

## NEW RELEASES

# Translating Nature and Claim-makings in Southeast Asia

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**N**ature is an artifact, understood and interacted with by people via culturally specific symbolic systems. In Indonesian rainforests, bee-hived trees are considered spiritual beings, and when people harvest the honey the bees are praised in bee-songs as beautiful girls. Fishermen cast magic spells to cajole the spirits of fish residing in the seas. Forests and marine landscapes that look “empty” to outsiders are in fact full of various cultural meanings and values that require culturally grounded semiotic processes of interpretation.

As reflected in Alfred Russel Wallace’s 1869 classic, *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), European accounts have traditionally depicted insular Southeast Asia as one of the “Spice Islands,” a source of exotic commodities such as cloves and nutmeg. In the past two decades, the vast forests and rich natural resources of Southeast Asia have attracted both foreign and domestic investment. To outsiders, the region’s thick tropical forests and boundless expanse of seas seem “wild” and empty, and therefore unclaimed. Thus, the allocation of land and resources has often been determined by external agendas and without consideration of local needs. In this context, large-scale influxes of foreign direct investment, and resulting processes of rapid industrialization and urbanization have produced many social problems, including the displacement of local

people coupled with low levels of compensation for their land by exploitative developers. Indigenous peoples of the region have been marginalized, impoverished, and displaced from their ancestral territories. Indeed, they stand to lose even more because they do not have any public voice. In the face of immense pressures exerted by state power and transnational economic forces, the indigenous communities are forced to employ multiple strategies to maintain their rights to their lands and livelihoods.

The volume under review here, *Culture and the Question of Rights: Forests, Coasts, and Seas in Southeast Asia*, edited by Charles Zerner, is a valuable addition to the literature of political ecology of Southeast Asia, a region where the problem of indigenous rights in relation to rapid social change has arisen as a central concern (cf. Brosius 1997; Li 2000; Zerner 2000). Based on field research conducted by the authors in Indonesia and Malaysia from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, the articles of this volume demonstrate how local people conceive nature and make claims to it vis-à-vis state power and transnational economic forces. In their accounts of diverse local situations, nature appears as a politically-situated cultural product.

The issue of “translation” is one of the main themes that links each article of this volume. The authors engage in multiple levels of translation, involving numerous boundary-crossings. By “boundary-crossings,” I refer to the various communicative negotiations between differently culturally situated actors, such as between local people and ethnographers, between indigenous people and government officials, and, on a larger scale, between different cultures. Specifically, this book examines the strategies that endangered indigenous peoples of the region have used to attempt to speak across difference in their efforts to survive social and economic marginalization.

The translators involved in these multiple boundary-crossings include bee-hunters, fishermen, shamans, indigenous writers, and ethnographers. All of these people engage in interpretations of the various signs and symbols embedded in local people’s visions of nature. Anna Tsing’s article on the honey hunting practices of the Meratus Dayak reveals that they think of honey trees and the bees in them not as “wild,” but as cultivated and managed natural resources. Meratus people claim their rights to harvest and distribute honey through their incessant care and management of the honey trees and bees in the forests. Durian trees appear as a marker of local people’s settlement history in Bagak, West Kalimantan, in Nancy Peluso’s examination of the changing composition of forests in relation to the community’s political history. To the Bentian Dayak in East Kalimantan, as Stephanie Fried notes in her contribution, rattan is not

merely a cash crop, but a sign of individuals' land ownership. Forests, seas, and coasts, considered by outsiders to be wild and exotic, are actually social spaces defined by their close relationships with human societies, thus challenging the conventional Western image of tropical rainforests and seas as the last remaining wilderness unspoiled by the process of "civilization" (cf. Cronon 1996).

