Faith in the Future

Social Sciences in Asia

Edited by

Sinha Vineeta
Alatas Syed Farid
Bun Chan Kwok

VOLUME 32

Faith in the Future

Understanding the Revitalization of Religions
and Cultural Traditions in Asia

Edited by

Thomas Reuter
Alexander Horstmann

BRILL

This publication has been typeset in the multilingual "Brill" typeface. With over 5,100 characters covering Latin, IPA, Greek, and Cyrillic, this typeface is especially suitable for use in the humanities. For more information, please see www.brill.com/brill-typeface.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

CONTENTS

CONTRIBUTORS

Thomas A. Reuter

Prof Thomas Reuter is a Future Fellow (Australian Research Council) at the University of Melbourne's Asia Institute. After obtaining his PhD from ANU in 1997, he taught at Heidelberg University, held post-doctoral and QElI Fellowships at Melbourne, and a Research Fellowship at Monash University. He was President of the Australian Anthropological Association (2002–2005) and Chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (2009–2012). Research has focused on Indonesian ethnology (Bali, Java, Kalimantan), Social Movements, Religion, Political Anthropology, Social Organization, Status, Globalisation and General Theory. Thomas has authored eight books and more than fifty articles.
Contact: thor2525@gmail.com

Alexander Horstmann

Alexander Horstmann, a social anthropologist, teaches at and is advisor to the Multicultural Studies PhD program at Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, in Bangkok, Thailand. Working on Thailand for 20 years, Alexander has researched Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Southern Thailand and has embarked in 2008 on a project on Sacred Spaces, Missionization and Humanitarianism among Karen Refugee Migrants from Southeast Burma in Northwestern Thailand. Alexander's work has ben funded by DAAD, Fritz Thyssen Foundation, German Research Foundation, Thailand Research Fund and Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious Diversity. Being a senior research partner at Max Planck Institute in Goettingen, he has also started a project on New Urbanism, Agency and Diversity in Bangkok. Alexander is the author and editor of four books and numerous research articles in international journals.
Contact: ahorstmann3@gmail.com

Birgit Bräuchler

(Ph.D.) is Lecturer (Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin) of social and cultural anthropology at the University of Frankfurt. Her main research interests are media and cyberanthropology, conflict and peace studies, cultural rights and the revival of tradition. She is the author of *Cyberidentities at*

War (transcript, 2005), editor of *Reconciling Indonesia* (Routledge, 2009), co-editor of *Theorising Media and Practice* (Berghahn, 2010) and has published several book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals. Her current research is on the cultural dimension of reconciliation in Indonesia.
Contact: birgitbraeuchler@gmx.net

Peter Bräunlein
Peter J. Bräunlein is an anthropologist and religionist. He obtained his PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Freiburg and his Habilitation in the study of religion from the University of Bremen. Between 1986–1988 and 1996–1998 he conducted extensive fieldwork in the Philippines (on cosmology and shamanism of the Alangan-Mangyan; and on the cult of the saints and passion rituals in the Province of Bulacan). Between 2000–2006 he was curator of the Marburg "Museum of Religions." He is currently a senior researcher at the University of Göttingen. His research project on "Spirits in and of Modernity" is part of the competence network "Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia" (DORISEA). Other research areas: anthropology of Christianity; visible religion; museums, media, film and religion.
Contact: pbraeun@uni-goettingen.de

Annette Hornbacher
Annette Hornbacher received her doctoral degree in philosophy at Tübingen, and her Habilitation in cultural anthropology at the University of München. She taught at the universities of München, Göttingen, Tübingen and Heidelberg and held a Research Fellowship at München university. Since 2010, she is professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Heidelberg. Her research focus is on Indonesia (Bali, Java), ritual, performance, religion, modernization and globalization, and transcultural epistemologies. She is leader of a subproject on "*Adat or Agama*? *in Indonesia* within a BMBF research project on *Dynamiken von Religion in Südostasien*, Co-leader of a French-German research project: Local Traditions and World Religions: The Appropriation of "Religion" in Southeast Asia and Beyond, leader of a research project on "Heilige und Sakrale Schrift" in Bali which is part of an interdisciplinary research area "Material Textcultures" at the university of Heidelberg, and chair of the anthropological ethic workshop of the *German Association of Anthropologists*.
Contact: Annette.Hornbacher@eth.uni-heidelberg.de

Arthur Saniotis
Arthur Saniotis is a social anthropologist and Visiting Research Fellow at The University of Adelaide. His research interests include climate change, evolutionary medicine, futures studies, bioethics and comparative religion.
Contact: arthur.saniotis@adelaide.edu.au

Guido Sprenger
Guido Sprenger is Professor at the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. He has conducted fieldwork in northern Laos since 2000, focusing on the effects of external relations on ritual, exchange and social morphology. His research interests include cultural identity, sexuality and myth. He is the author of 'Die Maenner, die den Geldbaum faellten: Konzepte von Austausch und Gesellschaft bei den Rmeet von Takheung, Laos' (The Men who cut the Money Tree: Concepts of Exchange and Society among the Rmeet of Takheung, Laos.).
Contact: sprengerguido@hotmail.com

Erik W. Davis
Erik Davis is Assistant Professor of Asian Religions at Macalester College. He completed his doctorate at the University of Chicago in 2009 after three years of fieldwork, with a dissertation on contemporary Cambodian Buddhist funerals. Currently chair of the Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia Studies group of the Association of Asian Studies, his research has focused on ritual, death, agriculture, ethnic identification and ethnogenesis.
Contact: erik.w.davis@gmail.com

Blair Palmer
Blair Palmer obtained his PhD in anthropology from the Australian National University, with a thesis on migration and social change in Buton, Indonesia. Since 2006 he has been based in Indonesia researching conflict, democratisation and natural resource governance for, among others, the World Bank and the Asia Foundation.
Contact: palmerblair@gmail.com

Daromir Rudnyckyj
Daromir Rudnyckyj is Assistant Professor in the Department of Pacific and Asian Studies at the University of Victoria, Canada. He is the author of *Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalization, and the Afterlife of Development* (Cornell University Press, 2010) and essays and articles that have appeared in *Cultural Anthropology, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, the journal *Indonesia, Anthropological Theory*, and *Anthropological Quarterly*,

among other publications. His current research project, "Malaysia and the Globalization of Islamic Finance" examines efforts to make Kuala Lumpur the "New York of the Muslim World."
Contact: daromir@uvic.ca

Gerhard Hoffstaedter
Gerhard Hoffstaedter has researched culture, identity politics, and Islam in Malaysia since 2004 and has published in the area since 2008. He was awarded a PhD in anthropology and sociology from La Trobe University in 2009. Between 2009 and 2012 he was a research fellow at La Trobe University. Since 2012 he is a lecturer in anthropology in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland, where he conducts research in development studies, refugee and immigration policy and spiritual and existential security as well as religion and the state. His first book is entitled *Modern Muslim Identities: Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia* and is published by NIAS Press.
Contact: Gerhard Hoffstaedter <g.hoffstaedter@uq.edu.au>

Jovan Maud
Jovan Maud completed his PhD in 2008 at the Department of Anthropology, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. He lectured at Macquarie between 2006 and 2009, and was Acting Director of the Master of Applied Anthropology program there in 2009. Since January 2010 he has been a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany. He is also a Managing Editor of the *Journal of Global Buddhism.* Research interests include Buddhism and the nation-state in Thailand; transnational religious networks; religious commoditisation and syncretism; and pilgrimage and religious tourism.
Contact: jovan.maud@gmail.com

Shaoming Zhou
Dr. Zhou Shaoming is a lecturer at Asia Institute of The University of Melbourne, Australia. He has a particular research interest in the transformation of regional culture from the late imperial to the contemporary period in China. He has carried out fieldwork and research on death rituals in Shandong, with a focus on how the changes in culture have shaped rituals throughout recent history and how rituals have been re-created in contemporary China. At the same time, he has published widely on culture and comparative culture studies, on the Chinese system of ethics and on the interaction between traditional Chinese ideology and the lives of Chinese people.
Contact: shaoming@unimelb.edu.au

LIST OF FIGURES

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL REVITALIZATION:
A POST-MODERN PHENOMENON?

Thomas Reuter and Alexander Horstmann

A pervasive sense of displacement and insecurity has arisen and provoked a cultural and moral crisis in Asia and beyond. This crisis reflects radical transformations of local economies and the erosion of relatively secure traditional social and value systems due to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation and increasing participation in a global capitalist economy. New ways of practising and thinking about religion and tradition have emerged in response to the challenges of this new way of life and in this volume we explore some of their innovative, post-modern features. Contemporary forms of religiosity and tradition, we argue, do not simply reflect people's changing personal and social needs under the condition of late modernity we experience today. New global trends in religion point beyond the paradigm of (late) modernity insofar as they have the capacity also to inspire the societies of tomorrow.

Some of the defining features of the late modern socio-cultural experience include a profound sense of social isolation or lack of community, growing individualism and consumerism, heightened exposure to cultural difference through increased mobility and electronic media, together with an unprecedented degree of cultural and religious self-awareness at the level of local society. These factors can and often do generate a desire to strengthen and defend local traditions, but also a desire to adjust and adapt such traditions to better suit the realities of national—and increasingly, global—webs of economic interdependence and cultural exchange. Local people thus use traditional religion not only to overcome cultural crises and social conflicts, but also as a creative way to meet their current needs and express their aspirations for the future. Rather than being only a response to the forces of national and global market integration, religions should be interpreted as cultural and political projects to question and reconstruct the moral and social order of society.

Certainly, we do not want to romanticise movements for the revitalization of local cultures. We are keenly aware that religion has also been used and is continuously being used to promote religious and ethnic nationalisms or chauvinistic and exclusionary agendas. Yet, the contributors in this volume emphasize the creativity and ritual innovation members of local revitalisation movements employ to give renewed meaning to their respective social and cultural universes, to reconstruct broken community ties or connect to imagined local and transnational networks and pilgrimage routes.

The attitudes of local people towards traditions, however, are not shaped by cultural and psychological concerns alone. The revitalizations of local religious identities that are currently taking place in many parts of Southeast Asia are also pragmatic and strategic political responses to a growing sense of disenfranchisement. A sense of economic loss has arisen from widespread misappropriation of local material resources and from systematic assaults on local systems of moral and political authority, either by the nation-state or by multinational capitalist ventures. Many educated Southeast Asians view this as a contemporary form of economic and cultural colonialism, and revitalize local culture in order to establish an independent moral sphere from which to mobilize political resistance. In many cases, national elites are perceived as "captured," and hence as collaborators as well as internal colonizers in their own right. Revitalization thus can also be a response to the interventions and modernist agenda of the nation state.

Revitalization, broadly defined, is the conceptual adaptation and practical reapplication of elements of an established local way of life with the aim of remedying certain aspects of a changed life situation that are considered undesirable. While this definition implies that people maintain a sense of continuity and avoid change because they value much about their own established way of life, it also suggests that change tends to be very welcome to the extent that its effects are perceived to be favourable. Most people engaged in revitalization understand that there is no hope and no need to recreate the exact conditions of the past. Change is a part of life and history is not reversible. Rather, revitalization movements arise when people contemplate recent change and arrive at a sense of being under threat or having already suffered a great loss, in one way or another. This kind of scenario produces revitalization movements, especially when the sense of loss is matched by a sense of having a reasonably good opportunity of restoring what is under threat or has been lost.

The sense of loss that drives revitalization may be unrealistic at times. We have short memories and often forget that what we may value about the past may have come at a cost. The sense of opportunity too can be unrealistic for similar reasons, to do with the systemic interdependence of different elements of a way of life, which may make the reapplication of individual elements of a previous way of life to a new situation quite difficult, too costly, or simply impossible. Social engineering or 'conscious social change' of any kind—be it state-endorsed or driven by social movements—is met by such difficulties, but that does not mean that revitalization is a mere pipedream. Rather, it means that revitalization always creates more social change, rather than simply undoing earlier changes. The outcome of experiments with revitalization is difficult to predict because deliberate social change is always accompanied by unintended and unexpected consequences. Such consequences are largely unpredictable because perfect knowledge even of the current social system—in all its infinite complexity—is not attainable, even for insiders, and probably less so for social scientists.

Given that the impact of every social change is uneven, revitalization—like every other form of deliberate intervention in the dynamic interplay of change and continuity in a society—will always have implications for the distribution of political power, wealth and prestige. The impact is also differentiated. Change of any kind—be it modernisation or revitalization—has different effects on different people. Revitalized traditions can be expressions of class formation in which powerful people on the local level symbolically express their ritual potency and business acumen, or they can be an assault on new elites. Even when the effect of revitalisation is ostensibly the same, it can be viewed differently; as a positive change by some groups and as a negative one by others, depending on the values they apply. Under what political circumstances then do revitalization movements gain ascendancy?

In most cases the revitalization of local values and practices is aimed at protecting or regaining local autonomy in situations where change has been involuntary and imposed by outside forces, such as corporate globalisation or the nation state—usually with a concomitant loss of power, resources and prestige for the majority of local people. Such conditions create a negative perception of recent social change and make revitalization a popular option. Even then, however, some members of the local society, most notably the new modern elites, will tend to oppose revitalization efforts because they have collaborated with and benefited from

the imposition of earlier changes, and from the disenfranchisement of the majority. Others again may have been extremely marginal under the earlier *modus operandum*, and may oppose revitalization because the new, modern situation has rendered them less underprivileged than they were before, even if this change is only slight. Suffice to say that these processes follow some fairly common sense principles. They also respond to historical and systemic complexities that are immensely difficult to untangle and appreciate, especially for outsiders. In-depth empirical research is therefore an absolute requirement for understanding revitalization and similar local manifestations of social and religious change.

Revitalization is not conservative; it is a form of social change—indeed a deliberate and premeditated act of social engineering. All such actions have unintended consequences and there can be considerable dangers. On the other hand, it is completely reasonable for local people anywhere to grasp opportunities to gain greater autonomy from outside forces and, hence, to take charge of shaping their own future. The desire consciously to shape one's own future lies at the heart of revitalization efforts of all kinds, and explains their essentially utopian character.

Early studies of revitalization movements tended to produce negative characterisations based on the assumption that the people involved are irrational and stuck in the past (e.g. Wallace 1966, Stewart & Harding 1999, Stewart & Strathern 2000). While Wallace's (1956) five stage model, for example, did recognize revitalization as a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a group to create a 'new culture,' he rated the impact of revitalization on society at large to be very low. For Wallace, revitalisation thus becomes synonymous with the adaptation of small cultural minority groups to the overwhelming external influence of Western culture and, within that, mainstream society. This may be correct in some cases and, clearly, the likelihood of religious revitalization turning the tables on globalization in a given place and time depends on many specific local, national and global factors. Conditions are not always broadly supportive of such movements. In broader historical terms, however, there are times leading up to a global paradigm shift when such movements not only succeed in maintaining local autonomy but may catalyse a cultural transformation within a hitherto hegemonic social order. Note that the transformative work of revitalization movements is often hard to detect even in retrospect, because their causes often disappear from the public agenda and they may even cease to exist as movements once their ideas have become mainstreamed and their demands for change have been met.

Revitalization efforts in Asia are diverse even within single countries, let alone within the region. They include new Buddhist groups, Islamic missionary movements, prosperity churches and Pentecostal summer camps. Migrant churches and charismatic Buddhist monks may appeal to vulnerable segments of the population, foreign migrants and refugees, who in turn contribute to the expansion of their congregations with their enthusiastic support (Horstmann 2010). Elsewhere, revitalisation may be about re-empowering local elites, and be opposed to an influx of labour migrants and foreigners with different religious traditions.

Most important of all, social scientists need to acknowledge that revitalization has in fact become a ubiquitous contemporary phenomenon, responding to real and extremely serious and widespread contemporary challenges such as environmental degradation, economic inequality, external political domination, community breakdown and social isolation (Reuter 2008). While some of its proponents may at times adopt a reactionary and backward-looking mode of thought, revitalization is predominantly a forward-looking or utopian project. Most contemporary religious or cultural revitalization movements can be described as attempts to address injustices and destructive tendencies in the all-pervasive process of corporate globalisation, which is often refracted down to the local level via corrupt, dictatorial or pseudo-democratic nation states whose leaders are 'on the payroll.' This kind of globalisation may have delivered technological advances and affluence in some cases but also new forms of injustice and human misery, and a consumer capitalist way of life that simply cannot be sustained. Many local empowerment movements thus feature an ecological dimension in addition to, or as an alternative to, religious revitalization (Reuter 2011, Reuter & Acciaioli 2011). With countless revitalization movements around the world sharing a common basic agenda of anti-modernist reform, and growing evidence of such movements joining forces within national and international umbrella organisations, their impact may be multiplied.

At the same time, it is important not to glorify revitalization movements categorically. Some of the legitimate concerns and reasonable aspirations of local empowerment movements deserve our acknowledgement. However, we also need to explore under what circumstances some of these movements, or factions within them, may resort to violent political action that may cause harm to innocent others, or damage future prospects for realising the valid causes of the movements themselves.

The multi-layered revitalization phenomena described in this volume are a manifestation of interconnected global and local efforts of resistance,

which seek to discredit and dismantle equally interconnected contemporary power structures operating also at multiple levels. Why is this happening and why are such movements proliferating at this time?

Answers can be found to explain each one of these movements in its own terms and by its own frame of reference, and such explanations do have considerable merit. Seen as a whole, however, revitalization efforts, at this late modern juncture in world history, reflect a rising global and local awareness of an impending crisis of civilisation, a desire to understand the nature of this crisis, and an attempt to create a better future. This is not to say that revitalization worldwide will accomplish the necessary correction to the established modernist perspective on life and associated socio-economic practices. Many of the papers in this volume indeed show that modernism, through the local interventions of nation states and the impact of global capitalism, is still very much shaping the lives of people in Asia on a practical level, and still occupies a hegemonic position in the public media as a master narrative of contemporary experience. In this sense, the contributions to this volume reflect a moment of significant tension in world history.

Comparative social science research is required to shed light on the revitalization of local traditions and the emergence of particular movements, because comparison allows us to pay due attention also to the wider processes of social change, of which these new forms of religiosity are an integral part. At the present stage of revitalisation research, a regional comparison is perhaps the best option because it allows us to provide sufficiently detailed analyses to reveal broader commonalities as well as divergences which together will assist us to build a better theoretical understanding of these processes.

In contemporary Asia, a sense of cultural crisis and fragmentation has been felt with particular acuteness, generating demand for innovative or transformative ideas about a world and a life experience which no longer seems to make any sense. A buoyant market for new forms of religiosity is catering to this demand in Asia, allowing local groups or individuals to shop around for new collective forms of piety and membership in associated social networks, or else to develop a more unique value system and spiritual path on the basis of their individual experience. The need for the support of a community of like-minded others is very strong in the rapidly transforming and often conflict-riddled societies of Southeast Asia, however, and thus motivates many to involve themselves in new socio-religious movements rather than relying on an individualised spirituality. Local revitalization, mass conversions and some of the more 'organised'

new age movements thus all answer a need for renewed solidarity and provide religious inspirations for dealing with life's problems in this age of globalisation.

The present volume consists of thirteen, in-depth case studies by an international group of researchers.[1] The studies reveal a renewed commitment to local tradition in the face of a massive assault on traditional ways of life, as well as identifying the pressures that continue to erode those ways of life in many parts of the world. Traditional elements of religion and culture are involved in an intensive dialogue with national and global power-knowledge formations, and are thus manifesting as a force for cultural and social innovation.

The case studies presented herein describe this dialogue of reflexive transformation at the intersection of the local and the global—a setting in which local religious revivalist movements often provide new therapeutic forms for healing and new communicative (symbolic) forms to grapple with significant social change. Those who join new cultural and religious movements not only seek the warmth of a tightly knit community but also associate themselves with a spiritual source of healing and spiritual strength, make critical statements about those who are in power, or find ways of re-sacralising the secular environment or even the state itself. Local religious revival movements may also react to disenfranchisement, social injustice and patterns of exploitation in regional settings, in undemocratic nation-states, or in the neo-liberal, capitalist world order at large.

Together, the papers illustrate the impact of late modernity and globalization on local cultures, while also showing that what happens at this intersection is a reciprocal process in the deepest sense. Religious movements are particularly important as a way for local peoples to articulate their desires, to decide how they wish to live their lives, and to shape their own future actively, while also reflecting their desire to find an appropriate place and status for themselves within a global social and political context of which they have become increasingly conscious and which they also largely take for granted.

Local religious and cultural revitalization movements ally themselves with new forms of religiosity, syncretistic recombination, bricolage or purification to engage arbitrary forms of state power, social anxiety and

---

1 Earlier versions of a few of the papers presented herein previously appeared in a special issue on 'Reflexive Transformation and Religious Revitalisation: Perspectives from Southeast Asia', in the Asian Journal of Social Science, 37(6), 2009, also edited by Thomas Reuter and Alexander Horstmann.

the loss of local political and economic autonomy, social networks and traditional forms of meaning. We maintain this thesis, although we also acknowledge that modernity has opened up possibilities for social mobility and prosperity to many people in Asia and beyond.

Religion provides an important resource for social networking and for making sense of the world in these turbulent times. We argue that new forms of religiosity are responding to this demand, allowing local groups or individuals to shop around for new forms of piety and associated social networks. The contributors' research thus supports the argument that new religious movements and revitalising religious traditions both respond to the same major socio-economic and political transformations occurring in the contemporary world (Keyes & Tanabe 1999) and that religious experience is intimately connected with issues of human security and safety (Salemink, Hylland & Bal 2010).

In the process of revitalization, local cultures and religions do not remain unchanged. Looking at processes of mobility, violence and displacement, we emphasize that we are looking at religion as a phenomenon in motion and constant change, and distance ourselves from the idea of fixed cosmologies and from mechanical models of social reproduction. In the case studies presented below, we emphasize that local cultures and religions are undergoing a deep transformation and that, in many cases, cultural and religious boundaries are becoming more pronounced as a result. This is especially likely in cases where different religious traditions and associated movements compete within the same community or territory. Local religious traditions often serve revival movements as a platform for active or passive resistance to the religious and cultural purification campaigns of nation states or of global missionary organisations. Ironically, processes that are believed to erode local cultural traditions, such as commoditisation, may actually inject new life and energy into the revitalization of local religion while revitalization in turn helps to keep capitalist society "spirited."

Outline

Thomas Reuter's paper describes multi-layered religious revitalization movements in Bali, and in Indonesia generally. Reuter notes that the Balinese movement known as 'Ajeg Bali' has been instrumental in the reinforcement of cultural boundaries between the Hindu Balinese majority and Muslim labour migrants from other parts of Indonesia attracted by Bali's booming tourism economy. Following the dramatic collapse of former president Suharto's dictatorial government in 1998 and a massive pro-

cess of political liberalisation and decentralisation, local traditions that had long been undermined by the nation-state were vigorously promoted and reinstated. Balinese revitalization is also a response to a major terrorist attack on Bali by an Islamist group in 2002, whose members are at the radical fringe of a much larger, national Islamic revitalization. Balinese society is by no means homogeneous either, and revitalisation is thus occurring on multiple levels. This paper describes how the indigenous Balinese, or "Bali Aga," against the backdrop of national Islamic revitalization and a provincial level Hindu Balinese counter-revitalization, have in turn revitalised an ancient regional ritual, which has also aided them in regaining a degree of political autonomy from mainstream southern Balinese society such as they had not experienced in more than 600 years. The unique feature of this case study is that it shows how different layers of revitalization are linked and mutually constitutive, just as are the multi-layered power structures whose injustices these movements are responding to.

The revitalization of local traditions as a strategy of reconciliation is central to *Birgit Bräuchler*'s article on traditional knowledge, ritual and conflict in the Moluccan Islands. Bräuchler discusses the use of cultural tradition by social actors in the Moluccas to end the severe interfaith violence that swept the region in recent years. According to her analysis, traditional means to end the violence were used from the very beginning of the conflict. The most well known tools were *pela* and *gandong*, the major elements of a traditional system of inter-religious alliance. Bräuchler notes that the actors do not see these forms of civility as static, but rather as traditions that need to be adapted to modern times, and broadened to meet emerging problems in a rapidly changing society. Bräuchler sees local strategies of reconciliation as a crucial resource that can be tapped by local actors to overcome ethnic or religious violence and hatred fuelled by outside interference. Current re-appraisals of local tradition are being performed against the background of having to overcome this legacy of recent conflict.

