

# PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

From the Public Anthropology Review Editors

## Introducing Public Anthropology Reviews, September 2010

David Vine, Alaka Wali, and Melissa Checker, Public Anthropology Review Editors

Welcome to the third installment of *American Anthropologist's* new "Public Anthropology Reviews" section. We hope the section is fast becoming an important resource and space to present, constructively critique, and debate cutting-edge anthropological work that seeks to reach nonacademic audiences and influence critical issues of the day. If you missed the section's first two issues, we encourage you to revisit those reviews (available in the journal and open access at <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/123301409/PDFSTART>) and our introduction to the section (Checker et al. 2009).

In this issue, we begin with our first "dialogic review," which will generally feature an anthropologist and an interlocutor offering two perspectives on the impact and import of a work of public anthropology. In this case, we feature *Vibrant*, the six-year-old biannual international journal of the Association of Brazilian Anthropologists (ABA), which is seeking to increase the global accessibility of Brazilian anthropology by publishing in English, French, and Spanish—rather than just in Portuguese—and by making *Vibrant* available free online. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, who oversaw the launch of *Vibrant* as president of the ABA and remains an editorial board member, offers an overview of the linguistic, technological, and political-economic complexities of expanding the diversity of anthropological voices and disseminating anthropological knowledge around the globe. Then interlocutor Janet Chernela critiques the journal from the point of view of a reader.

Eric C. Thompson discusses another effort to introduce anthropological perspectives into popular discourse in his review of "Ini Budaya Kita" (lit., this Is Our Culture), Julian Lee's regular column for a Malaysian art and lifestyle magazine. As Thompson explains, Lee and a number of anthropologically inclined guest writers bring anthropological insights to contemporary Malaysian life while questioning popular, and generally narrow, understandings of "culture" that are

frequently used by political conservatives "to rail against all manner of things—from music to political protest—by disparagingly commenting. . . . this is not our culture" (this issue).

Next, Robert Rotenberg discusses Jared Braiterman's Tokyo Green Space blog on "microgardening." The blog is documenting efforts to use gardening in the smallest and most unusual urban spaces—rooftops, walls, schools—"to support biodiversity in the world's largest city" (this issue). Of particular interest to environmental and urban anthropologists, not to mention gardeners, Rotenberg's review describes a blog that combines design anthropology, lush color photography, and the eye and imagination of the flâneur to explore a transforming Tokyo.

Finally, Edward M. Maclin brings us an analysis of anthropologists' presence at the 2009 global climate change talks in Copenhagen, Denmark. Drawing on his own, at times harrowing, research at the talks, Maclin describes some of the challenges faced by anthropologists studying climate change and environmental activism in both conducting research and disseminating research findings about an issue of such obvious global significance beyond academia.

In future issues, we intend to review a broad range of topics including the U.S. military's Human Terrain program, anthropologists' response to the earthquake in Haiti, service learning, new publishing experiments, and changes to tenure requirements. We continue to welcome submissions for work to be reviewed as well as the names of potential reviewers (e-mail [publicanthreviews@gmail.com](mailto:publicanthreviews@gmail.com)). We also welcome your suggestions, critique, and other feedback as we develop this important new section of *American Anthropologist*.

### REFERENCE CITED

- Checker, Melissa, David Vine, and Alaka Wali  
2009 A Sea Change in Anthropology? Public Anthropology Reviews. *American Anthropologist* 112(1):5–6.

Indian in Brazil. *Vibrant* 5(1):7–19. [http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v5n1\\_ramos.pdf](http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v5n1_ramos.pdf), accessed March 1, 2010.

Reesink, Edwin

2008 Substantial Identities in “Rural Black Communities” in Brazil: A Short Appraisal of Some Community Studies. *Vibrant* 5(1):111–140. [http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v5n1\\_reesink.pdf](http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v5n1_reesink.pdf), accessed March 1, 2010.

Rezende, Claudia Barcellos

2007 Gifts of Food: Sociability and Friendship among English

Middle Class People. *Vibrant* 4(2):5–26. [http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v4n2\\_rezende.pdf](http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v4n2_rezende.pdf), accessed March 1, 2010.

