

Making sense of the state from its margins

As a child growing up in Australia, I was made aware of the country's frontiers from an early age. The shape of Australia's landmass was printed on the covers of my schoolbooks and as I rubbed out pencil marks, I eroded the coastline of my Australia-shaped eraser. As with many young nation-states, the use of representations of Australia's land-based territory is part of the country's nationalist project that fosters a sense of belonging among its people. At the same time, this naturalising of clearly defined state boundaries disguises the porous nature of those boundaries, their significance for national development and the experience of the people residing along them.

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Between Frontiers: Nation and Identity in a Southeast Asian Borderland.

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WHILE STUDIES of globalisation and transnationalism have attended to the interplay between states, they rarely question the way in which the state's territoriality is recognised and the national space arranged. Instead these processes have tended to be conflated with historical accounts of treaty ratification within global politics. *Between Frontiers: Nation and Identity in a Southeast Asian Borderland* highlights and addresses this neglect. As its title suggests, the book's focus is the 'in-between'; the liminal place where nations join and the domestic encounters the foreign.

The frontier in question is the borderland between Malaysian Sarawak and Indonesian Borneo, where ethnically homogenous and culturally similar communities are divided by different historical, economic and political circumstances on either side of the national border. Using archival and ethnographic research methods, Noboru Ishikawa provides a rich account of how the state actualises and maintains its territory and the kind of national order that emerges in response, as people strategically situate themselves as members of local community, nation and ethnic group simultaneously. In so doing, he brings the study of nationalism 'down to earth', focusing not on the nation-state as something imagined, disseminated or fashioned, but on its concrete reality and presence underfoot.

Ishikawa and his wife, Mayumi, conducted fieldwork in the Sarawak community of Telok Melano, where the village boundary coincides with the national border. The oral histories they collected connect ancestors of present-day residents with events described in the archival documents that cover 140 years of local and national history, which the author draws upon extensively. While scholars have struggled to accurately study processes of transnationalism and globalisation using multi-sited ethnography following flows of people and goods, Ishikawa provides a dynamic account of the dialectic between states using traditional methodologies in a single site, to great effect.

The macro history Ishikawa describes echoes that of the wider Southeast Asian colonial experience. The author begins by describing how the state deliberately incorporated the hinterlands of the Sarawak colony and the subsequent process of boundary making. This he situates within the wider political-economic context of the 1920s rubber boom, related international regulation and illicit trans-border trade, as an example of the imperial enclosing of economic space and the response of people living on state borders. Ishikawa then examines how the Telok Melano peasantry have been

simultaneously drawn into and excluded from the national space from the 1880s, and discusses the issue of ethnic displacement. Using a historical account of the moving boundary, he explores how social identities are formed in relation to local recognition of space by examining the interplay between nationalism and village communalism. In the latter, more ethnographic parts of the book, Ishikawa describes daily interactions and flows of goods, people, diseases, ideas, practices, technologies, institutional and organisational forms, between Telok Melano and an Indonesian migrant community across the border, demonstrating how the structural osmotic pressure between the two changes the value of labour, commodities and personhood as people and goods move across the border. He also chronicles a recent widening of the economic gap between Malaysia and Indonesia that has changed the nature of frontier relations, with the Indonesian side of the border abandoning its own economic community and selling labour, agricultural products and natural resources into Malaysia.

The book's concluding discussion concentrates on the dialectical relationship between transnationalism and the space of the nation-state. Counter the Weberian notion of the nation-state as a fixed territory, Ishikawa demonstrates how the flow of people and goods into and out of national space, and the policies and practices related to these flows, provide the very basis for the construction and evolution of the national space. As state boundaries become more rigid, socio-economic differences (particularly in the value of labour and currency) become more marked, stimulating movement of labour and commodities across them, and making the border significant in the lives of those living within and along it.

The main, early form of transnationalism in the region was mercantile trade between the Malays and Chinese. Under capitalism, transnational flows of labour and natural resources were initially tolerated, given they posed no threat to national interests; but in recent decades, the Malaysian state has increased its control of the borderland niches for developmental purposes, establishing checkpoints and sponsoring improved transportation networks that facilitate timber-related industries and agro-plantation businesses. Such investment marks borderlands as a new site supporting national projects and state-controlled transnationalism – and not only in this region. As states have increasingly mobilised and managed social and natural resources, state-led capitalism is increasing rolling into borderlands in search of economic growth. Ishikawa ponders how residents of borderlands the world over will react to this expansion of controlled transnationalism, noting the potential to learn from borderland populations that entered transnational modernity ahead of the majority of humanity living within single nation-states.

The value of the book is the skill with which Ishikawa entwines thorough archival and ethnographic research into a rich account of the social, economic and political processes in the making and maintaining of national space and societal responses to it. With its clear signposting and systematic

analysis, the book retains the rawness of its origins as a PhD thesis. The choice of field site reflects Ishikawa's fascination with the liminality of borderlands, which he describes in the book's early pages as 'zones in which things are no longer what they were but not yet what they will be' (p.5). Such mystical language promises a more experiential, subjective account of borderland life than the resulting text provides, with its ethnographic material emerging only a hundred pages in. However, without the structural leaning of the book's analysis, Ishikawa would be unable to 'ground' the study of nationalism away from the trend towards treating it as an abstraction, as he admirably sets out to do. Ishikawa's project in this regard is not groundbreaking. Leach's work on highland Burma' comes to mind as an earlier proponent of the porous nature of the nation space. What *Beyond Frontiers* provides, however, is an important counter to the existing literature on the nation-state, state and nationalism – concepts at the heart of many a degree course – that takes fixed territory as a given. In anthropology, much of the classic literature regarding the state stems from African ethnographies. How different the discipline's approach to the state might look if students were taught as much about maritime Southeast Asia, where states have always been 'weak', as they were about *The Nuer or African Political Systems*.² Given that national space on land accounts for a fraction of the earth's surface, with oceans covering its majority in which hundreds and thousands of people live and work, one wonders why anthropology and other disciplines fail to draw more on the approach of French historian Braudel in their explorations of the nation-state. Braudel's epic, *La Mediterranee et le Monde Mediterranee a l'Epoque de Philippe II*,³ charts the creation and development of societies by the sea that connects them and positions seafaring people as the links between shores. Equally, when students are asked to discuss whether the state's power is in decline, they might draw on the likes of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*⁴ to argue that transnational corporations and international governance have usurped the power of all but a 'monarchy' (USA and G8 countries) of individual nation-states. They would do well to also attend to Ishikawa's quiet ethnography of people for whom the question of state power is age old.

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Notes

- 1 For example, Leach. 1960. 'The Frontiers of Burma', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol 3(1), pp. 49-68.
- 2 Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (eds.). 1987. *African Political Systems*. London: KPI in association with the International African Institute. Evans-Pritchard. 1940. *The Nuer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 3 1949, Paris: Librairie Armand Collin.
- 4 2000, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

