

chapter, Endres indicates some more recent aspects of these transformations—the ways in which ethnic minorities have been “hybridized” by their depictions in the performances, and the influence of overseas Vietnamese returning to their homeland to sponsor new rituals and introduce a more sudden, spontaneous form of possession. The old imperial deities have become “cosmopolitan travelers in the transethnic and transnational spiritscapes” (p. 199) inhabited by the newly mobile populations of those who worship them. Endres herself has proved an insightful and perceptive guide along these journeys.

This is an important book as much for the conceptual challenges it presents as the new ethnographic details. It is a theoretically sophisticated study that asks questions about the role of particular agents and power relations in resurrecting and reconstituting a once suppressed set of ritual practices. The answers that it provides will appeal to scholars of religion, ritual and Vietnamese studies.

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## ***Natural Potency and Political Power: Forests and State Authority in Contemporary Laos***

SARINDA SINGH

Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012, 192 p.

### *“Muang Metaphysics”*

The question of how the Lao state maintains legitimacy and authority in the countryside is a key topic of interest for both Lao studies scholars and development practitioners. With the development of a resource frontier, based on the development of hydropower, mining and forest-land concessions, the Lao state is increasingly making its full regulatory and extractive presence felt in

rural areas. How are local communities in Lao PDR (Laos) understanding and reacting to these sweeping changes of commodification and ecological modernization? While conservationists, Lao state officials, and local villagers each perceive forests and the extractive logging and hydropower development that are transforming these resources, are they truly “seeing” and understanding these processes in the same way?

With a new monograph, *Natural Potency and Political Power*, anthropologist Sarinda Singh makes a solid contribution to our understanding of tropical forests and wildlife as materialities, discourses, and most importantly, as potent socio-cultural objects and symbols. Singh has two key objectives in this book. She seeks to promote an understanding of forests and wildlife in Laos based upon a cultural studies approach to “symbolic meanings” (p. 4) (as opposed to, for example, political ecology’s primary focus on the actors, institutions, and discourses governing forest access and livelihood). Secondly, Singh focuses our attention to how differing ideas of the wild forest (*pa*) and wildlife animals (*sat pa*), and ideas about clearing forests and consuming forest animals, are interwoven with issues of identity and the legitimacy of state rule in Laos. This represents an interesting avenue to proceed. Singh’s research is nuanced and well grounded in Laos as a place and a cultural-political context—the author’s dissertation fieldwork site in the Nakai Region of central Khammouane Province—and the themes engaged in the book make it of relevance to readers beyond the Lao studies/political ecology community.

The book proceeds in seven chapters. Chapter 1, “Peripheral Engagements,” presents a useful review of the nature of contemporary state authority and political culture in Lao PDR. Singh forwards three key features of governance in Laos (p. 7): (i) An enduring divide between policy development and practical policy application, and an associated logic of policy as negotiation. This draws in part upon Peter Jackson (2004) on the Thai “regime of images” (a citation missing from the book’s reference list); (ii) A logic of “state sanctioned, family based patronage” (p. 8); and (iii) The maintenance of secrecy, fear and uncertainty by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), and an associated system of authority through illegibility (p. 9). Singh discusses forests and wildlife as key realms of symbolic meaning, based in large part on a classical *muang: pa* dialectic (civilized human settlement versus wild forests), which Singh argues are historically embedded in Tai-Buddhist culture. In this first chapter Singh also forwards an interpretive framework based around the terms “potency” and “potential” (“a power that is yet to be realized” p. 14) as alternative ways of understanding political power and symbolic authority in Laos. This section on understanding the cultural topologies of political power draws upon Theravada Buddhist studies, particularly Reynolds (2005).

The second chapter, “Comprehending Conservation,” traces through foreign and Lao discourses and ideologies of forests as threatened natures. Singh argues that an internalized metaphysics of the *muang* and the *pa* is at work in relation to a generalized “antipathy to conservation” in Laos (p. 49); or, for example, when local Lao informants express desires for development as

opposed to forest preservation.

In two of the strongest chapters in the book, Singh turns towards “Appetites and Aspirations” (Chapter 3) to locate the symbolic potency of wildlife, and wildlife as social objects of consumption and meaning. Singh continues this line of argument with a discussion of “Ecopolitical Elephants” (Chapter 4), where elephants are interpreted as symbols of royalty, targets for poachers, and perhaps, occasional objects for local culinary consumption in Nakai Region. Singh argues convincingly that pachyderms are intimately bound up with power, potential, and legitimate state authority in rural Laos: “Elephants are emblematic of the potential of the *pa* that elites attempt to monopolize to support their authority over the *muang*” (p. 98).

Chapter 5 “Debating the Forest,” examines the state of forest management in Laos. Here, Singh argues that it is not deforestation per se which destabilizes the notion of rightful state authority, but rather rampant deforestation without an appropriate sharing of benefits and prosperity. The case study is drawn from the powerful “Phonesack Group/Nancy” logging company, which has been engaged in extensive extractive logging in the Nam Theun 2 hydropower zone in Nakai Region, central Laos.

