

Reassessing Ritual in Southeast Asian Studies
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ABSTRACTS

Performing the Way of the Cross: Rituals of Self-Mortification in the Catholic Philippines

Julius Bautista

In this paper I provide an analysis of the *Via Crucis y Pasion y Muerte* (“The Way of the Cross”), a Passion Play in which actors from the province of Pampanga, Philippines perform Christ’s crucifixion by having themselves nailed to the cross in front of thousands of spectators. Filipino Catholics are often taken as exemplars of the vitality and frenetic growth of Christian populations in the ‘Global South’ amidst the staggering decline of the faith in its traditional Western bastions. How can one think of self-mortification in the Philippines as offering new ways of thinking about ritual practice? By examining the crucifixion rituals, I aim to highlight the limits of the methodological frameworks that have been used in situating Filipino Catholicism within wider discussions about global Christendom.

The Death of Civil Society and the Life of Ritual

Francis Lim Khek Gee

In various Southeast Asian societies, the coexistence of intense religious ritual activities with efforts at modernization has provided scholars with important material to critically engage with various forms of secularization theory. While debates and criticisms abound with regard to secularization theory, I propose that it is also timely to embark on a critical engagement with the concept of ‘civil society’ and how this concept [has](#) shaped our understanding of religion and ritual in society. The dominant conception of ‘civil society’ in the social sciences today draws on considerable intellectual resources from the European liberal political tradition. Such conception tends to posit not only a domain that is autonomous of the state, family and the market, but also paints a picture of modern society [that is](#) highly differentiated into distinct domains of activities. In this way, ‘religion’ and the ‘religious’ [have been allotted their](#) autonomous domain [distinct](#)

from the 'political' and the 'economic', and 'civil society' becomes a space where actors from these supposedly distinct domains can engage with one another. One important consequence is that ritual has largely been conceptually confined to the religious domain. I will draw upon a recent work, *Ritual and Its Consequences* (OUP, 2008), by Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon, to highlight the need to [examine ritual as an important component](#) in all aspects of everyday social life, and not just in the religious domain. I will also attempt to offer a critique of Seligman et. al.'s idea that ritual functions essentially in the subjunctive mode. I suggest that ritual activity can in addition be usefully analysed in terms of its more broadly conjunctive aspect, especially its function of imposing some sort of generic truth property by bring together mixed conjunctions from social discourses.

Changing Urbanisms and the Ritual Ecology of Waterloo Street, Singapore

Daniel PS Goh

Waterloo Street is one of the oldest streets in the civic center of Singapore. It boasts a series of religious buildings from different faiths, many built in the nineteenth century, sited close to each other. In the postcolonial period, public housing estates sprung up in the area. More recently, the Waterloo streetscape has been undergoing transformation due to urban renewal, heritage regulation, and infrastructural works accompanying global city making. Centering on the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, arguably the most popular temple among Chinese Buddhist-Taoist religionists in Singapore, this paper discusses the ritual ecology of Waterloo Street in the context of the urban changes. I discuss three questions using archival and ethnographic materials. How have the religious rituals practiced in close proximity influenced each other and with what implications for religious beliefs and identities? How have the rituals been affected by urban developments in the area? How have the rituals influenced the Waterloo streetscape and the urbanisms impinging on it? Existing studies of ritual have focused on discrete religious communities and its relationship to bounded places. This paper seeks to look instead at the dynamic ritual ecology of interacting religious practices and the secularizing city.

Building Pagodas, Following Buddhist Saints in Sacred Land across the Thai-Myanmar Border

Yoko Hayami

Since nineteenth century Burma, Karen have been known for Buddhist-influenced “cults,” which have been understood to be idiosyncrasies of a tribal people under the influence of a universal religion. In the 21st century today, Karen on both sides of the Myanmar-Thai border follow saints who are on the Thai side called Khruba, and on the Myanmar side are known as charismatic monks such as Thammanya Sayadaw. While these charismatic monks are well within the Buddhist religious order in both countries, from the perspective of minorities in the peripheries such as the Karen, their worshipping practices are curiously similar to and seem to be along the same line as the above-mentioned “cults.” Karen gather around these saintly monks to seek their protection and power deriving from ascetic practices, and support their projects in building pagodas and other structures. The construction is financially supported by wealthy and powerful people from mainstream society. The larger and more elaborate the structures, the higher the recognized power of the charismatic figures, adding to the momentum of gathering more powerful support from the center, which then further increases the sacred constructions in a snowball effect. On one end of this process are people high up as royalty, or military, financial, or political figures, while on the other end are today’s impoverished Karen migrants across the border. If we take pagoda-construction as a ritual act of constituting sacred space, little has changed in this practice of the charismatic monks, or the Karen following from the nineteenth century. What has changed is the enormous width and amount of support such charisma can mobilize, defying national, economic or political barriers and redefining modern demarcations.