Rial, Carmen

2006 Le charme fast-foodien [Fast-food charm]. *Vibrant* 3(2):147–178. [http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v3n2\\_rial.pdf](http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v3n2_rial.pdf), accessed March 1, 2010.

Silva, Kelly, ed.

2008 *Vibrant* 5(2). <http://www.vibrant.org.br/portugues/artigosv5n2.htm>, accessed March 1, 2010.

## Reviews

# This Is Our Culture: Anthropology and the Public Sphere in Malaysia

Eric C. Thompson

National University of Singapore

Throughout much of Southeast Asia, from majority Muslim Indonesia and Malaysia to Buddhist Thailand, the idea of “culture” (*budaya* in Indonesian and Malay; *watthanatham* in Thai) has become a part of public discourse. In Malaysia, as elsewhere, culture has come to signify ways of thinking and acting that gain legitimacy through their association (real or imagined) with traditions passed down from generations past to the present generation. The idea of culture lends positive valence to those practices and ideas deemed to be part of “our culture” (whoever “we” are in a particular case) and militates against those things not part of “our culture”—which in most cases are associated with a corrupt, degenerate, and overbearing modern “West.” In Malaysia, it has become commonplace for politicians and various conservative ideologues to rail against all manner of things—from music to political protest—by disparagingly commenting “ini bukan budaya kita” (this is not our culture).

In 2008, Julian Lee, who lectures in anthropology at Monash University (Malaysia), organized a response to these repressive assertions of what Malaysian culture “is not” through a regular column in the art and lifestyle magazine *Off the Edge*, entitled “Ini Budaya Kita” (This Is Our Culture). Lee engaged a variety of scholars and social commentators—most of them trained in anthropology—to write short commentaries on topics ranging from food to government policies. The explicit objective of the column was to bring anthropological insights into everyday Malaysian life in an entertaining and thought-provoking fashion. Less explicitly, but nevertheless clear, Lee’s intention was to open up the idea of “culture” or “budaya” beyond staid, conservative, and negatively structured “traditions” (i.e., “Don’t do X because X is not our ‘culture’”). Rather, when used in these articles, the term *budaya* clearly refers to fluid, engaged ways of living in contemporary Malaysia.

Lee solicited contributions from an impressive array of writers, including senior anthropologists engaged in Malaysia-based research since the 1960s or 1970s, graduate students, and both Malaysian and non-Malaysian authors. In addition to providing readers with insights about both Malaysia and anthropology, the column also highlights the intersection between culture and politics. This last point is perhaps the most significant contribution of the undertaking. Culture and politics are too often thought of as entirely separate in Malaysia (and elsewhere). Although contemporary academic anthropology has drawn strong connections between the two, it remains the case that culture is more often than not used as a counterweight to politics—particularly progressive or reform politics. Politics is a field of struggle and change, but it is also tinged with suspicion and disdain. Culture is naturalized, pure, the way things are, and not to be questioned. The articles in the “Ini Budaya Kita” series almost all work against such a notion, especially those that link cultural, anthropological analysis to politically contentious topics, from reform-movement protests to racialized social policies, sexuality, and even polite and not-so-polite use of language.

The series, with over 20 contributions, is too extensive to review in detail here, but some examples of the most engaging pieces provide a sense of its flavor: The first article in the series, by Bill Watson of Kent University, reflected on his and his Malaysian colleagues’ personal experiences participating in student demonstrations in the 1970s, from the perspective of more recent demonstrations staged over the past decade by various *reformasi* (reformist) groups. Other articles directly address politically sensitive issues of race relations and gender norms. For example, in one of the more analytical contributions to the series, Steve Fenton writes about Malaysia’s “very peculiar multiculturalism.” Fenton argues that while Malaysia is held up internationally as a successful multicultural society, its success has come not through inclusiveness but, rather, via the enforcement

of ethnic boundaries and the redistribution of wealth and privilege on the basis of such exclusions.

