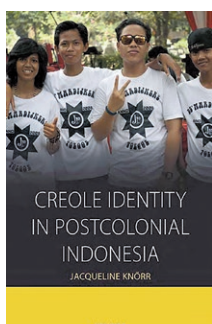


The creoleness of Betawi culture

Megacities of the 21st century have become contact zones where various cultures meet. These become places where not only commercial exchanges take place, but also where linguistic and cultural traits are translated between one culture and another. It is remarkable how often these sites of cultural translation include the great port cities of the age of colonization – like Lagos, Mumbai and the former capital of the Dutch East Indies, Batavia, present day Jakarta.

Reviewer: Paul Doolan



Reviewed publication
Jacqueline Knörr. 2014.
Creole Identity in Postcolonial Indonesia,
New York/Oxford: Berghahn,
ISBN 9781782382683

THE TERM “CREOLIZATION” has long been used to describe the phenomenon in the Americas whereby the languages of the children of immigrants and native languages merge within a contact zone, but equally, when the cultures converge to form new, hybrid cultures. Although a minority of scholars would like to restrict the use of the term to the Americas, or, even to the Caribbean only, there is a growing consensus that creolization is a useful heuristic concept that can be applied to the study of a variety of historical periods and in a variety of different places.

Cultural Anthropologist Jacqueline Knörr already applied the concept to West Africa; in this work she turns her focus to Indonesia’s capital, Jakarta, the old Batavia. She thoroughly and convincingly reveals the political, social and economic forces that underpin a specific example of creolization that today is at the heart of Indonesia’s official “Unity through Diversity” ideology. This is an important work as it exposes the lines along which creolization takes place and Knörr demonstrates how creolization comes to be instrumentalized by the creole group, when they reap the benefits of being recognized as a unique group. Furthermore, she argues that this process is supported by the Indonesian state authorities, who use the creole group, (by definition a unique group but of mixed ethnic heritage) as an exemplar around which this ethnically mixed nation can rally.

The creole group in question are the Betawi, a people descended from various 17th and 18th century immigrant groups from the Indonesian archipelago and elsewhere in

Asia, but who are now “regarded as the original inhabitants of Jakarta” (p.11). Although most of them do not like to be reminded of the fact, they are descended from slaves of the Dutch, and this is a key to the low social status they were long held in, in independent Indonesia, further aggravated by their low level of education. In the first decades after independence their colonial heritage and low social origins “made them incompatible with (Javanese) constructs of a precolonial cultural community of Indonesians” (p. 64). Knörr puts forth that attitudes common among the Betawi - shunning education, deep religiosity, lack of investment in the future, a high regard for the simple life and an aversion towards official institutes - contributed to their further marginalization. But Knörr argues that a change occurred among the central authorities in the late 1960s and, by the end of the 20th century Betawi culture had been rediscovered, revived and was being actively promoted, leading to what she calls “a social upgrading of the Betawi” (p.130). This process has contributed to a new national consciousness, a growing sense of Jakartan identity and has proved popular in the tourist industry, Betawi culture now being one of the city’s attractions.

Most interesting about this process, is how other marginalized groups, whose mixed origins also stretch back to colonial Batavia, have come to attach themselves to the Betawi and have even been incorporated within the Betawi, hence enriching “the internal diversity of the Betawi as a whole” (p.121). This is central to the Betawi integrative function, where “creoleness, on top of indigeneity, may significantly increase the potential for transethnic identification” (p.188). Knörr argues, and convinces this reader, that the creoleness of Betawi culture is what allows the non-Betawi inhabitants of Jakarta



Above:
Ondel-ondel,
Jakarta’s icon.
Male version. Image
reproduced under
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of Johannes Randy
Prakoso on flickr.

to identify with Betawi culture, “irrespective of their own identities.” (p.187) In other words, the Betawi have flourished recently because they are sufficiently unique as to be defined as a culture, but mixed enough and open enough, so that other groups can recognize something of themselves in the Betawi. Consequently, Betawiness is in fashion, it provides Jakarta with something special. Plus, it draws in the tourists.

This just skims the surface of what Professor Knörr has to say and her book contains much more of interest, including theoretical remarks on creoleness that are to be applauded for their clarity. But I do feel compelled to add a number of critical remarks, alas. While these remarks may seem severe, let me repeat that this is a work that rewards close reading and will enhance the reader’s knowledge of contemporary Jakartan ethnic politics. But allow me three points of criticism.