When the King Came to Town:Powers at the Periphery in Upcountry Sri Lanka

John Clifford Holt

Classical theories about “pulsating galactic polities” (Tambiah) and the “doctrine of the exemplary center (Geertz) are, indeed, clearly articulated in the liturgical dynamics obtaining between chief religious shrines of the former royal capital of Kandy and ritually-related outlying rural villages in surrounding upcountry Sri Lanka. From the mid-eighteenth century, the annual *alut sal mangalyaya* (“new rice festival”) and *asala perahera* (procession of the Dalada [“Tooth-Relic” of the Buddha]) evince a semiotic of power about how agricultural fertility is insured and socio-political hierarchy maintained, both forms of power understood to radiate from the capital center to village

peripheries. In this paper, I examine three local *sthalapuranas* (myths of origins about the establishment of shrines) germane to relevant village *devalayas* that seem to reflect concerted attempts on the part of village to assert the subordination of royal power to localized divine power, to declare and defend an intrinsic power of place in the periphery that is not simply a consequence of royally sponsored rites performed at the capital center. Faint echoes of this resistance can still be heard in contemporary relations between central government officials and local village interests.

Trance Dancers or Interlocutors of the Immortals?: Vietnamese Spirit Mediums In Global Perspective

Janet Hoskins

Two different modes of spirit mediumship are explored in contemporary Vietnamese communities. Those who “serve the spirits” of princes, heroes and goddesses fall into a lucid trance, in which they feel their bodies moving spontaneously to music and can bestow gifts of luck, health and wealth to their audience. Those who “have conversations with divinities” speak through swaying a phoenix basket, which traces out the cursive letters of literary texts. Both of these practices emerge from East Asian traditions associated with Taoism, of either the popular or elite variety. One is associated with bringing history back to life by incarnating the members of the imperial court in the market streets of urban Vietnam or garage temples in suburban Orange County. The other is a solemn but usually secret ceremony in which wisdom is passed on in a complex poetic language full of hidden meanings. This paper compares the trance dancers of Dao Mau (“The Way of the Mother Goddesses”) with the literary mediums of Cao Dai (“The Highest Power”) and looks at the different experiences conjured up in these linked, but quite distinct, forms of ritual expression.

God Coercion and God Worship of the Lahu Christians in Northern Thai Hills

Tatsuki Kataoka

It has long been discussed that our academic approach to Southeast Asian religion is biased by the perspective of modern Western Christianity. In this paper, focused on a case study of the Lahu of the mainland Southeast Asian uplands, I will present a more nuanced understanding of so-called ritualism in Southeast Asian religion and its transformation.

The bias mentioned above has been originated in Weber's arguments on rationalization of religion. In this series of discussions, the essential divide was set between "god coercion" and "god worship" in religious orientation. Modeled after the Western experience of Protestantism, "rationalization" is supposed to be a movement from god coercion or ritualism toward a form more centered on god worship. In this perspective ritual itself is marginalized as a residue of "pure religion", otherwise a romanticized "other" still free from the Western domination. Accordingly, interpretations of recent religious changes in Southeast Asia have been also divided between "rationalists" and their "anti-Western/ anti-modernist" critiques.

However, both views are equally simplistic and one-sided to understand what is happening in the field of religious transformation. The Lahu and their conversion to Christianity offer a good case study to reconsider such dichotomy. Their case show that in the course of Christianization of the Lahu religion and indigenization of Christianity, "rationalization" or purification of god-worship-centered doctrine and "backsliding" to ritualism or god coercion are at work at the same time. It is this tension which has provided a driving force of dynamics in the Lahu religion and its history.

Filipino religiosity in Japanese hinterlands: appraising the symbolic meaning of Catholicism in the lives of Filipina residents in Japan

Mario Ivan Lopez

Ritual practice such as the expression, demonstration, and validation of faith plays a fundamental role in the lives of migrants who travel overseas. In this context, this paper examines how long-term Filipino migrants settled in Japan express their Catholic religiosity and imbue it with new meaning as one of the everyday practices available to them in Japan.

In this paper I examine how for some, through settlement in Japan, religiosity becomes activated through sharing and discussing instability in family life in order to weather the uncertainty of overseas residence. Through ethnographic analysis of personal and devotional practices used at Catholic gatherings, I analyze the meanings behind Filipinas appeals to each other through Catholic practices and demonstrate that are re-invested with new symbolic meaning in Japan.

I finally argue that the discussions that take place between individuals and members of nascent communities present an ongoing process of reflecting upon and voicing

personal trajectories. The communicative role of rituals such as appealing through devotional practices in gatherings suggests that some Filipinas become aware of the potential their practices can have in restructuring their homes and subsequently social relations with families and partners.

