

Introduction: Indigeneity in ‘Southeast Asia’: Challenging identities and geographies

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Only a few decades ago, there was not a country in Asia that recognised the existence of specifically and legally defined ‘Indigenous Peoples’. In recent years, however, that has changed, albeit unevenly. The concept of indigeneity is being increasingly accepted, both by governments and the public, although it remains highly controversial, even in countries where it has made some ground legally. For example, in the region we now frequently refer to as ‘Southeast Asia’, the governments of the Philippines and Cambodia now define particular ethnic groups of people as Indigenous, and are providing these groups with particular rights.¹ In other countries in the region, the concept of Indigenous Peoples is still not legally recognised, but there is increasing acceptance of the concept, or at least recognition of it amongst certain groups. Questions related to the proliferation and contested nature of the concept of Indigenous Peoples were addressed during a multidisciplinary workshop organised by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in March 2015. This special issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* is devoted to considering some of the conceptions of indigeneity in Southeast Asia that brought together a group of scholars and activists from various countries in Asia and the United States for the workshop, which was financially supported through a grant provided by Open Society Foundations.

Whether one is fully supportive, partially supportive, or opposed to the concept of indigeneity, there is no denying its increased relevance and importance in the region, even if many governments and groups continue to believe that the concept is inappropriate for Asia and is only really relevant where large-scale white European settler colonisation occurred, such as the Americas, Australia and New Zealand.² The essays here — along with another set of articles derived from the same workshop, published in *Asian Ethnicity* in 2016³ — interrogate this important topic, and examine the various socio-legal contexts in which the concept is circulating.

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1 Ian G. Baird, ‘“Indigenous Peoples” and land: Comparing communal land titling and its implications in Cambodia and Laos’, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 54, 3 (2013): 269–81; Noah Theriault, ‘The micropolitics of Indigenous environmental movements in the Philippines’, *Development and Change* 42, 6 (2011): 1417–40.

2 Christian Erni, ed., *The concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: A resource book*, IWGIA Document No. 123 (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs; Chiang Mai: Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact Foundation, 2008).

3 ‘Indigeneity in Southeast Asia’, ed. I.G. Baird, special issue, *Asian Ethnicity* 17, 4 (2016). See, in particular, Ian G. Baird, ‘Introduction. Indigeneity in Asia: An emerging but contested concept’: 501–5.

The first article in the collection, written by Micah Morton and Ian Baird,⁴ provides the most comprehensive history of the rise of the concept of indigeneity in Thailand available to date. As has been shown in other countries in Southeast Asia, such as Laos,⁵ the hybrid nature of the concept is also evident in Thailand, as it was initially introduced in the country through activists from other parts of Asia, and influenced by international movements. This is not to say, however, that the concept of indigeneity has no relevance to people in Thailand themselves, or that some people in the country have not displayed considerable agency in recent years in asserting their right to be identified as Indigenous, even if the government of Thailand continues to refuse to recognise the concept legally, and many people, even those defined as Indigenous Peoples, have a variety of opinions regarding who should be considered Indigenous and who should not.⁶ Indeed, even though one can trace the modern concept of indigeneity to relatively recent times in Thailand, it is certainly true that those who assert their identity as Indigenous today have long faced various forms of discrimination and oppression by both the state and the majority populations in the country, and this is why many Indigenous activists in Thailand have embraced the concept, as they see it as a way to proudly assert their sense of difference, while at the same time demanding the rights and respect as citizens in Thailand that have long been denied to many.

The second article in the collection, written by Prasit Leepreecha,⁷ an ethnic Hmong scholar from Thailand who himself identifies as Indigenous, applies the concept of ‘becoming’ (*devenir* in French) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to conceptualise and examine the complex processes associated with ‘becoming Indigenous Peoples’ in Thailand, thus building on Morton and Baird’s article, but through examining the circumstances from a different but complementary perspective. Prasit argues, in particular, that while upland ethnic groups in Thailand are increasingly exercising their right to self-determination in defining themselves as Indigenous Peoples, there continues to be much debate and contestation among those groups as to not only the meanings associated with the Indigenous label, but also the appropriateness of the label to the Thai context.

