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## VIEWING AREAS: A REVIEW ESSAY

**Victor T. King and William D. Wilder.** *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia: An Introduction*. London: Routledge/Curzon, 2003. 384 pages, 11 maps, 40 figures.

**Jim Elmslie.** *Irian Jaya under the Gun: Indonesian Economic Development versus West Papuan Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002. 295 pages, 4 maps, 22 tables, 17 figures.

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*The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia* and *Irian Jaya under the Gun* are unlikely books to review together. The first, a textbook written for undergraduates, provides an introduction to the historical roots and current concerns of contemporary anthropological writing on Southeast Asia as part of a series that will include monographs on Southeast Asian societies. The second aims as much to inflame as to inform, using a combination of historical documentation, socioeconomic analysis, and personal testimonial to encourage readers to take an interest—and a stand—in the separatist conflict currently underway in Indonesia's easternmost province. That said, there are connections between the books. Irian Jaya's woes arguably bear a direct relationship to the province's uncertain place in area studies chartings. The Dutch defended the retention of western New Guinea after the rest of Indonesia gained independence by arguing that its inhabitants had nothing at all in common with their "Asian" neighbors. Some anthropologists demurely frame their ethnological mappings of the region to exclude this putatively "Melanesian" territory.<sup>1</sup> Victor King and William Wilder, the textbook's authors, who define Southeast Asia according to current national boundaries, mention postwar Dutch scholarship in Netherlands New Guinea, but have little more to say about the place.<sup>2</sup> For its part, *Irian Jaya under the*

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in a map at the beginning of Jane Atkinson and Shelly Errington's collection on gender in island Southeast Asia, "Irian Jaya/West New Guinea" falls outside the shaded areas that designate the "centrist" and "exchange archipelagos." The editors use these terms to group societies according to their kinship systems, which represent variants on a shared set of themes. See Jane Monnig Atkinson and Shelly Errington, eds., *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> In a peculiar appendix, the authors provide a list of ethnic groups that includes, under the heading "Eastern Indonesia, Lesser Sundas, Sulawesi, Moluccas (Maluku), Irian Jaya (West Papua)," the "Kapauku," the rather derogatory ethnonym used in Leopold Pospisil's early work on a group that now

*Gun*, like other works in the advocacy literature, flattens the social and cultural diversity depicted in *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia*; Elmslie refers to the Indonesian system as “Asian” and its representatives as of “Malay origin.” But it is not simply the different pictures of a shared landscape offered by these two books that make them interesting to read side by side. Equally illuminating are the different ways they contend with the risks that any author runs in taking an area as the focus of a study. To write is to exclude, and when one’s principle of exclusion is geographical, one limits the sorts of questions that come to mind.<sup>3</sup> If books were boxes, one might say that the contents of these two differ dramatically, but that they are “packed” according to the same equally problematic rationale.

Let us begin with *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia*. Although this textbook will certainly be useful elsewhere in the world, it makes sense that it was written and published in the United Kingdom. American anthropologists sometimes feel ambivalent about undergraduate training in their discipline. A friend who majored in anthropology at Stanford in the early 1980s had an opportunity at a brown bag discussion to ask Clifford Geertz what an undergraduate who wanted to become an anthropologist should study. Anything but anthropology, my friend remembers being told. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, the pathway into the profession is by way of a bachelor’s degree in anthropology; there is no coursework required of doctoral students, and those who come to the discipline after majoring in something else have to complete a master’s degree before beginning their PhD. What’s more, given the financial constraints faced by many British students, one can see why authors and publishers would try to squeeze a plethora of information into a single, relatively affordable text. In this context, *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia* performs a helpful function, although, as I will argue, at a cost.

