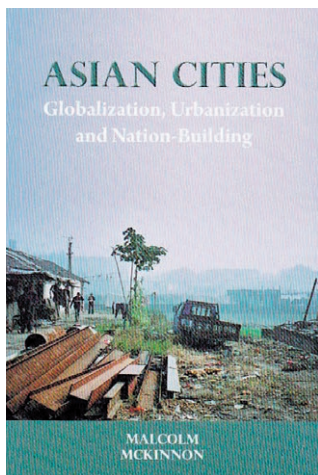


Whither the 'Asian' City?

The worlds of Santosh, or Mohammed or the women of Yangzhou cannot be explained by globalization yet that does not relegate them to the category of 'traditional' or 'backward'. They live in kaleidoscope worlds, as does anyone living in a rapidly changing capitalist city. It is a world in which making a living is an erratic, uncertain enterprise; in which faith can be regular observance, occasion for celebration or simply overlooked; in which marriage provides status and security but also carries risks. They are worlds in which 'of the city' or 'being urban' is the here and now, in which 'west' might be no more than a compass point. [p. 107]

Sin Yee Koh



Reviewed publication:
McKinnon, M. 2011.
Asian Cities: Globalization, Urbanization and Nation-Building,
Copenhagen: NIAS Press,
288 pages, ISBN
9788776940799 (pb)

In *Asian Cities: Globalization, Urbanization and Nation-Building*, Malcolm McKinnon argues that globalization is not the only default explanation for urban transformations in contemporary Asian cities. Instead, he argues that cities in "developing Asia" – which he interprets as the People's Republic of China, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia [p. 11] – face two processes that "do not affect Western cities in the same way" [p. 3]. These processes are urbanization (i.e., massive transformations of the social, cultural and built environment) and nation-building (i.e., the process through which a population of a particular territory acquires a shared identity). He supports his argument empirically by adopting comparative analyses of a metropolitan centre where "a great deal had been written" [p. 14] with a lesser known provincial or second tier city "with which it was more practicable for the researcher to become acquainted" [p. 14]. These are the three pairings of Shanghai with Yangzhou in China, Jakarta with Semarang in Indonesia, and Bangalore and Mysore in India.

The book is organized into four parts. Following an introduction in Part 1, Part 2 discusses urbanization and cities:

chapter 2 focuses on urbanization, defined as "the process by which cities and towns become more populous and more economically significant than rural areas" [p. 37]; while chapter 3 focuses on urbanism, defined as transformations in cities vis-à-vis traditional areas of life, including "new levels of education, new kinds of occupation, and new opportunities for private space" [p.71]. Part 3 discusses how various processes in Asian cities relate to nation-building: chapter 4 discusses businesses, i.e., the "building of domestic networks and markets by capitalist businesses" [p. 136]; chapter 5 discusses the flows of domestic labour migration; chapter 6 discusses the travel and hospitality industries in cities; and chapter 7 discusses how commercial popular culture is a national and global phenomenon in developing Asian cities. Part 4 concludes the book and postulates the future of urbanization, urbanism and nation-building in developing Asian cities.

McKinnon's broader objective is to question Eurocentric dominance in urban theories that have been conveniently projected upon non-Western contexts. Globalization, taken as the default explanation for late-20th and early-21st century Asian capitalism, results in "the relative invisibility of both urbanization and nation-building in scholarly discussion" [p. 9]. Triggered by his visits to a number of Asian cities in late-1990s and early-2000s, McKinnon questions how globalization has been conveniently interpreted as "symmetrical globalization" [p. 214], arguing instead that globalization pans out "asymmetrically" in different (developing Asian) contexts. Thus, he argues that it is useful to consider "multiple globalizations" [p. 215], as well as how the shift from one type of globalization to another implicates processes at other scales (e.g., regional, subcontinental, national).

However, a casual reader without the benefit of knowledge of recent debates in contemporary urban studies would find it difficult to follow McKinnon's book. The book gives prominent space to ethnographic accounts and detailed

descriptions of urban phenomena in the respective chosen cities. As a consequence, little space is given to explain the theoretical conversations that this book locates itself within. It is as if McKinnon assumed that readers would be familiar with debates about Eurocentricism and the questioning of globalization in urban studies. As a result, the reader is left to do a lot of work: firstly, to connect the dots between the stories; and secondly, to understand how these fit into the flow of arguments at the broader theoretical perspective.

On the other hand, as an academic researcher and writer, I find it hard to get past two shortcomings of the book. Firstly, while McKinnon has rightly identified that non-Western cities go through processes of urbanization and nation-building that were not similarly experienced in Western cities, his somewhat careless categorising of "developing Asia" repeats the flaws of Eurocentricism he criticises. In claiming that the purpose of the book is "to draw out common elements in the urban Asian experience of globalization" [p. 13], McKinnon has over-generalized and essentialized the "developing Asia" based on a few conveniently-selected case studies.

