

out, as well as addressing underexplored theoretical and disciplinary implications. Bringing center stage the many compelling questions posed in the short introduction – “Has ethnomusicology actually done its duty? ... Do we (still) need ethnomusicology as a discipline independent from musicology? ... And is it methodologically and epistemologically equipped for the future?” (vi) – would have greatly enhanced the final product. A longer introductory chapter could have explicitly linked contributions together, pointing out common ideas and more deeply examining future directions for dialogue. Moreover, a structure dividing the book into thematic sections might have brought to the fore larger themes too often lost in the details of individual contributions. That said, this is a very fine introduction to many of our (ethno)musicologies, and a point of departure for future discussions on the discipline’s continuing role within the study of music.

Leslie Tilley

Appadurai, Arjun: *Banking on Words. The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2016. 180 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-31877-6. Price: \$ 22.50

In 1990, Arjun Appadurai defined “finanscapes” (read: financial landscapes) as critical zones in the production of globalized culture and, as such, as an emerging field for anthropologists to focus on. To endorse such research, Appadurai later took an active role in establishing the Cultures of Finance working group at New York University’s Institute for Public Knowledge. After two recent publications (2011 and 2012) that specifically focused on financial markets, Appadurai has now published the book “Banking on Words. The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance.” In it, he sets out his understanding of how anthropology can help analyze the evergrowing importance of the global financial market as an economic system and cultural field. It is not surprising that University of Chicago Press has published this work. When anthropologists began showing an interest in financial markets, University of Chicago Press became the preferred publisher for the discipline’s scholars working on finance. Caitlin Zaloom’s “Out of the Pits” (2006), Annelise Riles’ “Collateral Knowledge” (2011), and Douglas Holmes’ “Economy of Words” (2013) are among the books that have been published by the University of Chicago Press.

Appadurai’s book, however, differs from these books, as it is conceptual rather than empirical. In fact, it is a collection of theoretical elaborations that aim to give a genuinely anthropological interpretation of derivatives and the financial crisis that started in 2007. Economically speaking, derivatives are financial products whose price is *derived* from an underlying asset. This can be a commodity, a security, or any other asset. Derivatives are classified either as futures contracts, forward contracts, options, or swaps. And as we learned in 2007 and 2008, their referential nature can have very real impacts. As most scholars today agree, derivatives were among the financial products that accelerated the market downturn that resulted in the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression.

The book consists of nine chapters that look at derivatives from different angles and from the perspective of many great minds of social theory, including Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Mauss. The author also takes into account more recent literature from the field of the “social studies of finance,” particularly the work that is concerned with the performativity of economics and that claims economic theory formats the economy as a field, rather than describing it (see, in particular, the work of Michel Callon and Donald MacKenzie).

In the introductory first chapter, Appadurai states that he aims to study derivatives as “the core technical innovation that characterizes contemporary finance” (1). To do so, he gives his own definition of a derivative: “a promise about the uncertain future” (2). He argues that, since a promise is a linguistic act, the derivative market is a linguistic phenomenon. Also, Appadurai is interested not only in the promise but also in the connectedness of these promises. As he explains, derivatives (as contractual promises) are based on other promises (a buy contract, a sell contract, or another derivative contract). They refer to underlying values, but do not represent a value in itself. This creates what Appadurai calls a “chain of promises,” whose value depends on other promises.

In chapters 2 and 3, Appadurai elaborates on what (beyond its mere focus on derivatives) seems to be the underlying goal of the book, namely, to define an overall “spirit” of today’s financial capitalism. As the wording indicates, this search is heavily influenced by the author’s deep fascination for Weber’s “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1905), which he says was his main influence when he began thinking about the economy as a cultural field. As Appadurai correctly points out, recent literature on the social studies of finance has offered much insight into the field of finance. Influenced by actor-network theory and its strong focus on devices, theory, and performative effects, the literature, however, has not given much thought to a potential underlying spirit that precedes everyday financial market practices. Here, Appadurai wants to reintegrate the question of the “spirit” into the analysis of the “financial machine.”

To do so, he frames the market as a source of the “sacred,” the ultimate authority of our time. In chapter 4, he does this in a particularly convincing manner by analyzing the mystification of the material through credit cards, paychecks, loans, equity shares, and mortgages. In chapters 5 and 6, Appadurai then slowly leads the reader to what he considers the current spirit of the financial machine: the spirit of uncertainty. Here, Appadurai builds on the work of a key figure in economics, Frank H. Knight, who wrote about the differentiation between risk and uncertainty in 1934. Knight argued that risk is everything that can be expressed in probabilities, while uncertainty is everything that cannot be expressed in probabilities. Appadurai takes this as a point of departure and argues that through the market – and trading as its central ritual – uncertainty is transformed into certainty in a performative manner. Similar to a religious ritual (as observed and described by anthropologists such as Stanley J. Tambiah, Maurice Bloch, and Roy Rappaport), trading thus produc-

es certainty. From this, Appadurai concludes that the market is not a place where supply and demand is negotiated, but rather an “ontological absolute” that creates economic and cultural realities itself.

