

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
a creative commons
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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.

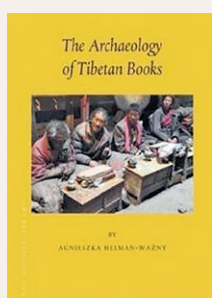
Thirdly, Knörr makes her argument with clarity and coherence, but I frequently found myself longing for punctuation. I failed to find a single semi-colon in the entire book; I’m sure there must be one or two. But even commas are used sparingly. The following sentence will serve as an example: “Thus, 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.

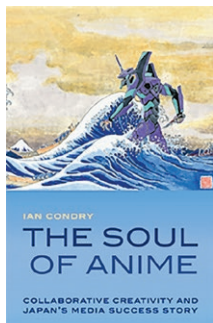
More than book-making

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

Collaborative creativity

At the heart of Ian Condry's stimulating exploration of anime's global success is his attention to how the medium thrives through "collaborative creativity": various forms of social engagement and energy investment undertaken by individuals who operate on both the production and consumption sides of anime-related industries.

Reviewer: Matthew Fraleigh



Reviewed publication

Condry, I. 2013.
The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story, Durham and London: Duke University Press, ISBN 9780822353942

WHEREAS SEVERAL of the pioneering academic treatments of anime have focused their analyses on the narrative content of specific works, the visual styles of particular directors, or the aesthetic features of the animated medium more generally, Condry is less concerned with a retrospective consideration of finished products than with the dynamic social processes by which they are created and consumed. This ethnographic approach is informed by several periods of fieldwork he carried out in Tokyo animation studios between 2004 and 2010, his interviews with numerous directors, artists, and other animation industry workers, as well as participant observations he undertook at fan conventions held in both Japan and the United States.

Condry begins with an account of the production of director Hosoda Mamoru's 2009 anime feature film, *Summer Wars*. He observes that rather than being focused on the actions of a single hero, this film is structured around the collective efforts of its various characters toward a common goal. The film's wealth of idiosyncratic characters furnishes a diverse range of viewers with multiple potential points of entry into the story: an effect only heightened by the director's decision to make the characters' design simple, thereby affording viewers the opportunity to contribute something of their own. Paralleling the inter-character cooperation depicted on screen is thus a process by which the viewers of the film are induced to participate actively as well: developing forms of connection with the work that ultimately produce a sense of "joint ownership". Moreover, Condry identifies further forms of such creative collaboration taking place on the production side as well: in the discussions among directors, designers, and animators, as well as in the creative staff's engagement with its source materials.

Turning to Hosoda's earlier film, *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (2006), for example, he notes how Hosoda introduced changes to the 1967 work of fiction by Tsutsui Yasutaka on which the film is based, making it more open-ended.

Condry's behind-the-scenes attention to the negotiations occurring among those involved in creating a work of anime continues in his second chapter, which focuses on the production of several animated TV series. Whereas the intricacy of anime narratives is often adduced as the major reason for their popularity, Condry's real-time observation of the deliberations taking place at these shows' regular planning sessions leads him to conclude that elaborately-conceived narrative lines may be less important in guiding a work through the development process than other factors – chiefly the creators' basic conceptions of the work's characters and their interconnections. It is not surprising that distinctive characters, rather than narrative arcs, would be the principal factor in some of the very short animated shows Condry considers, but he also offers examples of longer-format series in which

Below: *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*.



respecting Tibetan practices, in which texts are not conserved or restored but allowed to give themselves up to the elements, and writes that "[w]e would have to be able to point to great advances in knowledge to be gained by desecrating their sacred objects through conservation treatment in order to even begin to justify that practice." (p.202) It is especially powerful that this should have been written by a specialist in paper and the book arts, and indicates the challenges posed to anthropologists, artists, scientists and cultural historians,

Below: Holy scriptures in the Pelkor Chöde monastery of Gyantse in Tibet. Image reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy of Thriol on flickr.



both Tibetans and non-Tibetans, in determining the most suitable way to preserve the material artefacts of Tibetan book-production.