The book begins chronologically with a discussion of the traditions of ethnological research that grew up under the varied colonial regimes of the region. Although “great men” like Malinowski, Mauss, and Durkheim make an appearance, so do ordinary civil servants, whose interests and imperatives differed depending on the administration to which they belonged. Thus the French and Americans paid special heed to the “hill tribes” and “minorities” that inhabited their respective colonies’ “unpacified” frontiers, while the purported tension between “Islam” and “custom” figured prominently in the Dutch ethnological writings. This varied scholarship belongs to the prehistory of the anthropology King and Wilder focus upon, which emerged, along with the very category of Southeast Asia, following World War II. The authors discuss the scholarship of the period of decolonization, 1950-1970, in two chapters. The first covers the European tradition, which pursued questions raised by Dutch and French structuralism through research on myth, marriage, and symbolism in societies at the peripheries of the region’s emerging nations. The second concerns the American tradition, which privileged the dynamics and effects of modernization

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calls itself the “Me.” Left unmentioned are equally populous and well studied “ethnicities” such as the Biak, Dani, Asmat, and Marind Anim. Much in the manner of colonial census tables, the list ends with “Other Asians.”

<sup>3</sup> See Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Discipline and Practice: ‘The Field’ as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology,” in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1-46.

among the peasant populations at the core of these new nations. Key figures like J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong and Clifford Geertz receive careful treatment, and the section on the latter is particularly illuminating. Given the rather unsubtle way that Geertz is often branded as a promoter of the study of “isolated” cultures, it is helpful to be reminded that Geertz’s insistence on cultural difference emerged in the context of a scholarly project focused on the homogenizing dynamics of social change. This trans-Atlantic perspective illuminates broad continuities in American scholarship on the region, continuities easily overlooked by scholars caught in the fray of debates on the discipline’s complicity with colonialism and imperialism. Even as they critique the bad old days of modernization theory, today’s American anthropologists of Southeast Asia remain indebted to this period in the sense that problems of modernity, identity, religion, and economy remain central to the best contemporary work.

And yet much is left out by this dichotomy, with European structuralists, then Marxists, facing off with American culturalists. When we reach the discussion of contemporary scholarship, King and Wilder’s framework fails to capture the highly productive poaching undertaken by both “sides” across their respective domains. A consideration of the European tradition should surely have room for a fuller discussion of Fenella Cannell’s *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*.<sup>4</sup> Cannell’s remarkable study combines Maurice Bloch’s “Marxist” analytic with insights from the American tradition to find classically Southeast Asian forms of kinship and ideas of power at work in subtle, yet far-reaching ways in a community long held by observers—as well as its inhabitants—to have no “authentic” culture at all. Cannell’s study is mentioned once, as an example of “postmodern” ethnography, a label haphazardly slapped on a range of recent work. Another remarkable omission is Webb Keane’s *Signs of Recognition*.<sup>5</sup> Written on the American side of the Atlantic, Keane’s study offers a carefully theorized interrogation of the structuralist tradition, which is premised on an approach to representation that takes ritual speech and ceremonial exchange as historically situated and inherently risky forms of social action. Although *Signs of Recognition* does not focus on issues of modernity, identity, religion, and economy per se, Keane’s analysis shows how the semiotic study of phenomena once monopolized by “European”-style anthropology might open onto broader “American”-style questions of social change.

The fact that these works elude King and Wilder’s overview reveals the limits built into this kind of book. The textbook’s first chapter rehashes the dominant critiques of the very idea of defining Southeast Asia as a unified “area” to study. Yet, provisos and qualifications aside, the authors forge on, suggesting that it may be possible to find some empirical regularity among the societies treated under this rubric. The risks associated with this seemingly modest claim become clear in the second, thematically oriented section of the book. Some of the ethnographies treated in these chapters undergo rather idiosyncratic readings, by virtue of the way the authors group the topics they discuss. There are chapters on “social and economic change,” “ethnicity, identity, and nationalism,” “ecology and environmental change,” “gender and the