To translate locally specific conceptions of nature, the authors of this volume focus on diverse modes of expressive genres as both reflecting and shaping indigenous relationships to nature and natural resources. Tsing's analysis of Meratus bee songs indicates how the Meratus people interpret their relations to bees and honey trees as mutually reciprocal, which contrasts with Western assumptions about "wild" nature defined oppositionally with (tamed or domesticated) culture. The Mandar fishermen's performance of magic spells and erotic marine oratory, as considered by Zerner, reveals that the Mandar people conceptualize fishing as an activity of "moving" fish, both physically and spiritually, by manipulating their feelings through praising, flattering, and seduction. The tropes of desire, seduction, and intimacy present in the fishing calls recur across other Mandar oral genres such as prayers and songs, reflecting the local people's ideas about the relationship of humans to nature. Temiar shamans in Malaysia, as Marina Roseman points out, articulate and reproduce their locally specific visions of landscape and property in trance rituals by performing songs, narrated dreams, and dances. Through the rituals, the physical rainforest environment is transformed into a social sphere, shaped and configured in terms of Temiar local histories and memories.

The issues of indigenous rights to lands and natural resources, and the competing claims being made to them are another main concern of this volume. Borrowing concepts and terminology from Weber, Tsing insightfully distinguishes between "charismatic" and "bureaucratic" claims in order to contrast locally derived concepts of property claims and rights with Western conventions of "property-commodity." The Meratus claims to honey trees are "charismatic," where local authority requires personal "management" activities—paying regular visits, watching, and cleaning the trees. Conversely, "bureaucratic" claims rely more on impersonal and acontextual ways of marking ownership, such as fences and signs, whose force of authority is derived from governmental or other official recognition.

Donald Brenneis, in his contribution to the collection, similarly considers styles of claim-making by applying this charismatic/bureaucratic distinction. "Charismatic" claims, such as honey ritual songs (Tsing), erotic marine oratory and magic spells (Zerner), and trance songs and narrated dreams (Roseman) re-

veal that the indigenous groups claim their rights to access natural resources based on their successful establishment of personal, intimate, and charismatic relationships with nature, mainly relying on “sounds.” The “bureaucratic” style of claim-making, on the other hand, is often associated with “sights.” Visual representations of ownership, such as written documents and maps, are often used by state power to legitimize national authority over natural resource management. For example, Zerner’s article on Mandar fishermen successfully contrasts differences between indigenous and the state sanctioned claim-making; i.e. Mandar fishermen’s claims to marine resources based on “calls” versus the district’s written documents such as court proceedings (Zerner).

Describing claim-making as performance, Brenneis argues for the importance of its “genre,” as particular formal features of claim-making influence how effectively and persuasively claims are conveyed. Since the efficacy of claim-making is dialogically-emergent in the interactions between performers and audience, the styles of translation are crucial in making claims: How do claimants “translate” their claims so as to be recognizable and understood by the audience? Each contribution to the volume examines what kinds of genres are employed by local people in their attempts to articulate their relationships to nature, which also involve diverse types of boundary-crossings.

Stephanie Fried’s essay on the Bentian Dayak people in East Kalimantan illustrates local efforts to document their customary system of land tenure in written forms in order to legitimize their relationships with ancestral lands and rattan gardens so as to protect their territories from the infringement of logging companies. By tracking the codification process of Bentian customary land tenure over fifteen years, Fried argues that the Bentian writers have strategically appropriated rhetoric and metaphors from Indonesian national law and official discourses of development. The indigenous authors have emphasized the “rationality” of the Bentian shifting cultivation system, asserting their potential to contribute to national development as a “modernized” but more-or-less ethnically intact citizenry.

In addition to written documents, mapping, based on the legitimizing authority of the visual, is another device frequently used to advance claims. As the authors of this volume argue, the natural world is not an objective reality, but a politically situated construction. Given that diverse pictures of landscape compete for a representation of the same territory, mapping (grid cartography in particular) is itself an ideological work, presenting just one version of a contested landscape. Using a conventionalized grid system that is supposed to be “accurate,” and “universal,” grid-based mapmaking presents a particular de-

picture of landscape as legitimate and correct, while masking other versions as “invisible” and “incorrect.” In contrast, indigenous people eschew the static visual of the map, instead portraying their territories through songs, dances, and other performances which reproduce their histories and memories embedded in their views of landscapes.

