

In This Issue

Although the subject matter, geographic location, and disciplinary orientation of the five articles in this issue differ, they share substantial thematic and methodological resonances, which all of the authors noted when they read one another's articles in manuscript form. The articles share a concern with delineating the complexity of cultural contact, an interest in looking at how difference is produced, and a commitment to looking at questions such as the process of identity formation within a historical context. State formation and state power (in a variety of states—twentieth-century India, Qing China, the People's Republic of China, twentieth-century Indonesia) are analytical concerns of each of these authors. To some degree, all of the authors are resisting binary categories and are looking for a “middle ground” that will provide an arena for fresh analytical insights.

ARUN AGRAWAL's article concerns the management of the forest resources and its implications for community and state formation in the Kumaon Himalaya (north India) during the course of the twentieth century. The article traces the varying ways in which forest councils mediated between the state and the people who depended on the forests. His empirical evidence comes both from records of infractions of the rules of the forest councils and his own field work.

TANIA MURRAY LI's essay examines the relations between hill people and coastal people in Sulawesi in Central Sumatra. Her article demonstrates the ways in which the identities of the hill people are historically constructed in relation to the identities of coastal elites. Her paper traces the complex role that outside authority has had in the formation of local community and identity, and she finds that the hill people are often anxious to reap the benefits that they perceive would follow from a closer relationship with the state. Her empirical evidence, like Agrawal's, comes both from written records and her own fieldwork.

C. PAT GIERSCH looks at some of these same issues in another time and place—the southwest Chinese frontier in Yunnan during the period 1700–1880. He gives us snapshots of several residents of the frontier area, in order to show us the inadequacy of conceptual categories normally used to talk about the frontier. He uses the concept of “middle ground” to imagine a model other than assimilation or sinicization to think about the relations between Han Chinese and others on the borders.

BARRY SAUTMAN discusses debates about paleoanthropology and their political and cultural implications in China. A substantial body of Chinese scientific opinion disputes the “out of Africa” hypothesis, which suggests that *homo sapiens* evolved in Africa one to two hundred thousand years ago. These scientists argue instead that humans originated in China. Sautman's essay is rich with implications for connections between science and nationalism, and his invocation of Pilttdown Man (“the first Englishman”) reminds us that the conjuncture between paleoanthropology and nationalism is not particular to China.

EVELYN BLACKWOOD writes about the Minangkabau, an Islamic, matrilineal people in West Sumatra. Through a careful reading of writings codifying customary

practice (*adat*) written by elite urban men beginning in the early twentieth century, she problematizes *adat* as a source of knowledge about Minangkabau culture and identity and shows ways in which the roles of women appear muted in these texts. She shows how contradictions with Dutch and Islamic influences are mediated in *adat* writings and discusses how the flexibility of *adat* sayings has allowed them to be interpreted in light of contemporary concerns, particularly during the New Order of Suharto.

When I asked the authors of these five articles to read and respond to each other's essays, I was rewarded with a richness of commentary, highlights of which I will reproduce here. The first point of common ground that the authors of the articles in this issue noticed has to do with their interest in explicating the intricacies of state power and the processes involved in its exercise. As C. PAT GIERSCH put it:

Tania Murray Li's and Arun Agrawal's work shares with mine a curiosity about state power over land, people, production, and culture. Each article, in its own way, seeks to explain complex interactions between states and societies, cores and peripheries, the powerful and the weak. Perhaps the most interesting link among these three articles is their collective concern with moving beyond simplistic dichotomies: the actions of the (allegedly) unified state as opposed to those of the (allegedly) homogenous local community or the relations between one (supposedly) primordial ethnic group and another. Instead, each author explains how crucial cultural, economic, and political changes were produced through various processes of interaction, whether trade, protest, violence, or participatory management of forests. (Giersch, e-mail, 9 October 2000)

EVELYN BLACKWOOD echoes this observation when she comments that her paper and those by Giersch, Li, and Agrawal all explore the processes involved in the interface between the state and indigenous practices. She writes:

I like the focus on what happens in the interstices of these processes [of the interface between the state and indigenous practice], and the refusal to make any simple conclusion about what constitutes structures or groups, whether "the state" or "the indigenous people." These essays provide further evidence that states are not just about oppression and indigenous ethnic groups are not just about resistance. The processes at the interstices are much more complex. As Giersch notes, both sides are agents and objects of transformation, resulting in no simple pattern of assimilation, but recreation of practices into new forms. This is apparent in all cases: on the Chinese frontier (Giersch), with the forest council in north India (Agrawal), with the hill folk of central Sulawesi (Li), and with the Minangkabau (Blackwood). (Blackwood, e-mail, 29 December 2000)

TANIA LI comments that she and Agrawal share a common conceptualization of the nature of the relationship between state and community, and a common critique of the concept of community that they find in some advocacy literature. She elucidates the commonalities between the two essays:

First, the essays share a more or less explicit critique of concepts of state power as emanating outwards from a central source and being imposed on already existing, united, resistant communities. Interrogating the imputed boundaries between state and community, both of our papers show that communities are formed in and through their engagement with state powers and, moreover, that these are engagements that some, if not all, of the populace positively seek. State formation occurs anywhere and

everywhere that “the state” is invoked to arbitrate disputes between villagers, or every time they come to view themselves as unruly, in need of external guidance. Second, we share a critique of advocacy literature that takes the integrity of communities for granted and fails to appreciate the extent to which measures to “devolve power” to communities instead tie communities ever more tightly into bureaucratic webs. Agrawal focuses especially on the way that forest communities have used their local knowledge to intensify their own surveillance and participate in the crafting of the rules by which they will be bound. Villagers demand that the government provide them with maps, boundaries, and legal recognition—invoking precisely the machinery of rule that writers such as Scott see being imposed on them. (Li, e-mail, 2 November 2000)

A further point of commonality, this one encompassing all of the papers, has to do with the construction of identity. Sautman’s piece is fundamentally concerned with the question of what constitutes Chineseness and how conceptions of Chineseness are inscribed as biologically and racially constituted by the paleoanthropological establishment. Blackwood sees Minangkabau identity as historically constituted and fluid. She writes:

State and other processes have an impact on cultural identity, but these processes are not received or transformed in all places by all people within one “ethnic” group in the same way. Different sorts of identities appear depending on the location of the actors, a point that both Agrawal and Giersch make as well. Thus, although urban Minangkabau elites accommodate state and Islamic ideology by reinterpreting *adat* sayings, rural village elders do not make the same accommodations in their practice of *adat*. (Blackwood, e-mail, 3 January 2001)

Li writes about the constitution of identity in the uplands of Sulawesi, while ARUN AGRAWAL pinpoints the idea of contact leading to something new and different as an issue that animates both his work and Giersch’s:

Pat Giersch’s paper is especially focussed to examine how Tai “indigenous” identities and institutions were shaped by and shaped political processes, so that it does not make much sense to argue about the disappearance or survival of such identities and institutions as if they existed without the agency of the Tai. Nor does it make much sense to talk about the process being only uni-directional, since the Tai also shaped imperial projects and institutions. Just as Giersch shows that the Yunnan / Burmese frontier is less to be seen as the frontier and more to be seen as the context where mainstream Chinese and “indigenous” groups constituted one another, my paper examines how “indigenous” and British institutions of rule in the Kumaon hills, mostly thought of as distinct modalities of governance, came together to create what we see today as community. The state that came to Kumaon and made an effort to create new institutions around forest use was forced to take account of existing practices of forest use and mould its imperial project to those practices. At the same time, the community that one is often tempted to take for granted as the counter to state power is in reality a product that bears the strong impress of state projects as well. (Agrawal, e-mail, 13 October 2000)

A further commonality that links the Li, Agrawal, and Giersch pieces is that their projects are all situated in transitional zones. As Agrawal explains:

Each of the three papers is talking about transitional zones, and the construction of social interactions, collective identities, and governance institutions in such zones. Hill and forest areas in India have often been seen as the refuge of the politically

marginalized from efforts at centralized control, and, clearly, it is against such constructs of the margin as an isolated region, free from influences of central power, that Tania Li is arguing (interestingly enough, the “center” in her case is the coast). Pat Giersch casts the frontier as the middle ground, first by rethinking it as the space between two centers and then by showing that narratives of the sinicization of such middle ground are deeply flawed. Such marginal locations have often been used in South Asian historiography as either coming under the influence of centralizing regimes or falling outside the ambit of central control, and the history of these regions has been written from the point of view of the center. Subaltern scholarship, especially in its earlier incarnation in the 1980s and early 1990s, has done much to question such narratives of marginality and make a serious effort toward producing histories that change the focus of the surveyor’s lens. (The work of David Arnold on the Gudem-Rampa uprisings in the hills of Andhra Pradesh, that of David Hardiman and Ajay Skaria in South Gujarat, of Ramchandra Guha on Kumaon and Garhwal, and of Gautam Bhadra on frontier rebellions during the Mughal period come to mind.) In a general sense, these three essays also make a similar point to that of the subalternists, but they are different in their questioning even of some of those categories that earlier efforts at depicting the marginal and subaltern took for granted. I think that these papers are continuing evidence for the possibility that attention to such transition zones and to social change in such locations can have significant conceptual dividends. (Agrawal, e-mail, 13 October 2000)

Sautman’s essay, dealing as it does with prehistory, may at first glance seem to be set apart from the other four essays. But it too is fundamentally concerned with state power, with identity, with the production of difference, and with the ways in which state power is implicated in the production of difference. Tania Li points out that Sautman shows how differences once understood as cultural and historically contingent (like the difference between the hill and coastal people she studies) have become ethnicized and then “biologized and racialized as they became hitched to phases of a nationalist project.” Li also sees other connections with the Sautman piece—with Giersch’s attention to state efforts to construct and maintain boundaries in the service of national projects; to Blackwood’s discussion of the deployment of scholarship to serve official ends; and to Agrawal’s concern with issues of nation, history, and memory.

BARRY SAUTMAN himself elaborates on the connection to Blackwood that Li touched on:

The connection between my article and that of Evelyn Blackwood on Minangkabau *adat* writings is that both involve dissections of how expertise is deployed to serve state ideological purposes. While in the case of the *adat* writings, the state sought to establish a link between experts on a sort of customary law and the New Order through interpretations that would serve the state’s interest and reinforce its legitimacy, the Chinese state uses paleoanthropology in a sustained campaign to reorient popular concerns away from class and ethnic minority themes to pan-Chinese nationalism. Paleoanthropologists, as experts in the biology of deep prehistory, have been mobilized to that nationalist end, through appeals to patriotism and material and political rewards. (Sautman, e-mail, 13 November 2000)

Sautman also finds resonances between his article and Li’s. He writes:

[Li] deals with the production of difference, especially how the hegemony of cultural standards exercised by coastal people affects hill people. The state has played a considerable role in establishing this cultural hegemony, defining in many ways the

relationship between coastal and hill people. In some respects, hill people accept this hegemony, because they seek a close relationship with the state, one that mirrors what coastal people have already. In my own paper, I have tried to show how the state has made use of paleoanthropology to reinforce the sense of division between Chinese and foreigners, while at the same time including minorities within a supposedly biologically as well as culturally-based Chinese ethnic group. (Sautman, e-mail, 13 November 2000)

Arun Agrawal suggested that the articles he read shared an effort to question categories, which “resonates to a much wider range of discussions in the social sciences, and to some slow, almost subterranean shifts, discernable in some disciplines.” He goes on to say that “many of the seemingly stable concepts central to typological analysis since perhaps the early twentieth century need remarkable rethinking: community, state, market, frontier, local, global, indigenous, tradition, modernity, and so forth.” (Agrawal, e-mail, 13 October 2000)

These five articles all represent a part of the remarkable rethinking of categories that Agrawal notes. I hope this introduction will entice you to read them.

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