<sup>4</sup> Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Webb Keane, *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

sexes," and "urban ways of life." Within this framework, particular ethnographies appear as providing answers to particular empirical, geographically defined questions. Thus John Pemberton's *On the Subject of "Java"* tells us how people in Southeast Asia constitute "ethnicity," and James Siegel's *Solo in the New Order* contributes to our understanding of how they "adapt" to "urban ways of life."<sup>6</sup> Another reading of Pemberton's book might point out that it radically challenges this sort of place-based anthropology—and, indeed, anthropology *tout court*—while Siegel's study is as much an unsettling of Western assumptions about language and subjectivity as it is a description of a particular brand of urban life. The chapter on gender is particularly flagrant in this regard. The main purpose of the rich body of literature surveyed in this section seems to be to provide a response to the query: are the sexes relatively equal in Southeast Asia or not? After a promising beginning, the authors end up focusing on the least exciting problems one might draw from the European and American traditions. What is Southeast Asia like? What is to become of this place?

One does not have to read the entire book to sense that the authors' failure sufficiently to problematize the region as an object of inquiry is going to pose certain problems. Looking at the book jacket is almost enough. Although one cannot tell from the title how porous the category, "anthropology," will prove to be—with non-anthropologists from John Furnivall to Benedict Anderson quite rightly appearing as central to the scholarship discussed—one does get a sense of the ambiguity that runs through the work. In the title, the word, "modern," means both "contemporary" and "of modernity." We are left uncertain as to whether the textbook will privilege recently published studies or studies that focus on modern life. The image on the cover, made up of side-by-side photographs, captures the authors' orientation to the second meaning perfectly. A smiling peasant woman looks up from her planting and across the photographic frame to the temple and gleaming skyscrapers shown in the adjacent picture. If the woman in the rice field is in some sense emblematic of "traditional" Southeast Asia, the postcolonial cityscape is her future: a nationalized modernity, which is both a pleasant object of reverie and a figure of the forces to which she must "adapt."

In *Irian Jaya under the Gun*, boundaries take shape in a far more sinister fashion. On this book's cover, one finds a pair of human figures. On the right, a western Indonesian man in a civil service uniform sits astride a motorcycle. His attention is turned to the left towards a Papuan man wearing a penis gourd, who stares into the background, pointedly avoiding the first man's gaze. "Indonesian Economic Development" meets "West Papuan Nationalism," and the hostility is palpable. Elmslie lays out his thesis in the book's opening chapter, which accounts for why neither man is smiling:

[T]he West Papuans are "under the gun," physically and metaphorically. The conflict between West Papuan nationalism and Indonesian economic development is complex and multi-faceted, yet it became clear, as this work progressed, that, in the final analysis, it is economic development that is really killing the West Papuans...A rude awakening lay in store for the West Papuans as they emerged from millennia of isolation to find a world where hunger for

<sup>6</sup> John Pemberton, *On the Subject of "Java"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); James T. Siegel, *Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

resources was so great that anything could be justified in the name of development, including theft and murder. It is axiomatic that the West Papuans will continue their struggle for independence: from their point of view they have no choice. (p. 8)

Clearly, the reader is not in for the kind of subtle and qualified boundary building one finds in King and Wilder's textbook. That is not to say that Elmslie isn't aware of the different perspectives one gains on the troubled province, depending on whether one approaches it from the West or from the East:

If you travel down the Indonesian archipelago from the metropolis of Jakarta, Irian Jaya is the largest, most remote and most underdeveloped province in a vast, densely populated, multi-ethnic island nation. The problems encountered there: human rights abuses, corruption, ethnic tension, inequality, and land ownership disputes, are found throughout Indonesia. However, if you travel to Irian Jaya by way of Papua New Guinea, you perceive a different picture. You are in the occupied Melanesian country of West Papua. (p. 132)