As *Peter Bräunlein* shows in his contribution, new religious practices are also a product of the impact of the post-modern condition on the individual. The practice of crucifixion in the Philippines, which he describes, centres on the body, personal experience and pain. Those who choose to undergo crucifixion are often lay healers motivated by a desire to experience a dramatic identification with Jesus Christ, to enter a state of trance through pain as a religious experience of rebirth, and to improve their powers and reputations as healers. The practice of crucifixion is new, rather than a long-standing tradition, but is embedded in local traditions

and ideas about Christian saints. The performance of crucifixion imitates Christ's sacrifice and through this, charismatic authority emerges in an increasingly urban, post-modern social setting wherein more established traditional forms of church authority have been eroded.

The contribution by *Alexander Horstmann* is concerned with the revitalization of traditional ancestral rituals of multi-religious neighbourhoods in Southern Thailand. Two examples of traditional multi-religious and reconciling ritual are given to illustrate the contestation, polyphony and transgression involved in the dynamic of revitalisation, and the continuous importance of traditional beliefs amidst an atmosphere of religious tension and violence. Even today, against the background of an increasing hardening of inter-religious boundaries, Buddhist and Muslims in southern Thailand believe that they are part of an inherited, imagined community, insofar as they all consider themselves to be descendents of the first Manora teachers. The Manora is, traditionally, a healing ceremony to domesticate harmful spirits. The revitalized Manora dance drama, however, is a hybridized ritual integrating myth, a historical drama, performing art and ritual practice. At the grand Manora ceremonies in Ta Kura and Takae, thousands of pilgrims look for spiritual power by participating and becoming possessed by ancestral spirits. Horstmann provides the example of a woman who, in full Islamic dress, brings her ill child to be cured by the magic of the Manora ancestors. Coming into a Buddhist temple, she ignores the ordination of Buddhist nuns and the Buddhist diviners and spectacle, transgressing her own religious boundaries. In the 'ritual of two religions' the reproduction of core values coexist with subtle competition between Buddhism and Islam. Following Parkin (1992), Horstmann underlines the openness, ambiguity and contradictions of ritual action.

Annette Hornbacher's contribution links back to the chapter on Balinese ritual and political revival by Thomas Reuter. Hornbacher explores some of the underlying motivations driving a broader mood of crisis and revitalization of ritual culture that has swept the island of Bali since the demise of the Suharto regime in 1998, along with an unprecedented and troubling wave of suicides. Hornbacher utilizes Ulf Hannerz' notion of transnational cultural creolization in order to explain how Balinese have actively and successfully adjusted their cultural traditions to meet the demands of an international cultural tourism market. But in the shadow of their economic success, and contrary to Hannerz' theory, Balinese are also plagued by a growing sense of cosmic crisis, reflected in a loss of ecological sustainability, appropriate social relations, and spirituality. Current revitalization discourses therefore serve a critical cosmological function;

they directly question the value of cultural creolization strategies and of the modern worldview at large.

In his contribution on the 'greening' of Asian religion, *Arthur Saniotis* describes how religious traditions are evoked, revitalized and also transformed in an effort to address rising popular concern over the evident lack of sustainability of the modern capitalist way of life. Following Linder and Bateson, he argues that a evolutionary shift is required in the way we live our lives and think, and that religions everywhere are responding to this demand because religion is not only paradigmatic of social life but also a locus of paradigm shifts. This mobilization and transformative revitalization of religion is illustrated by reference to two examples: eco-Buddhism and forest temples in Thailand and an ecological movement spearheaded by Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia.

The contribution by *Guido Sprenger* looks at changes in the religious practices of the Rmeet, a minority in upland Laos, in response to a heightened sense of cultural self-consciousness and reflexivity that has arisen from increased exposure to and closer interaction with cultural others. Sprenger shows that while the ritual spilling of blood is crucial to Rmeet ceremonies, they tend to suppress blood-spilling whenever they receive lowland Lao guests who regard this practice as backwards or barbaric. As Sprenger explains, the suppression of blood spilling in the presence of the Lao visitors is an attempt to mediate and change a hierarchical relationship between the Rmeet and the lowland Laotians within a rapidly transforming social scenario.

The contribution by *Eric Davis* speaks to Sprenger's study by revealing how blood spilling is not suppressed but features as a prominent element of revitalized ritual for ancestral spirits in Cambodia. In Davis' case study, a Cambodian-Chinese spirit medium is possessed by violent and powerful ancestral spirits. The attendants take home a sacred paper in which the ancestral spell is marked with the spirit medium's blood. Davis explains that the monk here becomes the chief exorcist. He argues convincingly that the Chinese hosts of these rituals use them to assert their new freedom to display their Diasporic migrant identity in Cambodia.

Blair Palmer also considers the impact of mobility on contemporary Asian societies by examining patterns of out-migration in a South Sulawesi community, and exploring resulting tensions between traditionalist and modernist Muslims. In South Sulawesi, poor farmers and fishers aim to escape hardship by sailing to the city of Ambon in Maluku. Many have become successful traders and moderately wealthy or at least maintain a vision of becoming wealthy. Migration and new careers in trade have not

only devalued farming back home, but also the spirit beliefs that were closely associated with farming. The new class of traders tie their accomplishments in capitalist petty accumulation to a modernist Islamic revival doctrine, while traditionalist Muslims back home are now associated with poverty and superstition. The farming traditionalists still continue spirit worship in secret, but have quickly fallen to the bottom of the village hierarchy.

Daromir Rudnyckyj discusses an extremely interesting case of Islamic revitalization in Indonesia from above, taking up the example of a 'spiritual training programme' at a steel factory. At the factory, Muslim and Christian employees have had to undergo spiritual development training based on the Quran and the Hadith with the aim of improving their productivity. As Rudnyckyj explains, this spiritual training has replaced the nationalist indoctrination of the Suharto regime, and disciplines the worker's body by subordinating it to a uniform training based on modernist Islam. Spirit beliefs that do not conform to the norms of revivalist Islam are exorcised. Capitalist development in Indonesia hence goes hand in hand with modernist Islamic revitalization.

Islamization from above and the negotiation of Islamic lifestyles in an Islamic nation is also the subject of *Gerhard Hoffstaedter*'s contribution. The success and expansion of the Dawa revitalization movement was appropriated by the Malaysian government, which was engaged in a competition with the Islamic opposition over the question over Islamic piety. In the course of this race, the Malaysian government imposed an increasingly disciplinary and rigid form of Islam on Malaysian Muslims. Hoffsteadter's contribution provides a nice contrast with other, more rural contexts by discussing the tactics of middle-class professionals in Kuala Lumpur. These middle-class professionals endorse a state-proclaimed identity in order to achieve a more stable sense of self-identity for themselves.

In his chapter, *Jovan Maud* takes us to Southern Thailand in order to show how Buddhism, Chinese religions, Brahmanism and folk beliefs blend and are being revitalized through Chinese tourism in the bustling Thai city of Hatyai. As Maud explains, the presence of Chinese tourists is essential to the existence of certain religious practices. The inflow of religious tourists in Hatyai has boosted and led to commoditization of religion. Drawing on a range of religious activities, from Songkran New Year celebrations to the tattoos and amulets of the legendary Buddhist saint Luang Por Thuat, Maud illustrates that local religious practices and cults in Southern Thailand are being stimulated, mainly by tourists from

Penang and Singapore. The saint worship, tattooing and amulet cult has thus become a truly translocal phenomenon, and not merely a local ritual that is witnessed by tourists.

Shaoming Zhou's contribution complements Maud's paper by showing how ritual practice is faring in mainland China, where religious expression is generally still muted more than thirty years after the Cultural Revolution. The paper focuses on the complex ritual traditions upheld by funeral officiators. While funeral rites have experienced a revival throughout China from the 1980s onward, there has also been much adjustment of ritual procedures to changed economic and political realities. Zhou's case study of rural eastern China shows that funeral officiators, who were trained at Confucian academies in much of classical China, have been prominent laypersons in this region. But the 'laypersons' chosen for this role are predominantly village administrative committee members nowadays, rather than members of old elites. Expenditure on funerals is also restricted by state regulations to avoid 'wasteful' status competition, and family participation in ceremonies is curtailed by the state-sanctioned prioritization of work commitments (the "get rich first" doctrine). Ironically, prioritizing the pursuit of prosperity itself also constitutes a revitalization of Confucian values. Furthermore, administrative committee members are not unsympathetic toward tradition and local people effectively reintegrate them into a traditional elite role by inviting them to preside over their families' funeral rites.

References

Horstmann, Alexander (2010) "*Confinement and Mobility: Transnational Ties and Religious Networking among Baptist Karen at the Thailand-Burma border.*" Working Paper, 10–16 Nov. 2010. http://www.mmg.mpg.de/publications/working-papers/2010/wp-10/16.

Keyes, C. & S. Tanabe (2002) *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos.* London and New York: Curzon/Routledge.

Reuter, Thomas A. (2008) *Global Trends in Religion and the Reaffirmation of Hindu Identity in Bali.* Clayton: Monash Asia Institute Press.

—— (2011) "Devastation and Hope in Borneo: Anthropologists' First-Hand Account." *The Conversation*, 23 May 2011. Online: http://theconversation.edu.au/articles/devastation-and-hope-in-borneo-anthropologists-first-hand-account-2118.

—— (2011) "Faith in the Future: Climate change at the World Parliament of Religions, Melbourne 2009." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* (TAJA), 22, 2: 6–11.

Salemink, Oscar, Thomas Hylland Eriksen & Ellen Bal (eds.) (2010) *A World of Insecurity: Anthropological Perspectives of Human Security* (Anthropology, Culture and Society). London: Pluto Press.

Stewart, K. & Harding, S. (1999) "Bad Endings: American Apocalypsis," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28: 285–310.

Stewart, P. & Strathern, A. (eds.) (2000) "Special Issue on Millenarian Movements in Papua New Guinea." *Ethnohistory* 47(1).

Wallace, Anthony F. C. (1956) "Revitalization Movements: Some Theoretical Considerations for their Comparative Study." *American Anthropologist* 58(2): 264–281.

—— (1966) *Religion: An anthropological view*, Random House, New York.

AN ANCIENT TEMPLE AND A NEW KING: REVITALISATION,
RITUAL AND POLITICS IN THE HIGHLANDS OF BALI

Thomas Reuter

A series of extraordinary events culminated in October 2010, with the celebration of an eleven-day 'ritual for the revitalisation of the whole cosmos' (*karya pengurip jagat bali kabeh*) at Bali's most ancient and continuously active spiritual sanctuary—the former state temple Pura Kauripan, high up in the misty highlands of the island. The celebration also constituted a religious and cultural 'revitalisation' in the anthropological sense, because this ritual had not been held in two centuries, and certainly had never been witnessed by anyone alive today. Finally, this extraordinary religious performance also marked an astonishing political revitalisation. The great ritual attracted more than one hundred thousand participants and, more importantly, the scale of the ritual itself—comprising the sacrifice of twelve water buffaloes rather than the usual one—signalled that a new 'king' had come to be associated with this ancient state temple after a lapse of more than six hundred years. Indeed, it was largely by celebrating this high-level ritual that a local resident and member of the temple's congregation managed to install himself as the ruler of the entire regency and former kingdom of Bangli, within which the temple is located. This was made possible in the first place by a political liberalisation and decentralisation of the Indonesian state from 1998 onward, which has brought autonomy to the regions and triggered a tsunami of revitalisation movements that has swept the entire archipelago, including Bali (Reuter 2008a, 2009c). How Pura Kauripan came to regain the character of a state temple by producing a new 'king' makes for a rather interesting tale in itself, and one in which my own research served as the pebble that starts an avalanche. My ultimate aim in this paper, however, is to show how these events shed light on the broader late modern phenomenon of cultural revitalisation, which has become an important trend with the advent of globalisation—not just in Bali and in Indonesia but worldwide.

Revitalisation, as I understand it, is the adaptation and practical reapplication of elements of an established way of life to remedy certain aspects

of a changed situation that are considered undesirable. While this defini-
tion does imply that people like maintaining a sense of continuity and
avoid change because they value much about their own established way
of life, it also suggests that change is welcome to the extent that its effects
are perceived favourably. Most people understand that there is no hope
and no need for recreating the exact conditions of the past. Change is a
part of life. Rather, revitalisation movements arise when people contem-
plate recent change and end up with a sense of being under threat of,
or having suffered already, a great loss, coupled with a sense of having a
reasonably good opportunity to restore what has been lost. This sense of
loss may be unrealistic because we have short memories, and often forget
that what we valued about the past may have come at a cost. The sense
of opportunity too can be unrealistic for similar reasons to do with the
systemic interdependence of different elements of a way of life, which
may make the reapplication of individual elements of a previous set-up
to a new situation quite difficult or impossible, or too costly in terms
of other losses. Social engineering of any kind—be it state-endorsed or
driven by social movements—is plagued by such difficulties, but that does
not mean that revitalisation is a mere pipedream. Rather, it means that
revitalisation always creates more social change, rather than undoing ear-
lier changes. The outcome of such revitalisation experiments is difficult
to predict because deliberate social change is accompanied by numerous
unintended and unexpected consequences, given that perfect knowledge
of a social system is not attainable, even for insiders.

Given that the impact of every social change is uneven, revitalisation—
like every other form of deliberate interference with the dynamic inter-
play of change and continuity in a society—will always have implications
for the distribution of political power, wealth and prestige. Modernisation
and revitalisation both have different effects on different people and even
when the effect is the same it can be interpreted differently—as a posi-
tive change by some people and as a negative one by others. Under what
circumstances then do revitalisation movements arise?

In most cases the revitalisation of local values and practices is aimed
at protecting or regaining local autonomy in situations where change
has been imposed involuntarily by outside forces, such as corporate glo-
balisation or the nation state, usually with a concomitant loss of power,
resources and prestige for most local people. Such conditions make revi-
talisation a popular option. Even then, however, some members of the
local society, most notably the new elites, will tend to oppose revitalisa-
tion efforts because they have collaborated with and benefited from the

imposition of change and from the disenfranchisement of the majority.[1] Others again may have been extremely marginal under the earlier *modus operandum*, and may oppose revitalisation because the new situation has rendered them less underprivileged than they had experienced before. Suffice to say, for the purpose of this paper, that these processes follow some fairly common sense principles but also respond to historical and systemic complexities that are immensely difficult to untangle and appreciate, especially for outsiders—anthropologists included.

What makes the present case study particularly valuable is that much of its multi-layered meaning and complexity happens to be readily comprehensible to me because it is situated at the confluence of the two main branches of my research in Bali over almost twenty years. The first project, which began in 1992 and never really ended, was concerned with the people of the Balinese highlands, commonly referred to as the 'Bali Aga' and seen as indigenous people by other Balinese, who in turn see themselves as descendents of 14th century Javanese conquerors (Reuter 1998 a&b, 1999a&b, 2000, 2002a&b, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2009a). This body of work includes a fairly comprehensive ethnography as well as several articles focused specifically on the politics of representation that reproduces Bali Aga marginality. After an interlude of six years spent exploring Hindu-Kejawen and Islamic revitalisation movements on the neighbouring island of Java (Reuter 2001, 2004 a–c, 2008b, 2010b&c), my attention was drawn back to Bali to study local social change in response to the collapse of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998 (Reuter 2003a) and the Bali bombing of 2002 (Reuter 2003c). A second body of work emerged from this research, which is focused on the rise of a new Hindu Balinese revitalisation movement under the name of Ajeg Bali (Reuter 2008a, 2009b&c, 2010a, 2011) and is informed also by my other work on revitalisation in Java, Kalimantan and elsewhere in Indonesia.[2]

---

[1] In many cases the 'new elite' that arises after a major imposition of societal change is in fact a reconstituted old elite. In Bali, for example, under the Dutch colonial policy of 'self-rule,' many members of the local aristocracy became chief administrators within the colonial regime and, later, of the independent Indonesian state. For some of the weaker kings this alignment with the military might of the Dutch brought about an increase in their local powers, as well as a change in the instruments of power. This could be designated as a kind of elite revitalisation by way of forceful change. I would suggest however, that the term 'revitalisation movement' be reserved for popular movements with broad-based support.

[2] This broader national revitalisation phenomenon is also the subject of a joint research project with Dr Greg Acciaioli, University of Western Australia.

The present paper shows how the political sea change of 1998 and the post-2002 Balinese cultural revitalisation movement have also helped set the scene for an unexpected revitalisation push by the Bali Aga people. This more local revitalisation certainly resonates with the wider Ajeg Bali agenda, but it has a separate history and motive. It reflects an effort by the Bali Aga people to gain political autonomy in addition to the ritual autonomy and unity they had managed to preserve across centuries of southern Balinese domination. As for opportunity, this revitalisation exploits new possibilities arising within the liberal democratic environment of the post-Suharto "*Reformasi*" period. So that the reader may appreciate some of these complex dynamics between local and global events, I will very briefly sum up those findings of the two strands of my research that are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the present case.

A Bali Aga Perspective

Pura Kauripan is part of a large complex of temples set on a hilltop in the village of Sukawana, Kintamani district. The hilltop has been a prominent ritual site from prehistoric times and Kauripan became the state temple of the island's first Hindu kingdoms of the Warmadewa dynasty in the ninth century. Inscribed stone statues of some of these kings, from Udayana (991 AD) to Asta Sura Ratna Bumi Banten (1332 AD), still adorn its inner sanctum. The latter king is most likely the 'evil' King Mayadanawa of Balinese folklore, who was defeated by the founders of a new dynasty of Javanese (Majapahit) origin in the fourteenth century. He was the last 'indigenous' Balinese king who would have considered the newer Pura Kauripan to be his state temple. The newcomer dynasties of Gelgel and, later, Klungkung established a new ritual order pivoted upon the newer Pura Besakih as their paramount state temple. Pura Kahuripan was not abandoned, however, and over the last 622 years the temple reverted to being the ritual hub of social relations of the more than fifty Bali Aga villages who form a large 'ceremonial domain' (*banua*) around it—a kind of 'kingdom without a king.' The *banua* is a social institution that by far predates the first Hindu kingdoms in Bali, was appropriated by them, and outlived their demise. The domain of Pura Kauripan (also known as Pura Penulisan) is but one among several Bali Aga domains and the largest. At present it comprises some fifty villages, and this community of allied villages is referred to as the 'group of eight-hundred' or *gebog domas*. The people of the temple's domain have maintained a sense of common identity as Bali Aga and as
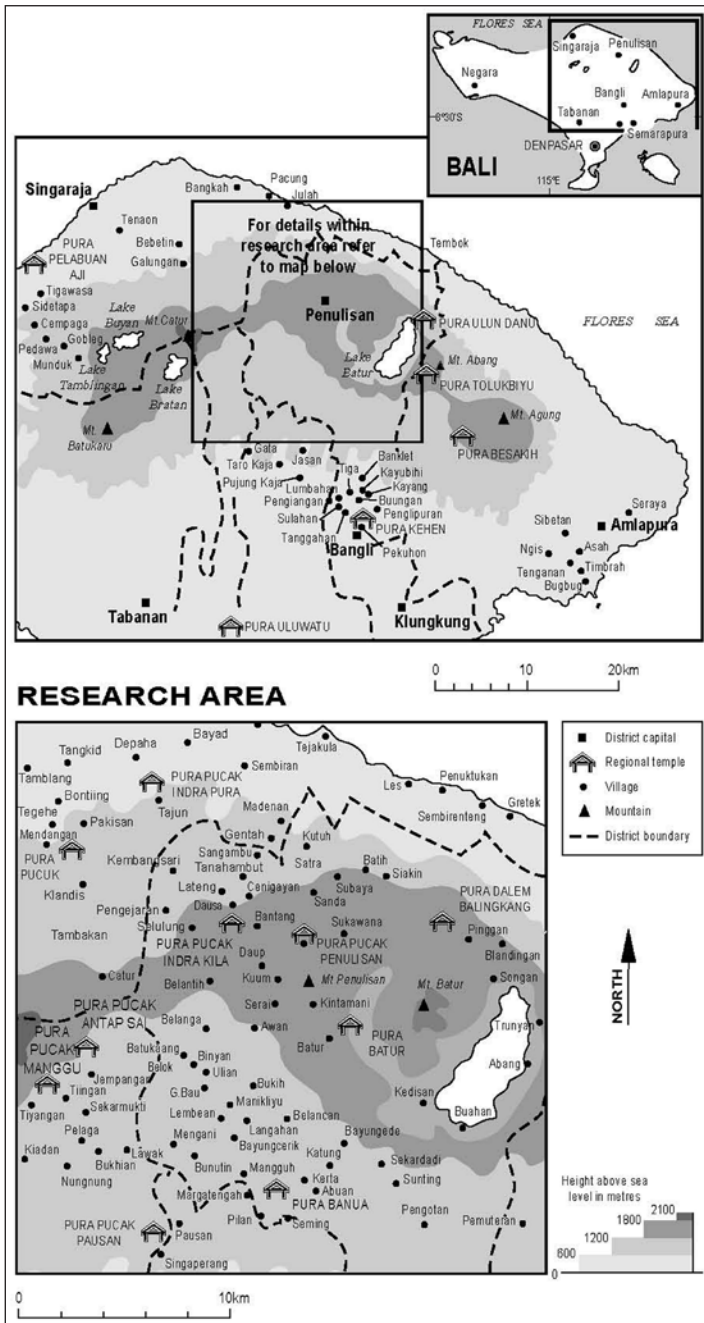
Figure 2.1   Distribution of villages with Bali Aga traditions in contemporary Bali.

heirs of the first Hindu kingdoms. While they have continued to celebrate an annual buffalo sacrifice at the Kauripan temple, the great Pengurip Jagat ritual had lapsed for so long that it was all but forgotten.

While kings belonging to the subsequent Gelgel and Klungkung dynasties of Balinese high kings and their retinues made Pura Besakih their state temple, this does not mean that they completely ignored Pura Kauripan. Some sporadic royal sponsorship of its ritual is reported in oral history and some literature. It is therefore possible that royal sponsorship for the Karya Pangurip Jagat itself has been received from time to time also, perhaps as late as the Klungkung dynasty. More so than the kings of the classical period, these royal sponsors would have been regarded as outsiders for whom the mountains and its people and temples were at best a secondary and probably a rather marginal concern. It is also possible that minor local kings still identified themselves with the temple after the classical dynasties had come to an end, and some of them may have sponsored the great ritual in the interceding period. In any case, I consider it extremely unlikely that the Pengurip Jagat ritual could have been remembered for over six hundred years (following the demise of King Astasura and the Warmadewa dynasty) unless it was celebrated at least sporadically in the meantime, with partial royal sponsorship or without any sponsorship at all. To sum up, while some of Pura Kauripan's aspirations for recognition as a major ritual centre could be maintained in the absence of a king who made it his state temple, it certainly never again served the role of paramount temple to any 'kingdom'—large or small, feudal or democratic—until the events described in this paper.

When I did my research in the highlands in the 1990s, the local community of villages was more than capable of financing the annual ritual and very loath to accept sponsorships for fear of losing control of the temple and its ritual to powerful southern Balinese outsiders. Some donations from modern and traditional political leaders were accepted for temple repairs and other expenses, but without granting any concessions in terms of ritual leadership. Notably, the community and its elders rejected repeated attempts by such sponsors to bring in Brahmana priests (*pedanda*) to celebrate part of the ritual, insisting instead that all ritual power remain with the head elders and traditional priest-leaders (*kubayan*) of Sukawana, the village in whose territory the temple is located.

The simple fact remains that there was never any royal person or, following Indonesian independence, any democratic leader, who was enough of an insider to see the temple as his socio-spiritual home base and to be, in turn, acceptable as a leader to its large Bali Aga congregation. District

heads (*camat*) were outsiders appointed by the Suharto state, and the heads of regencies (*bupati*) were also outsiders and Suharto loyalists because the elections were systematically manipulated by his authoritarian regime. Only well-connected southern Balinese with links to the regime had any hope of being allowed to become a *bupati*. Insofar as Balinese did partake in the power of the state, such participation excluded the Bali Aga people, who were regarded as a backward, low-caste minority. At the most, some Bali Aga people came to share in the power of the state by becoming 'village heads' (*kepala desa dinas*) who, for practical reasons, were nearly always of local origin so as to be able to play a Janus-faced mediating role. All of this changed for the Bali Aga, for all Balinese, and for the nation as a whole when Suharto was removed from office in a peaceful revolution in 1998. In the subsequent "*Reformasi*" period, revitalisation movements sprang up to take advantage of the power vacuum. Before I return to the specific case of spiritual, cultural and political revitalisation around the Kauripan temple, it is therefore necessary to outline briefly the broader contours of revitalisation in Bali and in the national context during this period.

