On the Edge of the Sacred Forest

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It is obvious to say that the relations between human beings and their non-human environment are complex, but it is important to draw attention to the way this complexity is modeled and which of the relevant actors and relationships are drawn upon for explanation—in particular when scholars, like the authors of these three volumes, intend to revise and reconceptualise human-environment relationships. These relationships are always formed under specific social and political conditions, which these studies aim to elucidate. The question is, which conditions are given more importance and which are less decisive in the models?

Southeast Asia stands out for its great diversity of human-environment interactions, while at the same time its rapidly developing economies create an urgent need to reform and rethink them. These three important contributions to the study of political ecology centre on forests, their globalised and localised uses, the national and transnational claims made in regard to them, as well as the position of those who depend on and live in them.

The three volumes do not shy away from the complexity of the situations they study, in terms of politics, local culture, ecology, history, and transnational
trade, even if policy makers or the public might like to hear simpler answers. But as complexity demands reduction for the sake of developing analytical models, each analysis highlights particular relations and structures. One of the relations underlying most of these studies is the distinction between centres and peripheries. This dichotomy is not only crucial for Southeast Asian polities in their history up to the present, but also for the study of processes of globalisation and localisation worldwide. It works through several codes: in political scales of larger and smaller power centres, villages, and households; as a classification of ethnicities into state-centred and village-based societies; but just as well for the contrast between spaces socialised by human beings and those outside of these, the realm of the forests. The analyses in these three books position themselves at the interface between such codes, by addressing the way that the differences between centres and peripheries shape the relationships between humans and their non-human environment.

The most important relationship this approach highlights is one between central states and their rural peripheries, but the relations between local smallholders and subsistence farmers on the one hand and trade or larger economic actors like estates on the other are also of crucial importance. However, certain other factors which weigh in on the human-environment relationship are hardly elaborated upon here, in particular those of religion, cosmology, or ritual. For many Southeast Asians, processes seen as production from a Western/modern perspective are conditioned by relations with non-humans beings, ranging from the spirit owners of the land to religious ideas about the place of human beings in the world. What seem to be relations of humans with resources, i.e. passive objects, are often treated as relations among human and non-human persons. However, such relations are rarely at the centre of analysis in these books. While the authors seriously aim at a holistic grasp of their fields of study, the models of politics, economy, and ecology which they employ allow little room for local ontologies. I will trace this limitation through the three books, with full respect and often admiration for their other achievements.

State and Forests in Laos

Sarinda Singh’s study, ‘Natural potency and political power’, explores practices and discourses of forest preservation and state governance in Laos, a poor country with a rich forest cover and nowadays much more a developmentalist than a socialist state. Government politics are secretive and opaque, while laws and regulations are comparatively few. At the same time, Laos joins