

Rupp, Stephanie: *Forests of Belonging. Identities, Ethnicities, and Stereotypes in the Congo River Basin.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. 306 pp. ISBN 978-0-295-99106-1. Price: \$ 30.00

Thinking about identity in a new, different way is the goal pursued by Stephanie Rupp in “Forests of Belonging. Identities, Ethnicities, and Stereotypes in the Congo River Basin.” This book, based on the author’s 2001 PhD dissertation and her fieldwork dating back to 1995–96, questions the predominance held by the concept “ethnic group” and of pairs such as “Pygmies” and “hunter-gatherers” as opposed to “villagers” and “farmers.” Set in southeastern Cameroon, it focuses on the Bangando, Mbomam, and Kwele slash-and-burn agriculturists, who also engage in hunting, fishing, and gathering, as well as on the Baka Pygmies, hunter-gatherers who also farm. The Bangando and the Baka speak Ubangian languages (too distant from each other for mutual comprehension), whereas the other communities are Bantu speakers. The author has shunned essentialistic, evolutionistic, ecological, and culturalistic approaches. For researchers trying to understand intercommunity relations, identity-making processes in southeastern Cameroon represent a complex, ambivalent puzzle. We can thank Rupp for this book, which proposes guidelines for thinking about this topic.

Rupp’s work is stimulating for several reasons. By drawing on Barth (*Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Boston 1969) and Jenkins (*Rethinking Identity. Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1994.17: 197–219), she has identified three identity-making processes and shown, how they are strategically adjusted to be rigid (stereotypes), viscous (ethnic affiliations), or fluid (social identities). To its credit, this book brings to light several levels of interrelations among communities that, as it turns out, are split but not just along the lines of belonging to an ethnic group or some other – more exogenous and artificial – category.

Although the general framework of the proposed model of identity-related processes constitutes a major advance in this field, the author’s overfocalization on academic and institutional stereotypes is unfortunate since it leads to overlooking other, complementary ones. For example, the basic role played by the processes related to clan-based identities in the context of ethnic identity are underestimated; and there is a tendency to generalize from the Bangando case. In this respect, Stephanie Rupp could have developed the role played by catholic religious ethnography and its apologetic anthropology in the academic stereotype’s construction (Mary, *La preuve de Dieu par les Pygmées. Cahiers d’études africaines* 2010.2–3–4: 881–905). She could have described also more clearly the uses of what one might call an evolutionistic stereotype, which has sprung from the civilizing, postcolonial ideology, with its cleavage between “primitive Pygmies” and “civilized villagers” and its insistence that the latter have dominated the former. It is put to use locally in the presence of outside observers in order to facilitate access to material, financial, symbolic, and electoral resources. The author could also have drawn attention to the “uncivilized ethnic Other,” a stereotype frequently described in the classical anthropological literature. In the context

of southeastern Cameroon, this trope is only activated in situations that do not involve alliances (whether based on marriage or pseudo-kinship, or following upon warfare). The book, in fact, mentions a good example of this stereotype, although the author does not analyze it in this way.

Telling anecdotes draw attention to the difficulty of adopting the “multiangular ethnographic methodology” advocated by the author and of comparing antagonistic emic viewpoints. For example, the pejorative view of the Kwele, reported without comment, is strongly tinted with the stereotypes conveyed by her Bangando hosts. This analysis would have benefited had it taken into consideration the literature on fieldwork methodology related to network studies. In fact, Baka-speaking “Pygmies” identified themselves as Bangando in the presence of an academic who was “affiliated” with the Bangando and who spoke Bangando. In a multethnic, multilanguage context, the researcher’s identity is strongly marked by his/her identification in the local setting and the language(s) used – at least in the case when the academic has tried to learn the vernacular, as Rupp did by taking courses in Bangando.

The significance of processes relating to clan-based identities is underestimated. Under the proposed model, clan affiliations are precariously located between ethnic and social identities, but closer to the latter than the former. For reasons perhaps related to both an inadequate understanding of kinship and the cursory references to kinship studies, Rupp does not seem to have gauged the effects of overlapping ethnic and clan-based affiliations. Earlier studies not mentioned in the bibliography by, among others, Alexandre and Binet (*Le groupe dit Pahouin (Fang, Boulou, Beti). Paris 1958*), followed up in one of my publications (Joiris, *The Framework of Central African Hunter-Gatherers and Neighbouring Societies. African Study Monographs* 2003.28: 57–79), have shown that ethnic affiliations are intrinsically trans-ethnic precisely because they are consubstantial with clan structures and are partly related to pseudo-kinship. This is the crux for grasping the ambivalence of identity-making processes in this region. Rupp’s book, however, has presented the making of clan-based affiliations as similar to the identity-making processes among groups mostly formed for temporary purposes. In Bangando, according to Rupp, the prefix *bo-* can be placed both in front of the name of a clan or of a temporary group, and she generalizes this to neighboring peoples. That is not true for the Baka language however. Also for this reason, one should not consider a clan-based identity to be a mere social identity.

