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New Decade, New Directions: Advancing the Study of Southeast Asian Religions

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Journal

Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, 36(3)

ISSN

0217-9520

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.1355/sj36-3o

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SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia Vol. 36, No. 3 (2021), pp. 573–600 DOI: 10.1355/sj36-3o

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Notes & Comment

New Decade, New Directions: Advancing the Study of Southeast Asian Religions

Alexandra Kaloyanides, Chiara Formichi, Cuong T. Mai, Richard Fox, Kelly Meister Brawn, Nathan McGovern, Penny Edwards and Oona Paredes

Introduction

On 9 December 2020, a group of scholars of Southeast Asia gathered over Zoom as part of the American Academy of Religion's annual conference for a special roundtable: "New Decade, New Directions: Advancing the Study of Southeast Asian Religions". This session considered key works in the study of Southeast Asian religions from the last decade and discussed ways the field should develop over the next decade. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines charted a collaborative historiography that we are happy to share with *SOJOURN* readers in this special package. We also offer glimpses into each author's new research projects. This package, then, offers a knowing glance back at important scholarship from the 2010s and a promising picture of where the 2020s could take the study of religion in Southeast Asia.

This section features scholarship from a diverse range of disciplines, including history, anthropology, gender studies, literary studies, media studies and ritual studies. It encompasses multiple Southeast Asian locations, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Southwest China, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam. To harmonize our multi-vocal collaboration, each of our eight

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contributors first highlights a monograph or journal article from the last decade that they find important in advancing the field and then relates how a particular research project of theirs seeks to further that advancement.

The panelists and attendees found that the American Academy of Religion roundtable was especially successful in generating a multidisciplinary list of suggested readings. We hope that *SOJOURN* readers will find in this list new titles to illuminate their own scholarship and teaching. Given the wide range of expertise among the panelists—both geographically and disciplinarily—readers working on Southeast Asia should be able to find something here to deepen and broaden their studies. Through this collective effort to read more widely, we hope to contribute to a more knowledgeable and collaborative future for Southeast Asian studies that amplifies the work of Southeast Asian scholars and institutions. While all of the panelists-turned-authors here are currently based in North America, this print version was created to connect with *SOJOURN*'s international readership.

Our roundtable also proved to be a welcome opportunity to step back and survey the study of religion in Southeast Asia. We acknowledged that the category 'Southeast Asia' has its flaws (especially as a result of Western colonialism, Cold War geopolitics and institutional histories). Our conversation, though, demonstrated the value of imagining Southeast Asia as a somewhat coherent region. Even across major religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, across mainland and maritime regions and across vast time periods we can recognize patterned ways Southeast Asian communities have made meaning in their lives.

This collection reveals shared concerns about academic categories such as 'religion', 'secularism' and 'syncretism' as well as a common need to have previously unexamined sources—texts, artefacts, ethnographies and more—inform future scholarship. We also show a pervasive interest in the Southeast Asian expressions of powerful relationships between human and non-human beings. We hope that this will encourage continued conversations across national boundaries, religious traditions, time periods and academic approaches.

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On *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. By Ronit Ricci. University of Chicago Press, 2011

Chiara Formichi

Ronit Ricci's *Islam Translated* was published by Chicago University Press in 2011, and it won the Henry J. Benda Prize at the Association of Asian Studies in 2013. It was also extensively reviewed in several journals dedicated to the study of Asia. But it was not so excitedly received, at least in the formal channels of academe, in the field of Islamic Studies. It is with this frame that I discuss *Islam Translated* as an influential text in the study of religion from a Southeast Asian studies perspective. Here, Southeast Asia is a point of departure, rather than arrival, for the study of Islam.

In *Islam Translated*, Ricci traces the circulation of and discusses the interactions between multiple "tellings" (p. 21) of the so-called 'Book of One Thousand Questions'. This originally Arabic-language text presents a conversation between the Prophet Muhammad and a Jewish scholar; at the end of the encounter, the scholar converts to Islam. We know that this text had become widely circulated by the tenth century. In the following centuries, translations were made in Persian, Turkish and Urdu, and copies of manuscripts from at least the sixteenth century have also survived in Tamil, Malay and Javanese. Deploying her impressive linguistic mastery, Ricci focuses on these latter three "tellings" and their relationship to the Arabic texts.

Ricci moves within and across the Indian Ocean, describing it as "a translocal Islamic sphere constituted and defined by language, literature, and religion, [spanning] a large geographic area through South and Southeast Asia" (p. 4). In calling this space an Arabic cosmopolis, she echoes Sheldon Pollock's Sanskrit cosmopolis (2006). Whereas some have found shortcomings in this application, I want to focus on the ground-breaking implications of this choice.

