

Vargyas, Gábor: A megértés édes öröme. Terepmunka, politika, etika a Közép-vietnámi Felföldön [The Sweet Joy of Understanding. Fieldwork, Politics, and Ethics in the Central Vietnamese Highlands].

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BOOK REVIEW

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Gábor Vargyas is a doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, professor emeritus of the Department of Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology, the University of Pécs, and research professor emeritus at the Institute of Ethnology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Eötvös Loránd Research Network [ELKH]. His most important fieldwork was carried out among the Bru, a mountain ethnic minority group inhabiting the area between the central Vietnamese coast and the middle reaches of the Mekong River. This vast area is divided in a north–south direction by the Annamese Cordillera, a mountain range that runs parallel to the coastline and forms a natural border between Vietnam and Laos. Similarly to other ethnic groups, the Bru live on both sides of the mountain range. Their language belongs to the Katuic branch of the (Austroasiatic) Mon-Khmer

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In the early access version of this article the name of the author of the book was featured incorrectly as “Gábor, Vargyas”. In this version it has been corrected to “Vargyas, Gábor”.

language family, forming one of the two major dialect chains of the Western Katuic subgroup. The area inhabited by the Bru became a buffer zone between the Vietnamese and Siamese empires in the 18th century and came under direct Vietnamese control in the early 19th century, in the course of rivalry for control of the left bank of the Mekong. The Bru became part of the globalized colonial world with the formation of French Indochina in 1887, and — after a fairly short period of peace — their history continued to be shaped by turbulence as they entered the 20th century (21–29).

As its title suggests, Gábor Vargyas's book focuses on learning about and understanding the Bru, although it also reveals another world: the innermost thoughts and feelings of the researcher in his/her quest for understanding. It is the process of understanding, as it evolves through the exploration of the inextricably linked external and internal worlds, that weaves the 15 papers in the volume into a coherent whole, with a focus on the field, which, for the author, represents the justification and quintessence of the anthropologist's work.

The author carried out 18 months of fieldwork among the Bru in 1985–1989, in the heart of their ancestral homeland, near the Laos border. At the time, his research took place in the framework of "fraternal" cooperation between the Institute of Ethnography of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences. As Hungary was still part of the communist world at the time, the opportunity for the fieldwork was largely owing to Gábor Vargyas's ability to take advantage of a situation that had earlier been an obstacle — namely that he was an Eastern European "communist" researcher in a "communist" country in Southeast Asia. And although socialism came to an end in Hungary while the author was still in Vietnam, references to a shared socialist past retained their significance during his later fieldwork.

His second six-month field trip took place 20 years later, in 2007, in a site about 500 km south of his initial fieldwork, in Dak Lak Province, in the framework of a project run by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle: *Social Support and Kinship in China and Vietnam* (2006–2008). This place was inhabited by Bru who had been airlifted in the spring of 1972, during the Vietnam War, and resettled in the area of another hill tribe, in the hope that they would be able to return to their own home once the war situation improved. This had never happened, and by the time Gábor Vargyas made his second field trip in 2007, the atmosphere had become far less friendly than it had been in the 1980s, due to the unrest in the region in 2001 and 2004: the area was hermetically sealed and under military control. This rendered fieldwork in the genuine sense of the word impossible.

Thus, by 2007, the field had changed irrevocably; it had closed in on itself, giving rise to new problems and new research questions, which had a far-reaching impact on the author's collecting methods and, as a result, on his thinking about fieldwork and anthropology. The order in which the selected essays appear in this volume, and their thematic classification, reflect this partly unconscious change in perspective.

The first five studies in the volume reflect what can be considered Gábor Vargyas's "classical" interest in ethnohistory. The very first study, *The Bru in Time and Space*, attempts to provide a more comprehensive picture than previously available of the geographical location, linguistic division, ethnic history, and research history of the Bru. In addressing these issues, the author positions within the world of the Bru both his own research and his presence, extending his survey up to the present day and expressing his concerns in relation to the future.

