

Euroseas 2022

Panel: **Affect in Sociality in Contemporary Southeast Asia**

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This panel explores the role of affect in sociality in Southeast Asia: its forms and modes of expression in social contexts, its role in shaping the tenor and direction of interaction, and its impact on relations with the political and natural environment.

The affective turn has usefully highlighted the importance of prediscursive bodily experiences and intersubjective experiential states in social life, and in Kathleen Stewart's (2017: 194) terms, "helped return anthropology to sense and sensation, materialities, and viscera." Denoting, in a Deleuzian-Massumian framework, intensities or potentialities that impel people to action, affect offers a means to explore how social life is shaped by the elusive forces that operate in shared emotional landscapes beneath the level of cultural representations.

Affect is adopted to open new perspectives on social life in Southeast Asia, with particular attention to contexts of contemporary change, including environmental transformation, cultural reorientation, political integration or marginalization, and ensuing existential uncertainties. We are interested in the "affective resonances" of these and like conditions which often loom large in the present lives of Southeast Asians. Affect is envisioned as a means for attending to the political through something that feels "really real", which exists in material reality and has acute contemporary significance (Rutherford 2016: 292). Besides its resonating qualities, panellists may address affect's potentiating and potentially debilitating qualities: how it encourages or inhibits agency, enchants or disenchants, unites or divides. Contributions may explore any of the ways sociality is shaped by affect, understood broadly to include sensuous and tactile experiences, moods and ambiences, along with emotions, as the subjective and cultural extensions of affect. They may favourably consider "affective encounters" – between local actors, or between locals and migrants, corporations, government agencies, or nonhuman entities. The focus can be on any context (ritual, political or everyday) and quality (effervescent, tranquil, or transgressive) of expression of affect.

References

Rutherford, Danilyn. 2016. Affect theory and the empirical. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45 (1): 285–300.

Stewart, Kathleen. 2017. In the world that affect proposed. *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (2): 192–198.

Accepted papers

Session one:

Kenneth Sillander

University of Helsinki

The Tenor of Sociality: Affective States of Being-in-Interaction

How are we to approach social life? Dominant theoretical traditions have tended to focus either on forms of social organization or collective representations, on observable “objective” patterns of social relations or behavior, or on “subjective” cultural constructs. In this paper, I suggest that it may be useful to focus on a third dimension denoted by the term “tenor”. By this I mean something like its enacted style, aesthetics or sensuous form, and its experienced mood, timbre, or feel. I argue that particular forms of sociality are associated with particular affective states of being and that these are central to sociality. I suggest that studying these states may be a fruitful way to make use of the concept of affect, as well as to sharpen the implied focus of the term sociality on the *practice* of real ongoing social life and the *experience* of participation in it. By means of illustration, I will discuss two distinct forms of sociality practiced by the Bentian, an indigenous Dayak group of Indonesian Borneo. Indexed by the vernacular concepts of *rengin meroe* (“coolness,” “tranquility”) and *mengkelotes* (“roundabout,” “indirect”), they consist respectively of a more orchestrated and formalized and a more informal and unorganized variant, which occur mainly in distinct contexts, publicly and front stage during communal events, and more privately among intimates in everyday settings. Both are valued practices, associated with central cultural values, and contextually invested instrumental interests and pragmatic goals, but the reason for their valuation and impact on people arguably rests less with values or any ulterior functions than with the immediate sensuous-material conditions of their realization and the affective modes of being that participation entails.

Van Minh Nguyen

Université Libre de Bruxelles (LAMC; EAST)

Intimacy on Two Wheels: Traffic Sensescapes in Ho Chi Minh City

In this paper, I analyse the haptic and sonic strategies that motorbike users in Ho Chi Minh City perform to achieve intimacy. I use intimacy as a theoretical framework that extends the ontological role of the sensory from the individual to the relational, and from the subjective to the social. Theorising traffic as a forum of embodied sociality highlights not only the heightened sensory ambience of streetscapes, but also the agency of street users in producing a sensorially complex social world. Based on thirteen months of motorbike ethnography, I draw on concepts from sensory anthropology and urban studies to rethink the affective time-spaces of street ambiances. Firstly, I deploy the concept of somatic work to analyse the senses as dispositions

of a habitus that are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Secondly, I apply the concept of sociothermic affect to sensory experiences of roads to explore co-production of urban ambiances. Finally, I reflect on invisibility and civil inattention to understand traffic as a site of embodied politics, which blurs the threshold between public and private.

Dat Manh Nguyen

NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies KNAW

Pitiful Spirits: South Vietnamese War Dead and the Struggle for Recognition

Following the economic reforms in the late 1980s, Vietnam has witnessed a “commemorative fever” in which monuments, rituals, and other forms of remembrance of the war dead have occupied much of the country’s physical, political, and cultural landscapes (Tai 2001; Schwenkel 2009). These forms of commemoration and remembrance evoke and mobilize the affective languages of sacrifice, care, comradeship, and familial ties. Yet, despite the wide-spread call to remember those who had died during the Vietnam–American war, the war dead has not been commemorated equally; some have been neglected and marginalized from the country’s postwar national imaginary.

