
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Malays in Singapore: culture, economy and ideology by Tania Li

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It would be wrong to end on a carping note. It is always easy to criticise a book for what it does not do (and perhaps did not set out to do) – even when one's remarks are intended to be constructive. Far better to say that this is an important book – a scholarly work, which is well-written and which attends directly to several key debates in development theory and practice. That it is also a splendid account of Latin American politics, and yet one more contribution to the debate on the crisis of Marxism, only adds to its value. *Democracy and Development in Latin America* is a fine achievement.

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References

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Li, Tania *Malays in Singapore: culture, economy and ideology*. Singapore: Oxford University Press. 1989. ISBN 019 588 9142, price £19.50.

This book will be welcomed by all those interested in the social dynamics of ethnicity in Singapore, and the way in which typical practices in the Malay household conspire to affect the position of the Malay community in the wider economic arena.

The fieldwork was conducted in 1983-84 among the Malay minority community. Data were collected primarily by interviewing members of some 70 households from three separate areas of the city. This was supplemented by interviews with village elders, elites, entrepreneurs and religious officials; and by keeping abreast of issues discussed in the media. The pitfalls of such a research technique are recognized by the author, but in such an urban and private society it is difficult to see how they could all be avoided. Despite the relative

dearth of concrete case studies however the material supplied seems just about sufficient to lend substance to her general arguments.

Li argues that the Singapore Malay household is not, as often claimed, a corporate unit with a joint estate, making joint decisions and having common interests. Instead the Malay household is depicted as a social formation in which each member of the family acts as a separate economic agent. Social and economic relations with others are individually created and sustained through both material and immaterial exchanges. The question then becomes what holds these individuals together? Here we are given an astute analysis of the notion of 'householding'. Householding comprises three analytically separate processes: current reproduction (the maintenance of current consumption); extended reproduction (transfers across the generations); and expanded reproduction (practices which increase the productive base beyond that needed for current and extended reproduction).

The first part of the book (chapters 1-5) is devoted to a detailed analysis of these processes of reproduction, and it is argued that their main characteristic is the ambiguity in cultural conceptions concerning the various transfers and exchanges between the individuals in the household (which are overwhelmingly nuclear in form).

Relationships between members of the Malay household are viewed in terms of kinship sentiment which is highly valued in itself and is a source of both self and social esteem. She shows that the tangible demonstration of this sentiment is accomplished through exchanges and transfers (domestic labour, money, affection, etc.) couched in the idiom of the gift. The crucial point here, it seems, is that while household members construe transfers as gifts, this gift claim depends on the recognition of imbalances in the exchanges of commodities, that is, on the covert and unspoken calculation of values and equivalences.

There is evidence that Malays are conscious of the tension inherent in the gift voluntarily given but which induces calculation, self-interest and social relationships built up on debt and obligation. What then happens in a household is not a pooling of resources which can be used collectively for a joint enterprise, but a distinct separation of resources and strong tendencies to indulge in individualistic endeavours. The exchanges between the spouses are not the subject of defined rights and obligations but must be negotiated. Similarly whatever is exchanged between parents and children is not guaranteed but is contingent on the practices of particular individuals, although sanctioned by rather vague normative

ideas of proper behaviour. Since parents cannot be sure that their children will support them in their old age they strive to make provision for themselves. Thus even should parents try to expand current consumption by entrepreneurial activity, they tend to take a one life-time view of it, rather than to build up resources which can be passed on to the next generation. Within this framework of the gift topics such as divorce, wage-labour, the work and earnings of children, entrepreneurial activity, etc all receive attention.

The argument in the second and third parts of the book concern the way in which interpersonal patterns of behaviour within the local community have an impact on more inclusive social processes. Because culturally there is a trade off between the purely social and the purely economic aspects of household relationships, entrepreneurial activity within the household and between separate households is hindered. Several other important factors which reinforce this trend are also brought into the discussion. The forces impeding business enterprise in the Malay community are compared to those which appear to encourage it in the Chinese community, where the idiom of kinship sentiment is not the gift but rather a durable debt owed by the children to the parents. This together with a number of other significant factors concerning the position of the Chinese community in the Singapore national economy foster the capacity of the Chinese household to act as joint enterprise.

In addition to these differences the government has pursued social and economic policies which have at the same time discriminated against the Malays and advanced the position of the Chinese. These policies have shaped and been shaped by the social and historical construction, by elites (including Malays), of the Malay as rural, backward, ignorant and lazy. Even though until 1959 the economic position of the mass of the Malays was hardly different to that of the Chinese, recent changes in the structure of opportunities have reinforced stereotypes of the Malay and Chinese. Since these ideological views have an impact on the structuring of changing social and economic conditions they have also had a real effect on the position of the Malay and Chinese communities. Within this broad framework Li closes her book with a brief analysis of class formation, and an interpretation of ethnicity in which ethnic groups have come to be associated with economic performance.

No doubt some carping criticisms could be made of the occasional thinness of the book's ethnographic base or the lack of reference to this or that piece of literature, but overall this is a work of originality and ingenuity which makes a very significant

contribution to our knowledge of modern Singapore Malay culture during a period of rapid change.

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Martin, D.A. *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*. Blackwell, Oxford, 1990. ISBN 0-631-17186-x xiii, pp. 295, index, bibliography. \$25 (hard cover)

Stoll, D. *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990. ISBN 0-520-06499-2 xxi, pp. 331, index, tables, bibliography. \$24.95 (hard cover)

Conservative Protestantism now claims over ten per cent of Latin America's adult population, and its numbers – proportionately and absolutely – continue to rise. Although religious – like sexual – activity, is notoriously difficult to quantify, Protestant growth is now sufficiently advanced to demand proper investigation and explanation. These two well-researched and richly detailed books should do much to increase our understanding. They also show how religious phenomena so often transcend their subdisciplinary interpretations. In this case Martin, a sociologist best known as the Grand Theorist of secularization and Stoll, a social anthropologist previously concerned with the negative impact of Christian missions upon indigenous peoples, show substantial consensus in their conclusions.

Both invest Evangelical Protestantism with, as Stoll (p. xv) puts it “a dynamic of its own” in contemporary Latin American political, economic and social development. Both see Protestantism as conducive to political quietism rather than radicalism, and as eventually consolidating a dependency culture among its adherents. It is likely to expand further in the future, building upon indigenous secular aspirations as well as capitalizing upon the internal tensions within late Colonial Catholicism. Both single out Pentecostalism as especially significant, and for the same reasons – its creation of lay leadership roles among the economically powerless, the effectiveness of the conversion process in generating a heightened social identity,