



Anthropology Book Forum

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Living with Uncertainty: The Potency of ‘Maybe’ on the Mekong

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Johnson, Andrew Alan. 2020. *Mekong Dreaming: Life and Death Along a Changing River*. Duke University Press. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1082-1

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Mekong Dreaming is an ethnography of a town on the Mekong river that has undergone rapid change in the last two decades, not only in the town itself but also in national and transnational circuits. The book is clearly written, presenting a compelling narrative of daily life and also delving into complex topics without drowning in academic jargon. As such it is accessible for both students and experts.

At first glance *Mekong Dreaming* appears to focus on an environmental/economic issue—the damming of the Mekong and its effects on ecology and livelihood—but I would not consider this to be a book about ‘the environment.’ Instead it takes quite a classic ethnographic approach of covering several interrelated aspects of life in the town and beyond. The river is the major protagonist in the book, and acts as a stage for the dramas and presences of its human, nonhuman, and inhuman inhabitants.

The pseudonymous town of Ban Beuk is located in northeastern Thailand, where the Mekong divides Thailand from Laos. Fishing is a major and long-standing industry in this town—or, at least, it was until the Jinghong Dam was constructed upstream in China. Since then, the river has changed; it is no longer in sync with natural environmental cycles, and is thus out of sync with the ritual cycle as well. Fishing has become a risky and unpredictably craft with dwindling returns, echoing the risk involved in other productive practices, such as migration to work in Bangkok or overseas.

The book explores how residents cope with this uncertainty. Since the river no longer conforms to nature, most of the signs and symbols fishermen usually read have disappeared. If the river floods when not a drop of rain has fallen, how can its changes be predicted? If fish have changed their behaviour or disappeared, how are fishermen meant to know where to fish, what techniques to use, and so on? If the local spirits are not providing coherent answers, where does one get good information? In short, what happens when the symbolic life of a productive community is disrupted?

Mekong Dreaming opens with the author recounting a conversation with a local fisherman, Lert, who says that in 2006 the river began to act ‘against nature’ when it flooded and tore through his house without a drop of rain having fallen. He dreamt that he saw the dam and it had a crack and one day would spill open and everyone in the town will die. Johnson stresses that Lert’s dream was simply generated by anxiety, but that Lert claims to have seen the real state of the dam. Indeed, Johnson also had a dream about an island on the river. When he asked a local woman what it meant, she responded that the island king was talking to him, but sometimes it was difficult to understand what he meant. “Or maybe it was the tree [that sent dreams]” (p.3), she added.

Johnson uses these vignettes to set up the theme of uncertainty and the quest to find information from different sources. In particular, he uses it to make his claim that the dam itself is more than material: “It is a shadow that provokes Lert and others to think about the nature of their relationships with other sources of potency—human, animal, ecological, and supernatural—and it signals that these relationships are in flux” (p.2). Yet this world, and the information revealed by these different protagonists, is only ever revealed partially to any particular person. These moments of catastrophic change amount to the “fluttering of an opaque curtain: just as old situated knowledge fails, new knowledge can suddenly work” (p14).

The author then explores these ideas through five chapters. Chapter One, *Naga and Garuda*, examines Ban Beuk as a border town, especially its marginality and relation to Bangkok as the ‘center.’ Chapter Two, *River Beings*, provides an account of the dam’s construction and its absent power. Chapter Three, *Dwelling Under Distant Suns*, focuses on how migrants to Bangkok and several sites overseas tap into new, distant sources of potential and their promises to bring it back to Ban Beuk. Yet distance transforms migrants into strangers, ties weaken, and the promised prosperity is also rendered uncertain. The purpose of this chapter is not to deepen our understanding of migration as a topic; rather, like Chapters Two and Three it places Ban Beuk in a transnational context.

Chapter Four, *The River Grew Tired of Us*, looks at how other-than-humans, such as gods, spirits, water serpents and ghosts, respond to the river's changes and 'migrate' in their own ways. It includes a particularly memorable vignette in which townspeople try to convene with a spirit to stop the construction of a new dam, but the spirit proves as ineffectual against bureaucracy as the people themselves. Chapter Five, *Human and Inhuman Worlds*, concludes the book by returning to the theme of potential and the ontological shifts involved with living with things that are “fundamentally unknowable” (p.163).

The power of Johnson's approach is that rather than simply casting uncertainty as a negative, he explores the ways in which uncertainty—the power of “maybe”—can act as a potency rather than simply something to be worked around. Such potency is a property of humans but also inhuman and nonhuman things, including materials, humans, spirits of the water, divine beings, animals (especially fish), the river itself. Johnson explores the “fantastic and messianic qualities of such beings” (p.7), both near and distant. He argues that “It is via engagement with the potential in distant beings and objects that the possibility for radical change—in the self, in the world—emerges” (p7).

Johnson does not attempt to set a political agenda: at no point does he state what such “radical change” should evolve or how power should be (re)distributed. He describes several contentious political issues and also the politics of infrastructure development (dams, roads, etc.) without appearing to pass judgement or set an agenda for the residents of Bam Beuk. Given that his topic is uncertainty, and indeed the unknowable, this is entirely appropriate. As Johnson states of his interlocutors, “one must live with the unknowable, harness it, and learn how to dwell with it even as it in turn slips from our grasp” (pp.168-169). This could just as readily apply to us readers. *Mekong Dreaming* leaves us with as many questions as answers, so we too must come to terms with the fact that Johnson has provided us with a fragment of information and that he, like the spirits he described, may also lack answers. Maybe.

Erin B. Taylor has a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Sydney and specializes in investigating financial behaviour and technology use. She has been designing and carrying out research since 2003 in diverse contexts including Australia, Portugal, the Netherlands, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. She is a co-author of the report *Female Finance: Digital, Mobile, Networked* (with Dr. Anette Broløs, 2020, EWPN/Keen Innovation), the *Consumer Finance Research Methods*

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