

Book Review: Rights to Culture - Heritage, Language and Culture in Thailand

**Edited by Coeli Barry
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reviewed by
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Overview

Rights to Culture: Heritage, Language and Culture in Thailand is a collection of chapters on eight research projects funded by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, under the Culture and Rights in Thailand project, initiated in 2010. The volume is one of few to address cultural rights in Thailand via a socio-legal and anthropological approach.

Review

The first chapter, an introduction by Coeli Barry, provides a masterful overview of culture and rights in Thailand. It draws together how the notions of culture, identity, and national development were employed by the military, mainly via the centralized education system, to create a homogeneity of 'Thainess' which only ended after the Cold War, when state sponsored tourism development and the official promotion of diversity following the 1997 constitution resulted in a benign (as of 2013), yet paternalistic, recognition of difference. Among other nuggets, Barry points out that rights as such in Thailand may not exist, instead taking the form of petitions for patronage by power blocs.

Two chapters address cultural rights in Northern Khmer territory, one on tangible cultural heritage, namely cultural heritage management at two sites at Phnom Rung Historical Park (Denes & Sirisrisak), and one on intangible cultural heritage, namely Khmer language rights (Vail & Pantakod). However, both ultimately emphasize the dominance of the Thai centralized state over ethnic minority community rights, despite a certain level of benevolence.

The first chapter could be better situated in the academic literature and firstly provides a context and background to Khmer sanctuaries. This introduction points out that such sanctuaries, while ruins, are traditionally transformed by local communities through their reuse as ritual places, evidence of a continued syncretism of Theravada Buddhism, Hindu-Brahmanism, and animism. The chapter recounts how community ceremonies effectively ended following restoration by the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Culture. The chapter focuses on the tension between the ethnic communities and the FAD, suggesting, however, some form of accommodation will be arranged to secure a UNESCO World Heritage Site application.

The chapter on the choice of orthography for Khmer vernaculars is concise and well-written, demonstrating the benefits of a partnership between a foreign subject expert and a Thai researcher. However, it could have better referenced the national policy-making context,

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specifically the draft Thai National Language Policy. Firstly, the chapter clearly presents key background sections on language maintenance and shift in Khmer, on the wider literature on language planning and linguistic ideology, and on multiculturalism in the Thai education system, before moving onto sections discussing how and why Khmer has, for decades, been taught in the Thai script, leading to the slow language death of Khmer. Both the state-backed approach of using a Thai orthography as a bridging language to Thai, propounded by Mahidol University, and the (rare) use of Khmer script are dissected. The chapter is rounded off by a section on the limited, persistent use of Khmer as a heritage and resource script and a discussion of the iconicity of Khmer identity.

The chapter by Ho & Chinnapong addresses the issue of rights in an urban context, focusing on the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) plan to develop the Rattanakosin heritage district of Bangkok, and the effects on diversity and communities. The chapter is well situated in the academic literature and describes the majority positions held by the three main players, namely the BMA, the Crown Property Bureau, and Wat Pho, as well as the voices and claims of community leaders and residents, involving support from NGOs and academics. The chapter deftly points out that place-based cultural and heritage claims, such as those of dried seafood merchants, struggle to attain the same level of ethnic-based cultural rights because of issues such as intergenerational and residential mobility in the urban context. The chapter recommends heritage custodianship by local communities.

Moving from the city to the forest, the volume includes a chapter on the long-standing and deadlocked issue of community forestry by Sae Chua. This is a substantial chapter, focusing on Northeast Thailand and therefore primarily Thai Lao, Bru and Phu Thai and Yao communities, though the ethnic aspects are not considered in any depth, and perhaps should have been. It looks beyond the traditional cultural rights-based environmentalism and associated claims of custodianship under communitarian, constitutionally based claims to analyze how the community forestry movement is essentially one to justify large-scale community exploitation of forests for farmland and foraging for basic survival, versus state initiatives to control forests and forest people. The chapter shows how environmentalism and rights under the community forestry movement have now evolved via the National Land Reform Network into communal land use titles. While the chapter adequately captures the historical context and presents the key dynamics of conservation versus eviction, one dynamic which is overlooked is the state-sponsored explosion of population in Northeast Thailand, demonstrating that responsibility for encroachment ultimately rests with the state.

Staying in the Northeast, Sunanta addresses a single site ethnographic study of a Phu Thai village, Ban Phu, despite its more expansive title, 'Negotiating with the center: Diversity and local cultures in Thailand'. Furthermore, the chapter struggles to present the Phu Thai as an ethnic group, despite a wider literature on the Phu Thai (see <http://www.phutai.thai-isan-lao.com/phutai-literaturelist.html>). Nonetheless, it presents an interesting, in-depth study of the village's history over the decades. It analyses key dynamics in its successful development, mainly close ties with officials and higher institutions, including the military and the monarchy, dating from the Cold War era. These contributed towards the village becoming a cultural tourist site. The chapter points out that state recognition of the Phu Thai and patronage of the village via localism projects has headed off claims for rights-based recognition, shutting down a public space for discussing cultural rights.

Sakboon usefully summarizes the situation of Thailand's highland ethnic minorities, focusing on how state policy both attempts to integrate highlands minorities by transforming them into Thai citizens and at the same time throws up barriers to their social mobility. The chapter provides a history of Thai state development policy of highland minorities, focusing on the national security issue during the Cold War and evolving state policy which first integrated highlands minorities and then revoked citizenship, with a description of the present, convoluted, legal situation. The chapter then considers in specific detail discrimination and marginalization, including restricted mobility and lack of access to education, spurred by attributing a drug addict identity to the minorities. The chapter concludes by making the extremely valid point that equal citizenship is unobtainable for many due to bureaucratic obstacles, local politics, and low-level corruption.

A somewhat anomalous chapter by Haberkorn addresses the Thai human rights culture during a historical period, 1958 to 1988. It is essentially a desk review of arbitrary detentions from 1958-1963 and 1976 to 1979 in the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, via the UN Human Rights Yearbook contributions by Thailand. While a useful exercise in understanding national human rights and the mechanisms by which they were abrogated (by branding opponents as hooligans), and of use for comparison with the repressive tactics of the present regime, the chapter is not tied particularly well to cultural rights *per se*.

To sum up, the book presents interesting ethnographic studies of various communities within the guiding framework of cultural rights. While it does not particularly address the broader human rights issues facing the larger, regional ethnic communities, the volume does open up the issue of cultural rights for discussion at a respected Thai institution under the Ministry of Culture. Finally, the book would have benefited from a conclusion, perhaps drawing together the main themes and suggesting avenues for further research, such as racial discrimination. Hopefully, the Culture and Rights in Thailand project will lead to successor projects and further, similar volumes.