The Ajeg Bali Perspective

Political liberalisation in Indonesia from 1998 onward, has allowed local identities and political aspirations to be expressed in a wide variety of revitalisation movements. One striking example of regional cultural revival movements in Indonesia is a new movement that has emerged in Bali. The movement became known by the name 'Ajeg Bali' which literally means, "Bali should stand tall," in the metaphorical sense of Bali becoming more self-confident in cultural terms and more empowered in economic and political terms.

Ajeg Bali reflects a growing sense of disenfranchisement and a concomitant desire for self-empowerment among Hindu Balinese. Major factors contributing to the rise of the Ajeg Bali movement include: 1) the, at first gradual, and then wholesale, touristification of local culture over the last five decades, 2) increasing economic dependence on a global market due to reliance on cash crop agriculture, handicraft exports and tourism, 3) massive environmental degradation due to rapid economic development, 4) the political liberalisation and decentralisation of the Indonesian state since 1998, 5) the perceived security threat and economic losses after the terrorist bomb attack on Bali in October 2002, 5) fears of a possible

Islamisation of the Indonesian state and, most prominent of all, 6) con-
cern over the massive influx of Muslim labour migrants from the 1980s
onward. Balinese thinking about Islam in general has also been shaped by
the Anglo-American-led global War on Terror, which began in 2001. It is
only against the backdrop of these global and national developments that
Ajeg Bali can be properly understood.

Their participation in a global political economy has been a challenging
experience for many Balinese. The challenges have arisen in an economic
context of mass tourism and in a political context of post-independence
integration into a highly centralistic, authoritarian and predominantly
Muslim nation state. The general response has been a protracted strug-
gle to retain a sense of Balinese uniqueness (*kebalian*). The major recent
changes that triggered the Ajeg Bali movement in particular, however,
have been located mostly at a national level. A significant shift occurred in
the relationship between Bali and the political centre in Jakarta through
a process of political liberalisation and decentralisation, following in the
wake of the collapse of former President Suharto's so-called 'New Order'
regime. Similar to many other regions in Indonesia, Bali has witnessed
ethnic tensions, sweepings, and the formation of militias and a revitalisa-
tion of traditional institutions. Most dramatically of any region, perhaps,
Bali was to feel the impact of political Islam and terrorism.

After the fall of Suharto violent political groups such as the *Front Pem-
bela Islam* and resurfacing elements of the *Darul Islam* movement have
gained a degree of public support (Crouch 1987) and have made their
presence felt, for example, by launching a series of attacks on "un-Islamic"
entertainment venues, churches and Hindu temples (ICG 2002, van Dijk
2002). Islamic paramilitary groups *Laskhar Jihad, Laskhar Jundullah* and
Mujahidin Kompak have fought in civil wars against Christians in Ambon
and Central Sulawesi (Aragon 2000, Bubandt 1991). Larger and more
moderate Islamic organisations gained some political ground by forming
new political parties (Bocquet-Siek & Cribb 1991), but struggled to reign
in resurgent Islamic radicals in their communities. Bali felt the effects
of this failure in October 2002, when bombs planted by Islamic extrem-
ists exploded outside the Sari Club and Paddy's Bar in the popular beach
resort of Legian, killing 202 people, among them many foreigners, and
bringing ruin to the tourism industry (Reuter 2003c).

A small Hindu enclave in a predominantly Muslim Indonesia, feeling
increasingly invaded by Muslim Javanese labour migrants and colonised
by wealthy investors and crony politicians in Jakarta, the Balinese had
begun to react to the threat, as they perceived it then, well before the

bombing, as ethnic tensions with Muslim labour migrants escalated. The Balinese' sense of their own position in the world cannot be understood without considering their experience with international tourism. Cultural tourism has become an integral part of Balinese lives. From the 1970s onward Balinese began to voice a sense of no longer being in control of their own culture, and yet its commodification formed the very backbone of their economy. The most significant social change, however, was a massive inflow of Muslim economic migrants from neighbouring islands who came to work or invest in the tourism industry.

The Ajeg Bali movement took shape in the aftermath of the Bali bombing, as Balinese reflected on what the Gods were telling them by sending this calamity. The term 'Ajeg Bali' was first used at the opening of Bali TV in May 2002, when governor Beratha urged his audience to help make Balinese customs (*adat*) and culture '*ajeg.*' The Ajeg Bali movement was encouraged by a local media magnate, Satria Naradha, who owns a TV station, four radio stations, the newspaper *Bali Post* and the tabloid *Denpost*, and is thus able to determine to a large extent the political agenda in Bali. The *Bali Post* popularised the term *ajeg* when it reported at length on a seminar under the title *Menuju Strategi Ajeg Bali*, 'toward a strategy for a strong and resilient Bali' (16 August 2003). Participants argued that Bali is endangered by a variety of external influences and has to be rescued. Experts in tourism, economics, religion, agriculture, education and the arts voiced a shared concern that uncontrolled tourism development has caused large-scale environmental damage and promoted a hedonistic, materialist attitude at the cost of traditional and religious values, while the influx of thousands of Muslim migrants has led to ethnic tensions and threatened security. A need for spiritual revitalisation was noted and the importance of local wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) and customary institutions stressed. Participants called for an economic and cultural master plan based on Hindu principles. The term 'Ajeg' soon began to appear everywhere; in local gossip, public meetings and on banners. In a new TV talk show called *Ajeg Bali*, public awards are given to "champions of Ajeg Bali" (*Denpost* 5.1.2004), and a competition was held to find the island's most 'upright' teacher or 'Guru Ajeg Bali' by popular SMS vote (*Bali Post* 14.11.2004).

The most serious concern raised under the banner of Ajeg Bali is not the threat of terrorism as such, but a more generalised fear of Islamisation (Reuter 2008a). The movement thus has been anxious to promote political unity among Balinese. There is growing disappointment among Balinese at their treatment by both of the nationalist parties—Golkar

and PDIP—which they have supported, believing that secular nationalism would protect Bali's special status as a Hindu enclave within a predominantly Muslim Indonesia (Bawa 2004:255). Their 'failure to protect Bali' from terrorism led to calls for the establishment of a 'Hindu party' by the head of PHDI Bali and local intellectuals in the newspaper *Denpost* (3.&4.9.2002).

While participants in the Ajeg movement are often explicit in blaming '*globalisasi*' for a decline of individual morality, the collapse of community structures and the painful transformation of local economies, revitalisation movements have flourished in Indonesia as a whole and national factors contributing prominently to this phenomenon need to be considered. Most notably, it was the decentralisation of state authority in the *Reformasi* period that created opportunities for long-frustrated local interests throughout Indonesia to be expressed without fear for the first time. After Regional Autonomy Laws 22 and 25 of 1999 were first implemented in 2001, cultural revitalisation movements throughout the archipelago became active in ways that would not have been tolerated by the previous regime. These movements foreground the rights of long-settled local peoples in the face of incursions by migrants and have actively campaigned against pressures from the centre, whether oriented to Islamisation, developmentalism or other national priorities. From 2001 onward these movements became mainstream and were able to set the political agenda for the new autonomous local governments.

The Ajeg Bali movement, while it has its own history and special features, is thus by no means an isolated or unique case. Similar movements elsewhere in Indonesia and in other parts of the world reveal a general trend towards a new understanding of religious identity. While such movements do evoke the idea of a tradition that is being revitalised after a period of decline, they are very much contemporary and post-modern in their character. The distinctly post-modern feature is that Ajeg Bali and similar movements assert a right for self-determination and autonomy. This entails a rejection of external authority and domination, and an insistence on the uniqueness and independence of the individual community or person, often in the name of 'diversity' as a fundamental value principle.

Within Bali this assertion of the right to be different and autonomous vis-à-vis the nation replicates itself at a regional level, and nowhere more so than among the people of the highlands. The latter have by far the most distinct regional cultural tradition on the island and have maintained a sense of unity and common purpose for centuries, through participation in inter-village ritual networks centred upon major regional temples like

Pura Kauripan. From a Bali Aga perspective, the causes of Ajeg Bali are easily comprehensible and worth supporting because they too see themselves as Hindu Balinese in a national context. In the context of "Propinsi Bali," however, they see themselves somewhat in opposition to southern Balinese, who have not accepted them—either as different in a respectable way or as being the same, and have marginalised them instead. The tale that is at the core of this paper, and which the reader is now in a position to better appreciate, is thus one of revitalisation to the second (or third, or fourth) degree.

Karya Pengurip Jagat Bali: Political and Religious Revitalisation in the Highlands

The title of this paper is of course an allusion to a classic paper by Gregory Bateson (1974), entitled 'An Old Temple and a New Myth,' which was based on his work in the Balinese highland village of Bayung Gede in the 1930s. Bateson's paper describes how the discovery of an old temple led to the creation of a new myth and associated inter-village ritual connections. In the present case, however, it was the rediscovery of an old 'myth' that gave a new meaning to a well-established and ancient temple. The events I am describing are an expression of the same traditional dynamics described by Bateson—at the nexus between sacred sites, narratives of origin and systems of ritual-political association—but they are also indicative of a new dynamic of revitalisation.

My own ethnographic research in the highlands becomes a part of the story at this point. In 1994, I collected and transcribed a large number of hand-written palm leaf manuscripts from the vast private collections held by many of my Bali Aga informants. The aim was to shed further light on the history of the region and also simply to show that the pejorative label of 'illiterate hillbillies' often pasted on the Bali Aga is utterly undeserved. One of the most interesting manuscripts I came across in the process was the Catur Dharma Kelawasan, which was written during the time of the Klungkung dynasty, approximately mid-18th century. While the entire Bali Aga literature project caused some excitement, it was due to the rediscovery of this manuscript that participants in the large and increasingly populous domain of Pura Kauripan began to think differently about the nature of their mutual association.

Most of the texts I collected were written on lontar palm leaves in Balinese script. The durability of the material is quite high but limited, and

they need to be transcribed on fresh palm leaves periodically. This makes it notoriously hard to date and authenticate such texts. Of the Catur Dharma Kelawasan, only a paper copy existed at the time, in the possession of Nang Kaler, then head of the temple committee of Pura Kauripan. This typed paper transcript was made and authenticated by the Ministry of Religion in 1974.[3] The text was nevertheless regarded as having limited validity because the original lontar manuscript, from the village of Bila in the northern regency of Buleleng, had long been lost.[4] A copy—still written on lontar leaf—had reportedly been made by the father of Nang Nata of Banjar Gunting, Sukawana, an ancestor of Nang Kaler from the Bendesa clan, which makes up most of the 'right moiety' (*sibak tengen*) in the council of elders in Sukavana village (2002b). The suspicion was that the 'copy' made by Nang Nata's father could have been his own creation rather than a copy of an authentic original. Since the typed transcript was based on his 'copy,' it too was suspect. As for a motive for making up such a text, this has to do with the fact that the manuscript designates the head of the Pasek Bendesa clan as the ritual leader at Pura Kauripan. This statement does also make sense insofar as the highest ranking elder of the right moiety (the *kubayan mucuk*) is indeed the highest traditional authority in Sukawana, where the temple is located, at least with regard to secular and political matters. However, it is the highest-ranking elder of the left moiety (*kubayan kiwa*) who has precedence in most ritual matters, such as in the act of sacrificing the buffalo at Pura Kauripan. Overall the whole idea of the moiety system is to maintain a balance of power and, given that balance is a process rather than a static state, this always does involve some occasional wrangling over who has pre-eminence in a particular context.

My research dispelled these suspicions and encouraged Nang Kaler to be more forward about discussing the content of the manuscript copy in his possession, because I discovered a second and entirely independent copy in the village of Manikliyu. This text was a segment within a large and evidently authentic lontar leaf manuscript in the collection of Jero Mangku Cidra. The two versions are nearly identical in content, and where they diverge it is clear that one is not a copy of the other because each contains information the other text lacks. In short, they are both

---

[3] The header says: Departemen Agama, Kab Bangli, Nr, Reg. 4403/ 1001, Sheet 34–35; 22. 10 1974.

[4] This account makes sense in view of the fact that the text contains some references to Islam, which had a prominent presence in Buleleng at the time, and until today.

imperfect copies of a more ancient original, which was perhaps the legendary one from Bila.

The manuscripts describe a ten-year cycle of ritual at Pura Kauripan with a succession of buffalo sacrifices, with decreasing numbers of buffaloes; 12, 10, (9,) 8, 7, 6, 5, (4,) 3, 2, and 1.[5] Within living memory only the single-buffalo sacrifice had been celebrated annually, on the fourth full moon of the Balinese calendar.[6] The first and largest, twelve-buffalo ritual is the Pengurip Jagat Bali, and the manuscript states that this ritual needs to be performed in the presence of the king (*ida dalem klungkung*), though most definitely not under his ritual leadership. The text makes it clear that the priest-leaders (*kubayan*) of Sukawana have to undergo eleven stages of priestly initiation and are equal in rank to the high king and to the head elder (*jero gede*) of the nearby Batur temple, with which Kauripan has a close and ancient association leading on to a state of separation and rivalry in more recent centuries. It is the priest-leaders of Sukawana who hold the ritual authority vis-à-vis the king's secular authority, thus forming the kind of encompassing dualistic political cosmology that can be found in traditional societies throughout the Indonesian archipelago and beyond.

Once it became beyond reasonable doubt that the manuscripts describe an authentic past ritual practice that had been all but forgotten and certainly neglected for one or two centuries, questions were raised in village gossip and at ritual gatherings of elders about the possibility, indeed the obligation, to hold this much larger ritual again at some time in the near future. To neglect a ritual obligation, even unknowingly, is considered dangerous in the extreme, bringing down severe retribution from the spirit world (*niskala*) upon all those responsible. The remainder of this story is about the unexpected outcomes of these discussions, which have continued unabated from 1994 until the present, and will continue into the future.

---

[5] The different levels of buffalo sacrifice listed differ across the two versions of the manuscript. While the Manikliyu version includes a four- and eight-buffalo sacrifice, the Bila version does not. Oddly, this means that the Manikliyu version lists eleven levels for a designated "ten-year cycle," while the Bila version lists only nine.

[6] Generally in Bali, and similarly in many other societies in the region, rituals involving the sacrifice of a water buffalo are rituals of the highest level within the class of rituals that are directed exclusively to the celestial Gods (*dewa*) and never to the more malevolent chthonic spirits (*buta kala*). The deity at Pura Kauripan, according to the text, is Ida Bhatara Siwa Sakti (Shiva in 'his' dual, male and female aspect).

The matter first came to a head in 1998 when a delegation from Sukawana visited then Bupati Ladip, regent of the regency (*kabupaten*) and former kingdom (*kerajaan*) of Bangli. Note that Sukawana and most other villages within the domain of Pura Kauripan are located in the mountainous Kintamani district, which is the largest district in the same regency. The delegation presented copies of the manuscript to the regent and requested his cooperation and financial aid toward the fulfilment of this ritual duty, in which he also had a share as the modern-day representative of secular authority. Bupati Ladip agreed to support the revival of the twelve buffalo royal ritual but this never eventuated, at first because he continued to stall and finally because he lost his office after the fall of Suharto. Ladip had of course been a member of Suharto's Golkar party. During the Reformasi period, Golkar—which had achieved results in excess of 100 percent of the vote in previous "elections" (*sic*)—was not disbanded but the party was utterly defeated in a free election. The winning party, PDIP, is the party of Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter from a Balinese mother of Indonesia's founding president Sukarno, whom Suharto had ousted with his military coup. Ladip lost his office. At a village level similar shifts occurred. Families such as the clan of Nang Kaler and the right moiety in Sukawana, who had provided a whole series of *kepala desa dinas* during the Suharto period and were thus necessarily associated with his Golkar party, suffered a similar decline in popularity and political power in the new democratic climate. The village heads who replaced them were all allied to PDIP.

The failure of this first attempt to revitalise the great ritual was met with mixed feelings in Sukawana. There had been reservations anyway, given that Ida Bagus Ladip, a practicing Brahmana priest, was a threat to Bali Aga claims to ritual autonomy—a kind of ritual class enemy. He was also a representative of the hated Suharto state, and it was widely assumed that he had used his support for the ritual revival plan purely as a strategic instrument to improve his popularity and thus maintain his hold on power after the political sea change of 1998, without any genuine spiritual sentiments to match.

Ladip's replacement was I Nengah Arnawa, the vice-president of PDIP Bangli, from the village of Kubu, a suburb of the regency capital (also called Bangli). Arnawa did not become aware of the plan to revive the ritual until after the 1999 election which brought him to power. He did take a very active interest, however, in the lead up to the next election, in 2004, looking to maintain himself in office in a by-then again more competitive environment. He too realised that the temple's massive local

congregation held a latent potential of political power in a democratic environment, but unlike Ladip he could rely on his local party cadres in Kintamani to muster local election support.

The connection with Sukawana and with the domain of Pura Kauripan changed accordingly at this time. Bupati Arnawa was no longer interested in the initial delegation headed by Nang Kaler and in their spiritual agenda. Though they had championed the plan in the first place the group were rarely consulted henceforth, except for copies of the manuscript. Instead efforts began to establish a new network of local political players within the regency based on the PDIP network. At the local level, this prominently included the current government village head (*kepala desa dinas*) of Sukawana together with key elders from the left moiety, allied to the village head through kinship and moiety ties, as well as the new village heads or other PDIP leaders of all the other villages in the temple's domain. In short, the whole plan began to be transformed from a religious revitalisation project to a more comprehensive revitalisation with a predominantly political base, under the auspices of PDIP. The importance of the temple and its ritual order remained central nonetheless, as we shall see.

Members of the new PDIP-based network of local political representatives took up the cause and presented the manuscript not only to Bupati Arnawa but also to the new governor of Bali. Rumour had it that the Bupati was supportive of the plan, but again nothing concrete eventuated, probably because by this stage it had become unclear who had control over the ritual order of the temple and authority to speak for the congregation. Nevertheless, his popularity in the Kintamani district is said to have benefited from the rumours of Arnawa's in-principle agreement to lend support and that this facilitated his re-election in 2004.

Disappointed with the lack of concrete action, another delegation from Sukawana—again from the original group—went to see Arnawa in 2007. This time the request was for the Bupati to give aid for the renovation of the temple instead. This was promptly agreed, a plan was drawn within a week, and the project completed by 2009. Evidently, the renovation was a much less controversial and complicated means to improve the Bupati's standing with the population in Kintamani than the revitalisation of the great royal ritual, for which a suitable "royal person" still had not emerged. As a native of Bangli Town and a southern Balinese, I Nengah Arnawa— though not a high-caste Balinese—was still an outsider from a Bali Aga perspective.

Arnawa may have benefited from this renovation project had he not run into problems of a different kind, to do with the murder of *Radar*

Bali journalist Prabangsa in which his brother was allegedly involved. Arnawa's former deputy, I Made Gianyar, became the new candidate of PDIP for the 2010 election and Arnawa was eventually expelled from the party altogether, in April 2010, after publicly supporting a rival candidate from another party. Born and raised in the village of Bunutin in the Kintamani district, Made Gianyar was instantly recognisable as an insider, thus presenting an opportunity to the temple's congregation to put their own man in power in the big town, and in the regency as a whole. This opportunity was seized immediately. The just completed temple renovations were credited to Gianyar, given that he too was a PDIP representative. In addition, this candidate was to be successfully linked to the temple through the revitalisation of the great ritual.

A momentous gathering of all the village heads of the domain took place at Pura Kauripan in the lead up to the elections. The purpose of the meeting was to form a team for the promotion of Made Gianyar in the election that would also serve as a committee for the realisation of the great twelve-buffalo temple festival. There were a few objectors who did not want to participate in what was obviously a conflation of religious and political forms of association, but most did comply and swore a solemn oath of support. Each participating village appointed nineteen prominent representatives to serve on the festival committee, which added up to a total of 697 members. Made Gianyar in return lent his full support to the festival, and preparations began, amidst much debate about how to do it right. Apart from neglecting a ritual obligation, making a mistake is the next-best way to bring calamity upon oneself, and the re-imagining of this major ritual on the scant basis of the instructions contained in the manuscript was clearly a stressful task. To make matters worse, there were also objectors within the community of Sukawana, among the ritual leaders at Kauripan. Understandably, members of the right moiety and of Nang Kaler's family felt sidelined as control of the temple committee was seized from them by the *kepala desa* of Sukawana and his allies among elders of the left moiety.[7] Some members of this faction also reported being pressured as to how they should vote. Even within the left moiety many

---

[7] As part of this local change of guard, stories were circulated which disputed the origin of Nang Kaler's copy of the Catur Dharma Kelawasan manuscript, with others from the left moiety claiming it was they who had preserved the original through the centuries.

people were frightened of divine retribution, saying that using it as a political instrument had polluted the religious purpose of the ritual. Community cooperation in the organization of the ritual was thus reluctant.

Be that as it may, I Made Gianyar became the new Bupati of Bangli in the election of 4 Mai 2010, though by a very narrow margin. Election statistics show that his success was mainly on account of the very strong support he received from the Kintamani district—that is, from the domain of the temple. With this success, the ritual became a certainty and also something of a victory celebration.

After weeks of preparations, the great buffalo sacrifice took place on 21 October 2010 amidst great excitement, and attended by an enormous crowd. As always, the ritual commenced with a ceremony in which the gods are invited to descend (*ngodal*). This opening ceremony is held before a five-roof pagoda-like shrine (*meru*) located in Sukawana's main village temple (*pura bale agung*). That is always so because the sacred relics that physically represent the Gods of Pura Kauripan are kept in this shrine, inside a steel safe. Among numerous other items, these relics include 1,200-year-old copper plates with royal edicts issued by first kings of the Warmadewa dynasty. Simmering tensions soon became apparent when the combination lock on the steel safe failed to open, probably due to corrosion. This omen was interpreted as a refusal by the Gods to descend for the ritual, and as a rejection of the self-serving motives of its promoters. The latter were not to be denied, however, and after many hours of delay the safe was finally opened, by force, using flame-welding equipment. Gossip soon began to describe this as *ngodal paksa*, or 'forcing [the Gods] to descend,' and as a very dangerous course of action.

Concerns about ritual procedure had already mounted before the ritual began. To begin with, the temple festival of Pura Kauripan always takes place on the fourth full moon (*purnama kapat*), but delays in the construction of a rather fancy hall for a gamelan orchestra inside the temple complex had prompted the organizers to delay the festival until the fifth full moon. This reasoning was widely regarded as flawed. The orchestra hall was seen as a minor consideration, whereas the delay meant that not just this festival but the entire ritual cycle of Sukawana was going to be out of kilter for the rest of the year, with a whole series of ritual events all to be held at the wrong time. The timing also conflicted with the instructions in the Catur Dharma Kelawasan, according to which the correct timing would have been on the fourth full moon in 2012. The several hours of delay in the opening ceremony led on to further problems, because it meant that

the great 'ceremony of presentation [of the offerings to the Gods]' (*ngantep*), which ought to be on the same day as the buffalo sacrifice, could not be held until early the following day. Furthermore, somehow the organizers forgot to place offerings to be consumed by the elders (*malang*) in one of the shrines of the Kauripan complex (namely, the *bale sekulu*).

It may seem petty to the reader that I should list this litany of ritual failures, but it was not at all a petty matter to those concerned. There was clearly a lot of nervousness about getting it right with a ritual that had been neglected for so long and was also exceedingly large and complex. In addition, the failures reflect a lack of popular participation. Normally the expectation is that in religious matters all members of the social body should fulfil their appointed duty without question and in complete harmony, and people almost always do cooperate in a such a manner that it seems almost marvellous to an outside observer. In short, there were misgivings and divisions not commonly experienced in the annual festival.

For centuries the temple had been the hub of a large regional alliance of villages under the purely ritual leadership of Sukawana, a network in which participants asserted their unity spiritually and socially but not so much politically. The introduction of a political motif, and the installation of a new, modern-day king of Bali Aga origin in Bangli was rattling nerves as people weighted up the potential benefits of political power against the potential loss of peaceful solidarity within. Just as they revitalised an ancient ritual, they feared the loss of the (by and large) peaceful togetherness they had experienced within the ceremonial framework of the domain (*banua*) the way it had operated until now. The victory celebration was thus a rather half-hearted one, and even as an observer, I can fully appreciate and recognize these sentiments as well-justified concerns. The unfamiliar element here is simply that what would be classified as social, ethical and psychological concerns in a western country are instead phrased in the language of *niskala*, the spirit world. In my view, that changes nothing when it comes to the facts of the matter.