The third article, written by Michael Dunford,⁸ is focused on two particular ways that the concept of indigeneity has emerged in Myanmar (Burma). On the one hand, ethnonationalist groups, such as the Chin National Front and the Karen National Union, have employed the concept of indigeneity in international forums as a tool for demanding increased autonomy within Burma. On the other hand, however, the Burmese government has used a nativeness understanding of indigeneity in its attempts to exclude certain ethnic minorities — most prominently the Rohingya — by explicitly striking them from the official list of Myanmar’s ‘national races’, a

4 Micah F. Morton and Ian G. Baird, ‘From Hill tribe to Indigenous Peoples: The localisation of a global movement in Thailand’.

5 Ian G. Baird, ‘Translocal assemblages and the circulation of the concept of “Indigenous Peoples” in Laos’, *Political Geography* 46 (2015): 54–64.

6 Ian G. Baird, Prasit Leepreecha and Urai Yangcheepsujarit, ‘Who should be considered “Indigenous”? A survey of ethnic groups in northern Thailand’, *Asian Ethnicity* 18, 4 (2017): 543–62.

7 Prasit Leepreecha, ‘Becoming Indigenous Peoples in Thailand’.

8 Michael Dunford, ‘Indigeneity, ethnopolitics, and *taingyintha*: Myanmar and the global Indigenous Peoples’ movement’.

point that Ardeth Maung Thawngmung also made in the particular context of Rakhine State in Myanmar.⁹

The fourth article in this collection, written by Nasir Uddin,¹⁰ considers how the global concept of indigeneity has become intertwined and translated to fit the local circumstances in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a contentious Bangladesh borderlands region adjacent to both Myanmar and India that has been the site of considerable ethnic violence over rights and autonomy, and political struggles following the ‘Peace Accord’ signed in 1997. Still, like Thailand and Myanmar, the government of Bangladesh has so far refused to legally recognise the modern concept of Indigenous Peoples.

The fifth article, authored by Oona Paredes,¹¹ considers the concept of indigeneity in the Philippines, with a particular focus on the Higaunon Lumads of northern Mindanao. While many governments in Asia can be criticised for refusing to legally recognise the aspiration of groups of their citizens to identify as Indigenous, Paredes emphasises how the Philippines’ legal adoption of the concept of Indigenous Peoples is ‘transforming how Indigenous Peoples maintain and perform their ancestral traditions, often leading to highly divisive internal debates about proper cultural and political representation’.

The sixth article, written by Noah Theriault,¹² considers how the legal recognition of the concept of indigeneity is affecting the Philippines, drawing upon fieldwork with Indigenous Palawan communities in the country’s southwest. In particular, Theriault explains how the legal recognition of the concept of Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines has led to the provision of new land rights associated with the idea of ‘ancestral domains’, but with the understanding that Indigenous Peoples should maintain an ‘ecological balance’ and cooperate with environmental regulations, thus leading to new and sometimes contradictory forms of environmental politics. As with Paredes’s article, Theriault’s essay interrogates how juridical conceptions of indigeneity are playing out on the ground. In particular, he aims to highlight the agency that Indigenous communities bring to their encounters with bureaucratic institutions, offering three examples of how Indigenous Palawan actors have creatively engaged with the dilemmas that confront them. Theriault’s work also fits well with recent work on Cambodia that has demonstrated similar kinds of contradictions and dilemmas.¹³

The last article in the collection, written by Fadzilah Majid Cooke and Sofia Johari,¹⁴ focuses on the particular ways that the concept of *Bumiputra* (sons of the soil) is manifesting in the particular context of Sabah, in East Malaysia. Although the concept was originally intended to support ethnic Malays and to a lesser extent

9 Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, ‘The politics of indigeneity in Myanmar: Competing narratives in Rakhine state’, in ‘Indigeneity in Southeast Asia’, ed. I.G. Baird, special issue, *Asian Ethnicity* 17, 4 (2016): 527–47.

10 Nasir Uddin, ‘The local translation of global indigeneity: A case of the Chittagong Hill tracts’.

11 Oona Paredes, ‘Preserving “tradition”: The business of indigeneity in the modern Philippine context’.

12 Noah Theriault, ‘Unravelling the strings attached: Philippine indigeneity in law and practice’.

13 Ian G. Baird, ‘Indigeneity in Southeast Asia and Cambodia: Opportunities and challenges, including those related to communal land titling’, in *Indigenous places and colonial spaces: The politics of intertwined relations*, ed. Nicole Gombay and Marcela Palomino-Schalscha (Routledge, 2019), pp. 176–193.

14 Fadzilah Majid Cooke and Sofia Johari, ‘Positioning of Murut and Bajau identities in state forest reserves and marine parks in Sabah, East Malaysia’.