First, by connecting the Islamicate world of South and Southeast Asia to Arabo-phone and Persianate areas, Ricci brings into this "translocal Islamic sphere" (p. 4) a vast expanse of the 'Muslim world', doing away with the framework—so deeply entrenched in the scholarship of Islam—that pits a putative 'Arab' centre against sprawling peripheries. She flattens the ascribed hierarchy between an Arab orthodox centre and the Asian derivative syncretic peripheries.

The implications of this approach cannot be emphasized enough because, despite a stated commitment to moving away from Cold War approaches to scholarship on Asia, we (collectively, as scholars operating in universities and professional associations) remain anchored—shackled, I would say—to the paradigm of sub-regional area studies and expertise as it emerged in the 1950s.

Forging ahead, Ricci's exploration and analysis of an originally Arabic text across the Indian Ocean is not pursued to suggest that the Arabic language (and the cultural paradigm that comes with it) was hegemonic in the area. Rather, in this cosmopolitan space, the Arabic narrative of 'The Book of One Thousand Questions' loses its specificity as an Arabic text, and through its various vernacular tellings it becomes a site of shared Islamic identity.

Hence, and this is my second point, Ricci's analysis of the tellings of 'The Book of One Thousand Questions' allows her to make a case for literature—and, with it, for religious conversion—as a locus of conversation where local (or vernacular) forms encounter, and change with, the foreign (original) narrative in a dynamic that is much more complex, rich and productive than the stale frame of syncretism.

These two contributions might be unintended by-products of Ricci's literary work, but they were foundational as I sought to understand what I found unsettling about Clifford Geertz's statement that Javanese Muslims are not "real Moslem[s]" (1960, p. 160), and why I found Mark Woodward's undermining of the Geertzian paradigm (1989, p. 77) incomplete. Ricci's framework of conversion and cross-cultural interactions as "conversations" (p. 21) guided me in reframing what it means to study Islam across Asia from a Southeastern perspective. In my recent monograph, *Islam and Asia: A History*, it is Ricci's work that most deeply contributed to shaping my approach to Asia as a "cohesive space of Islamized interaction", stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the western Pacific, with neither centres nor peripheries (Formichi 2020, p. 6).

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On *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors: An Interreligious Encounter in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam*. By Anh Tran. Oxford UnivZersity Press, 2017

Cuong T. Mai

I chose Anh Tran's book *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors,* published in 2017, for several reasons. The primary one is because it is the most important monograph in recent years to study Vietnamese premodern religions. Its importance partially stems, however, from there being few books published on Vietnamese premodern religions in English.

In previous decades it was Olga Dror's 2007 study of the cult of the goddess Lieu Hanh. And, before that, Cuong Nguyen's 1997 study of Zen in medieval Vietnam. The trend appears to be one full-length book per decade, which is not a healthy trend, and which is actually indicative of the strengths and weaknesses of Tran's book.

In brief, Tran's book is a translation and study of an eighteenth-century apologetic text composed by an anonymous European missionary. It is a catechism in defence of Christianity and against what the text's author deems superstitious, deluded and demonic practices and traditions, such as local village cults, Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, though Confucianism does come out a little better than the others.

The book is important for the non-specialist and specialist alike because it consolidates much of secondary scholarship written in English, French and Vietnamese on premodern Vietnam and sketches out in broad outline the three religions stated above and the cults of popular religion. It is the most thorough general overview available. This is no small feat.

With regards to its weaknesses, the most significant flaw is the general lack of attention to issues of theory and analysis. The author uses terms like syncretism, animism and cult without defining them. For example, popular religion is a contested term, and rightly so. There is so much in the way of rich theoretical discussion about this in religious studies broadly, but here it is used without reflection. Likewise, broad categories like Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism are used as if we knew what such terms referred to in premodern Vietnam, which I would argue we actually do not.

In conclusion, Tran's book is succinct, readable and provides a remarkably thorough overview and synthesis of what is already known, using categories that we have intellectually outgrown. Reading *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors*, I say to myself, this could serve as a good foundation for a new decade in the critical study of premodern

Vietnamese religions, but we need new primary sources and new theoretical questions (we cannot recycle the same sources and same tired categories every decade).

My current research on the religious discourses and practices embedded in *truyền kỳ* (transmission of marvels) narratives and stele inscriptions will, I hope, introduce new primary sources and raise new questions.

Some questions include what are the different forms of Buddhism in premodern Vietnam and how can we track them? Can we distinguish monastic, lay, client and aristocratic forms and different moral commitments therein? What are the different forms of Confucianism? Can we distinguish scholastic, state and popular Confucianism as fields of discourses and practices, overlapping at certain institutional sites?

Daoism in Vietnam is the least understood phenomenon. Similarly, it seems we have the most information on popular local cults, but the category of popular religion is the least theorized in Vietnamese studies; it is more often seen as the object of study of 'folk religion' or ethnography.

Can we use the study of Chinese religion as a starting point to generate rich theoretical questions and conversations? Do the sources indicate different types of 'syncretism'? Why have we ignored conflict between the different religious agents in premodern society? The background to syncretism is conflict, contestation and mutual appropriation.