The festival continued for a total of 11 days and was attended by more than one hundred thousand people from all over Bali, including government delegations from all the regencies, led by Bangli. For all practical purposes the ritual was a success, though for those closest to the temple and its world there remained a sense of unease. On 31 December 2010 this again came to a head. For weeks, the highlands had been pelted by unusually strong wind and premature rain. That night, in a most frightening thunderstorm, just before midnight on New Year's Eve, lightning struck the same pagoda shrine in which the sacred relics are kept and

set it on fire. According to the laws of the spirit world, some said, the fire which was used to break open the steel safe at the opening ceremony was not extinguished, as it should have been, by performing appropriate appeasement and cooling rituals (*bakti guru piduka*, followed by *bakti penyeeb*). Panic ensued, in fear of further calamities. Large numbers of villagers spend the entire night in the temple for days afterwards, to guard the sacred relics temporarily housed nearby, in the upper section of the great pavilion (*bale lantang*).

It is impossible to say what the long-term consequences of these developments will be. As I said at the beginning, revitalisation is not conservative; it is a form of social change, indeed a deliberate and premeditated act of social engineering. All such actions have unintended or 'invisible' (*niskala*) consequences, and anyone in the world who is considering some sort of social engineering would do well to fear and look out for such consequences. On the other hand, it is completely reasonable for the people of highland Bali, and for others like them, to grasp with both hands at any opportunity to gain greater autonomy from outside forces and, hence, opportunities to take charge of shaping their own future. This desire to shape the future lies at the heart of revitalisation efforts of all kinds, and reveals their essentially utopian character.

Concluding Remarks

Indonesia has undergone a great revitalisation as a nation from 1998 onward, shaking off the shackles of 32 years of dictatorship that had started with a CIA-backed military coup in 1966 and left a legacy of predatory development, corruption and dependence on foreign creditors due to massive sovereign debt. The Islamic revival that swept Indonesia during the *Reformasi* period is part of this reform effort to cast aside undue and predatory foreign influence—on a cultural, but also on a political level—so as to create a more autonomous (or 'ajeg') Indonesia (Reuter 2010b). Indonesian nationalists and nationalist parties share these same sentiments, though they may strongly reject the hard edge of Islamic revival and generally have a different perception of what traditions should be revitalised. There is thus some competition over revitalisation at a level of content, but different movements share the basic aspiration to make the nation more autonomous (ibid). In a second layer of revitalisation, at a provincial and ethno-religious level, the Ajeg Bali project seeks to establish a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis a Muslim-majority and an, until recently,

highly oppressive and centralistic nation state. Finally, what is happening in highland Bali is a third layer of revitalisation whereby the people of the highlands seek to extricate themselves from the dominant culture and socio-political hierarchy of Hindu Balinese society. Indeed, the case study of Pura Kauripan really constitutes the fourth level of revitalisation if we also consider how much religious revitalisation has been witnessed all around the world since the end of the Cold War (Reuter 2008a). Indonesia's national struggle to gain autonomy, in part through the mobilising power of cultural revitalisation, is thus not the largest frame of reference but only one example of a global process of 'resistance through revitalisation.' The resistance I am referring to, is aimed at ameliorating some of the undesirable consequences of corporate globalisation and the global injustices this has produced nationally and locally, not just in developing countries but also in the West, as is evidenced by the proliferation of Christian revitalisation movements in the USA, for example. Many of these movements are opposed to a consumer culture that they believe has undermined community and family ties, and has also brought us to the brink of a global environmental disaster. In this sense, revitalisation at a global level is more than just the sum of many national or local movements, but a response to intrinsically global challenges. Many national movements, such as the *Alliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN)*, an Indonesian organization that is itself an alliance of local community revitalisation groups, also have global connections to other organizations of similar kind with whom they share a common ethical and philosophical outlook.

Early studies of revitalisation movements tended to produce negative characterisations based on the assumption that such people are irrational and stuck in the past (e.g. Wallace 1966). First of all, we need to acknowledge that revitalisation is in fact a ubiquitous contemporary phenomenon responding to real and extremely serious and widespread contemporary challenges, such as environmental degradation, economic inequality, external political domination, community breakdown and social isolation. While some of its proponents may at times adopt a reactionary and backward-looking mode of thought, revitalisation is predominantly a forward-looking or utopian project. Most contemporary religious or cultural revitalisation movements can be described as attempts to address injustices and destructive tendencies in the all-pervasive process of corporate globalisation, which is often refracted down to the local level via corrupt, dictatorial or pseudo-democratic nation states whose leaders are 'on the payroll.' This kind of globalisation may have delivered technological

advances and affluence in some cases but also new forms of injustice and human misery, and a consumer capitalist way of life that simply cannot be sustained. At the same time, it is important not to glorify revitalisation movements but to explore under what circumstances some of these movements, or factions within them, may resort to violent political action which can cause harm to innocent others, or damage future prospects for realising the valid causes of the movements themselves.

The multi-layered revitalisation phenomena I have described in this paper are a manifestation of interconnected global and local efforts of resistance, and seek to discredit and dismantle equally interconnected contemporary power structures operating also at multiple levels. Why is this happening? Answers can be found to explain each one of these efforts in its own terms and by its own frame of reference, and such explanations do have considerable merit. Seen as a whole, however, these efforts, at this late modern juncture in world history, reflect a rising global and local awareness of an impending crisis of civilisation, a desire to understand the nature of this crisis, and an attempt to create a better future.

References

Aragon, L. (2000) *Fields of the Lord: Animism, Christian minorities, and state development in Indonesia*. Honolulu: Hawaii UP.

Bateson, Gregory (1970) "An Old Temple and a New Myth," in J. Belo (ed.), *Traditional Balinese Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bawa, Wayan (2004) "Apa yang dimaksud dengan Ajeg Bali," in Cika Putrayasa, Tegah & Mastriaduyani (eds.), Garitan Budaya Nusantara dalam Perspektif Kebinekaan. Jakarta: Peberbit Lokasan.

Bocquet-Siek, Margaret & Cribb, Robert (eds.) (1991) *Islam and the Panca Sila*. Townsville, Qld.: J. Cook Univ., SE Asian Studies Centre.

Bubandt, Nils (1991) *Soa: The organisation of political and social space in the North Moluccas*. University of Melbourne M.A. thesis.

Couteau, J. (2003) "After the Kuta Bombing: In search of the Balinese soul." *Antropologi Indonesia* 70: 41–59.

Crouch, Harold 1987. *The politics of Islam in Southeast Asia*. Bedford Park: Flinders University of South Australia.

Darma Putra, Ny. (2004) "Bali Pascabom: Konfilk, kekerasan dan rekonstruksi identitas budaya seputa Ajeg Bali," in Cika, Putrayasa, Tegah & Mastriaduyani (eds.), Garitan Budaya Nusantara dalam Perspektif Kebinekaan. Jakarta: Penerbit Lokasan.

Dijk, Kees van (2002) A country in despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000. Amsterdam: Koninklijk Instituut Voor de Tropen.

ICG (2002) *Indonesia Briefing*. Report by the International Crisis Group, Jakarta/Brussels, 21. 5. 2002.

Reuter, Thomas A. (1998a) "Houses and Compounds in the Mountains of Bali," in J. Davison (ed.), *Indonesian Heritage: Architecture*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, pp. 38–39.

—— (1998b) "The Ritual Domains of the Mountain Balinese: Regional Alliance and the Idea of a Shared Origin," in J. J. Fox (ed.), *Indonesian Heritage: Religion and Ritual*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet. Pages 82–83.

—— (1998c) "The Banua of Pura Pucak Penulisan: A Ritual Domain in the Highlands of Bali." *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 32 (1): 55–109.

—— (1999a). "Communicating through the Invisible: The Paradox of Association and the Logic of Ritualised Interaction on the Island of Bali" *Anthropological Forum*, 9 (1): 39–63.

—— (1999b) "People of the Mountains—People of the Sea: Negotiating the Local and the Foreign in Bali." In L. H. Connor and R. Rubinstein (eds), *Staying Local in the Global Village: Bali in the Twentieth Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. Pp. 155–180 (incl. 2 photos and map).

—— (2000) "Der Umgang mit dem Fremden auf Bali: Betrachungen zu den Auswirkungen der Globalisierung im Hinblick auf kulturspezifische Interpretationsmodelle," in B. Hauser Schäublin & K. Rieländer (eds), *Bali: Kultur—Tourismus—Umwelt: Die indonesische Ferieninsel im Schnittpunkt lokaler, nationaler und globaler Interessen*. Hamburg: Abera Verlag.

—— (2001) "Great Expectations: Hindu Revival Movements in Java." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12(3): 327–338. Special Issue 13: Beyond Syncretism: Indigenous expressions of world religions.

—— (2002a) *Custodians of the Sacred Mountains: Culture and Society in the Highlands of Bali*. Honolulu: Hawaii University Press. 400 pp. plus index and photos.

—— (2002b) *The House of Our Ancestors: Precedence and Dualism in Highland Balinese Society*. Leiden (Netherlands): KITLV Press.

—— (2003a) *Inequality, Crisis and Social Change in Indonesia: The Muted Worlds of Bali*. T.A. Reuter (ed.). London: Routledge-Curzon Press. With introduction and conclusion by the editor.

—— (2003b) "Mythical Centres and Modern Margins: A Short History of Encounters, Crises, Marginality, and Social Change in Highland Bali," in T. Reuter (ed.) *Inequality, Crisis and Social Change in Indonesia: The Muted Worlds of Bali*. London: Routledge-Curzon Press, pp. 256–304.

—— (2003c) "The Bali Bombing: Understanding the Tragedy Beyond al-Qaeda and Bush's 'War on Terror'." *Inside Indonesia*, 73: 4–5.

—— (2004) "Java's Hindu Revival." *Hinduism Today*. October-December 2004 issue, pp. 52–53. Republished by United Press International, Religion & Spirituality Forum, http://religion.upi.com, 22 March 2005.

—— (2005) *Custodians of the Sacred Mountains: Budaya dan Masyarakat di Pergunungan Bali*. Jakarta: Yayasan Obor. Indonesian translation of Custodians of the Sacred Mountains: Culture and Society in the Highlands of Bali, Honolulu, Hawaii University Press.

—— (2006) "Ritual Domains and Communal Land in the Highlands of Bali," in T. Reuter (ed.), *Sharing the Earth, Carving up the Land: Territorial categories and institutions in the Austronesian world*. Comparative Austronesian Project Monograph Series, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. Canberra: Australian National University Press. Pp. 65–82.

—— (2008a) *Global Trends in Religion and the Reaffirmation of Hindu Identity in Bali*. Clayton: Monash Asia Institute Press.

—— (2008b) *"Reading the Future in Indonesia: Javanese texts of prophesy as a Popular Genre."* 17th ASAA Conference, Monash University, 1–3 July 2008, Conference proceedings. Published online at: http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/mai/asaa/proceedings.php.

—— (2009a) "Origin and Precedence: The Construction and Distribution of Status in the Highlands of Bali," in Michael P. Vischer (ed.), *Precedence: Social Differentiation in the Austronesian World*. Comparative Austronesia Project Series, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. Canberra: ANU E-Press, pp. 13–49.

—— (2009b) (with A. Horstmann) "The Post-Modern Shift." *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 37(6): 853–56. Special issue on 'Reflexive Transformation and Religious Revitalisation: Perspectives from Southeast Asia,' Edited by Thomas Reuter and Alexander Horstmann (Mahidol University).

—— (2009c) "Globalisation and Local Identities: The rise of new ethnic and religious movements in post-Suharto Indonesia" *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 37(6): 857–871. Special issue on 'Reflexive Transformation and Religious Revitalisation: Perspectives from Southeast Asia.' Edited by Thomas Reuter and Alexander Horstmann (University of Passau).

—— (2010a) "Globalisation and Regionalism: The rise of a new cultural movement in Bali, Indonesia, after the 2002 terror attack," in Elizabeth Morrell and Cao, Huhua (eds.), *Regional Minorities and Development in Asia.* Routledge Contemporary Asia Series. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 157–170.

—— (2010b) "Winning Hearts and Minds? Religion and Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia," in Thomas A. Reuter (ed.), *The Return to Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*. Caulfield: Monash University Press.

—— (2010c) "The Time of Madness and the Return of the King: Prophetic Imagination and Societal Change in Indonesia." Refereed proceedings of the conference: "*Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds*," University of Sydney, http://anthroendsofworlds.wordpress.com/.

—— (2011) "Religion in the Age of Globalization: Emerging Trends Illustrated With Indonesian Examples," in Tomlinson, M., W. Smith, & L. Manderson, *Belief Beyond Borders*. Springer Press.

Wallace, A. F. C. (1966) *Religion: An anthropological view*. New York: Random House.

CULTURAL SOLUTIONS TO RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS? THE REVIVAL OF TRADITION IN THE MOLUCCAS, EASTERN INDONESIA*

Birgit Bräuchler

Since the resignation of the authoritarian Suharto regime in May 1998 and the beginning of a vital democratisation process (*reformasi*), Indonesia has been shaken by massive outbursts of violence in various parts of the country (see, for example, Coppel, 2006; Klinken, 2007). Due to an ineffective legal system and the Indonesian government's inability to put together a functioning Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), peace still cannot be restored by legal means or through an official search for truth as is often so prominently promoted in the literature on reconciliation.[1] This applies to the Moluccas as well—an archipelago in the eastern part of Indonesia, where one of the most violent conflicts of the post-Suharto era was fought out, mainly between Christians and Muslims from 1999 to 2003. Thousands died and hundreds of thousands were displaced. Law has not been enforced to the present day to deal with the conflict, only a tiny number of perpetrators or minor masterminds having been convicted to date, and a fact finding team sent by the central government to the region after the official peace talks in Malino (Sulawesi) in 2002 never released the 'truth' they uncovered. Since the Moluccan people had suffered tremendously in all sectors (the economy, education, and in social affairs, etc.), they became increasingly war-weary after 2002 and began to search for their own means of returning to normalcy. Culture and tradition became one of the primary means promoted to build inter-religious bridges and a common Moluccan identity in order to prevent any future divide along religious lines. This chapter discusses the revival or re-strengthening of what Dieter Bartels (1977) has coined 'Nunusaku religion' (centred around

---

[1] The TRC was meant to determine who was behind the mass atrocities of the Suharto regime, but also in the period after this (e.g., in East Timor). For more details on the planned and failed TRC, see contributions by Bräuchler, as well as Sulistiyanto and Setyadi, in Bräuchler (2009c).

the traditional village alliance system called *pela*) as one of those traditional phenomena used as an integrating mechanism; however, it also reflects on the challenges that accompany such a revival for peace.[2]

Culture and Reconciliation

These tendencies in the Moluccas are in line with broader developments on an international scale, where truth commissions and law enforcement, justice and human rights, forgiveness and amnesty often fail as means of reconciliation. This has led to two worldwide trends in which the Moluccan case fits well: (1) the common people affected by mass atrocities are increasingly mobilising traditional institutions or conflict resolution mechanisms for peace and stability in order to compensate for the insufficiency or failure of national and international interventions; and (2) people and organisations involved in developing conflict-solving strategies have started to think about the integration of cultural factors into the reconciliation process. According to Paul Lederach (1997: 94), for instance, "The greatest resource for sustaining peace in the long term is always rooted in the local people and their culture."

The time factor is crucial and an essential prerequisite for reconciliation based on cultural and collective identity transformation. Authors, such as Lederach (1997) and Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004), emphasise that reconciliation, first of all, has to be seen as a process and not a written agreement. Peace treaties, such as the aforementioned government-initiated Malino agreement for the Moluccas, usually fall short of establishing genuine peaceful relations between former adversaries since they involve only the leaders, who negotiated the agreement, whereas the majority of society members may not accept the negotiated compromises. They may help stop the violence and serve as an entry point for other initiatives but they usually fail to touch the root causes and the structural changes necessary to overcome them. They do not involve the society at large and also do not deal with the important process of trust and relationship (re-)building, i.e., the societal healing process, and the cultural dimension of it. The restoration of physical infrastructure is one important side but

---

[2] This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Moluccas between 2002 and 2008. The analyses and interpretations presented are based on observations and interviews in the field, when not indicated otherwise.

the rebuilding of social capital and the sociocultural fabric of a society that have been weakened or even destroyed during the conflict turns out to be much more complex and difficult (compare also Green and Ahmed, 1999: 191).

The revival efforts in the Moluccan context can be interpreted as attempts to build up, reconstruct or reinvent an all-encompassing identity that can integrate the former warring parties. This is especially important in places, where rival groups have to live together again as a single (and peaceful) society. One can also argue that trials or the uncovering of the truth in places such as the Moluccas (or Rwanda or East Timor), where neighbours had been fighting against neighbours, might even be counterproductive, if a certain degree of trust has not been established in advance. Moreover, these mechanisms usually aim for individual justice and maintain or even strengthen the victim-perpetrator divide, whereas the reintegration of the offenders and the restoration of broken relationships—not between individuals, but between the communities they are part of (sometimes including their dead members)—is the main objective in many traditional justice mechanisms (compare also Bräuchler, 2009a; Huyse, 2003: 106). It is important to realise that all communities have "their own cultural frameworks for understanding and addressing the distress they have suffered as a result of war" (Gibbs, 1997: 237).

As Marc Ross (2004) argues—and this will become very evident in the Moluccan case—cultural acts, symbols and rituals can play an important role in intergroup reconciliation.[3] They are typically ingredients in restorative justice processes and are essential for relationship-building and identity transformation. Lisa Schirch (2001: 155) ascribes three functions to rituals in the process of reconciliation: "Rituals can transform people's identities, create new, shared identities for people in conflict, and heal identity wounds that may result from conflict." Reconciliation must be embodied and lived out (Rigby, 2001: 189).

In the Moluccas, the revival of tradition is not only a local means of coping with the past violence, but part of a more common trend in Indonesia and, as outlined above, worldwide (compare also Bräuchler and Widlok, 2007). One of the positive outcomes of the democratisation process in Indonesia was the passing of new autonomy laws in 1999 and 2004. Fiscal and administrative political decentralisation was accompanied by a trend of revitalisation of *adat*—tradition and customary law—and traditional

---

[3] Compare also, e.g., Abu-Nimer et al. (2001: 344) and Ginty (2003: 235).

leadership in many parts of Indonesia, which some observers have called the "rise of the local" (Aspinall and Fealy, 2003: 1–2). On the one hand, this resulted in negative tendencies such as "the upsurge of ethnic chauvinism, local intergroup rivalries, and communal violence" in various parts of Indonesia, but on the other hand, it is the foundation stone for democratisation and, it opens up "new possibilities for seeing the past" (Zurbuchen, 2005: 4,22). In recent publications, such as the volume edited by Davidson and Henley (2007) on *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics*, *adat* is mainly seen as a problem; as something that is instrumentalised by local elites to gain access to resources, achieve power or legitimate conflicts. Only very few authors have reflected on the reconciliatory potential of *adat* and on the grassroots agency for peace.[4] As is shown in the edited volume *Reconciling Indonesia* (Bräuchler, 2009c), which explicitly focuses on reconciliation from below, this is not justified.

Conflict and Peace Initiatives in Maluku

Unlike most other parts of predominantly Muslim Indonesia, the population in the Moluccas (*Maluku* in Indonesian) is approximately 40% Christian and 60% Muslim (2008).[5] In the Central Moluccas, the traditional *pela* system, forming alliances between two or more villages irrespective of their religion, was mainly held responsible for the interreligious harmony for which the area was famous until 1998. That is why most people were taken by surprise when a minor quarrel between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim passenger in Ambon town (capital of the Moluccan province) in January 1999 ended up in a bloody and enduring multidimensional conflict in which society became divided along religious lines—socially and geographically. The official outset of the conflict was 19 January 1999, coinciding with Idul Fitri, the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. By August 1999, it had spread over the whole of the Moluccas and it took until February 2002 when, at least, an official end to the conflict could be achieved by a government-initiated peace meeting (named "Malino II"

---

[4] For some exceptions, see Amirrachman, 2006; International Crisis Group, 2003; Permana, 2002; Rahzen, 2002.

[5] The Moluccan archipelago was sub-divided into the province of Maluku and Maluku Utara (Northern Moluccas) in 1999. If not stated otherwise, I here refer to the province of Maluku. The Christian share used to be higher until the central government started its transmigration policy that brought more and more Muslim outsiders into the area.

after the place in Southern Sulawesi, where it was brokered). However, even after that, and until 2004/2005, there were occasional acts of violence, which were then called 'terrorist acts,' since the population as such was not willing to follow any more and condemned those perpetrators.[6] After years of violent conflict, the Moluccan people are now in search of peace and reconciliation.

Following the outbreak of the Moluccan conflict in January 1999, there have been hundreds of efforts to put an end to the conflict, initiated by religious, *adat*, government or NGO figures. Two days after the outbreak an interreligious team was already built consisting of two Catholics, two Protestants and two Muslims, who tried to open up a dialogue and socialise a peace agenda to the people and the government. On January 23, 1999, a Christian-Muslim NGO called Tirus (Tim Relawan Kemanusiaan untuk Keurusuhan—Humanity Volunteer Team for the Unrests) was founded, concentrating mainly on emergency help and the provision of clothes, food and medicine. Also in early 1999, but on a quite different level, a team called Tim 19 was sent from Jakarta to the Moluccas in order to investigate and stop the conflict. Consisting of high-ranking Christian and Muslim military officers who originated from the Moluccas—men such as Suaidi Marasabessy—this team produced mixed feelings among the population and created further chaos rather than relief. The list could be continued. For a long time, the efforts were without apparent success and were conducted without the support or even against the will of the Moluccan people. The Indonesian government mainly relied on military interventions and declared a civil state of emergency in June 2000. Both measures failed to stop the violence. Taking sides with the warring parties, many of the security forces became involved in the fighting themselves. The visits to the province of the president and vice-president (Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri by that time) also proved to be rather ineffective. Wahid's statement that the Moluccan people should rather try to solve their own problems was certainly not helpful for building faith in the central government's capacity to assist. Law enforcement

---

[6] I can only give a very rough overview here. For a more detailed outline of the conflict and references see Bräuchler (2005). Although the Moluccan conflict was often categorised as a 'religious war,' the actual background and its causes are rather political, economical and geographical. It is very much the result of the developments in Indonesia and the Moluccas over the last two decades. However, as in many other places worldwide, religion served as an ideal means of mobilising the masses for war. Since the factors leading to the conflict and its realisation were quite different in the three regions of the Moluccas (north, central and south-east), I focus on the Central Moluccas in this article.

did not take place at all. Rather, lawlessness ruled the scene. The Moluc-
can people, therefore, had to search for alternative means of coping with
the violence. Although there have been plenty of peace building coopera-
tions between local and international NGOs in the Moluccas, the failure
of the national government to effectively intervene for a long time has led
people in the Moluccas to talk about a peace and reconciliation process
that has been initiated from below (*proses rekonsiliasi lahir dari bawah*).
It came, so to speak, naturally (*cara alami*), when the Moluccan people
became aware (*masyarakat sadar sendiri*) of the disastrous effects of the
conflict on all levels of society and re-strengthened the consciousness of
their culture, their *adat* and their identity (*kesadaran budaya, adat dan jati
diri*). In the end, according to an *adat* elder in Western Seram, it was their
pela gandong[7] culture that brought them back to their senses, enabled the
restoration of broken relationships and turned *Ambon menangiseee* ("Cry-
ing Ambon") back into *Ambon maniseee* ("Sweet Ambon"). It is these local
voices, these local perceptions of how an end of violence and reconcilia-
tion were or are possible, that I am interested in.

   On almost all levels of society, there are high expectations towards *adat*
as a means to sustainably solve the conflict. I can only give some examples
here. At the beginning of the unrest in 1999, we heard local Moluccan
voices appealing to the population to think of their traditions, particularly
pela, and to put an immediate end to the violence and the conflict (Hohe
and Remijsen, 2003; Pannell, 2003: 25–26). The *BakuBae*[8] movement was
founded in 2000/2001 by local Christian and Muslim NGOs and peace
activists from Java and claims to be different from other peace initiatives,
since it mainly tried to invite grassroots people, such as traditional vil-
lage chiefs, religious figures, war leaders, youth leaders, women, refugees,
students and NGOs to its meetings and activities (Malik, 2003a; Malik
et al., 2003). Its focus is to promote the revitalisation of cultural concepts
to foster reconciliation. Analyses and publications such as *Maluku Baru*,
published in 2002 by the Working Group for the Moluccan Problem (Kel-
ompok Kerja Masalah Maluku), mainly consisting of Moluccans living in
Jakarta, argue in a similar direction.