The fifth chapter, “Tangles. Parallel Clans, Alliances, Rituals, and Collective Work,” is disappointing owing to the inadequate description of the structural complexity of pseudo-kinship. A major point calling for attention is the question of the boundary between “Pygmies” and “villagers.” The author has qualified this line of separation as sexual, whereas it is matrimonial as indicated, paradoxically, elsewhere in the book. She has interpreted the fact that the Baka and “villagers” do not partake of meals together as evidence of revulsion rather than as a prohibition of incest related to pseudo-kinship. Contrary to what

is stated, pseudo-kinship is vertical as well as horizontal and it comes into play in intra- as well as interethnic contexts. The author seems unaware of studies of the intra- and interethnic systems of homology between clans. Throughout the book, one notices a tendency to use sources without citing them appropriately; and the bibliography, largely based on that of the doctoral dissertation, is not up to date. By not questioning the limits of her fieldwork methodology, the author has been led to generalize from localized family histories.

Reading this book imbues us with an idealized vision of multiethnic solidarity. By adopting a view opposite the long tradition of writings on the “Pygmies” that have overemphasized – or even been obsessed by – “relations of domination,” other social and political possibilities are overlooked. The author seems to have erred in the contrary direction, by focusing exclusively on solidarity. Relations with elites and the latter’s role in local politics go unmentioned. The comparison with existing studies of Central African elites would have been useful for shedding light on the mechanisms of exclusion that turn the “Pygmies” into outsiders, unable to enjoy the monetary, material, and symbolic advantages generated by institutions active in the fields of development and conservation.

On account of the large place given to deconstructing academic and institutional stereotypes, this book might be seen as a state-of-the-art publication on the relations between hunter-gatherers and their neighbors. Its contribution is novel, even innovative, yet it somehow inadvertently illustrates how hard it is to switch from the stereotypes conveyed in the old corpus of culturalistic studies to the ideas to be gleaned from the hunter-gatherer revisionist debate (e.g., Headland, *Revisionism in Ecological Anthropology* 1997.38: 605–630).

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Rydström, Helle (ed.): *Gendered Inequalities in Asia. Configuring, Contesting, and Recognizing Women and Men*. Copenhagen: NIAS, 2010. 303 pp. ISBN 978-87-7694-047-8. Price: \$ 37.00

How can scholars bring fresh perspectives to the study of femininity and masculinity in Southeast Asia? This question, posed by Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz in “Bewitching Women, Pious Men. Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia” (Berkeley 1995), has not lost its relevance considering the proliferation of (edited) books on the complexities, (in)equalities, and interconnectedness of gender with politics, power, sexualities, modernity, globalisation in the Asian context during the past decade. Many of these volumes reiterate Ong and Peletz’ argument that gender is “a fluid, contingent process characterized by contestation, ambivalence and change” (1995: 1), and that this becomes all the more apparent in “the context of capitalist development, nation-state formation, and globalization” (1995: 8).

“Gendered Inequalities in Asia. Configuring, Contesting and Recognizing Women and Men” is here no exception. On the back flap we can read that “[g]lobal processes with flows in money, commodities and people have made

it increasingly varied and blurred in what it means to be female or male in Asia today.” In her introductory chapter, the editor Helle Rydström highlights two notions as central in the analysis of gender in this volume. The first is equality, “in terms of recognition and social justice for both women and men” (2), whereby the focus in the book is mostly on the misrecognition of women, or gender-specific subordination in terms of access to political and religious power, occupational and health inequalities, hierarchical orders in the family, and sexual practices. The second notion is intersectionality, or polytopicality, which refers to “the multitude of factors involved in the ways in which women and men – and their bodies, sexualities, colours and abilities – become males and females” (8).

While these notions do not contribute to a new perspective to the study of gender in Asia, the volume contains several interesting chapters that illuminate the interlinkages between politics, religion, family life, and gender and how these shape inequalities – based on gender as well as class, ethnicity, or caste. The book is divided into three parts: Part I discusses “The Global and the Local,” Part II focuses on “Contesting Family Life,” and Part III pays attention to “Masculinities.” There is no space here to elaborate in detail on all chapters, so I will pay a bit more attention to contributions and insights that I found most illustrative for the analytical approach proposed in the introduction.

Nguyen-vo Thu-huong’s chapter sheds light on the intersections between governance, gender, and class inequalities as well as between orientalist notions of femininity and the neoliberal order in contemporary Vietnam. Nguyen-vo explores the gendered consequences of the contradictions in governance, promoting on the one side global exchanges and on the other side advocating a conservative, inward-looking traditional cultural and political line and looks particularly at governmental approaches to (commercial) sex and desire after the transition from a centrally planned to an open market economy (*Đổi mới*). The neoliberal freedoms on which this new economy relies has been constitutive for the important role of commercial sex in business. Government interventions against this “social evil” are therefore careful not to influence the flow of commerce, and instead create a citizenry differentiated by class and gender. By calling upon “traditional” Vietnamese culture and women’s role in the family and society, middle-class wives are encouraged to make domestic sex more appealing to satisfy the natural desires of their husbands – and thus protect them from the diseases transmitted by the “dangerous” bodies of the prostitute, while lower-class sex workers are taught in rehab camps about their true place in society and the new economy – far from a world of glamour, money, and sex in order to take up a position of dexterous, docile, patient piece-rate workers.

Although in a different setting, i.e., postcolonial India, Sidsel Hansson and Catarina Kinnvall similarly focus on the contradictory processes that make “women” into symbols of a true tradition and the essence of the (Hindu) nation and that at the same time refute the very existence of the category of “women” due to multiple identities. The