

Herzfeld, Michael. *Subversive Archaism: Troubling Traditionalists and the Politics of National Heritage*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. Bibliography. Index. xvi+239. \$102.95 (hardcover). \$26.95 (paper and e-book). ISBN 978-1-4780-1500-0 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-4780-1762-2 (paper). ISBN 978-1-4780-2224-4 (e-book).

Michael Herzfeld's *Subversive Archaism* is based upon his 2018 Henry Morgan Lectures at the University of Rochester. He focuses on two communities with which he worked extensively as an anthropologist: Zoniana, a mountain village in Crete, Greece; and the urban enclave of Pom Mahakan in the center of Bangkok, Thailand. Repeated visits to both sites allow him to demonstrate intimate knowledge of the localities and to show how their situations have changed over time. The book is not structured so that he treats one of the communities in a large unit and then the other in a separate section. Rather he switches back and forth from one to the other every few pages, often every few paragraphs or sentences. This approach effectively maintains focus on the conceptual issues. I appreciate this as a reader who can then more easily apply the subject matter and ideas to my own research domains.

Both Zonianians and the Chao Pom (people of Pom Mahakan) exist(ed) in some state of tension with their respective nation-state (i.e., with the monarchy, politicians, bureaucracy, and/or police) and both actively engage(d) cultural features that predate those used symbolically by the nation-state. This is made clear by the book's subtitle, "Troubling Traditionalists and the Politics of National Heritage." Herzfeld explores the efforts of the Zonianians and the Chao Pom to protect and promote their local ways of life, which often pit them against the nation-state and render them as "subversive."

Herzfeld spends some time describing the positions, strategies, and characters of the agents of the nation-states. He provides a brief history of Greece and Thailand, emphasizing how modern nation-states are relatively recent constructions and strongly connected with Western colonial history. Greece and Thailand each "conceptually airbrush" their official histories to claim continuities that are much more direct than historically experienced and much longer than their current political formations (modern Greece became independent in 1828 and the Chakri dynasty was founded in 1782). Herzfeld argues:

Neither country was officially colonized by Western states, but both were constantly under pressure to conform to Western demands, demands that were cultural as well as political and economic. I call the indirect but often humiliating domination of these states "crypto-colonialism." (12)

In this description, the modern nation-state claims a monopoly on moral and cultural authority: "The ethnonational state abhors internal exceptions" (81). State players, including the Thai monarchy, Greek local and national politicians, diverse bureaucrats, journalists, certain neighbors, and the police, insist on their own legitimacy, naturalness, consistency, and correctness. Unofficially, this

opens them up “to criticism as bearers of foreign values and as agents of foreign interference” (12). Herzfeld provides sufficient information to show us that his communities are not particularly marginal but clearly “marginalized” (cf. 150), not particularly ethnic but “ethnicized,” and likewise “vilified,” “illegalized,” stereotyped, and “othered” in various ways by the nation-state’s actors. The nation-state’s representatives demonstrate significant agency when they feel their ideals are challenged, but they are presented in a rather unflattering way as mostly two-dimensional characters/caricatures. True to the goals of the monograph, these government representatives are presented primarily as a foil for his main protagonists, the people of Zoniana and Pom Mahakan, who rise in this reader’s imagination as much more colorful, creative, and sympathetic.

Zonianians and Chao Pom shared “an awareness of the replacement of an older polity by a modernist nation-state of largely foreign inspiration” (42). In Zoniana, elements older than the modern nation-state included partial retention of a patrilineal clan structure (as well as related blood vendettas, sheep stealing, and use of guns). While the state preferred social organization based upon nuclear families, the Chao Pom partially organized their community in a traditional, centralized way Herzfeld identifies as a mandala or *moeang*. In this system power, legitimacy, and status are focused at the *moeang*’s center and irradiate downward and outward in somewhat concentric circles to elastic edges. Remnants of *moeangs* can be found on many overlapping levels in Thailand and other places, though the nation-state prefers exclusive dominance of an official *moeang*, centered on the Thai king. The Chao Pom were more inclusive of ethnic diversity than the increasingly ethnonational Thai monarchy and bureaucracy. They were not legal owners of their property but made special claims to the area by being exceptionally good stewards of this historic neighborhood, self-regulating lawfulness and cleanliness, and promoting their heritage architecture through their own initiative. All these features “contradicted the state, positing an alternative antiquity, social organization, and moral order” (81).

Following Herzfeld’s nuanced descriptions, we come to realize that these two communities were only partially archaic and only partially subversive. In other ways, they were quite modern and loyal. Most members were strongly supportive of their nation-states in principle. Indeed, sometimes these community members identified themselves as more Greek than the bureaucrats that marginalized them, or better at following Thai Buddhist ideals. Neither were they anti-modernist: The Zonianians were unusually expansive in business ventures. Both groups used technologies, strategies, and arguments like the state to try to advance their own positions: “Subversive archaism is a performance of conformity with ideals of national heritage, but one that deliberately sets a trap [to recognize alternate authorities] and tempts the state to fall into it” (144).

I appreciate Herzfeld’s discussion in Chapter Five, where he describes his use of the concept of “polity” in a loose, “transgressive” way, as “a system of governance that is significantly more generic than the idea of state and is informed by an ethic of shared understanding of the universe” (99). Using this approach, politics can sometimes also be temporally impermanent “as a shared way of life

or an evanescent moment of mutual understanding” (97). This move allows him to observe the interactions and compare the nation-states, the capital cities, and the small communities on a somewhat level playing field. Similarly, he finds it useful to deal with “cosmologies” as a broader and more flexible conceptual category than “religions” (Chapter Four).

Civility (hospitality, good manners, proper dress, and other expressions) is understood as a basic positive quality by all four main polities in Herzfeld’s study. He describes how their relations and negotiations tend to go through modes of civility, strained civility, vilification, and sometimes violence. One of Herzfeld’s focal communities continues to enjoy substantial success in their subversive archaism, though the other locality has been physically destroyed and its citizens disbanded.

Herzfeld’s *Subversive Archaism* focuses specifically on two small communities of the type that is typical of classical anthropological research (“I thought I was going to study kinship and marriage, just as an obedient Oxford-trained anthropologist should” [ix]) and their challenging relations with another common unit of study—the nation-state. Advantages of this approach are that he can rely on rich comparative scholarly resources, and that the two very different case studies can be juxtaposed with some common frames of reference. These two communities, however, are not the only possible settings for subversive archaism. As I was reading, I often thought of other examples of archaisms invoked in relations between groups at different scales: within empire-building and empire-managing contexts; within the nation-building process itself; among subgroups of artistic and occupational communities; and even in the context of individual relations. Of course, these diverse scales of comparison surely feature their own diverse qualities, tendencies, and patterns. Herzfeld recognizes several variations in his comparative comments dispersed throughout the text, in his flexible use of “polity,” and in a dedicated sub-chapter “Mutations of Subversive Archaism” (164-167). I appreciate these gestures as an additional move that can bring the subject matter closer to home for many readers cross-culturally.

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