However, while the ethnic history of the peoples of Southeast Asia can scarcely be known, if at all, from historical sources, an interest in this history occupies a prominent place not only in Gábor Vargyas's research but also in international anthropological trends. The goal of new



theoretical and practical approaches is to point beyond the familiar narratives by redrawing the geographical and cultural divisions inherited as a result of colonial and Cold War territorial partitions. This is the aim of the second, two-part study, “Above” and “Below”: *The Bru and “Zomia,”* the first part of which examines the question of whether the Bru can be considered to be “indigenous” in “Zomia.” (The term “Zomia” is an extension of the territory known earlier as the Southeast Asian Highlands, including large parts of former High Asia, the Pamir and the Hindukush.) By analyzing the relationship between the Bru and “Zomia,” the author intends to formulate critical insights contributing to the theory of James Scott, the world-renowned political scientist and historical anthropologist. The crux of the debate is the issue of indigenous peoples versus newcomers (refugees from the state), and Gábor Vargyas — who is essentially in agreement while expressing reservations regarding certain details — argues his position by means of micro-historical data. He states that “In ethnicity, identity, culture, social organization, etc., despite the flexibility and situational nature – that Scott speaks about, – there is then so much more permanence beneath the surface than it is commonly assumed! Looking at just the last 100–150 years, the Bru have been hit with a dramatic amount of trauma: they were hauled off as slaves; states and military troops came and went over their heads; (...) their villages, houses and fields were scorched, (...) they were temporarily or permanently evacuated or relocated, locked in ‘strategic hamlets’ fenced in by barbed wire, and we cannot even estimate their dead; all in all, world history has not been kind to them – yet, as soon as the situation allowed for it, they returned, and, stubbornly stuck to their territory, to their language, culture, ethnic identity, they remained what they were –Bru!” (66).

In the second part of the chapter, the author examines another aspect of the above statement: the question of the withdrawal of the Bru from the state. On this subject, he is vehemently opposed to Oscar Salemink’s suggestion that “revolutionary” (i.e., communist) or Christian conversion would have meant surpassing their traditional cultural concepts or *habitus*. Of all the essays in the present volume, the arguments made here by Gábor Vargyas may be the most relevant to anyone carrying out research in a context similar to that of the Bru. “Today, communism is at best a failed historical attempt which everyone who personally experienced it hated or suffered from — except, of course, those who benefitted from the system, which were not few in Vietnam. (...) Everyone who in the past 70 years ever lived or died in Vietnam, in the Highlands of Vietnam — just as in, say, Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union — knows this from experience. And yet, if they still desired a national and even transnational world that transcends their own social space, they certainly would not seek it in communism!” (91).

To lend credibility to his words and to fill in the general gap in international scholarship regarding the fate of the Bru in the war, Gábor Vargyas publishes excerpts from an 18-h life story interview recorded in 1989 with a man he calls by the pseudonym Khȭi Saràng. In this and the following chapters, which, although from different perspectives, essentially deal with the “timidity” and “soft” strategies of the Bru, as well as their apparent submission and obedience, and at the same time their stubborn insistence on independence on the margins of the existing power and political systems, the story of Khȭi Saràng focuses attention on the events and arenas of human life. The study *Old/New Ideologies, New Contexts* also provides insights from a bottom-up perspective, via Khȭi Saràng’s life story, into the question of how the previously discussed behavioral patterns and values were given expression during the Vietnam War. The studies *Two Elections in Vietnam. History from a Bottom-Up Perspective.* and *The Voice of the Lord from a Record Player*, which deals with Protestant and Catholic evangelization among



the Bru, redraws the framework of interpretation of processes that have hitherto been examined mainly at the macro level, drawing on the recollections of Khõĩ Saràng.

Although closely related to the foregoing studies due to its historical perspective, the next essay is at the same time an introduction to the subsequent studies in the volume, which explore questions related to fieldwork. The essay *Fieldwork and Historical Memory at the Borders of Political Regimes* is also a confession: in this chapter, Gábor Vargyas examines the question of whether the communist countries of Southeast Asia can be considered a distinct anthropological terrain in light of the transcript of Khõĩ Saràng's life history and the ethical problems arising from its planned publication. Discussing the concept of "friendship," and its indispensable basis, "trust," Gábor Vargyas focuses on one single specific issue: the relationship to the Asian/Vietnamese colleagues/partners compulsorily assigned to "look after" the researcher in the field. He identifies this question as being one of the most important yet scarcely acknowledged challenges specific to the field in socialist Asia (204).