Although Elmslie makes the point that "Irian Jaya is where Asia meets the Pacific, not in a clear line, but in a gradual blur," he is frank in describing his own perspective, which is based on his long acquaintance with Papua New Guinea. A tribal art dealer, as well as a political economist, Elmslie has traveled extensively on both sides of the island, making forty trips since 1983. The book includes a number of mistakes someone familiar with other parts of Indonesia might not have made. *Orang asin*, "salt people," appears instead of *orang asing*, "foreigners," a spelling mistake reflecting Papuan pronunciation; Elmslie presumes that census data on Indonesian speakers can be used to calculate the number of migrants in the province, whereas Indonesian (or rather Malay) has long served as a lingua franca in this region; rather than supporting West Papuan separatism, the newly independent nation of East Timor immediately—and predictably, given its leaders' need to live with a more powerful neighbor—came out in support of Indonesia's territorial integrity. Although the book began life as a doctoral dissertation in economics, *Irian Jaya under the Gun* often strikes one more as an expression of West Papuan nationalism than as an analysis of the phenomenon. The question is why.

To a large extent, Elmslie's embrace of the Papuan cause stems from the merits of the case. In the book's opening chapters, one finds a brief synopsis of western New Guinea's history, including a discussion of how the United States pressured the Dutch to transfer the territory to the United Nations, then to Indonesia in 1963. Elmslie cites compelling evidence on the abuses surrounding the "Act of Free Choice" held by Indonesia as part of the settlement in 1969, when 1,022 bribed and threatened representatives voted unanimously in favor of the territory's integration into the Republic. This synopsis is followed by an analysis of socioeconomic data confirming the very real disparities in health, wealth, and education that divide the province's indigenous inhabitants from other Indonesians. Elmslie is on solid ground using this data, along with data on the abuses associated with the province's enormous copper and gold mine, run by United States-based Freeport MacMoran, to argue that the Papuans have every reason to question the benefits of Indonesian citizenship. His discussion of West Papuan politics is somewhat less compelling. Elmslie describes the Papuan movement's "Great Leader," Theys Eluay, who voted in the Act of Free Choice

and served as a government party politician in the 1970s and 1980s, as an anomaly, when many of the leaders of the post-1998 movement were just as much the beneficiaries of New Order patronage. Certainly, the fact that Tom Beanal, the other prominent Papuan leader of the post-Suharto period, serves on the board of Freeport MacMoran is worth pondering, given the relationship between nationalism and development proposed in the book. Just as questionable is Elmslie's use of Indonesian government statistics to confirm the claims of commanders from the Free Papua Organization (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*, or OPM) concerning the number of currently active OPM troops. Even if Indonesian census figures were accurate—which seems debatable—there are surely other explanations, having to do with labor migration, for instance, for the relative dearth of young men in the village rolls. Finally, considering the mass gatherings of 1998 to 2000, it seems reasonable to claim that support for independence has remained very high—and even grown—over the period of Indonesian rule. But Elmslie simplifies the processes involved in this outcome by tracing it to the fact that “once a person's identity is established by historical and cultural influences, it is nearly impossible to change.” (p. 23) This premise begs the question of how the province's indigenous inhabitants have built a social world that both relies on and rejects Indonesian institutions and ways of life.

But Elmslie's affinities also seem to result from the peculiarly compelling quality of his encounters with Papuans. *Irian Jaya under the Gun* tells us less about Papuan political consciousness, per se, than about the real and imagined role of Europeans, Australians, and Americans in giving the current movement its distinctive form. Although the book falls short of Elmslie's stated goal—to provide verified “facts” on the situation (p. 134)—it is highly revealing nonetheless. Chapter 7, “International Media, Political Activism, and the OPM: A Personal Perspective,” describes how the author became directly involved in the separatist struggle. Future histories of Papuan nationalism will trace the rise of the post-Suharto popular, non-violent movement to two events in 1996: the exposure of human rights abuses in and around the Freeport mine, first by an Australian NGO, then by the Bishop of Jayapura, and the OPM's kidnapping of a group of European and Indonesian naturalists, which ended in the murder of two of the Indonesians and brutal reprisals against villages in the Mapnduma region. Both incidents attracted sustained attention from the international media and further exposés by Indonesian and international human rights groups. The pro-independence rallies of 1998 directly followed a series of demonstrations in Jayapura and Jakarta against the abuses outlined in the various reports.