What are the different conceptions of ritual power seen in the 'transmission of marvels' narratives? Can we move away from the view of 'religion' as institutional bodies to approach them more as communities of practice anchored at certain local sites of power?

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On *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma.* By Alicia Turner. University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014

Alexandra Kaloyanides

My nomination is Alicia Turner's 2014 book *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*. Not only has this work been transformative for the study of Burmese Buddhism, but it has also pressed scholars of religion at large to re-examine the category of religion in light of Buddhist histories. Turner focuses on Burmese communities at the turn of the twentieth century who used shifting definitions of the Western category 'religion' to advance Buddhist projects that they hoped would preserve Buddhist teachings endangered by the British overthrow of the monarchy, a monarchy that had been chiefly responsible for the protection, promotion and purification of Buddhist institutions and practices. Turner's book skilfully draws our attention to the term '*sāsana*'—a Pali word referring to the teachings of a Buddha and the time period in which these teachings flourish in this world. Turner shows that for Burmese communities in the colonial period the worldview and the mechanics of *sāsana* provided an orientation and an agenda for saving Buddhism. Turner demonstrates how these communities employed long-established Buddhist practices as well as newly available colonial technologies to renegotiate life under the British.

Turner's book stands out in my mind for its nuanced history of lay people—working-class people like teachers and clerks—who stepped into a Buddhist custodial void. This book centres the agency of Southeast Asian communities and chisels away at a calcified vision of Western colonial domination. Turner completed her book before the acceleration of terrible violence against the Rohingya, a genocidal campaign that has made scholars of Myanmar re-examine the stories we are told and the stories we tell about the country, especially the story of Myanmar as a vastly Buddhist nation whose twentieth-century violent militarism is largely explained by the wrongs it suffered under the British. We are now paying closer attention to expressions of Bamar superiority alongside a more sensitive concern for marginalized communities. Furthermore, new work is seeking to investigate notions of ethnicity, race and class and the way that they have been constructed together with notions of religion and *sāsana*.

I am finishing a book project on nineteenth-century Burma that started as a study of the first communities to convert to Christianity through their engagement with the American Baptist mission to Burma, which began in 1813. As I did archival research and fieldwork to understand the ways that this Protestant operation altered the religious landscape, especially among the Karen, the Kachin and the Chin, I began to find curious connections with larger Buddhist reform movements in the Konbaung Kingdom. Furthermore, I found that American Christianity itself transformed in Southeast Asia. Evangelists who had arrived vilifying Buddha statues found themselves creating tree shrines and their converts consecrating multicoloured paintings of Jesus. As eccentric as these objects might seem, I have found that they are at the centre of a revealing story of religion in Burma. Thus, my forthcoming book, *Objects of Conversion: Relics of Resistance: Materials of Religious Change at the American Baptist Mission to Burma*, focuses on powerful Southeast Asian artefacts to understand how the Burmese transformed Buddhism to counter Christianity, how minority communities took on Baptist identities, and how Protestantism transformed into a kind of Southeast Asian religion. By telling stories of four key things—the sacred book, the schoolhouse, the pagoda and the portrait—my book aims to illuminate little-known histories of Burma's last kingdom and the United States' first ever intercontinental mission. Furthermore, I seek to build on the work that Turner and other scholars have done both to decentre Western colonialism in our histories and to better understand the complex ways that empires—Western *and* Southeast Asian—produce knowledge about religion.

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On "Exploring the Role of Language in Early State Formation in Southeast Asia". By Thomas Hunter. Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper Series No. 7, 2011

Richard Fox

The piece I chose for our roundtable conversation is Thomas Hunter's 2011 essay "Exploring the Role of Language in Early State Formation in Southeast Asia". And I would like to begin simply by stating that I chose this article because I believe Tom's work warrants greater attention than it has received to date, particularly for those interested in re-evaluating the history of religion in the region. As already noted in today's discussion, the recent scholarship has included some remarkable efforts to trace Buddhist, Brahmanical and Islamic connectivities within Southeast Asia and beyond. To be sure, this desire to capture 'the big picture' is a most welcome development. Yet, at least in my view, the terms, concepts and "moral geographies" (Bloembergen 2021) at play in this pursuit of a more 'connected' history are not always entirely unproblematic. It is here that Tom's work becomes especially pertinent. I have had the privilege of studying with him in various contexts over the years. And, in my view, his sensitivity to the complexity of *language-in-use* is arguably unrivalled in the field of Southeast Asian Studies today. I hasten to add that, by language, I do not mean a disembodied collection of statements, but rather something like *linguistic modes of embodiment and articulation*—ways of becoming, being in and working to transform the world through speech, gesture, writing, reading and other forms of textual (and non-textual) practice. Here I may be reading too many of my own preoccupations into Hunter's work. So, what does the paper itself have to say?