Secondly, although McKinnon has attempted to address issues of bias in his ethnographic methods (e.g., selection bias, language barriers) [pp. 11-19], this appears cursory and lacks further elaboration. For example, no mention was made about the durations, frequencies, and nature of any fieldwork visit, other than a quick mention that "ethnographic investigation was carried out periodically in the case study cities over six years" [p. 16]. Another sentence mentioned that "ethnographic material is least rich for China and richest for India" [p. 16], without explaining why and what implications this would have on the analysis. These shortcomings, unfortunately, do not do justice to his use of comparative urban research, as recently advocated by urban studies scholars.¹

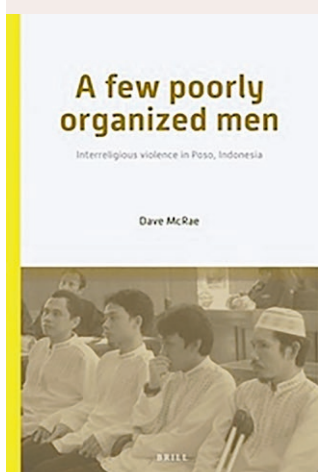
There is no doubt that McKinnon's message is important: cities in "developing Asia" have divergent urban experiences "on the ground" [p. 69], which urban theories developed from the Western experience cannot quite capture and explain. Furthermore, processes and phenomena within a nation-state may better inform our understanding of cities, in addition to globalization as an explanatory factor. Unfortunately, this message has not been fully articulated and/or supported with convincing comparative analysis of both "developing Asia" and "the West". For the significance of the underlying message contained within, I wish that this book had articulated the message loud and clear, instead of leaving the casual reader lost without a clear sense of how the case studies connect with each other and to a broader debate.

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Notes

1 Robinson, J. 2011. *Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35: 1–23.

A few poorly organised men



Indonesia's transition from Suharto's authoritarian regime to a more democratic government saw a number of violent uproars, especially in the so-called Outer Islands. Apart from the separatist movements that sought to establish their own independent states (in Aceh, East Timor, and West Papua), many violent regional conflicts materialized along ethnic-religious cleavages.

Antje Missbach

Reviewed publication:

Dave McRae. 2013. *A few poorly organised men: interreligious violence in Poso, Indonesia*, Leiden: Brill, ISBN: 9789004244832

The interreligious conflict in Poso, Sulawesi, was Indonesia's most protracted conflict during the post-Suharto era (1998–2007). While previously a quiescent and peaceful locality without any history of interreligious unrest, between 600 and 1000 people lost their lives there due to the outbreak of violence and the many acts of reprisal. Although this number made the Poso conflict less damaging than the deadly clashes

in the neighbouring Moluccas taking place around the same time, the events in Poso nonetheless had deep repercussions among the local Muslim and Christian populations. Also, it left a distressing mark on the national recollection.

Based on long-term observations and multiple fieldwork encounters over ten years, Dave McRae has gained unique insights into the local settings in Poso and the socio-political developments that shaped the bloody events. Thus, his book presents the first comprehensive history of the conflict in Poso. Nonetheless, given that the causes and courses of interreligious violence in Indonesia, and elsewhere, have busied

large numbers of scholars, experts of local conflict histories have to put up with the question of what are the greater contributions of their books to understanding both the genesis of interreligious violence and finding ways to terminate it? In other words, what could be possibly learned from reading a narrow account of just one conflict rather than a more comparative analysis of interreligious violence that takes into account a number of conflicts? There are a number of good reasons, which make Dave McRae's book an enriching and rewarding reading.

Violent conflicts in Indonesia have often been described as the consequence of the rapid political change after the end of the Suharto-era. This change was characterised first and foremost by democratisation and decentralisation that allowed more people to partake in political competition. McRae, however, makes the effort to study the local dynamics in great detail in order to explain both the onset and the continuative dynamics of the enfolding violence. Rather than just assuming that "violence [can be utilised] as political tool in political contestation" (p. 54) when transitioning state authorities (including the security forces) can no longer guarantee law and order, McRae points out the "insufficiency of political interest to account completely for the violent action of the key actors" (p. 66). As McRae successfully demonstrates, by instigating violence against people of the opposite faith, local conflict leaders had little to gain, but much to lose. Having been found guilty for the instigation of violence, in fact, cost a number of promising candidates their prospect of success in

Quarrelling with the past



At one point in his intriguing, provocative and sometimes irritating *A Lover's Quarrel with the Past: Romance, Representation, Reading*, literary scholar Ranjan Ghosh claims that indignation and dissent “can infuse a sense of discovery to our historical studies.” [p. 79] The phrase, subconsciously perhaps, describes Ghosh's own work, a work that is not only written in dissent, but cries out in justified indignation.

