

## Book Reviews

ANDREW C. WILLFORD. *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice: History and Recognition in Malaysia's Plantations*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2014. 318 pp.

The trope of the ‘sucked oranges’, which was first used in the 1930s to describe the systematic exploitation of South Indian labourers on Malaya’s plantation frontier, has since inspired numerous scholarly works on the subject (Aiyar 1938: 22; Jain 1970; Wiebe and Mariappen 1978). Andrew Willford’s sensitive and detailed portrayal of Tamil plantation residents differs from these past approaches in its bold attempt to tell the story of these sucked oranges in their own words. It shifts the focus from labourers to residents, shedding new light on the community’s efforts to hold on to the last remaining vestiges of its identity amidst the Malaysian state’s relentless seizure of plantation lands to make way for development projects aimed at furthering Malay pride. This process, which began in the 1960s, acquired renewed momentum with the government’s announcement of ‘Vision 2020’ in 1991. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted primarily in the state of Selangor, the book’s value lies in its discussion of the ambivalence characterizing plantation residents’ responses to their displacement; their ability, for instance, to exist simultaneously in states of alienation and empowerment. *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice* picks up from Willford’s first book, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (2006), by elaborating on the violence of evictions and forced resettlements as well as the narratives of victimhood that these experiences elicited. The crux of the discussion is the looming question of what the future holds for the plantation residents, now robbed of the physical landscapes which had formerly given them at least their subaltern identity. As the residents of the last plantations struggle to reconcile their memories of a relatively peaceful past with the prospect of an uncertain future, the author presents this unsettling question for the reader’s urgent consideration.

The discussion focuses on three states of displacement: communities facing a future of retrenchment and resettlement; those that had been reduced to ‘squatter’ status; and, finally, former plantation residents resettled in low-cost housing. Their responses to these tiers of displacement are explored over the course of ten chapters. At the outset, the author clarifies that his is not a historical focus, although he is interested in recovering a subaltern community’s sense of its history (p. 15). Chapter 2 begins the narrative with an overview of the politics of development in Malaysia and the implications for Tamil estate communities. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the related issues of nostalgia and compensation. These chapters’ discussion of the Tamils’ recourse to spirituality as a means of coping with

inadequate material compensation leads us to Chapter 5, which studies the contributions of activist individuals and groups working to seek redress on behalf of the embattled residents. Chapter 6 discusses the urgency of securing adequate political representation for the residents, particularly in light of the looming threat of demolition facing the remaining estate temples. Chapter 7 elaborates on the issue of legal violence by exploring the causes and consequences of the Kampung Medan riot that erupted between Indians and Malays in 2001. Chapter 8 probes the possibility of reconciliation with the circumstances of forced resettlement through a discussion of resettled residents' perspectives, while Chapters 9 and 10 examine the involvement of professional segments of Malaysian Indian society on the issue of resettlement, with an emphasis on the dramatic rise to national prominence of the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF).

The triangular relationship between violence, displacement, and nostalgia forms the overarching theme of Willford's compelling narrative. Of particular value is his argument that the Tamils' collective memory of betrayal – their so-called 'archive of victimhood' – has constituted an important political critique not only of the state's indifference to eviction, but also of the inadequacy of political representation, especially by the Malayan Indian Congress (p. 39). In light of HINDRAF's demands for compensation from the British for having 'abandoned' their Tamil subjects to the whims of Malay chauvinism, this argument points to a betrayal at a much more local level.

Willford's discussion of religious ritualism as a coping mechanism provides important insights into a little known aspect of plantation life. A noteworthy contribution here is Willford's examination of the violence of animal sacrifice, which has persisted in spite of religious opposition, as a response to the violence of state law, as the ritual is believed to imbue temples with sacred power enabling them to resist demolition (pp. 38, 159). The discussion forges meaningful connections between the community's archive of current victimhood and its envisioned state of future empowerment. In the plantation residents' psyche, their temples face the threat of demolition because the gods they house are powerful enough to threaten the dominant Malay-Muslim identity. The Tamils' articulations of a defensive racism alongside the institutionalized racism to which they are subject is a further example of the author's attention to the community's subtle exercise of agency within the limits imposed by its marginality.

This book could have benefitted from a wider discussion of nostalgia's significance in informing expressions of Tamil identity. From yearnings for the lost splendours of Lemuria to the travails of Tamils in war-torn Jaffna, nostalgia has influenced imaginings of Tamil identity across time and space. As a literary device, it was applied to consolidate political power in Tamilnadu just as it offered a psychological resource for plantation Tamils to cope with their marginalization (Ramaswamy 1997). These perspectives could have been incorporated as a way of framing Tamil understandings of marginality, redemption and empowerment. Regardless, this book is a timely contribution to the field of ethnic minority studies in a context wherein the resettlement of minority peoples continues to pose complex ethical and political dilemmas. The plantation Tamils' situation offers parallels to the uncertainties facing Malaysia's indigenous tribal

communities who are equally at the mercy of aggressive development; their profound sense of loss and lack of representation echoes the plight of the Rohingya boat people and other refugee communities suffering the effects of displacement on an international scale (Dean and Levi 2003). In addition to being a valuable resource to scholars of Southeast Asian studies, *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice* should be required reading for individuals seeking subaltern perspectives on nation-building driven by ethnic-majority nationalism.

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ANDREW ALAN JOHNSON. *Ghosts of the New City: Spirits, Urbanity, and the Ruins of Progress in Chiang Mai*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014. 190 pp.

Cities express progress, prosperity, and power, and are the stuff of human imagination and endeavour. The allures of the city are hard to resist – the hubris of progress and ‘quality of life’ indicators of urban planning invoke utopian imaginations, while their excesses and failures elicit dystopias and fierce critiques. Corporate and government rhetoric encourage economic, intellectual, and moral investments such as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s promise to build over one hundred ‘smart cities’ (Greenfield 2014). Cities are spaces of meanings that rest on conceptions of progress, abstractions of power, and the interoperability between progress, power, and prosperity.

Andrew Alan Johnson’s new book evokes the idea of the city as ‘haunted’ space in a sophisticated yet highly readable ethnography of urbanity that