Tibetan orthography

This is a very fine book, and I can find very little about which to complain. However, given the importance of the written text in Tibetan culture, I would have appreciated more space being devoted to the carving of xylographs and to the scribal arts. While Bacot's 1912 essay on *dbu med* script¹ remains one of a very few scholarly treatments of Tibetan orthography, it would have been valuable to have had a more extensive discussion here of the practise of carving, technical descriptions of the various different scripts employed, and perhaps even a brief foray into marginalia. The orthographic and design choices which we make when writing even the most trivial of texts – or even in preparing a text file on computer – make their own individual contributions to the final product, and I would welcome perhaps a follow-up paper analysing the physical construction of letters in order to better understand its role in the Tibetan book arts.

Book reviews don't generally consider the book-as-artefact, but in reviewing this particular book, it would seem apposite to remark that, as always, Brill has produced a beautiful addition to its extensive Tibetan Studies Library. The quality of paper and the photographic reproductions are exemplary, and both the heft and character of the object are conducive to contemplating what, if produced with less concern for readability and aesthetics, might have become, given the nature of its technical and scientific content, a considerably less enjoyable read, at least for those not familiar with the arcane study of the book arts.

a work's complete narrative has yet to be determined (or even glimpsed), and yet the work begins to take shape around its distinctive characters, premises, and worlds. An argument that Condry introduces and continues to develop over the remaining chapters of the book is that the anime character can fruitfully be considered a generative platform itself, conducive to migration across diverse media.

While much of Condry's analysis focuses on the production and consumption of anime in the early twenty-first century, he also endeavors to place contemporary Japan's anime industry in both historical and comparative contexts. In the third chapter, for example, he discusses the postwar development of Japanese anime, focusing especially on the work of Tezuka Osamu. Rejecting accounts of modern Japanese anime that would describe it mainly as an autonomous outgrowth of earlier domestic visual traditions, he identifies various ways in which Japanese animators saw American animated films as both sources of inspiration and targets of rivalry: the Tōei studio, for example, explicitly aspired to become the "Disney of the East". Attending to the embeddedness of the Japanese anime industry in this larger context, Condry also notes variant features of the production process that distinguish American and Japanese animated films. In the fourth chapter as well, Condry adopts a longer chronological view in recounting how Bandai was able to obtain the rights to producing Gundam plastic models in the 1970s and to unexpectedly transform a toy that had prematurely been judged a failure into one of its most popular products. Condry emphasizes the role that small networks of fans and the media that connected them played in achieving this remarkable success.

One of Condry's most interesting chapters concerns the practice of fansubbing: overseas fans' cooperative production of subtitled versions of anime works. While such activity is unmistakably prohibited by copyright law, Condry vividly demonstrates how many producers of fansubs understand themselves to be acting in the service of anime rather than counter to the interests of anime producers. He describes these fansubbers' meticulousness and attention to detail, showing how they add value, for example, through annotation of supplementary historical or cultural information. Observing that some remove their fansubs from circulation once subtitled commercial versions are available, he argues that a set of ethical principles underlies their efforts.

Throughout *The Soul of Anime*, Condry shows how the anime production process often opens up various kinds of "empty spaces" that facilitate idiosyncratic forms of creative engagement and consumption. With its equal attentiveness to the industry and to its fans, Condry's book is a timely addition that helps elucidate how the "collaborative creativity" that characterizes producers and consumers alike lies behind anime's success.

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Explorations of Tibetan book culture

In recent years, the invaluable work of Gene Smith and the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (www.tbrc.org) has made it possible for Tibetan texts to be reproduced digitally and reprinted endlessly on-demand. However, the TBRC's work preserves the ideas held within a text and its literary style, and not the text itself. The engaging explorations of Tibetan book culture, however, as presented in *The Archaeology of Tibetan Books*, celebrate the tactile nature of these artefacts, the physical act of holding and turning the pages, an act that leaves over time the marks of many fingers, the extensive quality control issues in selecting fibres and writing materials for different types of text, the religious and cultural vitality of texts, and the devoted commitment to aesthetics and textual accuracy of the various scribes, wood-carvers, editors and printers. The decoding of these elements is a vital aspect of a deeper understanding of Tibetan culture, and Helman-Ważny's research offers a most welcome contribution to this important work.

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References

- 1 Bacot, J. 1912. 'L'écriture Cursive Tibétaine', *Journal Asiatique* 10(19):5-78.