

Haunted Houses and Ghostly Encounters: Ethnography and Animism in East Timor, 1860–1975

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When the Timorese surrendered their most sacred ancestral heirlooms to the Portuguese administrators in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, did they adopt a rationalist and naturalist cosmology? When they treated missionaries with the highest respect, did they do so out of their commitment to the Christian god? Or was all of this shaped by an animist point of view that flexibly took up and transformed whatever powerful forces arrived on the island?

Animism has ambiguous overtones in Southeast Asian studies. For a long time, the term denoted world religion's Other, conceived either as the ontology of those not converted to one of the scriptural, transcultural religions or as the residue of practices and ideas that preceded conversion and still resist orthodox purification. In this undertheorized context, it slightly hinted at "backwardness" and "superstition." Only in recent years has a broader debate on animism in anthropology, in which Philippe Descola, Tim Ingold, and others have revived the term as a critical counter-concept to Western-modern ontology, caught the attention of scholars of Southeast Asia.

Christopher Shepherd's meta-ethnography of East Timor before Indonesian occupation is probably the first monograph-length attempt to merge previous and current notions of animism in the region, and it is a successful one. This is not least due to his recognition that the new anthropology of ontologies is conditioned by the earlier reflective turn that questioned how anthropological representations were constructed in the first place.

Shepherd's book is not primarily a historical reconstruction of Timorese rituals and cosmologies in the period defined in the subtitle. Rather, it is an analysis of the way they were portrayed in the writings of colonial and professional ethnographers. Yet, the author also attempts to capture what eluded their gaze and thereby to understand how Timorese animism adapted to colonial circumstances.

His argument is in line with other analyses of Southeast Asian concepts of the stranger, like the figure of the stranger king. The Timorese saw a continuity between the powers of animist life forces and spirits on the one hand and the power of Portugal and Catholicism on the other. Adopting Christianity or respecting administrators was not simply a recognition of the Europeans' superior force but also served rather animist purposes. Timorese were trying to figure out who commanded the most effective power in their environment, in an arrangement that Shepherd, adopting Kaj Århem's term, calls "hierarchical animism." Insofar as this made the Timorese adopt new ceremonies and respect new socio-cosmic obligations, Shepherd calls the result "transformative animism." Only on the final page does the author arrive at the conclusion that this inclusive flexibility is not a deviation of animism but one of its central features.

Shepherd moves through a series of works, committing each chapter to one writer, characterized by a role model. Thus, among the ethnographers of the colonial era, he identifies “the Governor” (Afonso de Castro), “the Naturalist” (Henry Ogg Forbes), “the Magistrate” (Alberto Osório de Castro), “the Captain” (José Simoes Martinho), “the Administrator” (Armando Pinto Correia), and “the Missionary” (Abilio José Fernandes), while professional anthropology is represented by “the Sentimentalist” (Margaret King), “the Theologian” (David Hicks), “the Apprentice” (Shepard Forman), and “the Detective” (Elizabeth Traube).

While the positions of the colonial administrators vary quite a bit, none of them veers from the paradigm of European superiority, a fact that Shepherd often comments upon with wry humor. However, quite a number of these accounts—most dramatically the one by Fernandes—contain clues as to how the Timorese placed outsiders within their own cosmological framework. Professional ethnographers get a more extensive and detailed treatment. Here, Shepherd shows at once how they attempted to construct a unified cultural truth of the Timorese and how they reflected critically on their own procedures.

Still, Shepherd proposes his central thesis with considerable care. When he suggests that the Timorese conceived of foreigners in terms of spiritual power, he does so in the form of questions. These are not rhetorical—he does not try to force upon readers that Timorese unambiguously classified King as a *lulik* (sacred) person or took Hicks’s fearless strolls into the forest as unequivocal evidence that he was a wandering soul. Rather, he raises the possibility that the Timorese pondered this possibility.

In this way, he reiterates Timorese—and in many ways Southeast Asian—animism more generally. This is an ontology of possibilities that branch out according to communication and context, not one of an ultimate truth waiting to be revealed by science. In a way, Shepherd’s own reflections on ethnographic form concur with animist epistemology, thus suggesting that Southeast Asian epistemologies impact on the way that anthropologists know about them. So, did animism’s flexibility and indeterminacy inform its anthropological representations? In this respect, Shepherd could have been more explicit about the theoretical consequences of his analysis.

This reluctance to elaborate on consequences may relate to the fact that Shepherd never lets his own ethnographic knowledge of Timor—which produced his first book in 2014—interfere with his hermeneutic reading of others’ accounts. His refusal of the position of the know-it-all, however, leads to an odd exemption. On the one hand, his critical—though sympathetic—analysis of anthropological representations inexorably reveals their modernist and politically accommodating strategies, especially regarding the Indonesian occupation. This even pertains to ethnographers like Forman or Traube, whose reflexivity Shepherd praises. On the other, he never applies these standards to himself. Thus, he takes to task professionals for not laying open their strategies and agendas but never clearly reveals his own.

Lucidly written and well argued, narratively dense while not indulging in theoretical diver-

sions, this volume provides fascinating insights into both the history of ethnography on East Timor and the transformation of Timorese ritual and cosmology. It provides rich opportunities to reflect upon the conditions of representation, the power of colonialism, and the power of animism to tap into this power.

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Rural Development in Southeast Asia: Dispossession, Accumulation and Persistence

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In recent decades, rural societies and the agricultural sector in Southeast Asia have undergone dramatic transformations and been integrated into the global economy. A range of book series, special issues, regular articles, and reports have intensively addressed agrarian transitions in Southeast Asia. This topic has been framed and explored in specific contexts or from dominant theoretical or disciplinary perspectives. However, the overall picture of the dynamic processes of social change in rural society in Southeast Asia is still unclear. In *Rural Development in Southeast Asia: Dispossession, Accumulation and Persistence* Jonathan Rigg insightfully outlines the general trends of agrarian change in Southeast Asia, both critically and comparatively. This short book is part of Cambridge Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia, a series that focuses on a specifically featured country or theme through a brief but comprehensive overview of the debates in existing literature.

After clarifying the problematic rural-urban dichotomy, contributory rural-urban connections, and characteristic agrarian transitions, Rigg outlines these rural concerns in Chapter 1, as a mirror reflecting the social transformation processes on the ground, which challenges common modernization and development theories based on experiences from the Global North. In order to better understand rural development in Southeast Asia, three core issues—traditional rice farming, featured as smallholder persistence; market-oriented cash crops (focusing on rubber and oil palm) that are characterized by upland dispossession; and rural landlessness—are discussed in Chapters 2 to 4. Theoretically, starting from the agrarian question and related debates on interrelations among peasantry, peasant agriculture, and capitalism as a point of departure, Rigg conceptualizes the puzzle that “while peasants may have largely disappeared . . . the smallholders farm has not” (p. 7). Rigg maintains assiduous attention to this issue, in response to the transition toward large farms (Rigg *et al.* 2016; 2018; Rigg 2019). In addition, he argues that current theoretical con-