liberalization of Myanmar's trade had led to the withdrawal of support by former patrons in the Thai military, who no longer depended on armed groups conducting cross-border smuggling to access the Burmese market. KIO and KNU leaders were also apparently motivated by a belief that peace (or at least abatement of conflict) would deliver benefits to the leaders themselves, but also to their communities of supporters.

Ceasefire agreements brought some measure of prosperity to KIO and KNU territories but also increased drug abuse and associated criminality, the presence of Tatmadaw forces in areas where they had previously been absent, rampant environmental degradation, and forced displacement from land to make it available for development projects or resource extraction. Moreover, the state of ceasefire and the availability of rents from private enterprise allowed KIO and KNU leaders and their loyalists to divorce themselves from their co-ethnic communities, on whom they became less dependent for recruits and tax revenues. Brenner theorizes this disconnection as the breakdown of legitimacy and the disembedding of rebel movements from the communities they claimed to represent.

Rebel Politics argues that the detriments of "ceasefire capitalism" (Woods 2011) led to a desire for an alternative political project, which some entrepreneurs within the KNU and KIO were able to harness to lead factional struggles for power—largely successful in the case of the KIO faction associated with the leaders of the KIO's youth wing, Education and Economic Development for Youth (EEDY), Sumlut Gun Maw, Htang Gam Shawng, and U La Nan, and more ambiguously successful in the case of the KNU Concerned Group faction. These revitalization movements have posed a significant threat to the attempt to achieve a comprehensive settlement to the armed conflict in Myanmar, as they are skeptical of the peace terms on offer and of the requirement to abide by a ceasefire (and all it entails) as a precondition for participating in the peace process. The origins and trajectories of these dissident, revitalization movements form the substance of the two case studies in *Rebel Politics*. These case studies are based on long-term fieldwork in rebel-held territories, as well as unprecedented high-level access to the leaderships of the two movements, which provided an opportunity to observe the leadership struggles at close range.

The focus of the KNU case (ch. 3) is on the marginalization and resurgence of KNU leaders Naw Zipporah Sein, Baw Kyaw Heh, and David Tharckabaw (who were skeptical of the ceasefire terms on offer by the then-Thein Sein government) by KNLA Generals Mutu Say Poe and Saw

Johnny and KNU General Secretary Kwe Htoo Win. Generals Mutu and Saw Johnny were delegated to discuss ceasefire terms with the government in 2012, but they exceeded their mandate by agreeing to a ceasefire. This unauthorized agreement set off a leadership breach in the KNU, with the Executive Committee at first dismissing its architects, and then the Central Committee reinstating them a week later to avoid fracturing the movement. This apparently left the pro-ceasefire faction preeminent within the structure of the movement (though a more complete description of the structure of the KNU's political processes might have aided the reader's understanding of exactly how). At the same time, the ceasefire faction rapidly began to lose support as junior enlisted members and grassroots communities objected that the faction had apparently been willing to sell out the revolution for a few development concessions. A new faction, the KNU Concerned Group, led by Naw Zipporah, Tharckabaw, and Baw Kyaw Heh and drawing significant support from KNU Brigade 5, arose to challenge the ceasefire supporters. Insubordination by this Concerned Group and its supporters, who attacked Tatmadaw units that were intruding into KNU territory as part of a roadbuilding project despite the continued commitment of the leadership to the ceasefire, led the KNU to suspend its participation in the peace process in 2018.

The KIO case (ch. 4) covers the ceasefire period, beginning in 1994, and the emergence of a dissident movement within the KIA, beginning in EEDY, established by Sumlut Gun Maw and Htang Gam Shawng in 2003. EEDY, later led by U La Nan, attempted to revitalize the armed movement from the ground up, focusing on ideological and military training of young recruits. As the Tatmadaw attempted to consolidate its control over ceasefire armed groups including the KIO, insisting they transform themselves into subordinate militias of the Tatmadaw, the young officers associated with EEDY asserted their opposition and made a play for the leadership: "The young officers incorporated those [senior leaders] they could, forced others to retire, and sidelined still others while letting them keep their formal standing" (p. 93). The rise of EEDY led to a confrontation over the China-backed mega-dam project at Myitsone. KIO leaders declared their opposition, and when Tatmadaw troops moved to secure the site, this triggered a new round of intense fighting and the end of the ceasefire.

Brenner describes the trajectory of his two cases as "leadership co-optation; group fragmentation; contention over authority; and renewed resistance from within" (p. 99). While this trajectory is clearly documented in both cases, the reader is left unsure of its implications. There are at least four causal explanations for which the two case studies provide evidence. First, it may be that the basic premise of ceasefires-for-development was a valid approach to gaining the consent of the KIO and KNU (or of Kachin and Karen communities), but top leaders of the two organizations engaged in corruption and self-dealing, alienating those outside their core clique. Second, it may be that ceasefire capitalism is incompatible with justice or even a minimally inclusive form of development, that it is a coercive project of hyperexploitation—of people, of land—requiring the violent displacement of civilian populations. The only collateral benefits of ceasefire capitalism, then, are in the

form of protection money paid to those able to credibly threaten to stand in its way.

Third, it may be the case that the apparent abandonment of the self-determination project, in favor of the uneasy compromise of a ceasefire, was inconsistent with the political aspirations of Karen and Kachin communities. Hence, reformist leaders were successful because they could credibly promise to revitalize this project (which was supported by the emphasis on ideological training in the KIO youth movement). Fourth, it may be that personal enrichment isolated leaders within the KNU and KIO (and their factions) from their broader movements and civilian constituents, drawing these leaders into large towns and cities where their new wealth could be better enjoyed, and leading to the disembedding of these leadership factions from their constituencies. Reformist leaders such as Baw Kyaw Heh of the KNU and Gun Maw, Gam Shawng, and U La Nan in the KIO were, therefore, successful because they were willing to do the work of political mobilization.

These four explanations are not necessarily incompatible, but they carry different implications: is it more important that rebel movements defend communities from attack/displacement, or that they provide them with economic benefits, or that they offer a compelling political/ideological project, or that they be embedded in communities and engaged in reciprocal relationships of governance? Brenner seems to favor “sociological” explanations (Brenner 2020) consistent with the last two arguments; other scholars of support for armed groups have argued for the primacy of coercive authority, or the capacity to monopolize force in a territory and exclude the chaos and predation that comes when coercive authority is contested (Kalyvas 2006, 91–116, 173–180; Malthaner 2015; Ross 2019).

Rebel Politics’ documentation of pivotal points in the recent histories of the KNU and KIO, supported by extended, high-level fieldwork, makes a valuable contribution to emerging scholarship on the intramural politics of rebel movements, which complements Brenner’s prior work on this topic (2015; 2017; 2018). *Rebel Politics* offers a corrective to optimistic predictions that the peace process, initiated by the Thein Sein government and continued under the present government of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, will resolve the long-standing armed conflict between Myanmar’s many ethnic armed organizations and the central state through a process that focuses on delivering a peace dividend of increased development. The roots of the KNU and KIO rebellions are deep, and communities have shown themselves capable of holding armed groups faithful to the project of self-determination.

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