Figure 1. Actual Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Democracy Party flag, indicating how the concept of indigeneity is beginning to gain some traction in parts of Southeast Asia.

‘Orang Asli’ people in West Malaysia, Malaysia’s own particular variety of indigeneity has now expanded to Sabah, where it has to adapt to the local context and understandings of ethnicity. Cooke and Johari contend that, ‘indigeneity is not primordial, but is positioned in relation to dominant identities and relations with other non-dominant, Indigenous groups’. Moreover, they point out that Indigenous Peoples are not the passive receivers of what they consider to be ‘the process of “Othering”’. Drawing on ideas related to environmental justice, the authors make the point that land-based communities have found some leverage in gaining rights via the global environmental justice movement and by making identity claims attached to place. The authors argue that sea-oriented coastal peoples require other social symbols than land for making identity claims, including through evoking ‘modern’ livelihoods and conservation.

Crucially, none of the articles in the collection either advocates for a simple concept of Indigenous Peoples, or dismisses the concept of indigeneity as irrelevant or inappropriate. Instead, each of the authors has focused on unearthing the specific ways that the concept of indigeneity is being both deployed by various actors and responded to by those who are coming into contact with it. Ultimately, the set of articles, as a collective, is effective in demonstrating that the concept of indigeneity represents so many things to various peoples in different places and at different times. The most important lessons that emerge from this collection, at least from my perspective, are: first, that we need to recognise the variety of ways that the concept of Indigenous Peoples is understood and being deployed in Southeast Asia; adopting simple positions regarding complex questions associated with the concept of indigeneity is inappropriate. Second, whether one tends to be critical of the concept of indigeneity in Southeast Asia, or sees its potential as an emancipatory tool for empowering

peoples who have been historically subjected to various forms of oppression and discrimination, or maybe a bit of both, the relevance of the concept of indigeneity in the region cannot be denied. The articles in this collection clearly demonstrate that while the concept is certainly unfamiliar and confusing to many, it is also highly relevant to others, albeit hardly in the same ways.

Another important lesson that we can draw from this collection is related to geography, particularly borders and regional boundaries. Some of the articles in the collection — particularly those written by Uddin, Dunford, and Morton and Baird — implicitly or directly challenge the concept of ‘Southeast Asia’ as a region with firm boundaries associated with particular nation-states. Indeed, some might wonder why a study centred on Bangladesh, usually located in South Asia, is featured in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. Uddin’s article, however, is about the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where the various peoples are often considered to be culturally and ethnically ‘Southeast Asian’ rather than ‘South Asian’. If Uddin’s article implicitly challenges the hard regional boundaries sometimes linked to our understandings of where Southeast Asia is located, Dunford’s article about Myanmar demonstrates the usefulness, even the necessity, of challenging regional boundaries to make sense of the politics associated with conceptions of indigeneity. For example, Naga leaders originally from northeast India, in ‘South Asia’, have played crucial roles in the proliferation of the concept of indigeneity in Myanmar, and one can also see how the persecution of Rohingya and attendant crisis in that country further demonstrates the need to move beyond reifying regional boundaries that emerged during the Cold War.

Finally, Morton and Baird further demonstrate how individuals and groups from places typically situated in ‘South Asia’ have had a significant influence on the development of the concept of indigeneity in Thailand. To be clear, these articles are hardly the first to challenge our ideas of region. Although many are familiar with James Scott’s use of the term ‘Zomia’ in his 2009 book, *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*,¹⁵ it was actually the social scientist Willem van Schendel who first introduced the term. Unlike Scott, however, Van Schendel applied the term Zomia to challenge the boundaries that exist between regions, particularly South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ Apart from using Zomia to disrupt regional conceptions, we can also think of other geographical terms that are effective in challenging regional boundaries, such as the Chinese term ‘Nanyang’ (Southern Ocean, 南洋), which geographically conceptualises Southeast Asia differently, and illustrates another way of thinking about the region. What we can see from some of the articles in this collection is that thinking about some of the ways that the concept of indigeneity is being presented and performed also has the potential to similarly challenge preconceived ideas of region, something that I see as being positive.

Ultimately, the set of seven articles in this special issue, and the other set of five articles published in *Asian Ethnicity*, serve to nuance and complexify our understandings of the concept of Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia.

15 James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

16 Willem van Schendel, ‘Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: Jumping scale in Southeast Asia’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, 6 (2002): 647–68.