

## Culture

# Georges CONDOMINAS, *L'espace social à propos de l'Asie du sud-est*, Paris, Flammarion, 1980. 514 pages, glossaire, index, illustrations

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Georges CONDOMINAS, *L'espace social à propos de l'Asie du sud-est*, Paris, Flammarion, 1980. 514 pages, glossaire, index, illustrations.

By Ok-Kyung Pak  
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This vast volume of 514 pages (including more than 60 pages of glossary and 40 pages of index) by a French ethnologist, G. Condominas, is a collection of his various articles written on Southeast Asia as well as his reflections on the profession of ethnographer between 1953-1977. The articles are grouped under 4 different themes, a presentation the author prefers to the chronological one. The introduction was written last (1977) in order to pull together in one volume originally unrelated, scattered articles.

Interestingly, these 20 articles written over 20 years somehow do hang together as a book and flow from one part to the other, which shows the depth of the author's concern and reflection on the ethnology of Southeast Asia. What strikes most in the book is the author's vast knowledge, not just ethnographical but also historical, ecological, geographical, archeological on this region and his strong identification with the people of the region as well as the desire to bring them 'in vivo' to the reader. In fact, this last point is the main preoccupation of the book.

The author is particularly concerned with the small groups of people (sometimes called 'the 4th world') who are regarded as 'savages' even by the people of the region and are being eliminated by their own governments today just as they were by the colonial administration of the past (pp. 103, 114, 120). Although Southeast Asia is divided into nations or states at present, the history and the ethnography of this region cannot, according to the author, be understood without considering those small groups or minorities who are now being assimilated to the majorities (pp. 240-316).

Thus the author defines the role of the ethnographer as witness of the weak, small minorities who do not have a written history and to whom their own history or identity is denied, since the history of this region is always written from the view point of the rulers/chiefs or conquerors (p. 146). In this sense this book is a very political one, as the author, on the basis of his intimate knowledge of the region, seems to argue for a special kind of political consciousness for ethnology, not only in the Southeast Asia region but also in general, and there lies the main thrust of the book.

The term 'social space' ('l'espace social') used as the title of the book and explained in the long introduction should be understood in this political sense. It is a concept taken from the work of a French geographer P. Gourou (1953), *L'Asie*, which the author finds preferable to the concept of 'culture' in ethnology. According to the author, 'social space' emphasizes interactions between cultures as well as those between different components (kinship system, religious system, technology, etc.) within one culture.

This perspective of studying cultures or social systems in relation to each other is not at all new. Particularly in the ethnology of Southeast Asia, the Leiden School of Anthropology has developed long ago (1935) the concept of Field of Ethnological Study for studying interrelationships (i.e. similarities and differences) between cultures of the region. Also, there are works of Friedman (1979), *System, Structure and Contradiction*, who provides a model for relating different social systems of the region in evolutionary perspective, as well as L. Berthe ("Parenté, pouvoir et mode de production", 1970) who proposes a similar model but for a more limited area, namely, Indonesia.

In other words, the idea of the author of this book on studying cultures in relation to each other is not new, but there is a certain difference between the concept of 'social space' and the other concepts or approaches mentioned above, namely, the former is political and descriptive while the latter are theoretical and analytical. The importance of the descriptive ethnography is expressed by the author as follows: as witness and description of 'une forme de vie collective donnée par un groupe humain original', it is irreplaceable, while there are always enough theoreticians ('penseurs') (p. 101). It seems to us that the concept of 'social space' is thought out by the author in order to be able to say not just on moral grounds, but also on scientific grounds, that each culture (or group of people) is very unique and deserves to be preserved and studied.

This point is perfectly justified, but there seems a certain danger in the author's insistence on descriptive ethnography, since one never does just a description, but makes certain interpretations in order to make sense of what is described (i.e. unrelated data), as the author himself constantly does in this book. For instance, one of his points is that a people without written history also has a history, and that the history of people having only oral tradition can be reconstructed on the basis of the stories they tell. Thus the collection of myths and legends transmitted orally is an important part

of the ethnographic data, which is a perfectly valid point. The author then proceeds to describe 2 Rhadé epic songs (pp. 222-239) of similar structure presenting a male hero and his adventures, but the hero in each story has completely opposite characteristics, one conforming to all the rules of the society but dying miserably and the other transgressing all the rules, yet triumphing in the end.