---

[7] Whereas *pela* goes back to an incident in the past, such as war or an accident, after
which a pact was concluded, *gandong* is based on genealogical ties and is, therefore, con-
sidered to be even stronger than *pela* (*gandong* derives from the Indonesian word *kand-
ungan*, meaning 'uterus').
[8] *BakuBae* is an Ambonese term for 'being good to each other,' or, translated more
freely, 'peace.'

In March 2001, a huge peace event was organised by various religious organisations under the motto "National Dialogue on Revitalising Local Culture for Rehabilitation and Development in the Moluccas towards a New Indonesia." More than 1,500 religious, *adat* and government figures were invited, as well as NGO activists, academics, students, business people and jurists from all over the Moluccas.[9] Kei Island in the southeastern Moluccas was deliberately chosen as the venue, since the conflict in the southeastern region had ended after only three months due to the influence of strong *adat* leaders (Laksono, 2002). Nonetheless, there was no tangible outcome or any follow-up from this event.

Various local NGOs (financed and supported by international NGOs) in Ambon town also use *adat* and culture as a strategic means in their peace and reconciliation projects. In a sense, the government initiated Malino II peace event, which resulted in the famous eleven-point peace agreement and put an official end to the Moluccan conflict, at least from a government perspective, also considers respect for tradition as an essential means for peace. Under Point (10) the agreement states: "In order to guarantee correct communication and harmony between the adherents of the various religious denominations in the Moluccas, all forms of religious services and religious display will respect the local diversity and culture."

Even the provincial government of Maluku regards culture as social capital in the legal, sociocultural and educational sector, promoting social anthropological investigations in their Strategic Planning (*Rencana Strategis*, RENSTRA) for the years 2003–2008; "local cultural values" need to be revitalised and "used to further regional development based on local capital" (Pemerintah Daerah Provinsi Maluku, 2004: 125). Moreover, increasing numbers of Moluccan academics from the faculties of law, sociology and anthropology are actively getting involved in identifying 'traditions' that can be revived for peace and as part of the process following the implementation of the new Indonesian law on decentralisation.

In January 2004, Christian and Muslim representatives from the Moluccas were invited to London for a "Maluku Reconciliation and Reconstruction Meeting," organised by the IICORR (International Islamic-Christian Organization for Reconciliation and Reconstruction) and supported by the British parliament. The resulting recommendations focused very much on the revitalisation of *adat* to build interreligious bridges and sustainable

---

[9] See the Crisis Center of the Diocese of Amboina Reports Nos. 146–150, 12–20 March 2001.

peace (see also Hollenstedt, 2004). Out of the many promising recommen-
dations of the London meeting, 'only' the Interfaith Council was put into
action thus far, which also places great emphasis on the cultural dimen-
sion in its reconciliation efforts. For a seminar bringing Moluccan Christian
and Muslim figures and students together for an interreligious post-
conflict dialogue in July 2006 in Ambon, it chose the quite provocative
motto: "Membangun Perdamaian: Belajar dari Kegagalan Agama-Agama,"
that is, "Building up Peace: Learning from the Failure of Religions." The
aim of the workshop was to discuss the experiences of both religious
groups in the conflict, to analyse why religion failed in preventing vio-
lence among the Moluccan people and to investigate whether and how
adat could help to overcome the religious divide.

Also, people from outside the area, such as the International Centre for
Islam and Pluralism (ICIP) in Jakarta, became interested in the reconcili-
ation process in the Moluccas and organised several workshops on local
wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) and peace in Jakarta and Ambon in 2006. On the
local level they worked together with members of the *Lembaga Kajian
Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Maluku* (Study Centre for the Empowerment
of the Moluccan People), who conducted research on local wisdom in the
area. According to them, it is essential to have an *adat* contract, since
there seem to be no other means and regulations to accommodate het-
erogeneity and multiculturalism in the Moluccas (*Perlu ada kontrak adat*,
article in the daily *Ambon Ekspres*, 17.03.2006). Even the media in Ambon,
though they had been very much part of the conflict through their parti-
san reports, now became involved in peace journalism. One strategy has
been to report on *adat* ceremonies, but also to present regular features on
Moluccan history and culture. The daily *Ambon Ekspres*, for instance, had
a series on the history of Central Moluccan villages, including the history
of selected *pela* pacts in 2006.

Pela

The most prominent cultural concept used in this omnipresent debate
is *pela* (for a detailed description, see Bartels, 1977). *Pela* pacts were con-
cluded after incidents, such as wars or accidents, where certain villages
had helped or have been fighting each other. *Pela* partners are not allowed
to marry each other, they are supposed to help each other in times of
crisis and in undertaking large community projects, such as the building
of churches, mosques and schools, and to share food whenever needed.

According to Bartels, for a long time *pela* was the cultic centre, the vehicle of something he calls 'Nunusaku religion'—that is, the ethnic religion of the Ambonese people, which transcends Islam and Christianity and integrates the Central Moluccan population. It is a sacred metaphor for Ambonese society (Bartels, 1977: 310–330).[10] Various external and internal factors led to the gradual degrading of this *pela* system, especially after the 1970s:[11] continuous efforts to purify Moluccan Islam and Christianity from *adat*, influences of globalisation and modernisation, migration to the area, the rise of the Muslims in politics and economics, and the central government's unification endeavours (e.g., the unification of village governments throughout Indonesia). The latter introduced the Javanese concept of an elected village head (*kepala desa*) to the Moluccas and put the traditional hereditary village head, the *raja*, to the side.[12] However, the main reason why *pela* could not prevent the 'religious' war in the Moluccas, according to Bartels (2003), is that *pela* pacts usually function on the village level alone and have little influence on the politics of government, religion, and economy beyond that level. *Pela* only binds two to four villages together, not the whole of the Moluccas. Nevertheless, Moluccans usually emphasise that *pela* partners never attacked each other during times of conflict; yet even so, it was rather difficult to actively help each other. On various occasions I was told stories where people were about to attack a village or a specific location and withdrew from the attacking mob when they realized that a *pela* partner was among the ones to be attacked.

---

[10] With 'Ambonese,' Bartels refers to people living on Ambon Island, Lease and Western Seram. For the history, development and role of *pela* during times of conflict and for reconciliation, see Bartels (2003); I briefly summarise his thoughts in this paragraph. Compare also Pannell, 2003: 25–26. Due to space constraints, I have to omit discussion of other cultural concepts that were (re-)strengthened and (re-)invented in the reconciliation process. See, e.g., Bräuchler, 2007, 2009b, 2010.

[11] Bartels (1977: 325), himself, already warned in the 1970s of a crumbling of the Nunusaku religion which would lead to a direct confrontation between Ambonese Muslims and Christians, not primarily as Ambonese, but as Muslims and Christians first and Ambonese second.

[12] Although the constitutional law assures the various *adat* communities in Indonesia respect and acknowledges their particular customary laws (UUD 1945, Bab VI Pemerintah Daerah, § 18), the government's main objective was to promote an *Indonesian* identity based on the state's *Pancasila* philosophy. One way to do so was the unification of government structures throughout Indonesia that culminated with law No. 5/1979 on Village Government in the unification or javanisation of the village structures by introducing the uniform model of the *desa* as an attempt to regulate people's lives even at the local level. By implementing this law in the 1980s the state was ignoring, delegitimising, marginalising and, not seldomly, destroying local forms of government that were grounded in local traditions, thus causing many problems until today (Fauzi & Zakaria, 2002; Thorburn, 2003).

Figure 3.1   Map of West Seram, Ambon and Lease (Haruku, Saparua, Nusalaut)

Pela became a symbol of brotherhood, reconciliation and peace for the wartorn Central Moluccan society and a lot of public occasions, such as the installation ceremonies of traditional village heads, are currently used to bring *pela* partners together again, especially if they come from different religious backgrounds, and to re-enact the history of the *pela* pact. As Bartels (2003) argues, " 'Pela Gandong' miraculously has become some sort of mythical pact of brotherhood encompassing all Ambonese Moslems and Christians," although it originally only united a very limited number of villages. Another event to reunite *pela* partners that I attended on Ambon was a traditional boat race (*lomba arumbai mangurrebe*), which was revived in 2005. *Pela* partners sit in one boat and compete against other *pela* pacts sitting in other boats. As Ross (2004: 216) emphasised, there is a need for inclusive (new and transformed) symbols and rituals for a successful reconciliation process. All these occasions in the Moluccas are used to symbolically demonstrate that *adat* is more important than religion and that people should remind themselves of their common origin.

In the following section, I will briefly sketch three case studies, where *pela* or *gandong (see Footnote 7)* became an important means to bring the Muslim and the Christian communities together again and take an important step in restoring broken relationships.

Pela Batumerah and Passo[13]

Batumerah is a Muslim neighborhood and an important entry point into the centre of Ambon town (before the conflict, there was a small Christian minority; see Adam, 2009). Passo is a Christian village right at the narrow isthmus of Ambon Island, connecting the Leitimur peninsula with a majority Christian population and the traditionally Muslim-dominated Leihitu peninsula. Both were, thus, occupying very strategic positions and became hot spots in the conflict. Anybody who wanted to reach Ambon town from the north or from the neighbouring islands usually had to pass through Passo and Batumerah. The *raja* (village heads) of Passo and Batumerah—conscious of their strategic roles—very early in the conflict planned to hold an *acara bikin panas pela* ceremony, i.e., a heating-up the *pela* ceremony, in order to revive the pact between their villages and set an example for Christians and Muslims to think of their common roots. Unfortunately, this never realised, since it coincided with the influx of external *jihad* fighters that heated up the conflict again. Nevertheless, the two *raja* tried to remain in contact despite the difficult situation, exchange information on the conflict dynamics and kept on initiating and joining interreligious meetings; although during the high tides of the conflict this was only possible on a warship provided by the Indonesian military. As soon as the situation was conducive and Batumerah people started to renovate one of their mosques, Passo met its obligations as a *pela* partner and delivered the sand (*pasir*) needed for the construction. The biggest reunion in the post-conflict era took place at the occasion of the installation ceremony of a new *raja* in Batumerah (*acara pelantikan raja*) in July 2006. Passo as a *pela* partner was invited and was also involved in setting-up the event. On this day, the history of the pact was retold and also re-enacted by child actors from both places: in 1506, an outrigger from Passo was on its way back from the north, where it had paid tribute (tax) to the Sultan of Ternate, and capsized. A Batumerah outrigger was close by and willingly helped, rescued the Passo people and shared their food with them. On the island that was closest by (Buru), a *pela* pact was concluded and an oath taken that forbids them to marry or to be hostile

---

[13] This section is based on interviews I conducted with the *raja* of Batumerah and Passo, several *adat* figures and common people, and my participation in the installation ceremony.

to each other and that obliges them to help each other whenever necessary. The re-enactment ceremony in 2006 was attended by hundreds of people from all levels of society (government, security forces, religious and *adat* figures, media representatives, and common people) and, thus, had a huge impact.

Gandong Tulehu and Hulaliu[14]

Whereas before the conflict *gandong* was often depicted as one version of *pela*, i.e., *pela gandong* (compare Bartels, 1977), after the conflict it became very important for Moluccan people to differentiate, since *gandong* is considered to be even stronger than *pela*. Muslim Tulehu, an important harbour and trade hub on the east coast of Ambon Island, lost its status and suffered greatly during the conflict. All Christians who used to pass through Tulehu on their way to the neighbouring islands (Seram and Lease, the latter with a Christian majority), or back from there to Ambon, did not dare to enter Muslim territory anymore. Hulaliu is a Christian village on the neighbouring island of Haruku and *gandong* with Muslim Tulehu. In 2002, Hulaliu, together with its Muslim neighbour villages on Haruku, with whom it forms the traditional Hatuhaha union, wanted to undertake a peace march to Ambon town, via Tulehu. By that time, it was still considered impossible for Christians to cross Muslim territory (and vice versa) and Muslim outsiders in Tulehu were about to prevent the Hulaliu people from passing. Nevertheless, through the intervention of its Muslim brothers from Haruku and Tulehu, they were finally allowed to pass. For economical reasons, the *raja* of Tulehu was very keen to stop the violence and foster reconciliation (which was not an easy task, since the big neighbouring Christian village of Waai had been wiped out during the conflict). After some initial attempts in 2002, he used his installation ceremony in 2003—that he describes as even bigger and more sacred (*lebih sakral*) than the Batumerah one—to invite Moluccan *raja* and its Christian *pela* and *gandong* partners, who were even picked up from their homes by Tulehu people, in order to sustainably solve the conflict in an *adat* way (*cara adat*) and to make Christian fishing boats enter the harbour of Tulehu again. More than 4,000 people had attended; among them

---

[14] This section is based on interviews and research I conducted in Tulehu, Hulaliu, their neighbouring villages and in other places on Ambon, Lease and Seram.
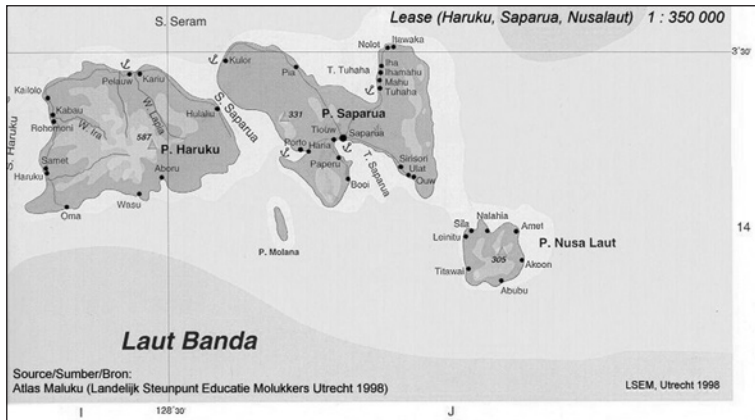
Figure 3.2   Map of Lease (Haruku, Saparua, Nusalaut)

more then 100 from Hulaliu and more than 150 from another Christian *gandong* village of Tulehu (Paperu). Since then, the Tulehu passage has been open again. Later that year, Hulaliu invited Tulehu to the installation ceremony of its raja, where it was the task of Tulehu to provide the cows needed for the ceremonial meal and to organise the reception.

Gandong Booi, Aboru, Kariu and Hualoi (BAKH)[15]

My last example deals with the *gandong* of four villages: Booi (Christian) on Saparua, Aboru (Christian) on southern Haruku, Kariu (Christian) on northern Haruku, and Hualoi (Muslim) on the south coast of Seram. This *gandong* goes back to four brothers that once lived on the mythical mountain of Seram, Nunusaku, and then had to migrate and finally settled in these places.[16] Kariu met a tragic fate in the recent conflicts. In February 1999, the whole village was razed to the ground by its Muslim neighbours and other *jihad* fighters from outside, and the whole population had to flee. Some Kariu people fled to Christian Hulaliu; some, who had family in town, to Ambon; but the majority to its *gandong* partner Aboru.[17] Muslim

---

[15] This section is based on my long-term engagement with the Kariu case.

[16] For one version of the BAKH myth, see Bartels (1977: 105–112).

[17] That times were exceptional and things often got out of hand can also be seen in the fact that there were some Kariu-Aboru marriages, which would be, under normal circumstances, strictly forbidden.

Hualoi did not join its co-religionists in expelling Kariu, but could also not prevent them from attacking. Nevertheless, Hualoi managed to get some help to the Kariu people in Aboru in the form of food and clothes (pressured by the Aboru people, Kariu had to reject the gift though). The destruction of Kariu was one of the triggers that got Hualoi to block the Trans-Seram Highway, the most important transport link between the western and eastern part of Seram. This was meant to prevent any further clashes between Christians and Muslims, but also hindered people from getting to the regional capital of Masohi on Seram, which, again, undermined economic development. When the situation in the Moluccas became more conducive again in 2003, it was the BAKH villages, slowly starting to visit each other again, that contributed to the re-opening of the Highway. In 2004, Christian and Muslim visitors found no hindrance anymore when they were invited to join the *raja* inauguration ceremony in Hualoi. Hualoi, as oldest brother in the BAKH *gandong*, also played an important role in the repatriation ceremony of Kariu in 2005, thus setting an important sign for other Muslims.[18]

These three case studies are concrete examples of where traditional alliance systems and genealogical ties were not able to prevent violence, but made important contributions to the restoration of relationships between Christians and Muslims—an essential step towards reconciliation in the Moluccas. The importance and significance of these cases can only be appreciated when one recalls the scale of violence and the rigor with which people were divided along religious lines without exception.

Revival and Reconciliation: Contradictions, Challenges and Prospects

Adat, culture and tradition became not only symbols for peace and reconciliation, but at the same time the manifestation of the Moluccan people's pride in their own locality and history, and the dissolution of oppression through the world religions, the central government and other malign influences from the outside. This also provides a way to interpret the conflict by blaming people from outside the Moluccas to be the *agents provocateur* who brought disaster to the islands.[19] In this situation, the

---

[18] For a more detailed description of the repatriation ceremony of Kariu, see Bräuchler (2009b).

[19] This is supported by instrumentalist theories as advocated by G. J. Aditjondro (2001) and Tamrin Tomagola (2000). These authors claim that the Moluccan conflict was

"language of culture," as Ichsan Malik (2003b: 21) calls it, is more apt to create peace than the language of politics or economy. This emerging symbolism also seems to be the reason why people in the Moluccas changed their attitude towards the length of the conflict: Whereas before they usually asked themselves why the conflict was going on for such a long time, a lot of people now seem to ask why the conflict in the Moluccas was terminated rather quickly compared with other conflicts, where religion is used as an excuse for war, such as in Northern Ireland or in Israel. The answer is: *adat*. It has become a common saying in post-conflict Maluku that now *adat*—in particular, *pela* and *gandong*—is stronger and sweeter (*lebih kuat dan lebih manis*) than ever before. One of my friends in Ambon recently overheard a conversation on the street where people were actually talking about *agama pela gandong*, a *pela gandong* religion, which would come very close to Bartels' idea of the Nunusaku religion. It is obvious that the Moluccan people try not to emphasise the bitter experience of the conflict any more, but rather the positive side of it.

To some critical readers this must seem to be a rather idealised image and might raise doubts and questions. I will try to address some of them in the following section by voicing a couple of critical comments about elitism, exclusivism and an alleged *adat*-religion opposition involved in the revival movement that should warn us against a rash identification of *adat* with harmony and peace. The first question has to do with who actually initiates these efforts to strengthen or revive dormant traditions. Who is behind them and who supports them? As we have seen in our case studies, *raja* often play a central role; in the BAKH case, an organisation of Kariu people based in Ambon was heavily involved in organising the repatriation ceremony; the government acted as the facilitator in some cases; and NGOs provided funds for installation ceremonies or facilitated the conduct of certain ceremonies. Do these figures act in the name of the people? While some might argue that the revival process gives expression to the social capital of the people, others might interpret it as an elitist construction. There is no easy solution to that. As mentioned before, there have been plenty of cases in the more general return-to-*adat* movement in Indonesia, where *adat* has been misused by individuals to gain access

---

engineered by the Indonesian military in collaboration with members or supporters of the former New Order Government, who tried to mobilise people through the instrumentalisation of ethnic, religious and separatist issues. To the contrary, authors like Dieter Bartels (2003) and Gerry van Klinken (2001) are looking at the internal factors that might have led to the violence.

to resources and individual power. Nevertheless, one cannot lump every-
thing together. There were many common people among those I talked
to in the Moluccas and during my several stays I also got an impression
of the significance of certain initiatives. Although there were also some
critical voices, all of the above examples were mentioned as positive ones
by people directly involved and by those who were only watching. Only
through an in-depth analysis of each individual case, through listening to
the people's narratives, taking into account all levels of actors (and pas-
sive recipients) and of their sociocultural context, can we try to make a
judgement.

The second point we have to think about is that, although a focus on the
grassroots is of essential importance, a certain leadership is nonetheless
often required to mobilise the masses. According to Bar-Tal and Bennink
(2004: 28), this could be "prominent figures in ethnic, religious, economic,
academic, intellectual, and humanitarian circles" and it should include
leaders on different levels. What is important for any successful reconcili-
ation process is that it must proceed in a top-down and bottom-up man-
ner simultaneously, independent of who initiated the process—whether
they be leaders or people at the grassroots. Leaders are essential for the
negotiation process, while a mobilisation of the masses is required for a
psychological change to take place in the society as a whole (Bar-Tal and
Bennink, 2004). In the Moluccas, the people themselves often do not dare
to take initiative: that is where facilitators have to come in. Prerequisites
include proper co-operation and the exchange of ideas. This is not easy to
achieve and many of the well-meaning reconciliation efforts, listed earlier,
had little effect and no follow-up.

Another issue that has not been addressed thus far is the potential
exclusionism arising out of the *adat* revival process. In the reconcilia-
tion process, *adat* is mainly referred to as an integrative force or as glue
(*perekat*). However, one might ask whom these people are uniting against?
As Putnam (2000) argues, inclusive identities usually imply the exclusion
of others—what he identified as the dark side of *bonding* social capital. In
the case of *pela*, the question arises: against whom do these villages unite?
It is not only an integrative force, but an exclusivist one at the same time;
and this is what Hohe and Remijsen (2003) had in mind when they were
warning that *pela* might help to prevent conflict, but that it might also be
used to foster conflict. If we look at the history of *pela*, many of these pacts
were concluded as a result of war, either in order to end hostilies or to
celebrate the victory of partners (that conclude the pact) against a com-
mon enemy. One could also interpret the competitive boat race between

groups of *pela* partners described above that way: such a race could be seen as an act of war and rather hinder reconciliation.[20] This is not just an outsider's reading though. This flavour of war (*perang*) attached to the *pela* concept is one of the reasons why many people in the Moluccas nowadays are so strict when it comes to differentiating between *pela* and *gandong* (see above).

Related to the question of exclusionism is the fact that large parts of Moluccan society, especially in the urban context and in migration areas, are not homogeneous at all. It has to be addressed how people coming from outside the respective *adat* systems, and thus being neither based in the cultural, nor the genealogical structure, can be integrated within it.[21] Batumerah is a perfect example. Although it is the only district in Ambon town that was officially (re-)granted the status of an *adat* village (following the new decentralisation law of 2004), the majority of its population are migrants who are not part of the local *adat* system. What do they think about the current revival trend? Both 'native' and 'migrant' people told me that it is actually no problem since the motivation of the migrants is to make a living, and is thus territorial and not ideational. However, others felt quite overrun, especially by the fact that, in villages that are now declared as *adat* villages, genealogical principles again replace democratic election principles when it comes to appointing the village heads. Future research needs to turn its attention to this problem particularly.

The third and last critical issue I will address is the *adat*-religion opposition. Religious segregation has been inscribed in the Moluccan geography and settlement structure for a very long time but it was immensely reinforced through the conflict, which further inscribed religious segregation into people's minds. In the post-conflict situation, *adat* is now sought out as one 'neutral' means to overcome the religious divide. However, the construction of a seeming opposition between *adat* and religion would rather contradict the situation in the Moluccas, where there is a high interlinkage if not merging between *adat* and religion, especially with Islam.[22] Moreover, it is not a realistic vision that the Moluccans will return to the old *adat* system, leaving religion out of the game. Christianity and Islam are, by far, too important in the Moluccans' lives by now. As

---

[20] I thank Tanja Hohe for this comment.

[21] This was explicitly problematised by the mayor of Ambon town, Yop Papilaya, in his speech on the occasion of the installation ceremony of the *raja* in Batumerah on 22 July 2006.

[22] See, e.g., Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann, 1988; Chauvel, 1980; Cooley, 1961.

Bartels (2003) has put it: "The traditional belief system has been mortally wounded. It is highly doubtful that the clock can be turned back. The wisdom of the ancestors has lost out to the teachings of Mohammed and Jesus and those people in the villages who benefited from the destruction of the *adat* structure are unlikely to pull out their stakes." Nevertheless, as outlined above, there is a rising tendency to revitalise certain aspects of *adat*. Some religious figures are very cautious about what this might bring along with it. In the long run, I would argue, it is not helpful to use religion as a scapegoat and not enough to promote local wisdom. What is necessary, however, is that the monotheistic religions in the Moluccas open up themselves to these new developments and cooperate with *adat* figures in order to prevent any conflict from happening in the future. An inter-religious dialogue has to be actively promoted and the passive tolerance between the two religious communities that existed before the conflict has to be transformed into an active understanding of each other's faith.