Firstly, there is the title of the work. Despite a chapter that deals with the relationship between the situation in Jakarta and national unity (and which makes up less than a tenth of the book), this is not a book about Indonesia, as the title implies. Indeed Knörr basically admits as much in the introduction: “We are concerned here with phenomena that exist in Jakarta and pertain to Jakarta.” (p.7) Regions beyond Java are ignored, other cities on Java are glossed over. Then why in heaven’s name does the title plainly say “Indonesia”?

Secondly, among the many works of her own that she lists in the bibliography, Professor Knörr includes her book *Kreolität und postkoloniale Gesellschaft: Integration und Differenzierung in Jakarta*. One immediately notices the term “Jakarta” in the title, far more accurate (dare I say honest) than the newer work. But my criticism goes deeper. The work being presently reviewed is, to a large extent, a translation of the earlier German language work. Some chapters are near identical, even using the same maps and illustrations. Yet nowhere, neither in the acknowledgments nor in the small print, are we informed that what we are dealing with here is, to a large extent, not a new work but a translation. Had I bought the original German language book, and then bought the present English language book, I would have that same feeling as when one arrives home from the department-store, having purchased one item, only to discover when checking my receipt that I had been charged twice for the same item. I would feel cheated.

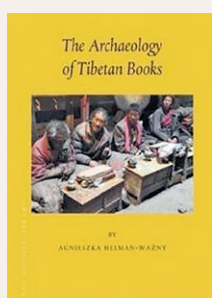
Thirdly, Knörr makes her argument with clarity and coherence, but I frequently found myself longing for punctuation. I failed to find a single semi-colon in the entire book; I’m sure there must be one or two. But even commas are used sparingly. The following sentence will serve as an example: “Thus, in the context of the Betawi revival it is above all those who on account of their relatively high social status or because they wanted to maintain or achieve such status used to conceal their Betawi identity who nowadays due to their social status are most likely to gain prominent positions both within the Betawi community and the public sphere more generally.” (p.102)

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Documents as artefacts

For someone who has spent time consumed by the craft of making paper, in Tibetan Studies scholarship, and who has lived as a monk in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery (albeit a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Scotland), *The Archaeology of Tibetan Books* provides fascinating insights into the science, aesthetics and tradition of making books in Tibet. Helman-Ważny’s approach is exhaustive, and it is her ability to make engrossing even the most detailed and painstaking analysis of manuscripts as the physical manifestation of fibre and ink that renders her book essential to the study, not only of Tibetan material culture and textuality, but of Tibetan culture as a whole.

Reviewer: Simon Wickhamsmith



Reviewed publication
Helman-Ważny, A. 2014.
The Archaeology of Tibetan Books,
Leiden: Brill, ISBN 97890042

Functional and spiritually inspiring

Her intriguing use of the term ‘archaeology’ focuses on the fact that written documents can be read as artefacts, whose “physical properties can be studied using methods similar to those used to study sculpture, painting or common material objects.”(p.2) Using this as a basis for reading texts, Helman-Ważny reveals a new dimension of Tibetan scholarship, showing not only how evidence regarding paper and ink manufacture can assist in establishing the date and provenance of texts, but also how issues of tradition,

climate and locale have affected the creation, design and preservation of these manuscripts.

In considering the trajectory of the book, I was taken by how the author moved from the biological structure of plant fibres to the myriad technical processes in the design and printing of texts, from the sourcing of inks (a particularly arresting chapter, on illuminated manuscripts, is entitled “Indigo, Gold and Human Blood”) to the detective work required in analysis of papers for the cataloguing of individual texts. The breadth of interdisciplinary scholarship represented here acts as an ideal vehicle to show how the relationship between artisans, scholars and plant scientists created texts which were durable and functional, as well as frequently attractive, desirable and spiritually inspiring.

More than book-making

Tibetan book culture has dealt almost exclusively with religious texts, and it is their ability to inspire devotion and to encourage deeper meditation practise which makes these books so much more than books, and this book in particular so much more than a work on book-making. In considering the materiality of these texts, we have to consider also their metaphysics. The sacred nature of the texts renders them, like statues, *thangka*, and offerings placed upon an altar, a medium which connects the practitioner with his or her Buddha-nature. When someone allows a text, or even a single page, to touch the ground, they raise it immediately to the crown of their head, an act of veneration and of blessing. The religious symbolism and cultural significance of books in Tibet makes the implications of Western intervention, and of analytical and conservation research such as Helman-Ważny’s, all the more complex; she argues persuasively for