Ritual and Art in Thai Buddhism

Justin McDaniel

The study of Thai Buddhist art has just begun to recognize the importance of images in the practice of ritual. However, in the few studies that exist, images are seen as being part of a ritual “context.” This paper will further question the study “individual” pieces of art and the notion of “a ritual context.” Moreover, since, Art historians in Southeast Asia have primarily concentrated on the study of images, stupas, manuscripts, and murals produced by the elite before the nineteenth century. I will shift focus in this talk and concentrate on vernacular art made in the last 150 years. While certain images in Thai Buddhism are lauded for their age or precious materials, most are honored for their connection to certain powerful monks, ghosts, and kings. Many of these highly revered and powerful images are made out of wax or wood, or crudely and mass-produced bronze, plastic copper, resin, or clay. Furthermore, instead of concentrating on the origins of pieces of art, I want to study art as it exists and operates in dynamic ritual activities and highly complex synchronic relationships with other images and with patrons, artists, and visitors. I want to move beyond aesthetic and iconographic analyses of individual objects, and focus on recipients, rituals, and agents, as well as the agency of the “things” themselves. Finally, I argue that images, photographs, murals, amulets, and buildings do not exist in static and repeated contexts, but in synchronic and diachronic relationships.

De-subjectification and Re-subjectification in/by rituals: Muslim-Buddhist relationships in a Southern Thai village

Ryoko Nishii

Religious boundaries between Muslims and Buddhists are not fixed in everyday practices in a village of Muslim-Buddhist co-resident on the west coast of Southern Thailand. In the village, about 20 percent of marriages are intermarriages between Muslims and Buddhists. There are two terms that can be translated as religion. One is *satsana*, which refers to knowing *bun* (merit) and *bap* (sin). These are human qualities

that both Muslims and Buddhists share, in contrast with beasts, which do not know *bun* and *bap*. Another is *phasa*, which refers to the differentiated practices peculiar to each religion. *Phasa* is usually understood as “language” and “speech” in standard Thai. However, in southern Thailand the meaning of *phasa* is explained as custom (*prapheni*), or to do, act, or perform a practice (*patibat*). *Phasa* is commonly used in designating the religious practice of both Muslims, *phasa khaek*, and Buddhists, *phasa thai*. When the word *phasa* is used, it contrastively indicates religious difference. In religious rituals the boundary between Muslims and Buddhists, that is, the difference of *phasa*, becomes apparent. Each side must follow its own religious ways. In the anthropological theory of rituals they pointed out that actors are de-subjectified in the process of rituals. However, in the context of Muslim-Buddhist co-resident village, to perform religious rituals designate their identity versus another *phasa* people. It means rituals make them re-subjectified.

Peutroen Aneuk: the ritual of the infants first time of getting out in Aceh-Kluet, Community, Indonesia

Sehat Ihsan Shadiqin

In this article, I will attempt to explain how Aceh-Kluet tribe community celebrate their infant first day get out of a house. In traditional Aceh-Kluet community an infant will get out of house after 44 days of given birth. There are more than six rituals prepared related to this event, such as; *petroen*, *pemanoe*, *peusilek*, *peuaqiqah*, *peucicap*, *peukap pha manok*, dan *peurateb/marhaban*. *Peusilek* ritual conduct only for a son. Each ritual lead by different person according to their specializing. This article will try to explain how Aceh-Kluet tribe society describe the ritual according to the readiness of the infants to face their future. There are two kind of future life in Kluetnese mind; worldly life and hereafter life. Worldly life means as period where children will obtain with two kind of life: cruel and peace. Through this ritual, they guides their infant to choose a peace side and leave brutal side in their environment to get harmonious life. Meanwhile in hereafter life, they guide their infant about what they should do here for the sake of their eternal life. In eternal life everybody must be responsible for his/her performance during they live in the world. The good performance will receive good reward and vice versa. In this article I argue that the worldview of Aceh-Kluet people which is built since the first time they get out of the house.

Possession Ritual in Contemporary Society: Religion and Modernity amongst the

Cham Vietnamese

Yasuko Yoshimoto

It has been pointed out that the popular religion which once attacked as superstitious and wasteful has “revived” in contemporary Vietnam. Possession rituals are one of the cases which become a conspicuous feature of contemporary life. This presentation, based on case study of religious practices among the Cham in south-central part of Vietnam, aims to demonstrate the actual conditions of the possession ritual called *rija* in contemporary village society. To consider them, first, I will focus on the official narratives and cultural policy in the research area. Second, I will describe the meaning and the actual conditions of the rituals of *rija* which are practiced by the villagers. Then, I will examine the impact and the influence of modernization to the religious practices in local society of the Cham in contemporary Vietnam