Nancy Peluso’s chapter provides an example of competing boundary making processes between local people and state power. Focusing on social meanings of durian trees among the villagers of Bagak in West Kalimantan, she examines how Bagak landscapes have been shaped through the interplay of ecological, social and political factors. Along with their social meanings as a maker of settlement history, the increased market value of durians have encouraged the villagers of Bagak to plant more trees in their territory, resulting in the change of the local ecological landscape from swidden fallows to forests over sixty years. At the same time, recently enacted Indonesian government land management policies have redefined the Bagak forests, which in reality have traditionally been culturally managed landscapes, as protected “wild” nature reserve, rendering any further modification illegal. Against this governmental intervention in local landscapes, the local people have continued to plant durian trees, continuing their “management” of the forests. A durian tree planted in the middle of the reserve itself visualizes local resistance, a “counter-mapping” of indigenous people’s views of landscapes.

Jane Atkinson’s essay, in addition to focusing on the importance of formal features of claim-making, is concerned with the political-economical factors that lead people to different kinds of exploitation of the environment, a process Atkinson calls the “commodification” of nature. She criticizes the essentialized images of indigenous people as homogenous “environmentalists” against monolithic economic and political forces that “destruct” nature. Rather, she calls for a historical and site-specific view to understand how people conceive of nature, and manage its resources.

Finally, this book suggests that nature is always culturally conceived, managed, and claimed in and through specific genres of performances, such as songs, rituals, dances, written documents, and other media. Whether or not local people successfully and persuasively claim their rights over nature is closely linked to the aesthetics and poetics of claim-making. Zerner calls this process “moving translation” because its efficacy depends on how successively the indigenous claims affect the audience’s sensibilities and morality. To be understood by outsiders, such as regional, national, and global audiences, indigenous people often employ discourses of cultural survival, environmentalism, eco-

conomic development, and modernization, discourses that these audiences can understand and recognize with ease. By redefining the study of indigenous rights as the sphere where the politics of nature converge with the politics of representation, this book calls for close attention to the communicative aspects of claim-making, in which meaning emerges through interactions between various performers and audiences.

Drawing on social construction theory and the critical insights of postmodernism, many researchers have recently come to agree that nature is culturally and discursively constructed (Escobar 1996). However, as Atkinson points out in the epilogue to this volume, the discourse-oriented studies of nature and indigenous rights tend to romanticize or essentialize indigenous people, and to ignore the heterogeneity of indigenous people's interests within broader political-economic contexts. In the case of conflict between indigenous people and government officials over the rights to control natural resources, differences in power relations between the two groups explain such conflict far more compellingly than different representations of nature. An emphasis on the communicative aspects of claim-making should therefore lead researchers to focus on the dialogical nature of claim-making and the multiple meanings, conveyed through various expressive genres and performances, that embody the indigenous people's relations to nature and how their meaning must be interpreted according to social contexts.

The stories of the indigenous people presented in this collection of articles have not ended. The book merely documents one moment in the indigenous people's struggle for their rights to access natural resources, and there will be many more such struggles in the future. Malaysia and Indonesia, in particular, have experienced drastic economic and social changes over the past few years. For example, since Suharto's thirty-two year authoritarian reign in Indonesia collapsed in 1998, succeeding restructuring of the government has decentralized the power of the state. Meanwhile, locals, proclaiming an "era of reformation," have demanded more autonomy and democracy. In this rapidly changing milieu, how do local people assert their rights? What kinds of discourses are employed and translated by indigenous people to be recognized and familiarized by regional, national, and global audiences? It is obvious that the subjects of "culture and the question of rights" must be reexamined in the context of current social change. This book, by focusing on nature as a political product and by framing claim-making in the sphere of communication, would serve as an appropriate starting-point for scholars and policy makers concerned with these issues.

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