There is no problem in describing these two contrasting stories, but when the author tries to make sense of the contradictory nature of these heroes, and suggests that these two stories are reflections of different historical stages of Rhadé society (p. 238), the reader is puzzled. The story in myth or epic songs may be a kind of historical reality, but one cannot simply mix mythical and historical realities on the same plane.

Another problem of a similar kind is found in the author's interpretation of kinship systems in societies of Southeast Asia. The author notes that in many of these societies both matrilineal and patrilineal principles are recognized (pp. 47-52). From this he concludes (p. 50), in agreement with Murdock, that the kinship system of this region is a 'cognatic system' (*système indifférencié*). Many ethnologists of Southeast Asia may well agree with the author's observation (or description), but it has also long been a contention of many eminent scholars (Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 1954; Needham, 'Classification and alliance among the Karo: an appreciation, 1978; Fox, *The Rotinese*, 1968; Barnes, *Kédang*, 1974); in Eastern Indonesia and elsewhere that kinship system in this area is characterized by 'generalized exchange' (Lévi-Strauss, 1948, *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*), or 'asymmetrical connubium' (van Wouden, *Types of Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia*, 1935) with the emphasis on either the patriline or the matriline. Thus when the author systematizes the observed facts, he is no longer doing a descriptive ethnography, but an interpretive one and he needs a theoretical justification which the concept of 'social space' cannot provide.

In spite of these problems, the author's definition of the ethnographer as 'l'historien du sous-prolétariat' (p. 146) and his viewpoint that neighboring social groups (or l'espace social) in Southeast Asia (irrespective whether they are marginal or not) should be studied in relation to each other are two important points that need to be repeatedly made.

Anne RETEL-LAURENTIN (éd.), *Une anthropologie médicale en France?*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1983. 164 pages.

Par Serge Genest  
Université Laval

Cet ouvrage est le fruit d'une rencontre organisée sous l'égide du Centre national de la recherche scientifique par Anne Retel-Laurentin dans le but de traiter de questions liées aux recherches en anthropologie médicale. L'auteur de l'ouvrage est décédé depuis.

Il semble que les objectifs visés par ce colloque aient été multiples. D'abord, réunir les divers spécialistes directement intéressés par le domaine des études comparées de la santé et de la maladie. Ensuite, aborder des thèmes généraux de réflexion se dégageant de travaux de recherche, comme par exemple la définition de concepts fondamentaux, les rapports interdisciplinaires. Enfin, poser de façon critique les problèmes du financement des recherches.

Comme dans toute rencontre de ce genre, des exposés ont été présentés, des questions formulées et la publication se présente comme un compte rendu de ces échanges: exposés plus ou moins longs et discussions.

La première partie de l'ouvrage comprend trois sections: ethnomédecine, expériences de recherches multidisciplinaires, particulièrement en nutrition, et épidémiologie. La seconde se centre autour du thème de la collaboration multidisciplinaire en anthropologie médicale en France. Elle ne comprend qu'une vingtaine de pages, et contrairement aux autres, renferme surtout des discussions entre participants.

Tout en offrant des renseignements sur des sujets aussi divers que les attitudes face à la maladie dans les Antilles ou encore dans des pays à tradition musulmane, la première section sur l'ethnomédecine couvre également des thèmes plus généraux. Les exposés de Mitrani, de Laplantine et de Zemleni sont des occasions de revenir sur les définitions de base de ce champ d'étude: situer l'ethnomédecine par rapport à l'anthropologie médicale ou reprendre les distinctions de niveau que la langue anglaise permet entre *disease* (atteinte biologique), *illness* (vécu subjectif de la maladie) et *sickness* (reconnaissance sociale de cet état).

La définition des concepts demeure un sujet passionnant parce que fondamental pour une meilleure compréhension des phénomènes et aussi