One Possible Way Out and Some Concluding Remarks

One remedy for the shortcomings of *adat* and its partly exclusivist character suggested by several authors and local activists, is social engineering—that is, a conscious attempt to adapt and develop the current *adat* system so that it becomes capable of integrating all Moluccans and providing a proper basis for peace. The Ambonese M. G. Ohorella (1999), for instance, suggests that *pela* has to be adjusted to modern circumstances. In order to encompass the whole Moluccan society, the *pela* system has to be broadened in order to integrate more villages and it has to be transferred to a higher level, in order to create pacts between districts, thus automatically integrating all Moluccan villages. This way, Ohorella hopes, the *pela* values of brotherhood and mutual help in times of crisis can be transferred to all aspects of Moluccan society: the social, cultural, educational, religious, economical, political, governmental and the security sectors. Yet a decade after he wrote this manuscript, there are still no signs that something like a generalised, all-encompassing *pela* will evolve.

According to Bartels, Ohorella's concept does not go far enough and is still too fragmented. What he is suggesting is the "conclusion of an all-encompassing grand 'Pela Gandong' between all Ambonese Moslems and Christians" that will restore harmony and "symbolically seal what-ever will be agreed on to normalise the relationship" (Bartels, 2003). As Bartels argues, this might be a realistic vision since, in the post-conflict

phase, it was the concept of *pela* as a Muslim-Christian brotherhood (as expressed in the Nunusaku religion) that was more important than the actual pacts; moreover, *pela* always proved to be a flexible concept. *Pela* pacts evolved over the centuries due to the changing social and political circumstances of the times. Why should they not be able to integrate non-Moluccans who are already residents in the area? This could then turn, in order to return to Putnam's theory, bonding into bridging social capital that is "outward looking and encompass[es] people across diverse social cleavages" (Lövheim and Linderman, 2005: 123–124). According to one of the initiators of the repatriation ceremony of Kariu village though, the time is not yet ripe for the implementation of such ideas. For me, one of the pressing questions for the future is: who is taking the initiative in these changes and who claims to represent whom? Who will become the agents for cultural change?

Even if Ohorella's and Bartels' visions may be too ambitious, endeavours to rethink and re-imagine cultural concepts seem to be recognised among academics as a legitimate means of promoting a cultural solution to societal conflicts. Kevin Avruch, for instance, states that culture needs to be not only analysed and understood by activists for the purpose of conflict resolution, but rethought, revised, and re-imagined (or re-engineered) as well (Askandar, 2006: 4–5; Avruch, 1998: 20–21). Social anthropologists always tend to challenge static concepts of tradition and the opposition of tradition and modernity and preach the flexibility and the adaptability of culture. Customary laws in general only survive due to their dynamic and adaptive character. Even the *raja* in a big reconciliation meeting in Ambon in January 2003 stated in reply to accusations of being too nostalgic (*romantisme sejarah*): "*Adat* is nothing static and rigid (*statis dan kaku*). To the contrary, *adat* is flexible and dynamic (*elastis dan dinamis*)...and democratic principles are actually rooted in Moluccan *adat*" (Gerakan BakuBae Maluku et al., 2003: 2–3). The Moluccans in the Netherlands are a living example for that. Like them, Moluccans at home will have to "engage in a continuous process of reinventing *adat* to reflect contemporary socio-political reality" (Bartels, 2003). According to Mary Zurbuchen (2005: 8), social memory can be wholly engineered at moments when societies change direction. Changes are, therefore, very likely to occur among Moluccans, who were shaken by a long-lasting violent conflict and are also the 'beneficiaries' of the central government's new and rather radical decentralisation policy.

While the revival of tradition could be an effective means of mobilising the masses for peace, to promote integration and restore societal relations,

we definitely have to look at it carefully and try to handle it in a balanced way. Shortcomings, such as exclusionism and elitism, have to be taken into account and we have to be aware that this can only be one important step in the broader process of peace building and reconciliation that, in the end, also has to deal with issues of justice, reparations, refugees, economic and educational recovery, and structural changes needed to overcome some of the underlying causes of the conflict. I think the Moluccans are in a good starting position, since the majority of them, Christians, as well as Muslims, were both victims and perpetrators at the same time. They were pulled into the conflict and were, themselves, not the wirepullers in the conflict machinery, who supposedly came mainly from the outside. This increases the chances that "local wisdom" and the "spirit of brotherhood" can overcome religious differences and prevent conflict escalation in the future (Amirrachman, 2006). However, we cannot stop at this point as the arising problems and contradictions I discussed give expression to the complexity of both the revival and the reconciliation process.

References

Abu-Nimer, M., Said, A. A. and Prelis, L. S. (2001) "Conclusion: The Long Road to Reconciliation," in Abu-Nimer, M. (ed.) *Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, Pp. 339–348.

Adam, J. (2009) "The problem of going home: land management, displacement, and reconciliation in Ambon," in Bräuchler, B. (ed.), *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*. London: Routledge, Pp. 138–154.

Aditjondro, G. J. (2001) "Guns, Pamphlets and Handie-Talkies: How the military exploited local ethno-religious tensions in Maluku to preserve their political and economic privileges," in Wessel, I. and Wimhöfer, G. (eds) *Violence in Indonesia*. Hamburg: Abera-Verlag, Pp. 100–128.

Amirrachman, A. (2006) "Local Wisdom Prevents Conflict Escalation." *The Jakarta Post* Opinion and Editorial, 20 March 2006.

Askandar, K. (2006) "The Role of Cultures and Religions in Promoting Peace." Paper presented to the International Workshop of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP) "Promoting Peace: The Role of Peace Cultures and Local Wisdoms." Jakarta-Depok, 25–27 April 2006.

Aspinall, E. and Fealy, G. (2003) "Introduction: Decentralisation, Democratisation and the Rise of the Local," in Aspinall, E. and Fealy, G. (eds) *Local Power and Politics in Indonesia: Decentralisation and Democratisation*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Pp. 1–11.

Avruch, K. (1998) *Culture and Conflict Resolution*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Bar-Tal, D. and Bennink, G. H. (2004) "The Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process," in Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. (ed.) *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Pp. 11–38.

Bartels, D. (1977) *Guarding the Invisible Mountain: Intervillage Alliances, Religious Syncretism and Ethnic Identity Among Ambonese Christians and Moslems in the Moluccas*. Ithaca: Cornell University.

—— (2003) "Your God Is No Longer Mine: Moslem-Christian Fratricide in the Central Moluccas (Indonesia) After a Half-Millennium of Tolerant Co-Existence and Ethnic Unity," in Pannell, S. (ed.) *A State of Emergency: Violence, Society and the State in Eastern Indonesia*. Darwin: Northern Territory University Press, Pp. 128–153. Available at: http://www.nunusaku.com/03_publications/articles/yourgod.html [accessed: 8 September 2006].

Benda-Beckmann, F. and Benda-Beckmann, K. von (1988) "Adat and Religion in Minangkabau and Ambon," in Claessen, H. J. M. and Moyer, D. S. (eds) *Time Past, Time Present, Time Future: Perspectives on Indonesian Culture*. Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 131. Leiden: KITLV Press, Pp. 195–212.

Bräuchler, B. (2005) *Cyberidentities at War: Der Molukkenkonflikt im Internet*. Bielefeld: transcript.

—— (2007) "Ein Comeback der Tradition? Die Revitalisierung von Adat in Ostindonesien (A Comeback of Tradition? The Revitalisation of Adat in Eastern Indonesia)." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 132 (Special issue "Die Revitalisierung von Tradition (The Revitalisation of Tradition)"): 37–57.

—— (2009a) "Introduction: Reconciling Indonesia," in Bräuchler, B. (ed.) *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*. London: Routledge, Pp. 3–33.

—— (2009b) "Mobilising culture and tradition for peace: Reconciliation in the Moluccas," in Bräuchler, B. (ed.) *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*. London: Routledge, Pp. 97–118.

—— (ed.) (2009c) *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*. London: Routledge.

—— (2010) The Revival Dilemma: Reflections on Human Rights, Self-Determination and Legal Pluralism in Eastern Indonesia. *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 62: 1–42.

Bräuchler, B. and Widlok, T. (eds) (2007) "Die Revitalisierung von Tradition (The Revitalisation of Tradition)." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (Special Issue) 132.

Chauvel, R. (1980) "Ambon's Other Half: Some Preliminary Observations on Ambonese Moslem Society and History." *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 14(1): 40–80.

Cooley, F. L. (1961) "Altar and Throne in Central Moluccan Societies: A study of the relationship between the institutions of religion and the institutions of local society undergoing rapid social change." Dissertation. Faculty of the Department of Religion, Yale University.

Coppel, C. A. (ed.) (2006) *Violent Conflicts in Indonesia: Analysis, Representation, Resolution*. London: Routledge.

Davidson, J. S. and Henley, D. (eds) (2007) *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics: The Deployment of Adat from Colonialism to Indigenism*. London: Routledge.

Fauzi, Noer and Zakaria, R. Yando (2002) Democratizing Decentralization: Local Initiatives from Indonesia. Paper presented to the 9th Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of Common Property, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. Available at: http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/archive/00000818/01/fauzin170502.pdf [accessed: 7 November 2005].

Gerakan BakuBae Maluku, Universitas Pattimura, Yayasan Kemala and Yayasan Tifa (2003) "Berpijak di Atas Bumi Kultural Menata Masa Depan Maluku. Sebuah Paparan Hasil Musyawarah Raja/Latupati di Maluku untuk Resolusi Konflik dan Menata Masa Depan Maluku." Kampus Universitas Pattimura, 9–11 Januari 2003. Jakarta.

Gibbs, S. (1997) "Postwar Social Reconstruction in Mozambique: Reframing Children's Experiences of Trauma and Healing," in Kumar, K. (ed.) *Rebuilding Societies After Civil War: Critical Roles for International Assistance*. London and Boulder: Lynne Rienner, Pp. 227–238.

Ginty, R. M. (2003) "The Role of Symbols in Peacemaking," in Darby, J. and Ginty, R. M. (eds) *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, Pp. 235–244.

Green, R. H. and Ahmed, I. I. (1999) "Rehabilitation, Sustainable Peace and Development: Towards Reconceptualisation." *Third World Quarterly* 20(1): 189–206.

Hohe, T. and Remijsen, B. (2003) "Peacemaker for Religious Conflicts? The Value of Pela Relationships in Ambon," in Ramstedt, M. (ed.) *Hinduism in Modern Indonesia: Hindu Dharma Indonesia between Local, National, and Global Interests*. London: Routledge, Pp. 126–143.

Hollenstedt, N. van (2004) "Internationaal spotlight op Maluku: Terugblik op conferenties in Duitsland en Engeland." *Marinjo* April/May 2004: 26–27.

Huyse, L. (2003) "Justice," in Bloomfield, D., Barnes, T. and Huyse, L. (eds) *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electrocal Assistance (IDEA), Pp. 97–115.

International Crisis Group (ICG) (2003) "Indonesia: Managing Decentralisation and Conflict in South Sulawesi." *Asia Report* No. 60. Jakarta/Brussels: ICG.

Klinken, G. van (2001) "The Maluku Wars: Bringing Society Back In." *Indonesia* 71 (April): 1–26.

—— (2007) *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small Town Wars*. Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series No. 15. London and New York: Routledge.

Laksono, P. M. (2002) "We are all one: How custom overcame religious rivalry in Southeast Maluku." *Inside Indonesia* 70: 7–8. Available at: http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit70/Laksono1.htm [accessed: 20 September 2004].

Lederach, J. P. (1997) *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Lövheim, M. and Linderman, A. G. (2005) "Constructing religious identity on the Internet," in Hojsgaard, M. T. and Warburg, M. (eds) *Religion and Cyberspace*. London and New York: Routledge, Pp. 121–137.

Malik, I. (2003a) *BakuBae: Gerakan dari Akar Rumput untuk Menghentikan Kekerasan di Maluku (The Community Based Movement for Reconciliation Process in Maluku)*. Jakarta: BakuBae Maluku.

—— (2003b) "Resolution and The Truth for Maluku," in Malik, I., Pattinaja, M. Putuhena, S. and Yakob, T. (eds) *Breaking the Violence with Compassion: BAKUBAE*. Jakarta: Civil Society Alliance for Democracy (YAPPIKA), Pp. 9–28.

Malik, I., Pattinaja, M., Putuhena, S. and Yakob, T. (eds) (2003) *Breaking the Violence with Compassion: BAKUBAE*. Jakarta: Civil Society Alliance for Democracy (YAPPIKA).

Ohorella, M. G. (1999) Modifikasi Bentuk—Isi—Fungsi Lembaga Pela dan Gandong Menuju Abad Modern. Tulehu, Ambon. Yayasan Pembangungan dan Pelestarian Masyarakat Hukum Adat "Negeri" di Daerah Maluku Tengah (YP2 MARHAN MALTENG).

Pannell, S. (2003) "Violence, Society and the State in Eastern Indonesia: Context," in Pannell, S. (ed.) *A State of Emergency: Violence, Society and the State in Eastern Indonesia*. Darwin: Northern Territory University Press, Pp. 11–36.

Pemerintah Daerah Provinsi Maluku (2004) *Rencana Strategis (RENSTRA) Provinsi Maluku Tahun 2003–2008*. Ambon: Pemerintah Daerah Provinsi Maluku.

Permana, N. A. (2002) "Revitalisasi Lembaga Adat dalam Menyelesaikan Konflik Etnis Menghadapi Otonomi Daerah: Studi Kasus Pulau Bangka." *Antropologi Indonesia* 68: 74–85.

Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rahzen, T. (2002) "Celebrate for Peace: Reclaiming Public Ritual can Help Resolve Conflict." *Inside Indonesia* 70 (April–June 2002). Available at: http://www.insideindonesia .org/edit70/Taufik.htm [accessed: 7 September 2004].

Rigby, A. (2001) *Justice and Reconciliation: After the Violence*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Ross, M. H. (2004) "Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation," in Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. (ed.) *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Pp. 197–223.

Schirch, L. (2001) "Ritual Reconciliation," in Abu-Nimer, M. (ed.) *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, Pp. 145–161.

Thorburn, Craig C. (2003) The Plot Thickens: Decentralisation and Land Administration in Indonesia. Paper presented to the conference "Politics of the Commons: Articulating Development and Strengthening Local Practices," Chiang Mai, Thailand, July 11–14, 2003. Available at: http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/archive/00001161/00/Thorburn.pdf [accessed: 20 December 2004].

Tomagola, T. A. (2000) "TNI/AD Otak & Dalang di Maluku." *Kathulistiwa Magazine*. Available at: http://www.geocities.com/ambon67/noframe/tamal1010y2k.htm [accessed: 10 October 2000].

Zurbuchen, M. S. (2005) "Historical Memory in Contemporary Indonesia," in Zurbuchen, M. S. (ed.) *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, Pp. 3–32.

NEGOTIATING CHARISMA: THE SOCIAL DIMENSION
OF PHILIPPINE CRUCIFIXION RITUALS

Peter J. Bräunlein

In the years 1996, 1997, and 1998 I carried out anthropological fieldwork on Philippine passion rituals.[1] The research area, the province of Bulacan, is socio-politically and economically part of the continually expanding capital, Manila, and many Bulaceños are working in Manila and commute daily. As a result they increasingly join the middle-class Manileños, who tend to escape the unbearable urban conditions and settle in housing projects outside of the overcrowded and heavily polluted mega-city. In many families at least one member lives abroad to earn money as, for instance, an overseas contract worker (OCW), a domestic helper, or simply a marriage migrant, and money transfers from Saudi Arabia or Singapore are considered usual transactions. The same applies to telephone calls from Italy or Israel. Bulacan is considered a prosperous province with a bright future—not only by politicians, but by the general public as well. So, at the beginning of the fieldwork I found myself in a setting that was anything but tribal. The growing number of huge shopping malls, daily traffic jams (even in small provincial towns), omnipresent advertisement banners about computer classes offered by local high schools,

the spread of internet cafes, where the new era of global communication was celebrated by enthusiastic teenagers—all these manifestations of the economic 'take off' stood in sharp contrast to the phenomena which I intended to study in the very same area. Bloody rituals of crucifixion, self-flagellation, and other forms of religiously motivated self-mortification seemed not to belong to the late modern era, but were clearly relics of an archaic, pre-modern Catholicism. By presupposing such a perspective, I have to confess frankly that I was influenced by a common characterisation of Catholicism designed by Protestant polemics in the European 19th century. It declared Catholicism as an anti-modern force within the period of European industrialization. The anti-Catholic propaganda announced that Catholicism is unable to cope with modernity since it is less rational than Protestant Christianity, essentially magical in nature, and still propagating the cult of saints and miracles in times of social dislocation and miserable working conditions. The portrait of Catholic Christianity as backward and mediaeval in character was scientifically perpetuated by Max Weber amongst others. He considered the Catholic Communion, the practice of confession, and the absolution as largely magical. According to Weber's view, Roman Catholicism lacks an inner-worldly ascetic ethos and the cult of saints is "fairly close to polytheism."[2]

Despite the insight that such a view is grounded in anti-Catholic sentiments, stirred up in the 19th century rather than in sociological research, my irritation persisted. In the course of my research I was left with an impression that was ambiguous, if not outright contradictory. The juxtaposition of seemingly backward religious expressions with the success of global capitalism and communication technology was, and still is, enigmatic to me and to some of my Philippine colleagues. To solve the problem by declaring Philippine society as pre-modern, or by analysing ritual celebrations during Lent as forms of "folk-religion" are poor attempts at finding release from such uncomfortable contradictions. The desire for an

---

[2] With emphasis on the sacraments Weber says: "Of an essentially magical nature is the view that one may incorporate divine power into himself by the physical ingestion of some divine substance, some sacred totemic animal in which a mighty spirit is incarnated, or some host that has been magically transformed into the body of a God." Weber (1965: 186); quoted in Hamilton (1998: 191).

With respect to the doctrine of the Trinity and the cult of the Virgin Mary and the saints, Weber regarded "Catholicism to be less monotheistic than either Judaism or Islam, which he thought was perhaps the most strictly monotheistic religion of all" as Malcolm Hamilton summarizes. Weber asserted: "In practice the Roman Catholic cult of masses and saints actually comes fairly close to polytheism." See Weber (1965: 138, 186); here after Hamilton (1998: 191–192).

explanation resulted in an increasing awareness of the social dimension of the Lenten rites under study and therefore it was obvious to recall related key questions of a sociology of religion: what is the place of religion in human society and how do worldviews and religious ethics influence the way people behave, individually and collectively? How can we understand and explain the similarities and differences of elite and popular patterns of religious action? What is the relationship of religion, human motivation, individual agency and social structure?

The development of a sociology of religion is closely connected to the development of western modernity and Christianity.[3] As an occidental scientific enterprise, sociology of religion started out with the ambition of answering questions about *Christian churches* and their place in a rapidly changing society under the premises of modernity. Implicitly presupposed are specific concepts of religion (the belief in the transcendent, soteriological doctrines concerning the salvation of the individual) and modernity (rational capitalism, functionally differentiated society). Sociology of religion therefore unfolds quite convincingly its explanatory capacity, though sometimes contested and debated, in the realm of western society and its Christian traditions. The application of such models to non-western societies, without being constantly aware of the fundamental differences, however, may be a risky venture.

While sorting out my field notes, interviews, collected stories, and videotaped rituals I looked for a useful theory in just that sociological toolkit. What I found were not ultimate answers, but inspiring questions; questions which had already been raised by founding fathers such as Ernst Troeltsch or Max Weber.

My paper is an attempt to throw light on the social dimension of crucifixion rituals and, furthermore, on the type of religious movement and/or association emerging from the activities of their protagonists. It is not my ambition here to deconstruct the typologies of Max Weber or Ernst Troeltsch—church, sect, and mysticism—or to propose a better-suited typology. Instead, by adopting related questions as the starting point, I attempt to investigate the social forces, either of consent or dissent, radiating from a seemingly bizarre ritual of the literal imitation of Christ's death.

---

[3] Almost all of the famous founders of the discipline of sociology of religion were deeply involved in political, socio-political and theological issues and affairs of the day. The biases and epistemological ambiguities produced by that engagement, however, were rarely reflected. See Krech & Tyrell (1995).

The Philippine 'Calvary Catholicism' and the Invention
of Crucifixion Rituals

Although the label 'Calvary Catholicism' is more a creation of journal-
ists than of social scientists, it denotes clearly the character of Philip-
pine Catholicism with emphasis on the passion for Christ, represented
in the images of the suffering son of God the Father. The fascination
with the battered and dead Christ can be regarded as a characteristic
feature of Philippine lowland society. Due to its Iberian heritage, Philip-
pine Catholicism resembles Spanish and Latin-American Catholicism in
many respects. But, beyond such resemblances it has also developed its
own peculiar character.[4] The textual basis of Philippine Catholicism is the
Pasyon Mahal, the translation of the biblical story in vernacular and in
verse form. Since the 18th century the Pasyon became increasingly popu-
lar, especially in those parts of the country seen as the power centres of
the colonisers. The poetic form—actually a peculiar interpretation of the
biblical passion—effectively transmitted indigenous cultural values. The
Pasyon replaced the traditional epics and, as a consequence, the ritual
singing of the Pasyon is in use until today. Without a doubt, the Pasyon is
the best-known text, at least among the people of Central Luzon (Tiong-
son, 1976).[5]

---

[4] It might come as a surprise that research comparing Iberian Catholicism with Philip-
pine Catholicism, be it anthropological, sociological, or historical is marginal, if not non-
existent. As well, studies in the fields of cultural history and anthropology of Philippine
Catholicism are poorly developed. There are no comprehensive studies on the cult of the
saints and the Virgin Mary, local feasts and processions, pilgrimages, apparitions, miracles,
etc. Most of the relevant materials published are journalistic, theological, or outdated. Out-
standing exceptions are the works of Reynaldo Ileto (1979) on religio-political movements
in the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary period, and Vicente Rafael (1988) on the process
of vernacularization of Christianity. Since the late 1980s more and more research projects
on Philippine Christianity/Catholicism/popular religion were initiated. Highly stimulating
are the works of British anthropologist Fenella Cannell (1995, 1999, 2005, 2006) on popular
religion in the province of Bicol, esp. on the cult of a miracle-working saint, and the study
of German historian Reinhard Wendt (1997) on the Fiesta Filipina. Filomeno V. Aguilar
provides an illuminating account of the convergence of capitalism and the indigenous
spirit world on Negros island (1998). Anthropologist Katharine L. Wiegele studied the
Catholic charismatic movement El-Shaddai (2004, 2006), and Smita Lahiri contemporary
forms and practices of mystical nationalism located at Mount Banahaw (2005).

[5] The content of the Pasyon, the story of Christ's death, is obviously 'western' and
imported. The social context and the aesthetic, however, are related to Southeast Asian
theatre practices. Ricardo Trimillos refers to a revealing analogy between the singing of
the Pasyon and the Javanese wayang kulit puppet theatre. In discerning such a connection
he offers an indigenous model of theatre performances in the Philippines which is only
masked by the Christian content. Cf. Trimillos (1992).

The most spectacular expressions of the so-called Philippine 'Calvary Catholicism' are flagellation and crucifixion. Flagellation was introduced by the Spaniards as a monastic exercise (*disciplina*), usually practised privately behind closed doors or in the church's gloom on every Friday throughout the year. The indigenous Philippine male population enthusiastically accepted flagellation and started to perform this bloody practice in public. The fanatical acceptance of flagellation, even by children, was surprising, because religious self-mortification was unknown in the pre-Spanish Philippines. 30 years after the arrival of the Spaniards, self-flagellation was already an established mass phenomenon, exercised in some parts of the archipelago. This caused the church to forbid the exercise (Chirino, 1969; Ribandeneira, 1947). The prohibition, however, turned out to be ineffective. Up to the present, ritual self-flagellation has been an uninterrupted tradition for more than 350 years.[6]

Ritual crucifixions, however, were absolutely unknown in the Philippines until the second half of the 20th century. The first Philippine crucifixion happened in the year 1961. It was a faith healer, Arsenio Añosa, who was nailed to a cross in the town of San Fernando. His crucifixion was performed annually between 1961 and 1976. Prior to his first crucifixion Añosa was a flagellant, who, by crucifixion, intended to get closer to Christ; closer than flagellation permitted. For Arsenio Añosa proximity to the dead Christ through the performance of crucifixion was a means to acquire healing power. The anthropologist Nicholas Barker who conducted fieldwork in San Fernando understands Añosa's decision to be crucified in the context of a specific revival of religious self-flagellation, which was evident from the 1960s onwards. This revival, which reached its peak in the late 70s, was itself clearly fostered by the Philippine media with sensational front-page headlines, news reports and photographs. The attention of the media had a direct impact on ritual performances, as Nicholas Barker lucidly demonstrates in referring to crucifixion and flagellation in San Fernando/Pampanga (Barker 1998),[7] and media influence had become even more pronounced when I conducted fieldwork in Kapitangan in the 1990s.

