

region, Nicholas Tapp outlines a process of "historical marginalization" of ethnic minorities in border areas and their "increasing vulnerability . . . to manipulation and exploitation by centrist administrations" (149).

Both Rajah's and Tapp's papers, notwithstanding their differences, have a similar quality: in Lilley's words, to "simultaneously pursue a detailed contextual analysis and the portrayal of a macro-political order" (182).

The most interesting aspect of this book is perhaps the global picture that it draws of contemporary Anglo-Saxon social studies in Southeast Asia regarding "ethnic" and "ethnicity" issues and of the different approaches commanding it. It serves to underline, if need be, that a modern comprehensive anthropological theory of ethnicity in Southeast Asia remains to be formulated.

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THAILAND

WAJUPPA TOSSA, translator and editor. *Phādāēng Nāng Ai: A Translation of a Thai-Isan Folk Epic in Verse*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press (London and Toronto: Associated University Press), 1990. xii+174 pages. Appendices, indices, map, bibliography. Cloth US\$34.50; ISBN 0-8387-5139-3.

This volume makes accessible one of the literary treasures of the Thai Northeast. It presents the epic romance of a legendary local prince (Phādāēng), whose love for a princess (Nāng Ai) leads to struggles against the serpentine *nagas*, who ultimately triumph. The original text, some 3000 lines of poetry, is translated into English in a style intended to capture quite directly the original Thai/Lao metrical form. The translation is accompanied by a wealth of notes, commentary-discussions, lists of persons, places, relevant terms, and a select bibliography.

The poem is but one from the rich Thai-Isan tradition, but it is especially well known to the Thai audience, having been designated as secondary school supplementary reading by the Thai Ministry of Education, with publication in 1978. There is even a Thai popular song about the leading characters.

The translator is on the staff of Srinakharinwirot University, Mahasarakham, which has been instrumental in a movement to foster Thai-Isan cultural awareness and to preserve traditional local texts and artefacts. "Isan," itself a Bangkok-defined term meaning "Northeast," raises some interesting issues involved with the book's main project. Over the past two decades Thailand has witnessed an upsurge of interest in different regional traditions and cultures—a counterpart to a more unified construction of Central-Thai-based "national culture" emanating from Bangkok. A Thai term, *thongthin-niyom*, has even been coined to refer to this awakening of "regionalism."

In Northeastern villages, where the text of *Phādāēng Nāng Ai* is still a part of living oral tradition, and where palm-leaf versions of the text are still to be found, the regional/central synthesis is a matter of course. When "Isan" farmers speak their native language they still routinely claim they are speaking "Lao" and refer to themselves as "Lao" as opposed to "Thai," although bilingual villagers may become "Thai-Isan" when speaking Thai.

Not surprisingly, then, the “regionalism” movement is not without controversy, since for the Northeast it implies recognition of the cultural, if not political, identity of an “Isan”—something to be differentiated at least partially from the dominant (Central) Thai culture. Perhaps, too, it is not to be completely identified with the Lao.

The source text on which the translation was based, which is similar to the Ministry of Education’s reader, linguistically encapsulates the synthesis mentioned above: the language is identifiably Lao, but rather than being published in Lao script, it has been transcribed using Standard Thai orthography in a slightly modified way. Some people refer to this hybrid writing system as the “Isan language.”

The translator-editor makes a good case for selecting *Phādāēng Nāng Ai* as a tale that “uniquely represents the Isan people” (2), as the text is unknown in Laos (3), and the poem’s toponyms are mainly familiar places scattered throughout the Thai Northeast. Ancient archaeological sites come in for mention. One function of the particular poetic genre, common elsewhere in Thailand as well, is to assign folk etymologies on the basis of the story’s events to names of familiar places, such as local swamps, villages, or islands. Over a hundred such etymologized toponyms are mentioned in the text, and a useful list and map assign these to the current Northeastern landscape. Etymologies may show a racy ingenuity, as when Phādāēng’s faithful retainer, Bak Sam, is pulled from his horse: “His penis was plowing the land into a furrow. It became a swamp promptly filled with water and people called it ‘Huay Bak Sam’ ” (i.e., Bak Sam’s Swamp, pp. 87, 124).