Well, in a brief thirty-two pages, Hunter draws together a set of insights gathered over decades of research and reflection on language and power in Southeast Asia, with a special emphasis on the archipelago now called Indonesia. Hunter is specifically interested in the interplay between languages: how various forms of Sanskrit and Pāli, for example, were deployed in the effort to display, shore-up and legitimize authority; and how new linguistic registers such as Kawi, or Old Javanese, and also various forms of Malay and literary Balinese emerged and transformed as a consequence of these processes. For our purposes, a key aspect of Tom's reflections on language is his attentiveness to local iterations of text, history and precedent, issues that are central to our assessment of the historical connections linking Southeast Asian religious traditions to wider Indic and Islamic networks of trade, migration, learning and belonging.

The article reviews the scholarship on what Hunter calls "the glossias" (2010, pp. 6–10), including Mikhail Bakhtin's account of hetero- and polyglossia and much later Sheldon Pollock on the ideas of diglossia and hyperglossia (2006). In building on these ideas—albeit not uncritically—Hunter introduces a series of his own terms and concepts that are meant to provide a more nuanced approach to the historical interplay between linguistic registers and the religious traditions they mediate. His work has focused predominantly on what we might broadly describe as the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions. But I believe Hunter's work is equally pertinent to our historical understanding of Islam. And here there are three aspects of this article—and his approach more generally—that I would like to highlight.

The first is his attention to complexity. Hunter's work is unremittingly attentive to the ongoing interplay of religious, cultural and linguistic forms as they traverse an artificial divide separating South and Southeast Asia—examining the way persons, things and ideas collide, inflect and transform one another as they work their way through people's lives.

The second aspect is nuance. Hunter's work—in this article and more generally—argues eloquently for attention to trans-regional connectivity and social transformation through time. And yet, simultaneously, his fine-grained attention to linguistic detail precludes recourse to facile concepts and terminology such as Sanskritization, Indianization, localization and the like. In addressing the question of social and cultural transformation, he attends to a familiar problem for the field, but does so in a productively unfamiliar way.

Finally, a third and closely related aspect is the way that, notwithstanding his use of Pollock's idiom, Hunter's argument—at least on my reading—undermines the grand narrative implicit in the idea of a Sanskrit ecumene or cosmopolis. In short, the unity implicit in this terminology may be a good fit for one's experience 'reading texts' from the comfort of one's office, or the library. But, in that oft-cited remark from Paul Mus, one must be wary of "mistaking a library for a country" (2011, p. 21) And, indeed, it is precisely this nuanced attention to detail that makes Hunter's work so wonderfully productive for thinking about religious transformation throughout Southeast Asia across historical periods.

So, how has Hunter's work inspired me? For my part, and here I'll be particularly brief, it is his attention to the interplay between languages that has inspired my own work on what I am provisionally calling 'aspiration' (Javanese: *gegayuhan*; Indonesian: *cita-cita*)—the way that young Indonesians in Central Java imagine and work toward a better life, and how these hopes for the future are depicted in various forms of ‘popular culture’. Here, I am working primarily with local film, street art, short fiction and pop music. And I am particularly interested in attending to the interplay between the national language of Indonesia, local variations of Javanese and the growing importance of English for embodying and articulating visions for the future, and how these various registers collide, transform and inflect one another, with an eye to the implications this may have for how we understand agency and collective life in the human sciences more broadly.

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On *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand.* By Justin McDaniel. Columbia University Press, 2014

Kelly Meister Brawn

I nominate Justin McDaniel’s *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* (2014), a study of modern mainstream Thai Buddhism. It is difficult though for me to narrow down the ways this book has shaped both my thinking and how I imagine it will continue to shape the next generation of scholarship.

The lesson I have selected to focus on from McDaniel’s work is this: the starting point for examining any religious landscape ought to be an expectation that people can and do hold seemingly contradictory beliefs simultaneously, and they often act in discrepant and perplexing ways. What flourishes within individuals and among communities is diversity, contestation, creativity and uncertainty.

To help make sense of this, McDaniel introduces the concepts of “repertoires” (p. 9), which include the texts people read and listen to, objects they use, the stories they learn from and enjoy, their ethics, rituals they like to participate in, their personal life experiences and memories, deities they follow, their everyday realities, and more. They are personal, diverse, evolving, constantly shifting, ambiguous, and negotiated through actual practice and conscious reflection on the values they subscribe to. In Thai Buddhism, according to McDaniel, repertoires tend to focus on four things: security, heritage, graciousness and abundance.

Therefore, instead of, for example, looking to understand how various doctrines like non-attachment, compassion and non-self are manifest in Thai Buddhism or how the most powerful institutions have affected influence, we can look to how individual agents navigate and try to make sense of the world. This includes looking at what relationships and networks between people, objects, spaces and various unseen forces of the world exist.