Chapter 6 “Concealing Forest Decline,” focuses upon the inclination of the Lao government to obscure institutional authority over forests (invoking a situation Le Billon [2002] has called the “instrumentalization of disorder”) and to blame swidden cultivators for forest decline. Singh argues that this strategy has the overall effect of destabilizing the legitimacy of state rule, for different people within Laos and international actors.

In the concluding chapter, Singh reflects upon a pervasive ambivalence amongst villagers, district residents and even local officials in Nakai Region regarding the overall “legitimacy” of state authority over forests. Singh writes: “Today, forest resources are declining in Laos, but prosperity for most is still to come” (p. 160). While legitimacy is difficult concept to pin down—not least in post-socialist authoritarian states—what seems more clear is that the cultural-politics of forests and development in Laos will continue to be unstable and contested well into the future.

This is an interesting book that advances our understanding of forest governance and political power in Laos. One might take issue with a small number of statements (on p. 37 Singh writes: “. . . the French colonial presence in Indochina did not lead to major conservations interventions or the imposition of scientific forestry.”) However, Mark Cleary (e.g. 2005) shows that the French developed a significant range of legislation and policies to manage the forest according to colonial scientific models, although admittedly the interventions were much more limited in Laos than in Cambodia or Vietnam. Overall the book is based on a solid empirical understanding of the multi-scaled politics of forest governance in Laos.

Such a study on a complex research topic inevitably raises further questions. Singh is careful to note that culturally embedded ideas about the forest are not fixed (and here Hjørleifur Jonsson’s [2005, 10] argument that “The idea of the forested wilderness is no longer diacritical for the clas-

sification of mountain peoples relative to Thai society” brings into question just how deeply embedded are cultural ideas of the forest). For me, this raises questions such as how historically mediated, Theravada-Buddhist understandings of *muang: pa* spatial-cultural diacritics are being reworked or indeed replaced by a new territoriality and technology of the environment in Laos—the *samphathan thi din*, or the “land concession”? Indeed, how are ideas of *muang* and *pa* understood by non-Tai ethnic minority groups in Laos, who are experiencing the blunt extractive side to resource development projects? There is also room for further conceptual work in Singh’s tripartite logic of state governance in Laos, for instance on understanding the intersections between natural resources, patron-clientelism and family-based networks, and how this is changing with economic development. How does a paradoxical interpretation of state legitimacy through inscrutability and illegibility connect with the growing national and international media profile of certain members of the Lao leadership, or for instance, the emergence of a more engaged National Assembly?

As with any primary field site of ethnographic research there are advantages and limitations. One wonders if resource-dependent communities whose forest-lands and community forests are being enclosed and cleared for plantation agriculture without compensation would tend to agree with certain statements such as “exploitation of resources can be taken as a positive sign of development and the state’s exertions of its due responsibilities to the nation” (p. 57), or, whether they would understand “forest clearance as a positive and civilizing action of righteous authority” (p. 157). Here one notes that Ian Baird (2008) has forwarded more critical interpretations of the extension of centralized state power into upland spaces and minority communities in Laos as a project of internal colonialism. Singh’s reflections on potency and potential as alternative, Buddhist-inflected conceptions to state power could also have been discussed in relation to concepts such as Gramscian hegemony, or for example to geographer John Allen’s relational, networked approach to power.

Nevertheless, in this book Sarinda Singh develops a well-crafted set of arguments and ideas around the place of forests and forest wildlife in Laos. It ably accomplishes what any scholarly study should aim for—stimulating the reader to reconsider both historical and contemporary understandings. For those studying the anthropology of nature and development, as well as forest policy and governance in Southeast Asia, *Natural Potency and Political Power* comes with this reviewer’s positive recommendation.

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## *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*

JOHAN SARAVANAMUTTU, ed.

London: Routledge, 2009, 188 p, with index.

The present volume seeks to understand “political Islam” which the editor, Johan Saravanamuttu, describes as “aspirations to political power and the remolding of state and society in accordance with Islamic teachings” (p. ix) in Southeast Asia. The project originated in 2004 and later adopted the notion of “authoritarian democracy” to serve as the contributors’ common frame of analysis. This is a key concept and has been theorized by one of the book’s contributors, Chaiwat Sathanand, as especially relevant to the study of Islam and governance in Southeast Asia. As presented, authoritarian democracy posits a ruling style that adopts a façade of democracy masking an inherently undemocratic regime that disadvantages the country’s minorities. Thus, regime power wielders could be Muslim, Buddhist or Christian while Islam might be either privileged or oppressed. In using this rubric, the contributors aspire to address a number of questions relevant to Islam and the region’s current political life.

The volume’s nine chapters cover Islamic Southeast Asia geographically and its Muslim majority and minority states. In his introductory chapter, Saravanamuttu concisely summarizes each contributor’s topics and major points of interpretation with sufficient detail to be of real value to the reader. The editor’s hand is also apparent throughout much of the book as many of the contributors reference each other in their own chapters, thereby demonstrating a degree of coordination and intellectual cross-fertilization and making for a stronger and more useful text. Still, there are some contributions that are not as tightly integrated into the study as one might anticipate, which is unfortunate, but this does not seriously detract from this worthy contribution to the study