Bruce Kapferer (ed.): Legends of People, Myths of State. Violence, Intolerance, and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia. New and revised edition. 446 pages. New York und Oxford: Berghahn Books 2012. ISBN 978-0-85745-436-2.

Angela Hobart and Bruce Kapferer (eds.): Contesting the State: The Dynamics of Resistance and Control. 297 pages. Wantage/Ascona: Sean Kingston Publishing/Centro Incontri Umani 2012. ISBN 978-1-907774-13-3.

Introduction[1]

> History, then, is very much a mythical construction, in the sense that it is a representation of the past linked to the establishment of an identity in the present. (Friedman 1992:195)

Anthropological interest in the states and state institutions goes back at least to Rivers' monumental *History of Melanesian Society*, published in 1914. In the Preface to the *African Political Systems*, Radcliffe-Brown famously declared: 'The task of social anthropology, as a natural science of human society, is the systematic investigation of the nature of social institutions' (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940:xi). However, it was after the questioning of some colonial-era premises (in the Fortes and Evans-Pritchard volume), and following the horrors of the Second World War that the issue of political organization (and how people deal with it) gradually moved to the forefront of anthropological studies. The end of colonialism, post-colonial controversies, globalization, and bloody conflicts in Sri Lanka, former Yugoslavia and the Horn of Africa, along with some more recent global threats, only reiterated interest in what could loosely be labelled 'anthropology of the state.' The 'state,' of course, can also be used as a symbol, as demonstrated by Abélès (1990).

Issues like ethnicity came more recently into the focus of anthropological research (Schlee 2008:5; Eriksen 2010:4), with Barth stressing that ethnic groups are *constructed*, and that they serve as 'culture-bearing units' (1969:11–13). In his masterful overview, Eriksen points to the role that self-identification plays in many contemporary expressions of nationalism. Sometimes issues of identification and self-identification are related to 'cost-benefit' evaluation (Schlee 2008:27; Bošković and Ignjatovic 2012:291–293). When it comes to relationship between ethnicity and identity, Schlee has drawn attention to the fact that conflicts often arise from the actual 'sameness,' so 'enemies become alike' (2008:11).

The books under consideration here present important contributions to contemporary anthropological attempts to understand the intricacies of political behaviour. They set out to explore the relationship between myth, ethnicity and violence (Kapferer), and resistance and control in state context (Hobart and Kapferer), and contributors to both of these volumes try to do it primarily through exploring different types of narratives.

Narrating the state

> The establishment of a telling link between the conditions of the present and the situation of the past is an important tool of political legitimation. (Kapferer 2012:90)

Contesting the State consists of nine chapters, plus the Introduction. The papers were first presented at the conference in Ascona, and the chapters examine some of the 'classical' anthropological topics, but from very contemporary angles. Thus, T. S. M. Evens looks at the 'non-dualism' and identity formation among the Nuer, Overing explores egalitarianism in an Amazonian society (Piaroa), and Hobart the relation between Hindu epics and formation of the Indonesian state. Hart's essay presents a study of an exile returning to his native country (Greece),[2] and Shrestha, in a 'post-Frazerian' way, documents the death of the divine kingship in Nepal. Three chapters that deal with topics that were very prominent in the media and popular discourses in recent years include Taylor on cosmology and Rwandan concepts of the state, Dawod on Sadam Hussein's rise to power in Iraq, and Kapferer and Wijeyeratne on the uneasy transition from war to peace in Sri Lanka. Finally, Friedman's more theoretical concluding chapter (on cosmopolitan intellectuals and re-configuration of the state) nicely ties with the introduction, in which Kapferer and Taylor briefly outline forces in the production of the state.

The volume is exciting collection of case studies, combined with specific theoretical points (the editors begin with quoting Cassirer, and there are frequent references to philosophers and social theorists),[3] and it opens very interesting questions regarding power, authority, and indigenous concepts of them. Its main value is in demonstrating how anthropological research is relevant *here and now* – as well as showing how anthropology is a truly *comparative endeavour*. The contributors respond to contemporary challenges of globalization, while at the same time presenting critical views of different points of view, based on contributors' extensive fieldwork. The papers in *Contesting the State* are also elegantly organized around topics that allow them to converse with each other (like Evens and Overing, for example, on 'societies without a state'), even without making direct references to each other's papers.