Crucifixions in the Philippines are phenomena of modernity and not centuries-old archaic relics. Ritual crucifixions are confined to a few places,

---

[6] For the development of self-flagellation in the Philippines after World War II cf. Bräunlein 2010: 259ff.; Barker 1998.

[7] Nicholas Barker conducted anthropological fieldwork in San Fernando in 1984, 1987, 1988, 1990, and 1991. Barker was able to interview Añosa, who died in 1993.

located mainly in the region near the capital of Manila. The most famous places are San Pedro Cutud (in the province of Pampanga) and Kapitangan (in the province of Bulacan).

The observations on which this text is based were made in Kapitangan, a small barangay (town district) within the municipality of Paombong/Bulacan. The settlement was founded approximately in the late 19th century. Until the 60s its population consisted mainly of rice-growing peasants but during the last decades the growing and selling of turf has become a major source of income in Kapitangan. Through the construction of paved roads in the 70s, Manila has become easily accessible and as a result, many people commute daily to the capital city.[8] While economic conditions have generally worsened in the Philippines over the past twenty years, the province of Bulacan is considered to have prospered. With few exceptions, most of the people I interviewed regarded themselves as neither particularly rich nor poor.[9]

Kapitangan has been a well known pilgrimage centre since the turn of our century. In the Barangay chapel a miraculous wooden figure of Christ (Sto. Cristo) is venerated. Numerous accounts of miraculous healings are known, and many cases of dream apparitions of the Sto. Cristo have been, and continue to be, reported.

Pilgrims either seek healing by touching the body of Sto. Cristo or visit the place because they have already experienced miraculous healings in the past. During the Holy Week, curing oil and perfumed water, which were used ritually for bathing the Sto. Cristo, are distributed for free. Semana Santa pilgrims are attracted not only from the nearby area, but also from the capital of Manila and from all over the island of Luzon, and hundreds of flagellants and other penitents can be seen in Kapitangan, especially on Good Friday.

The local tradition of crucifixion started in 1977 with Lucy Reyes, then an 18-year-old girl.[10] On Good Friday at noon she was nailed to a cross,

---

[8] In the 1950s and early 1960s of the last century, American anthropologist Charles Kaut conducted fieldwork in Kapitangan focussing on the socio-economic structure of the Philippine peasant society. His published results and insights as well as his generous readiness to provide useful informations by e-mail messages were extremely helpful for my own study. See Kaut (1969, 1961, 1965); Bräunlein 2010: 243ff.

[9] Almost all of the people with whom Fenella Cannell lived during her fieldwork in the province of Bicol (Southern Luzon) classed themselves as "we who have nothing at all." Such a statement is very common in the Philippines, where the gap between a privileged few and the majority of those "who have nothing" is immense. See Cannell (1999: 15ff.).

[10] On different occasions when I asked Lucy about her first crucifixion, she sometimes remembered 1976 as her first year on the cross, but sometimes it was the year 1977 or

which was erected on a temporary stage made of wood and bamboo. Her crucifixion was repeated over 13 consecutive years. In the late 80s, Kapitangan became increasingly a place that attracted not only Philippine Good Friday pilgrims, flagellants, and different kinds of penitents, but also journalists and tourists.

Growing up in a very poor family, Lucy had been a rebellious and headstrong person since her early childhood. Endowed with a spirit of resistance, she was fiercely opposing the expectations of her family. Oftentimes she was very sick and her sickness was accompanied by states of unconsciousness, and later by states of trance. Under the guidance of her aunt, contact with Sto. Niño, the Christ-child,[11] was established and Lucy developed healing abilities. Sto. Niño regularly visited Lucy during her trances and from that time has used her as an instrument to cure sick people.

The aunt, a childless spinster, saw it as her vocation to take care of young Lucy. For her, Lucy was sent by God and it was her obligation to serve as Lucy's 'spiritual mother.' "When Lucy came to me she was turning seventeen. She was like a newly born. It was as if I had given birth. She was my child spiritually," she explained.

The aunt organized the healing sessions. Under her guidance a coregroup of 12 ladies, the "apostles," was formed. She invented rituals and

---

1978. By asking friends and acquaintances of Lucy and by reading newspaper reports, 1977 came out as the most probable year for her first crucifixion. The gap in Lucy's memory is not necessarily a personal fault or inability, but reflects a culturally specific perception of the past. Fixing and memorizing events precisely in accordance with the calendar is not valued. The process of learning remembrance is culturally embedded, as we learn from the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992) and, more recently, from Jan and Aleida Assmann (1992, 1999).

[11] In Philippine Catholicism Sto. Niño is the most popular and most venerated image besides Jesus Nazareno, Jesus carrying the cross, and Mother Mary. Venerated are numerous representations of Sto. Niño distinguishable by garments, colour, gesture, size, facial expression, etc. Images of Sto. Niño are placed on countless house altars. Oftentimes they function as patron saints of families. Frequently a regional type or predilection, for example Sto. Niño de Cebu, prevails. The devotion of Jesus the Child in the Philippines dates back to the late fifteenth century Spain. In the 20th century the Sto. Niño cult was officially enforced on the occasion of Fourth Centennial Celebration of Christianization of the Philippines (1965–1966). The year 1965 was declared as Jubilee Year by Pope Paul VI and the 'original' Sto. Niño, brought to the Philippines by Magellan in 1521, was transferred from the Visayan island of Cebu to Metro Manila. Novenas were propagated, and, in the 1970s a phenomenal spread of the Sto. Niño devotion outside Cebu was noticeable.

Inspired by such observations, sociologist Douglas Elwood hypothesised that there were only two dominant Christ images in the Philippines: that of the Santo Niño, the holy child king, and that of the tragic victim, Jesus Nazareno. Cf. Elwood (1971); for the history of the Sto. Niño veneration in the Philippines Tañazas (1965), Takefumi (1987), Bräunlein (2009).

taught prayers in her house, which became the "temple" of a group of (mostly) female followers. They regularly assembled there and supported Lucy not only with prayers but also with material goods. At that time Sto. Niño commanded Lucy's crucifixion—repeatedly. Lucy was frightened, but encouraged by her spiritual mother. Finally she agreed. Her whole family was shocked, and the parents strongly opposed the plan, but failed.

For her crucifixion Lucy/Sto. Niño chose the churchyard of Kapitangan. Lucy's house was only two miles away and the place was well known for the Good Friday celebrations. As a person chosen by Sto. Niño, and, as a healer she felt obliged to visit Kapitangan frequently because the miraculous Sto. Cristo is considered the patron saints of healers.

Lucy asked a group of passion-play actors, called Hudyo, to assist her crucifixion. The leader of the group hesitated at first and then agreed. He and his men served Lucy not only as helpers with the skills to use a hammer, but in arranging every detail of the event. They gave instructions on how to construct the stage, and provided Lucy with the costume, a wig, the cast-iron crown, and the wooden cross. Dressed as colourful Roman centurions, they came for Lucy early in the morning of that Good Friday in 1977. They accompanied Lucy on her two-mile "way of the cross" to the "calvary" in Kapitangan by pulling her along, beating, and humiliating her. At noon, in front of a huge crowd, two of the Hudyo hammered the alcohol-soaked stainless steel spikes through her hands. Lucy fainted. After a few minutes the nails were removed by vice grips and alcohol was poured on the wounds. The motionless, "dead" body of Lucy was brought into the chapel and laid on the altar. After 30 minutes she revived and was able to walk back to her house, carrying the cross on her shoulder. In 13 consecutive years Lucy's crucifixion was repeated. Whenever she was asked about her motives she replied: "I am doing this because Sto. Niño told me to do this." In exchange she had been given divine power to heal the sick, she said.

Starting with the crucifixion, Lucy's career advanced rapidly. The number of her clients and followers grew, although disputes caused the splitting of the group quite frequently. After five years, Lucy and her spiritual mother separated. Lucy rebelled against her and chose another spiritual mother, who provided housing, food, clothes, and organized her healing sessions. Later a 'spiritual father' appeared and offered his assistance. Under the guidance of Lucy's spiritual parents the core group undertook excursions to the provinces and visited pilgrimage sites and churches. These activities they called 'mission trips.' For Lucy, a house as well as

a chapel next to it were constructed. The magnificent (and very expensive) image of Lucy's patron saint, Santo Niño de Pandacan, was placed inside with the help of her spiritual father. But after a while Lucy also rejected his support and regulations. After quarrels over financial matters she decided to live independently on the compound, assisted only by a close follower. It is in this chapel, where Lucy heals regularly, under the guidance of her Santo Niño.

Soon journalists came to Kapitangan to interview Lucy. Film crews also appeared and made her well known through TV documentaries. Invitations to TV-talk shows followed, and she became famous nationwide. In 1990 Lucy was nailed for the last time. In the late nineties when I regularly visited Lucy, she was a respected and well-to-do woman.

In the 1980s more and more persons, mostly females, received the command to be crucified in Kapitangan. All of them were healers; and all of them were, in the beginning, followers of Lucy, scrutinizing her healing techniques and the way of her crucifixion. All received messages from Sto. Niño or Jesus Nazarene, and all of them considered Lucy their role model. All claimed to have been really chosen by Sto. Niño or the Nazarene. All of them built their own chapel where they held healing sessions under the image of their specific patron saint. And all of them compete with each other for the most authentic performance, spiritual power, for disciples, and prestige.

In Kapitangan, not more than 3000 people are able to watch the events on stage. Compared with the Good Friday events in San Pedro Cutud/San Fernando (Pampanga), Kapitangan has not reached that level of attraction yet, and it probably never will. Located some 20 miles away from Kapitangan, San Pedro Cutud/San Fernando is the most popular and best-known crucifixion site in the Philippines. More than 20,000 spectators are present to observe the crucifixion of 10–15 persons, exclusively males, yearly.[12] In Kapitangan between one and three persons have been nailed to the cross each year. It is vital to note here that the persons' underlying motives and intentions to be crucified differ in San Fernando/Pampanga from those nailed in Kapitangan/Bulacan. In San Fernando a 'vow' is the dominant

---

[12] There are two remarkable exceptions: in 1994 a Belgian lady, the 54-years-old Godelieve Rombaut, was crucified there as the first foreigner in the history of Philippine crucifixions. In 1997 Amparo Santos, known as 'Mother Paring,' hitherto crucified in Kapitangan for ten years, decided to move to San Fernando for further crucifixions. She justified her decision by saying that the masses of spectators and the bigger number of the media representatives in San Fernando are more attractive for her compared to Kapitangan. For that reason she might be able to disseminated more effectively her message there.

pattern, whereas the 'possession/trance/healing-complex' plays the most important role in Kapitangan. Nick Barker's and my findings reveal two different patterns of ritual crucifixion within a relatively small area.

The Philippine 'New Mysticism' as New Religious Movement (NRM)

The story of Lucy's crucifixions, her career as healer, and the group around her form a pattern that fits perfectly into the category of the so-called *New Mysticism*. This label was introduced by the Philippine Jesuit and psychologist Jaime Bulatao (1981 [1992]). Bulatao characterizes New Mysticism as a "religious-mystical flowering" of the post-World War II period, occurring all over the Philippines "though often unobserved by the official church."

Summarizing Bulatao (1992, 54ff.), characteristics of the New Mysticism are as follows:

1. The trance state: "usually without willing it, he or she is 'possessed' by the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin, or some saint" "Typical characteristics of the trance are body rigidity with convulsive movements, tightly closed eyes, rapid breathing, speaking in a voice and accents quite different from the usual. This voice follows the personality of the 'possessing spirit': Deep and heavy in the case of the Nazareno, playful and childish in the case of Santo Niño, sweet but aggrieved in the case of Blessed Virgin of Fatima or the Mother of Perpetual Help."
2. Oftentimes a message is delivered during the state of trance. This message is usually "a lugubrious one about the sinfulness of men, the need for repentance, and the threat of foreboding calamities."
3. Healing is done in the state of trance by massage or the laying on of hands, rubbing of oil, the drinking of water blessed by the mystic, or simple herbal medicine.
4. The mystic and their followers are for the most part faithful Catholics.
5. Once a new healer appears, a new social organization starts growing around him/her. A core of disciples and firm believers act "as middlemen between the mystic and the crowds of followers as well as protectors against sceptics and disrupters of ritual. Typically too, one of the group's first projects is to build a chapel in honour of the patron saint. To one side of the chapel a room is set aside for consultations and for healing." The chapel is financed by donations of patients and clients. No payment is demanded for healings.

6. The healer is the founder and centre of the group. Ritual creativity and inventiveness is highly developed.
7. The group around a mystic tends to expand. "They all speak of their urge as a 'mission.' Certain days of the week are set aside for excursions into the provinces, sometimes to foreign countries," such as Guam or Australia. Some groups claim a following consisting of thirty to forty thousand people, others count only two dozen followers.
8. The movement has no centralized organization. Each group around a mystic goes on its own, usually competing with another, "or, like the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople, mutually excommunicating each other." Towards the Catholic Church and its priest, however, an overwhelming desire for acceptance and approval is felt. The new mystics and their followers regard themselves by no means as dissentient or heterodox.

In Bulatao's depiction we can easily identify Lucy as a new mystic and the group around her as a typical Philippine New Mysticism group.

Furthermore, the Philippine New Mysticism is a facet of the so-called New Religious Movements (NRMs), a world-wide phenomenon which has mushroomed in the industrial societies of the West in recent decades (Hamilton 1995: 193). New Religious Movements show an extraordinary variety, which challenges and confuses sociologists of religion.[13]

By placing Lucy and her crucifixion in the context of the New Religious Movements, it is helpful to recall the famous typology *church, sect*, and

---

[13] The definition of a NRM given by Eileen Barker is a very broad and pragmatic one: "the definition from which I personally start—for purely pragmatic reasons—is that an NRM is new in so far as it has become visible in its present form since the Second World War, and that it is religious in so far as it offers not merely narrow theological statements about the existence and nature of supernatural beings, but that it proposes answers to at least some of the other kinds of ultimate questions such as: Is there a God? Who am I? How might I find direction, meaning and purpose in life? Is there life after death? Is there more to human beings than their physical bodies and immediate interactions with others?" Barker (1999: 6) But Eileen Barker does not forget to emphasize that generalising about NRMs is nearly impossible: "One cannot generalise about NRMs. The only thing that they have in common is that they have been labelled as an NRM or 'cult.' The movements differ from each other so far as their origins, their beliefs, their practices, their organisation, their leadership, their finances, their life-styles and their attitudes to women, children, education, moral questions and the rest of society are concerned. Attempts to produce typologies have been limited, and even relatively useful distinctions (. . . .) do not really help us to anticipate with much certainty the *empirical* characteristics that might follow from the *defining* characteristics of each category." Barker (1999: 20).

mysticism, developed by Ernst Troeltsch, which identifies the basic forms of Christian organisation (cf. Troeltsch 1931).[14]

Troeltsch explained mysticism as a religion in its own right, constituted by its own set of beliefs, characterized by radical religious individualism, and by the goal of some form of union with God. It is mysticism which Troeltsch judged most likely to flourish in the modern world and which he envisaged as the end point of Christianity, "in the sense that it drew on modern scientific ideas and [is] closely related to the individualism of contemporary societies" (Hall 1987, 155). Troeltsch's idea was developed further by many scholars into diverse classification-schemes. As a rule, however, those typologies only partially apply to most organizations.[15]

Howard Becker developed the category 'cult' following Troeltsch's category of mysticism. Typical for a cult is the high degree of individualism. Becker distinguished 'cult' from 'sect' "by the fact that adherents of this loosely knit and unstructured form of religious expression were little concerned with protecting their organization but were seeking 'purely personal ecstatic experience, salvation, comfort, and mental or physical healing'" (Becker 1932: 628, after Hall 1987: 156).[16]

The emphasis on personal experience, salvation, and physical healing on the one hand, and the characteristic weak forms of organization on the other, can be easily identified among the New Mystics. Unlike sect, such mysticism is not a protest-movement or schismatic group opposing the teachings of the church. It is *not* a voluntary institution with a strong sense of distinct identity and separateness, as Bryan Wilson (1970) defines sect, but a movement *within* the church emphasizing and seeking spiritual experience.

The New Mysticism in the Philippines described by Bulatao can be seen as a hybrid of sect and mysticism, but being more mysticism than sect.

---

[14] The contrast of "church," i.e. established religion, and "sect," a schismatic group which is in tense relation with the parental religion, is not very fruitful for the analysis of New Religious Movements. And in its common technical usage it promotes prejudicial understandings. If we understand the church-sect dichotomy less as a taxonomy but instead as a continuum, at least some problems with such a dichotomy are eliminated, as Lorne L. Dawson recommends (cf. Dawson 1992).

[15] Bryan Wilson (1982, 90) added a third dimension of denomination between church and sect. Through the "discovery" of *New Religious Movements* a fourth addition to church-sect theory had to be introduced (cf. Barker 1982, 1999).

[16] Becker included in his category 'cult' Spiritualism, Theosophy, Christian Science, and a variety of 'Pseudo-Hinduisms' linked with 'Swamis and Yogis who consent, for a consideration, to carry their messages to the materialistic Western world.' (Becker 1932: 628, after Hall 1987: 156).

We have to note here that Bulatao's term New Mysticism, which points to New Religious Movements in the Philippines, might be misleading. Bulatao neither explains from which source he took the term nor does he discuss the term sociologically or theologically. It is evident that his use of the term resembles, wilfully or not, Troeltsch's somewhat vague category. Troeltsch laid emphasis on a growing individualism, whereby personal religious experience is sought independent of the fellowship of a religious community (Chryssides 1999: 7). What is labelled mysticism in the Philippines, exemplified by Lucy and her group, is different from the common notion of mysticism. Actively sought is not mystical union or inexpressible experience of oneness with God as a lifelong personal project. Unlike European mystics of the late medieval ages, such as Heinrich Seuse or Meister Eckhardt, the Philippine mystics do not teach or preach about the 'unspeakable' nor are they intentionally longing for such a unification.

Instead, God is viewed as the active party using a chosen person as his instrument. God commands and the believers follow passively the instructions from above. There is no need to search for God, his presence is taken for granted. God's intervention comes first and is physically felt by the chosen ones through grave sickness and pain. Being nailed to the cross is the ultimate sacrifice a human being can offer, and a person who went through it is awarded with healing power. For the person undergoing crucifixion the ritual serves as an instrument of empowerment.[17] On the cross the nailed person, whose perceptible painlessness proves his/her authentic calling, is very close to God. The followers are attracted by healing powers which demonstrate the intimate relationship between healer and God.

From a Weberian perspective, we can consider ritual crucifixions and the connected group of believers to negotiate charisma by self-stigmatisation. Crucifixion thus is an act of self-humiliation, and a highly refined and effectively dramatized self-stigmatisation. The performance of crucifixion imitates Christ's sacrifice and through this, charismatic authority emerges—at least from the perspective of the core group of followers. Suffering as evidence of being chosen by God transforms suffering into salvation. This was symbolically connected in early Christianity, and is just as closely connected in the present New Mysticism movement. The

---

[17] With the underlying pattern we are instantly reminded of shamanistic illness. In addition, the problematic categories 'syncretism' and 'folk-Catholicism' have to be addressed. I intend to publish a paper to discuss this issue separately.

relationship between the suffering and the conquest of suffering contained and contains legitimating qualities for the early Christians and for the contemporary supporters of Lucy Reyes, for example. Suffering changes into salvation, stigmatising into de-stigmatising, and stigma into charisma. Jesus, the original charismatic and stigmatic exemplified such fundamental changes of spiritual power and status by altering his position from a slave to a world-conqueror. Imitating this pattern, self-stigmatising was a means to gain and institutionalise power, but also to express critique against power, as Ebertz (1999) emphasises with respect to the process of personal-charismatic and institutional-charismatic stabilisation of early Christian communities. The 'pathos of humility' (Demutspathos), the rhetoric of sacrifice, martyrdom, and self-denial, enforces charismatic authority, which is diversely illustrated in early Christianity (see Mödritzer 1994: 256; Ebertz 1999: 139).

In crucifixion rituals such a 'pathos of humility' unfolds its power. The person nailed to the cross owns charismatic authority by way of example. In the Philippine context, or in the context of crucifixion rituals in Kapitangan, such charismatic power is intimately connected with physical healing. Self-stigmatisation is transformed into charisma which works effectively among the followers as healing power. Illuminating in this context is the etymological connection between the German words *Heil* (salvation) and *Heilung* (healing). Thus *Heil*—salvation—is not an otherworldly but an inner-worldly concept, and able to be pragmatically realized as *Heilung*—healing.

In the process of stabilizing the charisma, the regularly performed healing ritual becomes the centre of such a group. The healer's ritual performance provides for cohesion within the community and opens the way to a "routinization of charisma" in the Weberian sense. Through the weekly healing performances, which function as a ritual transmission of healing power or charisma, the position of the healer is legitimised. S/he uses such healing performances (mission trips or other activities) to secure certain powers of control, including the designation of charismatically qualified staff, revelation through oracle, trance, and associated monetary exchanges.

Healers who underwent crucifixion can, at least to a certain degree, be compared to the Weberian "ideal-typical" prophet. A prophet bases claims to leadership on his or her own personal powers of charisma. Like the ancient Hebrew prophets, Philippine healers like Lucy consider themselves to be simply tools or instruments of God. Their orientation is this-worldly and concrete, though they are motivated entirely by religious

concerns. Humility and insistence on their complete dependence on God are of great importance. Prophets in that sense were not chosen by any formal means; usually they receive a call, which often they accept only with great reluctance. This definition of a prophet matches exactly with the present case from the Philippines. Almost all of the persons who received a call to undergo crucifixion hesitated and resisted at first. At the beginning the experience of receiving a call or encountering a divine force, let us call it charisma, caused an internal reorientation and a radical alteration of the persons central system of values. Most of the 'chosen ones' thus came into deep conflict with their families and had to endure social humiliation until their charismatic authority was accepted, at least by a few of them.

Charismatic authority, however, is never uncontested. Rivalry is part of the business, and the question of whether one is really chosen or only pretending to be, causes serious gossiping among followers and competition on the cross. Ideal and material interests of followers in the continual reactivation of the community, and the interests of the administrative staff and close disciples of the charismatic leader in stabilising their positions can promote a 'routinization of charisma.' Under certain circumstances the very same interests can lead to the destabilisation of the group and, in many cases, to serious quarrels. As B. O. Long (1981) reminds us, conflicts between prophets are typical and occur in many cultures (Hamilton 1998: 151).

Similarities between the Philippine New Mystics and "ideal-typical" prophets in the Weberian sense should not be overstated. The Philippine healers who I have interviewed do not aim to create a new social or religious community by means of prophecy, nor do they attempt to predict anything. The basis of their religious communities is provided instead by their healing powers and associated ritual activities.[18]

From an outside perspective the performance of crucifixion may be regarded as the central ritual and the community around the healer as a crucifixion cult. On account of their spectacular character and extraordinary publicity, crucifixion rituals can be characterized as performative events designed to attract clients, followers and disciples. From an inside perspective, however, such a characterisation would be rejected. A healer would argue that crucifixion is not an act of volition. Crucifixion has no

---

[18] Weber's characterisation of the Israelite prophets was criticised among others by Berger (1963) and Turner (1974). A lucid overview of Weber's concept of prophets and charismatic authority and his critics is presented by Hamilton (1998: 143–146, 150–155).

end in itself and does not stand apart, since the whole life of a healer is devoted to the service of God.

By applying the category of New Mysticism (Philippine style) to healers, to their ritual crucifixion and to the motivations that inspire the core group of followers, we can discern a specific form of community within which a healer, trance healing, the availability of miraculous power and the veneration of a saint (Sto. Niño) play the most important role. The dynamic of such communities is based on the ritually gained and perpetuated stigma and charisma of the founder. It is the intimate relationship between the healer and God, which forms the attraction for a group of followers, whereas the regular spiritual intermediaries of the Catholic Church, namely priests, are of minor importance. By claiming direct access to divine power, the group and its leader question the authority of the clerical hierarchy. Such an implicit protest, however, is in most cases neither reflected upon nor overtly expressed nor used as a means of propaganda against the church. New Mysticism is more of a potential or "under cover" critique.[19]

Crucifixions, Sto. Cristo, and the Local Community

Beyond the core group around the mystic, the effects of stage crucifixion are quite different. The interpretation of crucifixion, and hence its meaning, changes across widening circles of perception around the Good Friday event. Until now we have maintained a microscopic focus on the inner circle, the mystic and the core group of followers. Let us now use a

---

[19] Joachim Wach (1944) "distinguished two forms or religious protest—secession, leading to the formation of an independent organization, and 'protest within,' leading to the formation of an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*." Hall (1987: 156). The Philippine New Mysticism can be regarded as an ecclesiola in ecclesia, at least in some aspects, such as imitation of liturgical forms, questioning the sacramental monopoly of the church, direct availability of divine power. On "passion" as an idiom of critique and resistance in Philippine Catholicism see Bräunlein (2008).