The theory of reflexivity and positionality, which perhaps receives the greatest attention in this chapter of the volume, belongs among the cluster of questions that have been at the center of international anthropological interest since the postmodern/reflexive turn in cultural anthropology. In Gábor Vargyas's case, however, interest in reflexivity and positionality is not primarily the result of theoretical considerations or academic trends. Beyond the expectations of the constantly shifting international academic environment and the ongoing emergence of new discourses, it was his fieldwork in 2007 that prompted him to address the respective theoretical and practical problems in light of the political context of his fieldwork, and the ethical demands and personal dilemmas arising from it. This is why, in his paper *Fieldwork, Politics, Ethics*, he explores a concrete problem that he had to face, and through which he is able to contribute new perspectives to mainstream international anthropology — namely, how an American military dog tag found among the paraphernalia attached to a Bru shamanic headdress confronts the researcher with an ethical dilemma.

The following two studies, however, go beyond reflexivity and can be interpreted as auto-ethnographic writings. These are studies that present the characteristic beliefs, experiences, and cultural practices of the Bru in light of Gábor Vargyas's personal experiences and self-reflection. In *And the Megaphone Roars... You Cannot Escape*, for example, he endeavors to uncover his subjective experiences, as recorded in the form of a field diary, of the village loudspeaker, one of the instruments of ideological repression, along with his struggles to silence it. In *The Ethnographer in the Tiger's Skin* we learn of the researcher's confrontation with the villagers through the tragicomic story of the skin of a killed tiger. In these two chapters, reflexivity uncovers, as it were, the epistemological value of emotions and supplements the possibility of knowing otherness, creating an extraordinarily perceptive picture of the Bru's decision-making mechanisms and their strategies for handling social crises.

The remaining essays center on cultural change and re-study. In *Photoshopped Ancestors*, Gábor Vargyas examines a phenomenon that occurred on an industrial scale in Vietnam in the 2000s in the form of digitization and Photoshop manipulation of old photographs, while in *Resettled Ancestors*, he outlines a twofold trend in the transformation of Bru religion, noting that Bru religion as he had known it almost a quarter of a century earlier "survives only at the level of religious anthropological literature — as a memento" (341). In *Coffee Garden and Rice-Soul Flower*, he focuses on what Homi Bhabha calls "mimicry," examining the Bru's religious displays and their symbolic forms of remembrance.



The volume concludes with the eponymous study *The Mango and the Sweet Joy of Understanding*. Drawing on Bru speech ethnography, the author once again focuses on reflexive fieldwork, turning again to Khõ'i Saràng — for the last time in the volume — as a guide to understanding. In Khõ'i Saràng's story, disputing parties use the example of a mango seed to bring an end to their dispute. In his study, Gábor Vargyas points out that the translation and interpretation of the story's poetic formula require both an understanding of the cultural context as a whole and a knowledge of botany, while even this may not be enough. Occasionally it is "serendipity" alone that can jolt research out of its impasse (15). However, the most important thing to remember is that serendipity always requires an ethnographer who is able to react flexibly, openly, and reflexively to the unexpected situations generated by the field. The title essay of the volume is an excellent example of the constellation of such conditions.

All things considered, one of the chief values of this volume is that it provides a broad overview of the key issues affecting the past and present of the Bru. These can serve as an important contribution to research not only on this region but also on all socialist and post-socialist states. Of particular note is the way in which Gábor Vargyas reverses the perspective of all earlier research on the Bru by juxtaposing practice and theory. He endeavors to explore the history of the Bru, their relationship to the state, their life strategies, their integration into the process of globalization, and the irreversible changes affecting their culture and religion from their perspective, speaking through them, without dissembling the fact that the process of understanding is inevitably subjective.

Judging from the book's epilogue, *Book and Photo Exhibition on the Bru — In Vietnam*, the process of understanding is far from complete. This is a report written for Hungarian researchers, presenting the Vietnamese reception of Gábor Vargyas's work in connection with his photo exhibitions in Vietnam and his book published in Vietnamese, written some three decades after he began his fieldwork among the Bru. Returning to the site of his initial fieldwork after thirty years and encountering the process of cultural transition, the disappearance of villages, and the loss of many of his Bru friends was an immensely painful experience for the author. However, it was also an opportunity to meet many old and dear friends, and it is perhaps because of these experiences, and his unrelenting urge to understand the present-day changes, that he leaves the door open to understanding, concluding his book with the sentence: "Only time will tell whether things have finally come full circle" (384).