Apart from etymologies, the translator summarizes various symbolic interpretations that the poem has been given by (i) a foreign anthropologist (TAMBIAH 1970, 298) who discerns a human vs nature theme, and (ii) by local Northeastern scholars, who suggest a rather direct historical allegory of the Thai conquest over the Khmers. A further consideration not taken up concerns the history of Central Thai campaigns against Lao peoples in the last century along with pillage, slave raids, population movements, and final political incorporation of “Isan” into Thailand. This is surely part of the shadowy historical background of the book’s more belligerent passages, although the overt ethnology of the plot deals with Old Khmers (the “Khom”) and the *nagas*, rather than with the Thais or the Laos. In any case, the text would be a valuable source for a study of folk history, and the notes make progress in this direction.

The poem is also a good source for the study of Buddhist and pre-Buddhist beliefs and practices as locally observed. Buddhist concepts are admirably explained in notes. The poem even has a role for Lord Thaen (or perhaps the Thaens, probably the original Proto-Tai sky gods), e.g., to receive locally made ceremonial rockets (*bung fai*) launched during special festivals. Failure in launching *bung fai* becomes a powerful omen foreshadowing the poem’s tragic denouement, the result of Nāng Ai’s partaking of the meat of a white squirrel (actually a *naga* prince in disguise).

In terms of the aesthetic goals of the translation, the translator has decided to attempt an imposition of Lao-Isan poetic forms onto English. Some Western readers will wonder at the extent of labored and arbitrary efforts to render the original Lao-Isan meter (called *khlong san*) into an estranged English analogue. In the translator’s favor, there may well be some sense of peculiarity or alienation even in the original text: therefore “a delicate balance between the familiar and the strange” (4) might be justified in the translation too. However, for this reader at least, the metrical effect is all too estranging and evokes hardly any of the lightness and alacrity of the Lao-Isan original. Rather, through Western literary associations the English version comes off as something of a ponderous dirge. Replete with syntactic inversion and Latinate

vocabulary, it resembles a serious and "heavy" eighteenth-century opus, perhaps Alexander Pope's *Iliad*. Fortunately, the plot and much poetic imagery are conveyed in spite of this needlessly weighty articulation.

In addition to aesthetic concerns, specialists may have reservations about some of the notes, linguists may wince at transcriptions (*karma* alternating with *kharma*, etc.), and philologists may wish there had been better consideration and comparison of the palm-leaf sources (the original text is now apparently lost [102]). Such criticisms are perhaps justified, but do not detract from the essential worth of the book, which is required reading for anyone wishing to understand the cultural roots of the Thai Northeast. A much wider readership with interests in comparative literature will find the book worthwhile reading as well.

REFERENCE CITED:

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SARAWAK

METCALF, PETER. *Where Are You/Spirits: Style and Theme in Berawan Prayer*. Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry 13. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989. xv+345 pages. Maps, figures, tables, appendix of themes, bibliography, index, glossary. Hardcover US\$39.95; ISBN 0-87474-620-5.

This is an excellent piece of work, not only in the field of Bornean ethnography, but more ambitiously in the anthropology of linguistic use, of verbal symbolism, and above all of religious practices. The author of *A Borneo Journey Into Death* (1982), Metcalf has this time produced a technically more sophisticated and theoretically more challenging monograph, based on data he collected during his research (1972-73) among the Berawan who live in the northern part of the Malaysian state of Sarawak.

Seven prayers (*piat*) are presented, both in transcribed Berawan and in English translation, arranged according to the ritual occasions on which they were recited. Each prayer is treated in a separate chapter, except for the first two, which were recited on the same occasion (the ritual of the Prayer of the House) and hence are naturally treated in a single chapter. These chapters also give succinct outlines of current Berawan rituals and religious notions; these will help readers unfamiliar with Bornean ethnography to place the texts within the wider belief system of the people and their ongoing social processes. An introduction and two theoretical chapters precede those that deal with the concrete texts.

The importance of prayers in Berawan religious practices is treated in the Introduction, which also argues for the significance of verbal aspects in ritual performances. The first of the theoretical chapters analyzes the stylistic features of the prayers, and the second isolates their thematic elements. In the conclusion, the author attempts a quantitative analysis of, among other things, the correlation between the styles and the