Elmslie recounts the personal role he played in the circulation of this information, as well as his joint investigations with the independent journalist, Ben Bohane. Like others before them, these two men felt they could only grasp the truth about West Papua by seeing the province for themselves. Elmslie's account of Bohane's adventures in Mapnduma, where the journalist went shortly before the kidnapping to interview Kelly Kwalik, a prominent OPM commander, recalls the more lurid accounts of backcountry travel found in advocacy classics like George Monbiot's *Poisoned Arrows*.<sup>7</sup> We see a European who is utterly dependent on his Papuan nationalist hosts, frustrated by their seeming failure to cooperate in his mission, yet seduced by the

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<sup>7</sup> George Monbiot, *Poisoned Arrows: An Investigation in the Last Place in the Tropics* (London: Abacus/Sphere Books, 1989).

experience into embracing their cause. Bohane spent several weeks in the forest waiting to meet Kwalik. He hounded his OPM handlers until one of them confessed that he himself was the commander, a claim that later proved to be false. The Indonesian authorities were quite wrong in accusing Bohane of having incited the kidnapping; but, as Elmslie points out, they were not wrong to suggest that his visit—which signaled Australian interest in the conflict—had an impact on the events that followed.<sup>8</sup> The mirroring of fascination and frustration so clear in this literature’s description of encounters between Papuan separatists and outsiders tells us something quite important about the expectations that have motivated the more theatrical forms of Papuan nationalist practice. Whereas the Papuan man in the cover photograph refuses to look at the Indonesian civil servant, individuals like Theys Eluay and “Kelly Kwalik” have been more than willing to make eye contact with people from beyond Indonesia, in hopes that, by virtue of the encounter, even more powerful foreigners will look back. One could almost picture the Papuan man in the photograph as looking past the uniformed figure of a national modernity to meet the gaze of a much wider world.

Books are not boxes after all; one cannot contain the linkages opened by a text, even one bounded by a particular geography. Ironically, it is King and Wilder’s text, which deals more self-consciously than Elmslie’s with the arbitrary character of borders, that more effectively domesticates the broader insights raised by the material it covers. Elmslie’s book, while less useful in some respects, is more provocative in others, in revealing the very conditions of the production of a particular geographic subject. In this era of sound bites and snap conclusions, there may be no way to tell the story of West Papua in a politically efficacious manner without reproducing the tropes on which international press reports on the province have long relied. Papuan nationalists have a good reason to find the image of “Stone Age” tribesmen with bows and arrows facing off with modern soldiers compelling, given the short attention span of those whose support they seek to gain. And yet, in his effort to witness the “facts” on the ground, Elmslie ends up telling a much more complicated tale. Papuan nationalism is neither a “South-East Asian” nor a “Melanesian” phenomenon. It is only by moving beyond these ethnological categories that one can come to understand how those who speak, and see, most effectively on behalf of this area have come to be *orang asing*, “foreigners”—like elite nationalist leaders, as I have argued elsewhere, but also like Elmslie himself.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bohane is not the only foreigner who influenced the kidnapers’ actions. One of the victims reports in his book on the ordeal that the European naturalists themselves came up with the idea of using the abduction to raise the OPM’s international profile. See Daniel Start, *The Open Cage: Murder and Survival in the Jungles of Irian Jaya* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> See Danilyn Rutherford, *Raiding the Land of the Foreigners: The Limits of the Nation on an Indonesian Frontier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) and “Why Papua Wants Freedom: Third-Person Nationalism and the Media of *Merdeka*” (unpublished manuscript).