This inherent messiness extends to the broader study of Thai Buddhism and the recognition that Thai Buddhist life is heterodox, idiosyncratic, contested and not necessarily dominated by the policies of the state. I think it is worth saying that this is easier to state than it is to study and write about because as scholars we are interested in making our subject matter clear and coherent and because neat and tidy categories, classifications and frameworks—especially those that have been used for a long time—can be so helpful. And also because it is hard to make generalized arguments via collections of idiosyncratic evidence and a seemingly infinite cacophony of voices and practices. The irony, of course, is that in studying Buddhism, and thus impermanence, scholars have utilized rigid categories and then made static the practitioners and practices they placed within them.

I tried to bring this lesson into my research on Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, a monastery in the Nakhon Si Thammarat, looking to local texts, heroes and heroines, objects and constantly evolving networks. In thinking about the material culture of the space that houses a Buddha relic at its centre, I wondered not only about how the space was utilized by everyday practitioners and pilgrims, but also about what relationships were formed within and because of it. For example, instead of looking to the Buddha, I turned to a local heroine, Hemachala. One example of what I found speaks to this inherent complexity discussed above: a tall statue that offers its tutelage to the monastery's gallery of Buddha images is holding out both its hands symmetrically with palms forward and is regally adorned. This is the favourite image for many local women—the one with whom they have cultivated a meaningful and extended relationship—as it is known to bestow blessings and assistance when they are in need. To them, this image is both the female heroine who brought the relic of the Buddha to the town, an image of the Buddha as prince, and the enlightened Buddha. The image is also a concrete imagining of the local heroine eventually achieving Buddhahood in her own right. The image can be all of these at the same time or any one of them, depending on the practitioner, whose needs are often focused on things like health, wealth and love instead of ultimate escape from *samsara* (rounds of rebirth). But when devotees need help the most, the persona of the female heroine most often comes to the fore. The image remains inspirational to contemporary devotees, especially women, and serves as concrete evidence of a fissure in the range of male-dominated iconography. Here, it is not a mere feminine symbol that has emerged, but in fact a female Buddha herself.

In developing a relationship with this image, these devotees utilize the practice of pact-making (Thai: *kho bon gae bon*). To use McDaniel's framework, this pact-making is a technology—like astrology, protections, precepts, amulets, etc.—and is used to solve a myriad of complex problems. In this practice, a promise is made to an image or an object that if a request is fulfilled the devotee will engage in some type of more intense, righteous undertaking. For example, if someone asks to get pregnant after a long period of infertility, they may promise to stay at the monastery for a number of days engaged in more rigorous and consuming Buddhist practice than usual (they may also continue seeing a fertility specialist, of course).

To truly value the importance of this pact-making, I utilize another lesson from McDaniel: we must take seriously the so-called worldly practices of devotees, understanding them as integral within the Thai religious landscape. Thus, the practices of countless Thai Buddhists and their vision of their religion is moved to the fore instead of relegating them to something beneath 'actual' practices like textual study or solitary contemplation.

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On *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand.* By Justin McDaniel. Columbia University Press, 2014

Nathan McGovern

I am currently working on research for a new book manuscript, tentatively entitled "Holy Things". It is a study of the practice of propitiating so-called 'holy things' (Thai: *sing saksit*) in Thailand and a genealogy of the category *saksit* in Siamese and modern Thai discourse. The work I would like to highlight as an inspiration for my current project is Justin McDaniel's *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (2011). In this monograph on the famous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Thai monk Somdet Tō, McDaniel provides a trenchant critique of the model of syncretism and replaces it not merely in name but through a thoroughgoing shift in theoretical outlook. He writes,

> Instead of seeing a Thai shrine or Thai monastery or even Thai image blending essentialized local and translocal, Indic and Southeast Asian, Brahmanic and Buddhist elements, I see these complex lives, rituals, and objects as questioning the very usefulness of metacategories like Buddhism, Brahmanism, animism, local, translocal, Indic, Chinese, Thai, and the like. In my experience and interviews, monks or laypeople prostrating in front of a shrine with statues of General Taksin, Kuan Im, Shakyamuni Buddha, Somdet To, Phra Sanghkhacchai do not see the shrine as a syncretistic stage or themselves as multireligious.… I started asking different questions and stopped trying to fit Thai practices into my preconceived categories. (p. 228)

McDaniel refers to his approach as a study of “cultural repertoires” (p. 9), but it can be understood quite simply as taking Thai religious practices seriously on their own terms rather than constantly forcing them through the filter of historical, anthropological, sociopolitical and other analytical categories preferred by scholars.