In chapters 7 and 8, Appadurai looks at the social outcome of this “sacred” market. Starting with a number of conceptual thoughts on individuals (as opposed to individuals), he looks for ways to transform the spirit of financial capitalism and the logic of derivatives markets from the “current exploitative, asymmetric and antidemocratic financial order” (118) into progressive and democratic structures. Based on one of the book’s rather few empirical pages, which deals with “toilet festivals” in Mumbai, he claims that the logic of derivatives presents the opportunity to turn “shit [sic] into social value and exclusion into empowerment” (123). Also, and surprisingly, he defines debt as a potential instrument of progress – if the profit resulting from it is “democratized” and “socialized” (128).

In chapter 9, Appadurai finally gives an analysis of the financial crisis and talks about the “failure of language,” which is prominently set out in the title of the book. As he puts it, the chain of promises, i.e., the derivatives market, did not break due to its referential nature alone. Rather, it was the rise of a new financial instrument – the swap – that challenged the contractual promises of the former derivatives market. Economically speaking, a swap is the option to exchange an asset for another predefined asset at a certain time in the future. In practice, swaps are often used to secure investors from a future decrease in an asset’s value. To Appadurai, it is thus a bet on the fact that promises made between market participants will be broken – a *promise against a promise*. And, as the author claims, the popularity of such swaps caused the chain of promises to break in 2008, resulting in an almost unprecedented financial crisis.

With this book, Appadurai confirms his status as one of the truly original thinkers of our time. His aim to bring the notion of spirit back to anthropological work on the financial markets is spot-on and truly needed. Here, Appadurai shows his immense knowledge of social theory and his ability to make this knowledge productive when analyzing contemporary cultural fields. Having said this, I must also give a word of warning. In many parts of the book, Appadurai’s analyses require a fair amount of expertise and endurance, as he integrates thoughts from scholars of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, and economics without too much introduction. Also, the book does not explain much about the functioning of financial markets in the sense of an empirical analysis. In this regard, the book itself is a kind of derivative, building on and referring to data from other researchers. So, while readers looking for empirical and explanatory texts might be better off referring to one of the ethnographies mentioned above, I highly recommend this book to readers who are interested in social theory and in an original and anthropological explanation of the financial crisis.

Stefan Leins

Århem, Nikolas: *Forests, Spirits, and High Modernist Development. A Study of Cosmology and Change among the Katuic Peoples in the Uplands of Laos and Vietnam.* Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2014. 463 pp. ISBN 978-91-554-9113-0. (Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology, 55) Price: SEK 382.00

Among the most pressing issues in the current anthropological study of human-environment relations is the relationship between perspectives that elaborate from local cosmologies and are often connected to the ontological turn, and approaches focusing on the way local situations are embedded in contexts of globalization, state power and neoliberal regimes, in brief, political ecology. This rich and lively book situates itself at the very intersection of these trends. It details the cosmology of Southeast Asian uplanders, their relationships with landscapes, species, and spirits, while at the same time analyzing the role of the hegemonic development agency of the state. It thus contributes to the study of human-environment relationships as well as to upland-lowland relationships in the region which James Scott has popularized as “Zomia.” The book is based on extensive fieldwork among Katu, Mon-Khmer speaking uplanders in Vietnam, and a shorter survey of Nge-Kriang, who speak a different Katuic language, for a development project in Laos.

While the villages in Vietnam have been heavily affected by the Second Indochinese War and succeeding resettlements, they were able to maintain their lifestyle as swiddeners and users of forests to a large degree. This is the condition of a rather remarkable cosmology. While many uplanders in Southeast Asia consider village space as the domain of ancestral protection, the centers of Katu moral space are situated in specific hills and their dominating spirits. These hill spirits, located outside the village, manage moral life in the village and punish transgressions like incest or adultery. Thus, the dominant social entity, the village, encompasses the inhabited space and its swidden fields but also the old-growth forest where the spirits dwell. Life in the village is defined through this complementarity of inside and outside, which does not separate a moral, social space inside from a wild and immoral space outside. The spirit forests, prohibited for agriculture, may consist of up to 30% of the village territory. Århem thus calls the beings dominating them “ecosystem spirits” – beings that define a place in its entire complexity, including forests, slopes, watercourses, and animals.

This leads Århem to his central thesis. The inclusion of old-growth forest into the moral domain of the village functions like environmental protection, as it provides biodiversity hotspots that house ecologically sensitive species like gibbons. The well-worn argument that animist cosmologies protect nature while naturalist ones destroy it often involves a good degree of romantic fantasizing about the exotic and authentic other – and, unfortunately, this volume is not entirely free of such projections, as when the author unnecessarily compares Katu ontology with the film “Avatar.” But he makes good on it by providing exceptionally solid ethnographic data. Animist care of spirit spaces and environmental protection end up having very comparable results, even though they