Drawing on recent fieldwork in southern Vietnam, I explore in this paper recent endeavors by southern Vietnamese veterans and family members to remember and care for those excluded from the communist state’s commemorative practices, including fallen soldiers of the southern Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Through ethnographic accounts of the rituals of care for the neglected dead, I examine how the affective idioms of sacrifice, comradeship, and kinship motivate, but also become reinforced, through the embodied encounters between the living and the dead, as well as their intimate and fraught relationships with the natural environment at the sites of commemoration. As such, using the theoretical lens of affect, the paper investigates both the power and the limits of the Vietnamese state’s necropolitics, particularly their management of the war dead as part of the postwar nation-building process.

Session two:

Rosalie Stolz

University of Heidelberg

Social Landscapes of Embarrassment

The display of embarrassment plays a prominent role in Khmu sociality in northern Laos and influences the ways in which persons navigate and experience social landscapes.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in northern Laos since 2013 (Stolz 2021), I will analyse the ethnographic relevance of embarrassment as social affect and delineate its effects in ‘affective encounters’ marked by alterity and hierarchy with a special emphasis on socio-spatial practices. In this paper, I seek to explore the ethnographic and more conceptual insights that we can gain from focussing on the affects engrained in sociality and by considering embarrassment as epistemic affect (Stodulka, Selim and Mattes 2018). Thereby, I will give special emphasis to different registers of embarrassment and the formation of affective spaces (Navaro-Yashin 2009) as examined through the lens of the ethnographic-cum-affective encounter.

Finally, this paper aims to highlight what we can learn from those social affects that elaborate social differences rather than unity and closeness and how dynamics of power are played out, and sometimes subverted, through different affective registers.

Isabell Herrmans

University of Helsinki

Images of Affect: Precarity as an Emergent Form among the Luangan of Indonesian Borneo

In this paper, I follow Kathleen Stewart (2012) in trying to write precarity as an emergent form. Writing in my case is inspired and elicited by photographs, which often render affects and sentiments momentarily visible in ways words may fail to do. The pictures are mostly portraits taken of people I worked with in an upriver area at the border between the provinces of East and Central Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo. Set among the Luangan Dayak, the paper is composed around scenes and encounters in which the tactile, sensuous, often involuntary way my interlocutors were affected by others – or the ‘absent presence’ of others (Low 2020) – became particularly poignant, allowing for exploring precarity as an affectively charged condition of human intersubjectivity. A picture of a man posing with his young daughter while holding a photograph of his dead wife materializes an all too common Luangan experience of being subjected to illness and premature death, registering an everyday yet singularly charged sensation of loss and longing. Attending to the embodied effects of being-in-relation and the vulnerability caused by such a constitutive relationality, the paper follows Judith Butler (2014) in aspiring to a broader notion of relationality, which involves a dependency on what she terms ‘infrastructure’, ‘understood complexly as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance’. Notably, interrogating precarity as an emergent form here not only pertains to an ontological vulnerability which is destructive of life, but also to the potentiality of resonant encounters, to the transformative capacity (seen in Luangan healing rituals, for example) of that which is still unfolding.

Ivan Tacey

University of Plymouth

Contagious Affect: Environmental Degradation, Thunder and Involuntary Trance among the Jahai and Batek of Malaysia

Ivan Tacey, University of Plymouth

In this paper, I explore meteorological and ecological catalysts of affect among Batek and Jahai post-foragers living in environmentally degraded Malaysian landscapes. The paper draws upon two case-studies. The first case considers a young Jahai woman spontaneously and involuntarily entering an uncontrollable trance state triggered by a thunderstorm. This event took place in a resettlement village amidst a landscape of intense resource extraction in which social life is marked by extreme levels of poverty, marginalization and underlying tensions with neighbouring Malays. The second case considers an elderly Batek Maia woman spontaneously breaking down into a state of trembling, weeping and lament, triggered by place-based nostalgia and anxiety about local environmental degradation. Through these cases, I explore how ecological and meteorological conditions can trigger involuntary, contagious affective states. I contrast these affective states with Kapferer's ideas of 'ritual as virtuality' (2004), during which shamans and other ritual practitioners, reconfigure "the dynamics of cosmological, social, and personal construction." Whilst controlled trances provide a productive means by which shamans are able to temporarily slow down' or suspend "the chaotic qualities of reality, thus allowing the dynamics of reality formation to be entered within and retuned, readjusted," I suggest the considered spontaneous involuntary trances and affective states, by contrast, amplify socio-environmental anxieties and cause ontological disorientation and vertigo. Importantly, they often have a contagious intersubjective nature that resonates through other subjects beyond the immediate context. This encourages me to discuss the contagious nature of affect, which although initiated by environmental catalysts at particular sites, can quickly spread between people and across locations, generating further affect-driven sociality.