Sandra Khor Manickam

Taming the Wild: Aborigines and racial knowledge in colonial Malaya 2015, Singapore, Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with NUS Press, 2015, Xii + 130 pp. ISBN: 9789971698324. Price: SGD 36.00 (paperback).

In today's Malaysia Orang Asli, the minority indigenous people, struggle for recognition in a Malay dominated country. For many the difference between a Malay and an Orang Asli seems clear enough but as scholars have shown, complex construction work has been necessary to create the categories of 'Malayness' and 'indigeneity' and was done partly by the British with their colonial politics and racial ideas. Sandra Khor Manickam's book, developed from her PhD thesis, traces the genealogy of the 'aborigines' of Malaysia, always in opposition to Malays.

Central to the book are knowledge claims about race and the ways in which ideas about indigeneity and aboriginality were made in many different forms. To criticise the fixity that seems to lie in all classifications, writes Manickam, her book aims to show how these ideas were made in specific social environments and how some became dominant while alternative or subversive classifications also came and went. This means that the book is two things. It is a semantic history of all the terms surrounding aboriginality: Orang Asli, Orang Asal, Sakai, Jakun, Negrito, Semang, Senoi, and other words used for those people who seemed to have lived in the area longer than Malays. It is also a history of the wider racial ideas that informed these meanings and classifications, formulated by British anthropologists and government officials.

The book is structured chronologically and thematically and divided into six chapters that carefully consider the making of racial classifications. Several chapters deal with late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists, sometimes doubling as civil servants, who wrote about the inhabitants of the region, starting in the first chapter with W. Marsden and J. Leyden, J. Crawford and T.S. Raffles, and continuing in chapters five and six with W.W. Skeat and I. Evans.

Chapters two and three stand out with a different focus from the rest. Chapter two is an analysis of ideas about indigeneity in a Malay text, Munshi Abdullah's Hikayat Abdullah and Hikayat Dunia (a book whose authorship Abdullah shares with an American missionary). According to Manickam, the first book suggests that Abdullah had a different perception of human difference than most westerners but the second book shows Abdullah's conceptual attempt to bring the words Jakun and Orang Asal closer to the English term 'aborigines'. In his first book, Abdullah related these terms to occupational differences while in Hikayat Dunia, he wrote more in terms of their aboriginality,

behaviour, and the possibility of improvement and even, once and without further comments, blackness. But as anthropologists too, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, went from categorisation on the basis of occupation to one based on a wider set of interlinked ideas about civilisational difference, first and later migrations and physical differences, Manickam might as well have emphasised similarity instead of difference in this chapter.

Chapter three focuses on the census, a now well-trodden path in the history of race and colonialism, from Charles Hirschman's work on Malaysia in the 1980s (Hirschman 1987) to Jane Ferguson's recent article on Myanmar in this journal (Ferguson 2015). Manickam's chapter is in agreement with earlier work in that it demonstrates how the census, in an attempt to regulate the confusing reality, cemented certain (racial) categories while dismissing others. But censuses, writes Manickam, had a logic that was different from that of anthropology. In the census, an important distinction was that between 'tame' and 'wild' aborigines (later 'settled' and 'nomad'). According to Manickam, this shows more mental flexibility among the civil servants than among anthropologists who tended to see 'tame' aborigines, who had mixed to some degree with Malays, as 'absorbed' by Malays and thus as 'extinct'.

There are two things that this book does well. One is that it shows how there was not a single, monolithic conception of race—specifically, as the book concludes, government ideas and those of anthropologists often differed. From the early twentieth century, the colonial government increasingly worked with the 'tame' and 'wild' distinction. Anthropologists, on the other hand, favoured a tripartite division of aboriginal races based on hair structure but also on less racial markers such as language and geography. So it is curious that the anthropologist who came up first with this tripartite division, the Swiss Rudolf Martin, is covered in just a few sentences while others are studied in depth.

The second thing the book does well is that this is really a history of Malaysia, while other books about race and anthropology sometimes tend to be more about the academic quibbles of British anthropologists than about the subjects they are studying. Of course, it is still a history of racial ideas that has little to do with how people defined themselves but at least it manages to keep Malaysia at the centre of the narrative. The book starts with Malaysian politics today and I would have liked it to end there as well but the book concludes with an excursion into the (no less important) issue of modern genetics.

The title, *Taming the Wild*, refers to ways in which all the historical actors tried to tame unruly information. This book contains the entire unruly zoo

of evolving terms and their meanings, so the glossary is absolutely necessary.

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References

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