Paul Doolan



Reviewed Publication:

Ghosh, R. 2012. *A Lover's Quarrel with the Past: Romance, Representation, Reading*. New York: Bergham books. 188 pp. ISBN: 9780857454843

THE ENEMY THAT EARNS GHOSH'S WRATH is those scholars and pseudo-scholars who shrink historical narratives into the pliable political tools of communalists; more specifically, the target of his ire is a Hindu fundamentalism that, thriving on anti-Muslim emotionalism, represents Indian history within a horizon permitting space only for a narrative of Hinduism, cleansed of all outsider contamination.

The heart of the book is an essay, “Reality of Representation, Reality behind Representation: History and Memory”. Here Ghosh allows his indignation to brush against those Indians who willingly permit their history to be shrouded in myth, so “myth and history hide beneath the skin of each other in a pontifical discourse that censors, suppresses and mismaps events” – all the better to feed the agenda of Hindu fundamentalists. [p. 18] The case study that forms the centerpiece of this essay is the north Indian town Ayodhya. Infamously, in 1992 a mob of tens of thousands of Hindus stormed the mosque in Ayodhya and tore it down, because the mosque reportedly stood on the site of the birthplace of Rama, an avatar of the God Vishnu. The mob could justify their actions by appealing to the collective memory among Hindus, of the Hindu temple that once stood on this spot. Ghosh convincingly maps how this ‘history’ was nurtured by British imperial scholars and later cultivated and developed by Hindu *sadhus*, politicians, historians, and archaeologists in order to produce “a public memory largely governed by communal discrimination and prejudice”. [p. 39] He plausibly argues that the mytho-history or heritage that has coalesced around Ayodhya provides a collective memory of fear and victimization, creating a screen upon which Hindu communal unity can be projected.

The Greek Goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, was the mother of the muses, including Clio, the muse of history. With the professionalization of historical studies one could be forgiven for believing that it was the other way around – that Clio, the muse of history, gave birth to Mnemosyne, Goddess of memory. But historians only offer one set of vantage points (among a multitude) from which to view the past. Novelists, politicians, artists and, increasingly, film makers offer the public representations of a past reality and when these representations come to be accepted they in turn contribute to the construction and distribution and maintenance of a mediated collective memory. In Ghosh's words: “Modern media and the contemporary politics of memory are entwined in a mutual embrace”, and, moreover, “Riding piggyback on such megamediatization-serialisation of the Hindu cultural past – the flow of cultural memory with its ‘entangledness’ in televisuality and popular culture – Hindu radicals win the major part of their battle by controlling public memory.” [pp. 56-57] In other words, when it comes to memory wars unleashed by rival cultural/religious believers, the Hindu fundamentalists have proven their political astuteness by creating mytho-historical narratives through the use of televised religious epics and other media strategies.

Aleida Assmann has written of how an area of land can become “a sacred text” and how usually this happens in places considered to be “the localization of myths”. Ominously, she concludes that he who conquers such a site “has to create a *tabula rasa* before he can engrave it with the tale of his own glory.”¹ This would imply more trouble ahead in Ayodhya. One can understand Ghosh's indignant call for dissent.

Opposing the totalitarian certainty of the fundamentalist, Ghosh is aware of the sheer difficulty of doing history, what he aptly calls “the agony of history”, whereby the historian accepts that something always escapes his representations but this lack

of understanding “makes him try his intelligence with greater enthusiasm and power to make deeper and varied sense of the past.” [p. 9] In the other central chapter of this book, “Whose Mandir? Whose Masjid? The Historian's Ethics and the Ethics of Historical Reading”, while acknowledging his debt to Groningen philosopher of history, Frank Ankersmit, he argues for an ethics of historical reading. Taking his cue from E. H. Carr's famous dictum that facts do not speak for themselves, he sees that the task of the historian is to invest the facts with meaning. That meaning will always be influenced by the present-mindedness of the historian, including the historian's personality and values. This is not necessarily a weakness, but a strength, ensuring the historian does not tail off into irrelevancy, forcing him or her to find the connection with the central discourses of our time.

Anticipating the recent revelations from former American intelligence analyst Edward Snowden, Ghosh expresses his resistance to “statist superintendence” of a “panoptic character resulting in disciplinary surveillance by the government”. [p. 105] He appeals to historians to not be “collaborators in power” [p. 115], but instead to embark on “the risk of history” [p. 119], daring to accept responsibility to the public when creating historical representations while aware of the double bind – our inability to understand the past fully and a lack of access to complete data due to the opacity of government.

The memory wars being fought over Ayodhya beg a comparison with what seems like a similar situation in Jerusalem. Professor Hans Bakker has written extensively about Ayodhya and has compared the situation in Ayodhya to Jerusalem during the Crusades. He has even dared to call into question the age of the Hindu city of Varanasi.² I was somewhat surprised to find no mention of Bakker in Ghosh's otherwise excellent bibliography.