The idea of looking into 'newly emerging ontologies,' such as power and control, will appeal to a wide range of scholars in social sciences and humanities, and should serve as an invitation to a thought-provoking dialogue, perhaps similar to the one inaugurated following the publication of *African Political Systems*. On the one hand, state as a political institution demonstrates capacity to change and adapt to new challenges. On the other, some of the more recent global developments (like 'neoliberalism') perhaps make states more congenial to difference, despite increasing internal fragmentation.

Myths and ethnicities

> Myth is a basic category of reference to the historical past. (Malinowski 1993:69)

Kapferer's book is a reprint of the 1988 volume, with the new Introduction, and five additional chapters/commentaries. Additional chapters provide a *dialogue* similar to the 'Comments and

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[2] Although it is unfortunate that she does not mention Ristovic's study (2000), which dealt extensively with the topic of children refugees from Greece.

[3] With the important point that scholars like Foucault, for example, formulated their notions within the conceptual history of West European (in his case, French) socio-political context.

'Reply' section following articles published in *Current Anthropology*, although less critical to the author (after all, this is Kapferer's book). However, they provide some kind of a book within a book, exploring from different angles (sometimes with refreshingly new insights) topics of nationalism and violence (like Bastin's comparative perspective, or Morris's re-evaluation of the sources for studying the ANZAC).

Kapferer's starting point is on the lines of what Cassirer called a move 'from form to function' (1923:11). Historically, nationalism was rejected by many social scientists as 'pre-modern' or destructive, and it was assumed that it will gradually dissipate, or retreat confronted with forces of modernisation.

> How nationalist discourse develops as a humanly destructive force is an empirical matter and demands an interrogation of nationalist arguments and how they became vital in political and social dynamics giving rise to the force and shape of their violence. (...) The perspectives of Gellner (1983) and Hobsbawm (1983), who exemplify such positions [objectivist and rationalist – A.B.], dismiss nationalist arguments as mere figments of the imagination or constructions and distortions of reality. Theirs are important contributions, however, they risk an overdetermination in a European and North American historical experience. Furthermore, they do not confront thoroughly enough either nationalist arguments or the discursive structures of their appeal. (Kapferer 2012:xiv)

The book is more than another approach to ethnicity and violence – it 'describes nationalism as an *ontology*; that is a doctrine about the essence of reality' (Eriksen 2010:129). War, birth, and death are all used as powerful symbols, but they gradually transcend the symbolic and enter 'reality.' In his understanding of interplay between symbols and everyday life, as well as insistence on religious aspects of nationalism, Kapferer appreciates Anderson's (1983) insistence on the importance of understanding nationalist constructions. However, he also notes:

> I conceived of *Legends* as an extension of Anderson's kind of approach, but my objective was to concentrate more on the diverse styles of nationalist imaginations than did Anderson, who in my view remained committed to a linear and too homogenized conception, one still honed within a Western historical perspective. (Kapferer 2012:xxii)

The relationship between myth and history is at the core of Kapferer's arguments. Both of these are different[4] forms of discourse. In his article 'The narrative turn', Paul Ricœur distinguished between two general types of narratives, historical and fictional.[5] Both of these types can be analysed in terms of the *common structure* (as done by structuralists), or their historicity (since they refer 'to the same fundamental feature of our individual and social existence' [Ricœur 1981:274]). The 'impossible logic' of narrative structures opens up another world. In Ricœur's words:

> Everything happens as if the free play of the imagination of mankind in its best storytellers had spontaneously created the intelligible forms on which our reflective judgement can in turn be applied, without having to impose upon itself the impossible task of constructing a

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[4] Or not so different – see Ricœur 1987.
[5] The fictional narratives include 'myths, folklore, legends, novels, epics, tragedies, drama, films, comic strips, etc.' (Ricœur 1981:281).