Although all the articles in the series offer thought-provoking insights, some are much more lighthearted than others. Liana Chua describes her experiences of “eating one’s way through fieldwork,” while Janet Carsten offers nostalgic reflections on fieldwork in a coastal fishing village. Finally, the article that would likely be of greatest interest to anthropologists beyond Malaysia—particularly those in teaching positions—is Patricia Sloane-White’s marvelous account of a video-conference-based course linking her students at the University of Delaware to those at two campuses of Malaysia’s Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. Sloane-White provides not only an engaging account of cross-cultural interaction but also an intriguing model for transnational pedagogy.

Although the “Ini Budaya Kita” series offers readers insights into contemporary Malaysia as well as a contemporary view of anthropology as a discipline, both the contents of the series and its omissions are telling—with respect to both Malaysia and anthropology. Most remarkable is the fact that as varied as the backgrounds of the contributors are, none of them come from Malaysia’s numerically and politically dominant Malay community. Much is said about Malays and Muslims, but Malay Muslim authors are not among the writers. The articles also deal overwhelmingly with topics and subjects that are mainly the concerns of urban, highly educated Malaysians. Reflecting anthropological trends elsewhere (e.g., the United States), the “Ini Budaya Kita” articles tend toward the academically fashionable and politically progressive, addressing issues such as theme parks, contemporary architecture, cinema, slang, environmentalism, and consumption (particularly, consumption of food). Nonurban and nonindustrial domains are relatively under-represented, notwithstanding two fine articles by Robert

Dentan and Alberto Gomes, both of whom write on discourses about and experiences among *orang asli* (non-Malay, indigenous peoples).

The “public” with which this particular exercise in public anthropology engaged in Malaysia is a somewhat rarified one. In the case of “Ini Budaya Kita,” written for and by a circle of Malaysian cosmopolitans (by which I mean citizens as well as noncitizens who are nevertheless intimately engaged with the country, myself included), this also reflects the rather severe limits on critical discourse in the country. In the name of “responsible” journalism and public order—the familiar argument that any public discussion of “sensitive issues” will result in social and political chaos—the topics and tenor of most of the articles from *Ini Budaya Kita* are only (and only marginally) permissible in a forum such as the English-language publication *Off the Edge*. It is hard to imagine them in a mainstream Malay-language publication consumed by a wider reading public. But then again—as Lee and his contributors argue—cultures, as well as politics and publics, are complex, unpredictable, ever-changing things.

#### NOTE

*Postscript.* Julian Lee has recently collected the articles from the series along with a number of responses to them to be published as an edited volume entitled *The Malaysian Way of Life* (2010) by Marshall Cavendish.

#### REFERENCE CITED

- Lee, Julian C. H.  
2010 *The Malaysian Way of Life: Twenty-one Insightful and Sometimes Humorous Essays That Reveal the Deeper Aspects of Malaysian Culture and Politics*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish.

## Tokyo Green Space [<http://tokyogreenspace.wordpress.com/>]

**Robert Rotenberg**

*DePaul University*

Unlike European and North American cities, Tokyo never benefitted from planning that incorporated green space into the urban form. Yet, the city is home to innovative gardeners who enjoy significant local governmental and corporate support. That is the finding of the Tokyo Green Space Project, a web log (blog) that examines the transformation of Tokyo into “an urban forest that supports bio-diversity, the environment, and human community” (<http://tokyogreenspace.com/about/>). Japan’s Council for Foreign Relations Hitachi Fellowship supports the project. Focusing on the connection between

the actions of corporations and governments and the planted spaces created by household gardeners, the blog documents distinctive gardening forms, such as pot gardening and vertical gardening.

This design-anthropology project, which began on March 31, 2009, is the work of Jared Braiterman. Design anthropology uses anthropological methodologies and theories in the data collection and analysis of a design process. The products of the design process improve on an existing program or material product or create new ones (Cardew Kersey 2007:1). Although the roots of design anthropology can be traced to the 1960s, the current research strategies were outlined only recently (Blomberg et al. 1993; Wasson 2000). Braiterman undertook the project to show