Ghosh has written an original, intriguing, even passionate book and, for the most part it is written in an appealing style, with interesting images and quirky turns of phrase. But it is sometimes burdened by what I felt to be unnecessarily obscure jargon and neologisms. An excellent chapter on presence, for instance, is weakened by a short section containing sentences such as: “Presence is not always a surfacing of the repressed; rather, it lubricates out of the persistent ‘translogical’ quarrel with the past, out of a negation of efforts that threaten to lobotomise the past and, also, grows out a negativity and apprehendability in historical representation and description.” Does it have to be this esoteric?

As Peter Geyl famously said, “History is an argument without an end.” Ghosh has sent us news from the frontline of the memory wars in India. No end to this argument is yet in sight. His book is a call for tolerance and sanity and doing history responsibly.

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Notes

- 1 Assmann, A. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 287-291
- 2 Bakker, H. 1991. ‘Ayodhya, A Hindu Jerusalem’, in *Numne* 38; Bakker, H. 1996. ‘Construction and Reconstruction of Sacred Space in Varanasi’, in *Numen* 43.

the impending local elections. By studying the most prominent leaders and core combatants, McRae not only disentangles the medley of payback and revenge, he also reveals an astonishing shortage of direct political interests. But how does McRae then manage to fill this explanatory vacuum in order to explicate the shifting dynamics of aggravation?

McRae divides the conflict in four specific phases that overlap and at the same time are each marked by very specific characteristics of patterns and participation in the collective violence. For each of these phases, McRae exposes different “divisions of labour” among conflict participants, which serve as one of the most outstanding factors for explaining the shifts in violent action. Whereas the first phase of fighting (1998-2000) started as a youth brawl and then developed into urban riots between rivaling patronage networks, the subsequent phase (May-June 2000) saw widespread killings carried out by Christian combatants, who had been recruited spontaneously and received some form of rudimentary training. While the two-sided violence between Muslims and Christians continued as tit-for-tat murders and sporadic attacks on villages during 2000 until 2002, the Christian dominance started to crumble with the arrival of mujahidin fighters from other parts of Indonesia. Not only had these mujahidin access to manufactured instead of only self-made weapons, moreover, because of their affiliation with Islamic terror groups, such as Laskar Jihad, some of them had previously received military-style training in other conflict areas, both inside the archipelago and overseas. Although these mujahidin brought

along a number of conceptions of piety and morality that they sought to impose on the newly recruited followers, they had no formulated further-reaching political objectives other than multiple revenge.

Given the swelling militancy and the enduring violence applied by the involved fighters, who did not shy away from bombing public markets, burning places of worship and beheading innocent civilians, one must ask the question of why the state authorities both at the national as well as at the provincial level remained inactive for such a long time? McRae refers not only to the peripheral significance of Poso amidst all the other Indonesian troubled districts and provinces, but also mentions the shortage of funding, skills and resources among the local police that prevented them from conducting proper investigations. Moreover, arrests were also impeded by the fears of reprisals towards law enforcers, as a number of officers had previously died while on duty. The inactivity of the central government only paused briefly in the aftermaths of 9/11 and once again, after the Bali bombings, when Indonesia saw widespread arrests of militant Muslims. Given the continuing violence and the risk that the Poso conflict might spread to other areas, the central government eventually had to stop looking the other way. The “cost of violence” among combatants increased through the deployment of extra troops and the arrests and prosecutions of some leading figures, making fighters rethink their participation. According to McRae, continuing to fight was seen no longer as a necessity for defence but rather became a choice that brought along higher risks than before when

perpetrators usually enjoyed impunity (p. 170). The battle fatigue together with the need for community rebuilding led some former fighters to return to their villages and take up their previous occupations in the fields and plantations. Financial shortages among the mujahidin also caused some of them leave their posts. Last but not least, the negotiations that eventually led to Malino Peace Agreement deserve some mentioning here, even though McRae deals with these consultations only marginally. However, given the involvement of four state ministers, first and foremost Vice President-to-be Yusuf Kalla, and several dozens of representatives from the Muslim and the Christian sides, this approach later became an important model for conflict resolution in other areas in Indonesia, such as in Aceh.

Dave McRae's book is a great example of thorough and subtly nuanced research. He has sought to reconstruct the violent developments through interviews with victims and perpetrators, court documents and other material evidence. In encountering the many voices and versions of the stories, he consistently applied a healthy amount of scepticism towards the content of material documents and interview responses, which allows him to create a well-nuanced and fine-graded analysis. Thus, his book offers profound insights that other comparative analyses can hardly ever offer. All and above, this book is written in a sober and straight-to-the-point-style, however, what makes it particularly pleasant to read, is the occasional interspersing of subtle irony.

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