My own work focuses on the category that is operative in the minds of contemporary Thai Buddhists: *sing saksit*, or ‘holy things’. *Sing saksit* includes all the sorts of images referred to by McDaniel: local spirits, Indic gods, Buddha images, Chinese gods, deceased kings and monks, and the like. In a procedure known as *kānbonbānsānklāo*, these ‘holy things’ are all worshipped in almost exactly the same way with the same goal in mind: receiving some sort of mundane boon. First, one goes to the *sing saksit* to *khò phòn*, or ‘ask for the boon’. In doing so, one must *bon*, or promise to give some offering in return. The system is cash-on-delivery, so there is no need to give the offering upfront, but if and when one does receive the requested boon, one must return to *kae bon*, or ‘fulfil the vow’ by giving the offering. Each *sing saksit* has its own personality and backstory and is known for preferring certain types of offerings. Interestingly enough, this includes even famous Buddha images, which are not conceived of merely as representations of ‘the Buddha’, but have their own names and personalities and are propitiated for boons like money, health and help in one’s love life just as would any ordinary local spirit.

While McDaniel’s observation about Thai religious practice is undoubtedly correct from a synchronic perspective, my genealogical research into the term *saksit* complicates the situation a bit from a diachronic perspective. Through a thoroughgoing search of Siamese literature from the thirteenth century up to and including the writings of Sunthòn Phū in the early nineteenth century, I have found that the words *saksit* and its equivalent, *sitthisak,* are almost never used to describe Buddha images, Buddhist monks or anything uniquely Buddhist. Instead, they are most often used to refer to gods and other supernatural beings, but also at times to human beings, weapons, and knowledge derived from the Vedas or *āgama*s. In general, they appear to be used as a part of a discourse of *saiyasāt,* which in pre-colonial Siamese referred to Brahmanism. For idiosyncratic reasons, in the nineteenth century when Western cultural concepts were translated into Thai, as with other languages around the world, most of the vocabulary of *saiyasāt* was used to translate concepts associated with ‘magic’, while *saksit* was used to translate the more religious concept of the ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’. This appears to have had profound effects on the religious praxis of contemporary Thailand, opening new arenas for discourse and its contestation that we see today.

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On *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka.* By A.M. Blackburn. University of Chicago Press, 2010; “Buddhist Pilgrimage Centers and the Twelve-Year Cycle: Northern Thai Moral Orders in Space and Time”. By C.F. Keyes. *History of Religions* 15, no. 1 (1975): 71–89; and *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta*. By J.S. Strong. Princeton University Press, 1992

Penny Edwards

Communities might be imagined, but beliefs are felt. Texts play a part in galvanizing beliefs, but no text exists in isolation. Each carries the scribal and spiritual imprint of past, present and future individuals: whether they be monks, laity or royalty. The interpretation these individuals bring to a text will, in turn, be shaped by context. But the legacy of colonialism for Theravada Buddhism has been a quest for authenticity and a search to codify and quarantine texts. Here, I reflect on three gems of scholarship that have resisted this impulse, forging new maps and methodologies by working outwards through archives, field sites and texts, through the lived experience of Buddhist monks and laity, to challenge both disciplinary orthodoxy and received geographies of Theravada Buddhism. I introduce these three works in the order in which I read them and revisited them in the summer of 2020 while thinking through ideas of belief, space and sovereignty for my forthcoming book manuscript on the Burmese prince in exile, Myngun Min (1844–1921). *Kingdoms of the Mind* explores the movement of Myngun along multiple axes, including Buddhist narratives and networks, spanning mainland Southeast Asia, India and Sri Lanka. Only one of the three works I consider here was written in the past decade. I link each of them here in the spirit of each work’s connective reading of texts and contexts.

The first of the three is *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (2010) by Anne Blackburn. Why, Blackburn asks, were the colonial founders of Buddhology so invested in celebrating textuality? If the answer to that question is that such scholars felt a stronger affinity with the texts they acquired than for the people they colonized, then the merits of Blackburn's methodology involve a reverse sensibility. By paying close attention to the voice of Venerable Hikkaduve in scriptural commentaries, personal correspondence, public interventions and royal missives, Blackburn brings Buddhism to life. Her reading of Pali, Sinhalese and occasional English sources conjures a world of "translocal Buddhism" (p. 209), where texts that appealed to ritual and royal authority, and the monks who moved these texts through mission and missive, reshaped the "experienced geography" (p. 209) of Southeast Asia. Tales of Buddhist lands across the water trafficked by monks on the move congealed this vision. (p. 151). Through these exchanges, Blackburn writes, in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka "the sāsana was used as a physical space and idiom", and "'translocal' mobility" became a "celebrated monastic asset". In a bold move, Blackburn argues for a notion of *sāsana* (the dispensation) as a "geography"—one embracing Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia and Siam (pp. 112, 168–69, 171). For Venerable Hikkaduve, Bangkok was a potential centre of a new regional order that could generate sufficient merit between Buddhist nations to destabilize British authority.

