

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

**EDYTA ROSZKO**, 2021, *Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Central Vietnam*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 260 pp., ISBN 978-0-8248-9055-1.

At the beginning of Edyta Roszko's ethnography, a group of fishers find something unusual in their net: a statue of a medieval Chinese dignitary, hands clasped in repose, who had been accumulating barnacles on the ocean floor. When the relic was brought to shore, the fisherfolk set up a makeshift temple in their village and provided offerings to their lucky find, their very own god of fortune. Eventually, they applied for permits to build a more substantial dwelling for the statue, but their application was declined. State authorities classified their new-found deity "superstition" – a catchall category used by the state for religious and folkloric beliefs of all kinds – and told the fishermen to put the statue away. Even so, the fishers continued to venerate their saint in private. Roszko's recent book *Fishers, Monks, and Cadres: Navigating State and Religion in Central Vietnam* is a fascinating and comprehensive ethnography about fishing communities in Vietnam and Vietnam's central coast. Through years of multi-sited ethnographic research at two sites – Sa Huỳnh, a coastal village, and Lý Sơn, an atoll 16 miles offshore – Roszko centers a marginalized people in a peripheralized region of Vietnam to explore how state, society, and religion have both been woven together and frayed over the last half-century.

As the title suggests, Roszko elaborates a theory of navigation: an artful, polysemic term describing not only the skills needed to find one's way through the sea, but the delicate balancing act between a host of binaries (and triads) that Roszko bends and pulls apart throughout the book. These include (but are not limited to): state and religion, religion and folklore, local and national, and many other categorial frameworks that frequently seep into one another. Interestingly, Roszko's theory of navigation applies not only to the fishers, but also to the state as

it navigates the unsteady boundaries between superstition and religion or between state-building and state-stripping. As a broader process, navigation seems like a useful analytic with wide purchase outside of Roszko's immediate case for scholars seeking to think through the messy realities of postmodern bureaucratic life more generally.

Aside from being a rich ethnographic study, Roszko's broader project is to push back against received histories, geographies, and hierarchies of much of the previous writing on Vietnam – of a North-South dichotomy, of a nation that is primarily agricultural in character, or of a communist state intolerant of folk belief. She shows, through ethnographic vignettes, stories, archival work, and analyses of historical events, how these received ways of thinking about Vietnam cannot fully describe (let alone adequately portray) the much more complex past and present of the country. To clarify this argument ethnographically, Roszko brings together “three analytical concepts – semiotic ideology, purification, and indiscipline” (20) that put a language to the ways that her subjects navigate various false binaries and other structural categories that resist tidy theorization. One such set categorical framework is the “triad,” as she calls it, of state, religion, and society at work in the opening vignette – the state sought to suppress veneration of the statue, the fishers' idea of religion was capacious enough to place the found relic alongside their Earth Spirit, and the society of fisherfolk in rural-maritime Vietnam more broadly would have to navigate between these ways of thinking too often framed as incompatible.

Chapter 1 outlines an exhaustive (if not overly detailed) exposition of the region's geography and history, offering deep context that is helpful to readers unfamiliar with the specifics of Vietnamese history; Roszko's take will likely also be of value to scholars of Vietnam and mainland southeast Asia for its comprehensiveness. Chapter 2 elaborates on one of the aforementioned categorical frameworks, the religion-folklore-superstition matrix, and demonstrates how the slippage between these categories (both as enduring anthropological topics and as official interests of the state) hints at their conceptual inadequacy, sometimes even to those practicing them. Chapter 3 takes on categories of geography– of land versus sea, farmer versus fisher, rice versus fish, the agricultural village (*láng*) versus the guild-like fishing organizations (*van*) – to destabilize received wisdom about Vietnamese history and culture (that is, of being predominately concerned with agricultural rice cultivation), and the role of the coast

as integral in Vietnam's past and present. Chapter 4 advances a theory of discipline and indiscipline by looking more closely at a conflict over another statutory relic, this time of the revered bodhisattva Quan Âm, to think through purification, religiosity, and post-socialist realities. Chapter 5 arrives at a location foreshadowed throughout the book, the Paracel and Spratly Islands (themselves further offshore from Lý Sơn atoll), which have been subject to conflicting claims of sovereignty between Vietnam and China. Roszko's study shines here, bringing a human face – through the practice of ancestor worship – to this conflict and its consequences for normal people trying to both make meaning and make a living amidst the broader geopolitical conflict. Chapter 6 discusses how women push back against male dominance as important (and too often undervalued) players in village politics that navigate the binaries and triads which are the central concerns of the book along with their own femininity, religiosity, and morality.

If one had to “gut” this book (as with a fish), the choicest filets would be Chapter 4, which shines ethnographically, and Chapter 5, which shows a crucial human side to a geopolitical situation too often left to non-ethnographic academic disciplines that also study the present (which will remain nameless). The head and tail and other parts of a fish beyond the filets, however, are integral to many dishes in Vietnam and in fishing communities around the world, and it is advised, both for the specific geographies of the region and the complex histories that Roszko treats so deftly, to consume this book whole. *Fishers, Monks, and Cadres* will be of particular interest to anthropologists of the state and of religion, as well as to those with interests in post-socialism and “maritime anthropology” more broadly, although those in the latter camp might crave more of the poetics that seem to characterize the new wave in the blue humanities and social sciences. Roszko's ethnography would be an excellent addition to undergraduate courses on religion and religious worlds, on states or bureaucracy, or on ethnography more broadly to show how certain thinkers (e.g. Webb Keane, Michel de Certeau, et al.) are taken up theoretically and practically in an ethnographic study. In addition, this book is sure to be a hit in graduate-level area studies and political anthropology courses, especially those that seek to show how “everyday” people inhabit, shape or contest geopolitical hotspots. Here and elsewhere, the marginal and once-peripheral are, upon closer inspection, central to understanding how contemporary states work.

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