priori the matrix of all possible stories. If that is the case, we could then paraphrase Kant's famous formula about schematism and say: the narrative schematism 'is an art hidden in the human soul, and it will always be difficult to extract the true mechanism from nature in order to lay it open before our eyes'. (1981:287)

The very distinction between 'history' and 'fiction' is in itself fictional in many ways. Ricœur points to the role of the myth as *mimesis* (following the argument from Aristotle's *Poetics*), but this is a *creative imitation* (1981:292–293), not a mere reflection of some 'objective' reality. Through the process of this creative imitation, the world of narratives (Ricœur's 'the world of fiction') brings us '*to the heart of the real world of action*' (p. 296). In conclusion, it seems that 'fiction, by opening us to the unreal, leads us to what is essential in reality' (*ibid.*).

Myths are important for people's sense of identity, as they offer a 'safe heaven,' a place where individuals can feel that their sense of belonging to a group (whether it is an ethnic group or a nation) could be in their best interest. Myths also form an important part of national ideologies, and one of the main achievements of Kapferer's study is to show how different national ideologies (in this case, Sinhalese and Australian) can be structured along very similar lines.

Nationalism influences and shapes ideology by providing important symbolic markers that allow members of the society to focus their anxieties and experience a sense of unity (Billig 1995, Eriksen 2010, Jenkins 1994). It also helps members of a society to form what is sometimes called the 'ethnonational bond' (Connor 1993), or 'ethnonational mobilization' (Ivekovic 2000). This 'bond' then serves to create a feeling of belonging to a shared community. Despite potential fallacies in the process of reaching this unity, the experience is real, and so are its consequences – and thus it is very important to comprehend the mechanisms that shape the public opinion when it comes to particular cases (Kapferer 2012:90 ff).

Concluding remarks

The world of human culture (…) could not arise until the darkness of myth was fought and overcome. (Cassirer 1946:297–298, *passim*)

Anthropological studies of ethnicity, nationalism, and the state have become increasingly popular in the last two decades. The end of 'Cold War,' dramatic political changes in the Balkans, former USSR, as well as in East Africa, provided significant insights into the works of political institutions. Globalized economies (which were, of course, present before, but we are today much more *aware* of them) made interdependencies of different political, social and cultural institutions more present in the media and in daily lives of people all around the planet. As Cassirer wrote, quoting Hegel: 'The state is no work of art; it exists in the world, and hence in the sphere of choice, accident, and error. Hence the evil behaviour of its members can disfigure it in many ways' (1946:266). Of the books discussed here, *Contesting the State* represents a long overdue critical approach to debates on authority and power in contemporary world. *Legends of People, Myths of State* has had an interesting history since it was first published. Some of Kapferer's arguments (whether one likes them or not)[6] actually look much more convincing today, then two decades ago, when nationalism seemed like another fallacy that is bound to gradually

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[6] For example, Spencer 1990a. On the other hand, Spencer 1990b is much more conciliatory, and seems to realize that the two of them actually address very different issues.

fade away. The civil war – which was not directly addressed in the book when it was first published – that began in Sri Lanka in 1983, ended in 2009, leaving at least 100,000 people dead and country economically devastated. There were also significant developments in the other case study of the book, Australia, with the political changes towards development of an 'egalitarian individualism' (addressed in the final chapter of the new edition),[7] as well as Prime Minister's historical public apology to members of the Aboriginal population (in February 2008). Perhaps some of these recent events better explain Kapferer's very pessimistic view of the state in general (primarily Australia, but Sri Lanka as well).

Nationalism did not whither away – it demonstrated amazing capacity of transformation and resilience. The same can be said of the states – the advent of global political institutions did not provide for any significant 'supra-national' identities. Anthropologists are in a unique position to observe and to comment on these developments, and these two books present an essential contribution to understanding ethnicity, violence, and myths justifying them. For states, just like any other social institutions, contain their own interpretations. One only needs to gain access to them.[8]

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[7] But see also a brilliant vignette on Crocodile Dundee, Kapferer 2012:16–17.
[8] Cf. Geertz 1972:37.

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