In his article "Buddhist Pilgrimage Centers and the Twelve-Year Cycle: Northern Thai Moral Orders in Space and Time" (1975), anthropologist Charles Keyes, a scholar of mainland Southeast Asia, traces and analyses circuits of myth, meaning and pilgrimage through interviews and research in situ and on the move. Keyes charts circuitries of connection among contemporary Buddhists in Thailand and Burma, and among monks and laity in earlier eras and adjacent areas, through a constellation of twelve shrines ranging from the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar to Bodh Gaya in India. Keyes's findings reveal a different 'map' to that envisaged by Venerable Hikkaduve and his contemporaries, one that connects Yuan Buddhism with Thai Lanna, and North Eastern Thailand with Burma—while bypassing Bangkok and Sri Lanka. Suturing these sites to realms of belief in time and space were life journeys of monks and pilgrims and stories of the journeys of relics of the Buddha. This dynamic of monks and laity moving to and between sacred sites, amulets and icons reinforced networks of belief and webs of meaning through devotional rites that honoured powerful forces and mythical monks. One such figure was Upagupta, and it is to him that I now turn.

In *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta* (1992), John Strong fuses analyses of Pali, Burmese prayers and Paritta (protective verses) with ethnography, charting the ritual, spiritual and material transmission of beliefs in Upagupta, a monk who is celebrated for his power to vanquish the demon Mara. Studies of Buddhism in the linguistically and ethnically diverse region of Northern Southeast Asia—an area encompassing the Shan State in Myanmar, North and Northeast Thailand, parts of Yunnan in China, and Laos—has, Strong writes, been hampered by "the blinders that have come with [the region's] designation" as Theravada (p. 171). Beliefs in Upagupta, known as Shin Upago in Burma, were carried by Burmese into parts of Northern Thailand through amulets. In Myanmar under military rule, Shin Upago's moral muscle (as the vanquisher of Mara) was remade in rituals through which monks and laity sought protection from "the evils of government" (pp. 277, 286).

Each of these three studies illuminates Buddhism as felt and lived and across time and space. Blackburn maps circuits of Buddhist merit and sovereignty conjoined at Bangkok as the axis of a regional geography of *sāsana*. Keyes sets out an overlapping and alternative spiritual topography that offered monks and laity membership in a moral community, astride political boundaries. Strong documents the adaptability of iconography and the longevity of ritual as vital corollaries to textual transmission. Each of these works offers powerful insights into Buddhism. And each owes its power to the author's humanistic interest, an interest that extends beyond “Buddhist works” to how Buddhism works.

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On *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism*. By Janet Hoskins. University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015

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For a key work in the study of Southeast Asian religions from the last decade that could shape the field’s next decade of scholarship, I nominate Janet Hoskins’s *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism* (2015). I do so as a Philippines/island Southeast Asia specialist who knows very little about Vietnam, and who does not study anything even remotely close to Caodaism. I also come to the study of religion from anthropology and (ethno)history, rather than religious studies per se. From this background, I nominate this book not only because it is an engaging read about a fascinating and relatively new religion but also because it has compelled me to rethink a lot of things in my work, not just in terms of religion but also for tradition and identity, colonial contact and, among so many other things, the fundamental nature of the thing that anthropologists call ‘culture’.

My initial approach to this nomination was to recall two books on religion in the Philippines that profoundly influenced my thinking back when I was a graduate student and that are still incredibly radical and compelling today, to the extent that I do not consider any subsequent work to have surpassed them in reorientating my thinking on religion. Of course, both books are from a lot more than a decade ago, but I consider them worth mentioning because they provide some context for my selection of Hoskins's book. Reynaldo Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution* (1979) and Fenella Cannell's *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (1999) were published twenty years apart, but I experienced them at more or less the same time. Both deal with the interaction between indigenous lowland cultures and their supernatural concepts with Roman Catholicism from Spain. They did so in a way that collapsed the ethnographic distinction that anthropologists still make between upland and lowland cultures, and this allowed me to appreciate that lowlanders were just as 'indigenous' and 'cultural' as the upland peoples I had been focusing on.

At the time, I was just beginning to grapple with the complex issue of colonial contact between indigenous Lumad peoples and Iberian missionaries in the early Spanish colonial period in the Philippines. Both Ileto's and Cannell's books were radical in approaching the mainstream, lowland cultures of the Philippines as a cultural and ethnographic object of study at a time when there was (and perhaps there still is) a strong bias against the idea that they are of any anthropological significance or interest—in contrast to the upland 'tribal' cultures. As Cannell (1999, pp. 241–45) explains in her concluding chapter, in a section entitled, coincidentally, "The Disappearance of the Lowlands as a Cultural Object", the Americans—and this includes their anthropologists—dismissed what they considered to be the lowlanders' overly Hispanized practices as inauthentic, peasant superstition and, of course, 'syncretic'. Both Cannell's and Ileto's works rendered moot the questions of authenticity, syncretism and the distinction between indigenous and foreign influence that still occupies a lot of Philippine scholars and thinkers. Conversely, their work allowed me to begin questioning the significance of these interrogations in the study of indigenous upland cultures as well, which has had a profound influence on my work.

This brings me round to Janet Hoskins's book, *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora*, which relates the evolution of a religion from a small, revolutionary religious sect in French colonial Vietnam into what is now a global religion, solidly established in the West, that is beginning to spread beyond its original diasporic adherents. In the process, Hoskins manages to unpack several key concepts—specifically, the nature of syncretism, what counts as indigenous, and what diaspora truly entails.

In both anthropology and Southeast Asian studies, syncretism as a concept has been frustrating because it is not just imprecise but it is also mostly unexamined and used primarily with the sense that we know it when we see it. It continues to carry pejorative connotations of inauthenticity and bastardization, always set against the implicit notion that there are 'real' religions out there that are not contaminated by local cultural or 'folk' elements. With apologies to Richard Fox and his commentary in this special section about productive unfamiliarity in reference to Thomas Hunter's piece, syncretism as a concept has for too long remained unproductively familiar. It is like the old Redfield (1955) binary of 'great tradition' and 'little tradition', which is useful to think with but which imposes a rather limiting understanding of religion and cultural dynamics.

Hoskins celebrates Cao Dai as an example of "outrageous syncretism", with its diverse pantheon of not only Asian religious and philosophical figures such as the Buddha, Guanyin, Laozi and Confucius but also non-Asian figures such as Jesus, Victor Hugo, Joan of Arc and Lenin. But Hoskins's real contribution here is in how thoroughly she unpacks syncretism, showing very clearly that it is a process rather than a condition. Rather than a lesser condition of 'folk' traditions, syncretism is instead the very engine that creates new religions. In essence, every religion is the result of a syncretic process that takes what already exists and transforms it into something new. In other words, every religion was/is/will be syncretic in origin, whether this process happens consciously (explicit syncretism), as in Cao Dai, or unconsciously (implicit syncretism), through idiosyncratic adjustments over time. Rather than syncretism being a bug that corrupts certain religions with ‘folk’ elements, it turns out to be the core feature of *all* religions. It may not be immediately obvious how revolutionary this idea is, but in my own work it has had ripple effects on how I think of everything, from colonial contact to religious conversion to indigenous tradition.

On the matter of what is ‘indigenous’ versus what is the result of foreign influence, Hoskins’s approach to Cao Dai likewise compels us to ask what counts as legitimately ‘Southeast Asian’. Southeast Asian studies has long had this concept of ‘localization’ to explain the widespread adaptation of cultural, religious, linguistic and other elements in the region from outside of it, something that has apparently been taking place for millennia. It has been argued by Barbara Andaya (1997) and other prominent historians of the region that European notions of tradition and ‘modernity’ do not adequately explain or describe how eagerly Southeast Asians actively and routinely embrace the new and make it their own, and have done so since ‘pre-modern’ times. This embrace of the new is exemplified in Hoskins’s study of Cao Dai, showing us that what is actually ‘indigenous’ here is the process and practice rather than any individual elements of theology or doctrine or ritual that can be separated from the mix.

Finally, there is the matter of ‘diaspora’, which has been a defining element of the Cao Dai experience and of how it became the religion it is today. Hoskins shows Cao Dai as not merely a religion *in* diaspora, but a religion *of* diaspora, one that continues to generate new scripture and new revelations and continues to evolve through the interplay between practitioners and churches back home in Vietnam and out there in the diaspora. More than this, however, we discover a deeper appreciation of ‘diaspora’ as a condition that precedes the actual movement of people away from home—in effect, a religion of “diaspora *before* diaspora” (Hoskins 2015, pp. 227–29; emphasis added). This throws into profound relief the true nature of the displacement that makes diaspora, particularly within the context of colonialism. Coloniality is not just about the loss of power but also a sense of profound displacement *at home*. Thus, diaspora becomes less about migration and more about the disintegration of one's world and the struggle to recreate 'home' under conditions where it can no longer be found.

I should explain that *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora* was already influencing my thinking and my work before it was published because, in the years leading to its publication, Janet Hoskins had spent some time at the National University of Singapore when I was based there. During this time, Hoskins shared the ideas that would become this book. I remember in particular a seminar in which the idea of syncretism was debated, including the question of whether the distinction was material to how practitioners understood their own religion. She also summarized these ideas in a working paper (2014) for the University of Göttingen's Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia (DORISEA) programme. These discussions allowed me to begin asking very different questions of both religion and culture, questions for which the notion of 'authenticity' has become irrelevant. This has also had a particularly powerful impact on how I look at indigenous traditions in my own work, which involves an upland indigenous minority population that has embraced evangelical Christianity, not as a break from their ancestral laws but as a continuation, fulfilment and affirmation of the same. Hoskins's approach to outrageous Vietnamese syncretism has allowed me to appreciate more fully how colonial contact generated some of the traditions now widely regarded as ancestral (Paredes 2017, pp. 10–12), something that I can more easily celebrate as exemplars of indigenous agency.

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