In early Christian communities (of the first century) oftentimes the authority of its leaders was challenged by self-stigmatising ascets. Affirming to be 'holy in flesh' they aimed at the removal of the elected leaders, and, instead, claimed exclusive leadership for themselves (see Ebertz 1999: 145f.). Self-stigmatisation thus worked as critique of institutional power. In the Philippines no person undergoing crucifixion challenges church authority openly, but expresses nevertheless implicit critique of a church being distant and lacking charismatic power.

wide-angle lens to gain some insight into discourses of consent and dissent, of identity and identification.

By placing crucifixion in the centre of the circle, different categories of observers, spectators, onlookers, and gazes can be discerned:

– The *disciples and followers of the crucified*, who are dressed in uniforms, hold candles and sing songs. They assist the healer on his or her way through the crowd and help to bring their body down after the crucifixion. They enjoy the privilege of greatest proximity to the crucified. They compete however with:
– The *representatives of the media*, i.e. cameramen, photographers, reporters on the crammed stage. Journalists try to interview the leading 'actors' on stage before crucifixions whenever possible and photographers are constantly struggling to position themselves in the crowd to catch a clear shot of the spectacle.
– The *crowd of spectators* on the ground is equally fighting for the best position to watch the main event, the hammering of the nails through the hands.
– Among the crowd there are *Good Friday pilgrims* whose main concern is to visit the miraculous Sto. Cristo in the church. Others, including villagers, foreign and domestic tourists are mainly attracted by the spectacle.
– Few *local inhabitants* of the village of Kapitangan attend, and most of these are curious children who climb trees, roofs and walls.

The actual ritual of crucifixion arouses the emotions of the spectators. The act of hammering the steel spikes through the palms evokes sudden "uuhs" and "ahhhs" from the crowd. The shared emotional tension among the crowd, however, is not spontaneous *communitas*, the experience of heightened sociality.[20] Emotions are provoked simply by the spectacular aspect of the ritual. In that regard crucifixion is comparable to a thrilling circus-performance or public executions during early modern times in

---

[20] Victor Turner distinguishes three types of *communitas*: spontaneous existential *communitas* (opposite to social structure), normative *communitas* (attempts to preserve *communitas* in a system of ethical precepts and legal rules), ideological *communitas* (remembered *communitas* in form of an utopian blueprint for the reform of society). See Turner & Turner (1978: 252). None of these types can be connected with crucifixion rituals.

Europe.[21] The emotions or, more precisely, emotional identification with the person on the cross, the sense of compassion, and the vicarious sensation of pain through the work of imagination can have a cathartic effect on spectators. When I asked them after the crucifixion about their feelings and impressions, the answers varied considerably. Doubt, astonishment, bewilderment, explicit critique, and even jokes were expressed. Only a few said they were truly captivated by the events on stage and therefore could better understand now what Christ must have endured on his way to the cross.

For the local population the events in the churchyard of Kapitangan and the huge crowd of visitors during Semana Santa ('holy week') are connected with their patron saint. The presence of the Santo Cristo in the church recreates and corroborates local religious identity. Most of the older people know stories or report their personal experiences of miracles caused by Sto. Cristo. A group of older persons regard themselves as caretakers of the Santo Cristo and feel obligated to organize the events inside and outside the church during Semana Santa.

For every Good Friday pilgrim it is obligatory to enter the church to touch and pray before Sto. Cristo. The icon has to be rubbed with a handkerchief to receive healing power. Since Santo Cristo is the patron saint of healers, many healers are in the church treating sick people of every age. Good Friday is healing day. While curing palm oil is distributed for free, most of the pilgrims also throw pesos into the donation boxes.

In the late afternoon on Good Friday the donated money is counted by a committee of the older people. In the years 1995–1998 the average amount was 100,000 peso yearly, a very considerable amount of money for a small village. Apart from these donations, there are further monetary gains because dealers have to pay rent to local landowners for setting up their booths along the main road. Many local families also sell snacks and beverages to the pilgrims. In other words, Semana Santa in Kapitangan is also a significant economic enterprise.

Despite rising problems with garbage removal, sanitation, water shortages, pollution, parking shortages due to the continually increasing

---

[21] See Foucault's *Surveiller et punir. La naissance de la prison* (1975). Foucault opens his work with the detailed and dreadful account of the quadripartition of the assassin Robert-Francois Damiens in the year 1757, publicly performed in front of a church in Paris. The Historian Richard van Dülmen (1995) focuses on the ritual aspects of public executions in his book *Theater des Schreckens. Gerichtspraxis und Strafrituale in der frühen Neuzeit* [Theatre of horror. Judicial practices and rituals of punishment in early modern times].

numbers of pilgrims, I have never heard a single word of complaint from locals. "We feel honoured by the pilgrims and tourists. We welcome all of them. Imagine, the visitors come from all over the island of Luzon, and even from far away from countries like the US, Australia, and Germany. This is due to our famous patron saint. Our Santo Cristo is very mighty, he is guarding us," most of the inhabitants of Kapitan agree. Locals associate the flow of visitors with cultural prestige; not with environmental pollution. And for the locals it is Santo Cristo, in the first instance, who attracts the pilgrims and tourists. Of course, everyone knows that the crucifixions have made Kapitangan a well-known place. Within local perception, however, crucifixions are seen as a secondary though economically important phenomenon.

Whenever I asked inhabitants of Kapitangan about the crucifixions they signalled consent. Most locals had observed crucifixion only once in their lives[22] and many know scarcely anything about the motives of the persons nailed to the cross. The decision to be crucified and the act of crucifixion itself were never criticised nor questioned. No theological, philosophical or common sense objections were expressed. But whenever materialistic motives and selfishness were suspected to be the attitudes of some of the healers undergoing crucifixion, critical comments were provoked.

Crucifixion rituals do seem to strengthen the sense of community on the local level. This effect is not due to 'communitas' evoked by the ritual itself, but due to the presence of Sto. Cristo. Since the miraculous discovery of the Sto. Cristo (probably at the end of the 19th century)[23] the inhabitants of Kapitangan are very proud to have direct access to Christ, and many of the older generation affirm there is no need of a priest, except for basic services such as baptism, marriage ceremonies, and funerals. In times of hardship they ask Sto. Cristo and not the local priest for support. An intimate relationship with Sto. Cristo secures salvation. This kind of

---

[22] Good Friday is the central and most important date for family gatherings in the Philippines. Friends and relatives are invited and delicious food is offered the whole day. The place of adults during Good Friday is therefore at home. Most of the local people explained that the duties of the family union demand presence. Moreover, waiting under the broiling sun in a crammed churchyard, watching how a person is nailed through hands and feet is not amusing.

[23] The legend tells that the Sto. Cristo was found under a pile of soil. It was not a piece of art, but relics of Christ's body itself. The real bones of Christ are believed to be still inside the carved image. The theological statement that due to the rising of the Lord no human relics of Jesus Christ on earth exist does not create any "cognitive dissonance" among the followers of the Sto. Cristo in Kapitangan. The believers simply ignore such arguments.

relationship contains a latent potential for heterodoxy. Individual salvation depends only partly upon reception of the sacraments and acquiescence to the Catholic creed.[24] The local community of believers, although they consider themselves 100 percent Catholic, is therefore self-reliant and enjoys a certain degree of religious autonomy. The Catholic Church and its priests represent institutional aspects of religious identity but do not necessarily fulfil personal needs and creeds. The teachings of the church are regarded as distant and out of touch with the life of simple people, whose needs are related to their mundane existence. Of interest to them are less a concern with otherworldly gains but more the material improvement of life conditions and relief of sickness. Christ, the patron saint of Kapitangan, acts through visions, dreams and miracles. For the locals he is first and foremost a healer and caretaker. In a neo-feudal society the patron-client relationship persists. Besides the family-network, which hopefully safeguards the individual against insecurity, a mighty patron is needed. The mightiest patron, however, is Christ. In the case of Philippine crucifixion rituals, the literal re-enactment of the biblical passion story serves as source of power and a means for coping with powerlessness.

Crucifixions, the Media and Philippine Catholicism

Leaving Kapitangan aside and analyzing crucifixions instead as media events, we can discern another layer of identity discourse. Shortly after World War II, when the Philippines became independent and the process of decolonization was initiated, cultural and national identity was publicly debated. The definition and re-definition of cultural/national identity remains, until today, an unfinished project, especially for politicians and intellectuals. Since religion, especially Roman Catholicism, is intimately connected to Philippine identity, it is not surprising that passional prac-

---

[24] In 1998 the Bishop of Malolos came up with the idea to install the church of Kapitangan as a quasi-parish church with a permanently residing priest. Many of the families of Kapitangan agreed because they expected an improvement of the church services and religious education. The influential group of the elder, however, strongly opposed the plan. "We don't need a priest, we have our Sto. Cristo," the caretaker of the Sto. Cristo, and a faithful Catholic, told me outraged. "All priests are liars, they never keep their promises. We are determined not to tolerate any priest in our village. The Bishop's priest will not be able to stay for a long time in Kapitangan. Be sure, we will stone the priest." The fierce outburst was not only the result of bad experiences of the past, but also caused by the suspicion that the bishop's main interest is money, namely the huge amount of money which is donated every Holy Week.

tices like the Semana Santa rituals attract the interest of the Manila Media and thereby the interest of the educated middle and upper classes. In the 1960s flagellation became a visible 'movement'—a movement that was actually a revival.[25] In countless newspaper articles flagellation was interpreted as a performance of penance.

Philippine nationalists, who interpret the passion-complex from a Marxist perspective, try to use practices and symbols of popular Catholicism for their political aims. Flagellation and crucifixion are thus perfect symbols of the misery of the rural and urban poor. In squatter areas of Manila passion plays are re-enacted by political activists in order to call the public's attention to poverty and miserable living conditions.

Foreign media reporting on Philippine Lenten rites tend to adopt this interpretation. Supplementary statements are added about the perilous effects of religion in underdeveloped Third World countries. Maintained thereby is the image of a divided world, with a few advanced, enlightened, secular societies opposed to the rest, which is pre-modern, permanently exposed to natural and political disasters, and inhabited by religious fanatics.[26]

For the politically left, the Philippine passion complex is an outgrowth of the colonial past and proof of a 'colonial mentality'—of an inferiority complex. For them, flagellation and crucifixion are obviously linked to social inequality and oppression. This burden will vanish, so they argue, in the wake of growing class-consciousness. Others perceive flagellation as horrifying and barbaric but nevertheless intrinsically Filipino; part of a 400-year-old cultural heritage. Accordingly self-induced pain and suffering is seen as a necessary ingredient of the Filipino world-view. The term 'Calvary Catholicism' is a reflection of this outlook.

In the 1970s and 80s the media interest in flagellation declined and shifted to another form of self-mortification—to crucifixion. It was the village of San Pedro Cutud, in the province of Pampanga, which became increasingly popular due to its Holy Week rituals of flagellation *and* crucifixion by nailing, which started in the year 1961. There are between

---

[25] The revival of self-flagellation among lower class Filipino men started shortly after the World War II. Nicholas Barker asserts that unlike other revivalist movements, the revival of religious self-mortification in the Philippines was not organised. Brotherhoods, fraternities, formal or informal leaders are absent. Nicholas Barker personal communication, 1998.

[26] See for example the TV-documentary of the German journalist Hetkämper: KREUZIGUNG UNTER DEM VULKAN [Crucifixion under the Vulcano], (NDR (ARD-Studio Tokio) 1996).

10 to 15 Cristos nailed to the cross, and hundreds of flagellants are present yearly. In the late 1980s the Department of Tourism started to sponsor crucifixions financially. Meanwhile multinational soft drink corporations, Coke and Pepsi, discovered the place and erected "Welcome" sponsorship banners and drink stalls at "Calvary," where the crucifixions take place.[27] On Good Friday 20,000 people are visiting San Pedro Cutud annually to witness flagellation and crucifixion.

Through the efforts of the Philippine print and broadcast media a standard version of flagellation and crucifixion was created. The Holy Week rituals in San Pedro Cutud served as the initial model and the standard interpretation derived from this model, is applicable to any other place.

On the Saturday following Good Friday, in almost all newspapers of the country one can read articles on the front page like the following:

San Fernando, Pampanga

Fourteen people were crucified in Barangay San Pedro Cutud here on Good Friday and dozens whipped their own back into bloody pulp as the country commemorated the death of Jesus Christ nearly 2,000 years ago. One Japanese and thirteen Filipinos were nailed to wooden crosses under a broiling noon sun while thousands of tourists from the United States, Japan, and Europe gawked at the spectacle in Asia's only majority Catholic country.

The Catholic Church however frowns on the bloody rites, which combine Catholic fervour with traditional primitive beliefs. (…)

One of the men who flagellated himself with a bamboo whip encrusted with glass shards said the rite was part of a vow he took to implore God to stop the flow of volcanic mud called *lahar* from nearby Mount Pinatubo. (…)

Reaction by tourists to the crucifixions ranged from revulsion to admiration.

'It's nice to see, but it's crazy,' said Frank Demeyere, a 27-year-old native of Brussels who works in Hong Kong for a trading company.

'Religion drives people too far,' said Antoinette Bruin, a 25-year-old secretary from Rotterdam (…).

George Morgan, a 41-year-old businessman from London, was horrified about the risk of contracting AIDS. 'It's very interesting to understand a bit of the local culture. I wasn't disappointed but these people should be more careful about the HIV virus,' he said. Local officials assured participants only clean nails were used.

The 14 individuals were nailed to the cross for about 15 minutes before being brought down and given herbs to close their wounds.

---

[27] Barker 1998.

> Roland Ocampo, who has been nailed to the cross every Good Friday for the past seven years, defended the practice and said he would continue being crucified as part of a vow to God.
>
> 'I am doing this because the birth of my wife went well' he said as he winced in pain after his ordeal.
>
> Hawkers in Cutud did a brisk business selling soft drinks, fried fish balls, and wide-brimmed hats along the narrow two-lane road leading to the crucifixion site.

This excerpt from an article in *The Philippine Journal* (Saturday, April 6, 1996) provides an apt example of how newspaper reports are produced. All of these Good-Friday-reports, so I learnt from a Filipino journalist, are usually written up before the event. Only the number of crucifixions, the names of local actors, and some comments of tourists were inserted after the reporter witnessing (at least part time) the Good Friday rites has transmitted this information by phone-call.

The phrase "the Catholic Church frowns on the bloody rites," the depiction of flagellation and crucifixion as a combination of Catholic fanaticism with primitive beliefs, the emphasis on vows as the main motivation for flagellation and crucifixion, and the comments by non-Philippine tourists are often repeated themes.

Public knowledge about the 'true nature' of flagellation and crucifixions and the public discourse on Good Friday is shaped by the media, and the discourse is ambivalent throughout. The Catholic Church neither condemns nor condones the Lenten rituals. Fascination of and opposition to flagellation and crucifixion are simultaneously at hand. Crucial questions are raised: "Who are we Filipinos?" or, at least, "Who are those Filipinos with the lashed and bloody backs, or nailed to the cross?" Semana Santa, as the main religious celebration of the year, and the bloody Lenten rites give occasion to politicians, representatives of the Catholic Church and journalists to release statements about the meaning of Christ's death for the communal whole, for the nation, for 'being Filipino.' The sense of 'togetherness,' of unity, of a shared cultural heritage and destiny, is evoked and affirmed. Thus cultural identity is negotiated through the interpretation of passional Catholicism.

Conclusion

Inspired by the typology of Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber's ideas on stigma/charisma and his concept of the "ideal-typical" prophet, I reflected

upon Philippine crucifixion rituals under the perspective of Christian community formation. Three different community formations were explored:

1) *The community of followers around a healer*: Here the focus is on healing power. Salvation is pragmatically equated with physical healing. The centre of the group is a charismatic leader who regularly performs healing sessions. Crucifixion is evidence of his or her complete submission to God. Crucifixion can be considered as a ritual by which self-stigmatisation is transformed into charisma. Crucifixion provides charismatic authority on which the religious community is based.

2) *The local community of believers* of Kapitangan: Bonds of solidarity are maintained among villagers by their intimate relationship to the local patron saint. Salvation can be received through Sto. Cristo. Therefore, the "means of grace" (Gnadenmittel) are not completely in the hands of the Catholic Church and its representatives. The ritual crucifixions in the churchyard of Kapitangan are interpreted as proof of Sto. Cristo's power. Thousands of pilgrims and spectators underscore the importance of the Sto. Cristo and afford the local community with social prestige. The sense of belonging within the local community is thus enforced by ritual crucifixion irrespective of the motives and ambitions of the victim.

3) For *the national community*—still in the making—crucifixions, re-coded by the print and broadcast media, serve as a focus and illustration of the nations' cultural heritage. Crucifixions are not practised in all regions of the Philippines, but because flagellation and crucifixions are media events they are *known* across the archipelago. Token opposition and critiques of the barbaric and gruesome spectacle are a part of the public discourse on religion and modernity, but Lenten rites, self-mortification, blood-shedding, and suffering are nonetheless depicted as components of Filipino identity.

I cannot share the daring ambitions of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch—both fascinated by the all-embracing impact of modernity—in constructing grand narratives on the essential structures of Christian community formation. New Religious Movements defy sociological theorizing and the explanatory capacity of the models I have used herein is definitely limited. Nonetheless, the ideas of Weber and Troeltsch enable us to widen the frame of analysis so that the peculiarity of Philippine crucifixion and its bizarre, exotic aura dissolve, at least partially. It has become evident,

I hope, that ritual crucifixion as a localized form of Christianity inherits social forces unfolded on three communal levels.

Fieldwork among Catholics in Kapitangan showed that the Christian message is socially realised not so much through the church's teachings, but through the literal interpretation of the "founding myth" or master narrative of Christianity—namely the passion story of Christ. This myth allows for different modes of identification. Identification with the Christian religion is established and "acted out" through the passional discourse, including the image of Sto. Cristo—Christ on the cross.

References

Aguilar, Filomeno V., Jr. (1998) *Clash of Spirits. The History of Power and Sugar Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Assmann, Aleida (1999) *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München: C.H. Beck.

Assmann, Jan (1992) *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: C.H. Beck.

Barker, Eileen (1982) *New Religious Movements: perspective for understanding society*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.

—— (1999) "New Religious Movements: their incidence and significance," in Wilson, Bryan & Jamie Cresswell, eds., *New Religious Movements*. Challenge and Response. London: Routledge, pp. 15–32.

Barker, Nicholas H. (1998) "The Revival of Religious Self-Flagellation and the Birth of Crucifixion in Lowland Christian Philippines," *Discussion Paper no. 63. Nagoya-University*. Nagoya University: Graduate School of International Development.

Becker, Howard (1932) *Systematic Sociology on the Basis of the Beziehungslehre and Gebildelehre of Leopold von Wiese*. New York.

Berger, Peter (1963) "Charisma and religious innovation: the social location of Israelite prophecy," *American Sociological Review*, 28 (6): 940–950.

—— (1973) *The Social Reality of Religion*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

—— (ed.) (1999) *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Grand Rapids: Erdmans.

Bräunlein, Peter J. (2010) *Passion/Pasyon. Rituale des Schmerzes im europäischen und philippinischen Christentum*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

—— (2008) "Passion" als Idiom von Kritik und Widerstand im philippinischen Katholizismus. In: Hutter, Manfred, ed., *Religionsinterne Kritik und religiöser Pluralismus im gegenwärtigen Südostasien*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, pp. 231–250.

—— (2009) "Image Transmissions as Image Acts. Christian images, emotions and religious conversion in the Philippines," in: Mersmann, Birgit, ed., *Image Transmission*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, pp. 11–36.

Bulatao, Jaime C. 1992 (1981) "The New Mysticism in the Philippine Church," in: Bulatao, Jaime C.: *Phenomena and their Interpretation. Landmark Essays 1957–1989*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, pp. 54–62.

Cannell, Fenella (1995) "The Imitation of Christ in Bicol," Philippines, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.), 1, pp. 377–394.

—— (1999) *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—— (2005) "Immaterial Culture. Idolatry in the Relación de las Islas Filipinas. The Philippines in 1600. Text and Translation by Ramón Echevarría Lowland Philippines," in: Willford, Andrew/Kenneth M. George, eds., *Spirited Politics. Religion and Public Life in Contemporary Southeast Asia*. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, pp. 159–184.

—— (2006) "Reading as Gift and Writing as Theft," in: Cannell, Fenella, ed., *The Anthropology of Christianity*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 134–162.

Chirino, Pedro S. 1969 (1604) Relación de las Islas Filipinas I de lo que en ellas an trabajado los padres de la Compañia de Iesvs. Manila: *Historical Conservation Society* Vol. 15.

Chryssides, George D. (1999) *Exploring New Religions*. London/New York: Cassell.

Dawson, Lorne L. (1992) "Church/sect theory: Getting it straight," *North American Religion*, 1: 5–28.

Ebertz, Michael N. (1999) "Die Institutionalisierung von Charisma und Stigma: Herrschaftsbegründung und Herrschaftskritik im frühen Christentum," in: Krüggeler, Michael/Gabriel, Karl/Gebhardt, Winfried, eds., *Institution—Organisation—Bewegung. Sozialformen der Religion im Wandel*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, pp. 133–150.

Elwood, Douglas J. (1971) "Popular Filipino Concepts of Christ," *Siliman Journal* 18(2): 154–163.

Emmet, D. (1956) "Prophets and their societies," *Journal of the Royal anthropological Institute*, 86: 13–23.

Foucault, Michel (1975) *Surveiller et punir. La naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard.

Halbwachs, Maurice, (1992) *On collective memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hall, Michael, (1987) "Sect," in: Eliade, M., ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 13. London/New York: MacMillan Publ. Company, pp. 154–159.

Hamilton, Malcolm (1995) *The Sociology of Religion*. London: Routledge.

—— (1998) *Sociology and the World's Religions*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Heelas, Paul (1996) *The New Age Movement*. London: Routledge.

Ileto, Reynaldo (1979) *Pasyon and revolution: popular movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila press.

Kaut, Charles (1960) "Process and Social Structure in a Philippine Lowland Settlement," in: Sakai, Robert K., ed., *Studies on Asia*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 35–50.

—— (1961) "Utang na Loob: A System of Contractual Obligation among Tagalogs," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 17 (3): 256–272.

—— (1965) "The Principle of Contingency in Tagalog Society," *Asian Studies*, 3(1): 1–15.

Krech, V./Tyrell, H. (eds.) (1995) *Religionssoziologie um 1900*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

Lahiri, Smita (2005) "The Priestess and the Politician: Enunciating Filipino Cultural Nationalism through Mt. Banahaw," in: Willford, Andrew / Kenneth M. George, eds., *Spirited Politics. Religion and Public Life in Contemporary Southeast Asia*. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, pp. 23–44.

Long, B. O. (1981) "Social dimensions of prophetic conflict," *Semeia*, 21, 31–53.

Luckmann, Thomas (1967) *The Invisible Religion*. New York: Macmillan.

Mödritzer, Helmut (1994) *Stigma und Charisma im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt. Zur Soziologie des Urchristentums*. Freiburg/Schweiz: Universitäts-Verlag.

Rafael, Vicente (1988) *Contracting colonialism: translation and Christian conversion in Tagalog society under early Spanish rule*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila Univ. Press.

Ribadeneira, Marcelo de (1947/1599) *Historia de las Islas del archipiélago filipino y reinos de la Gran China, Tartaria, Cochinchina, Malaca, Siam, Cambodge y Japón, y de lo sucedido en ellos a los Religiosos Descalcos*. Madrid: Colección España Misionera 3.

Teñazas, Rosa C. P. (1965) *The Santo Niño of Cebu*. Cebu City: San Carlos Publ.

Takefumi, Terada (1987) *The spirit cult of Santo Nino: An anthropological study of popular religiosity in the Philippines*. [Unpublished Ph.D.] Quezon City: U.P. Diliman.

Tiongson, Nicanor (1976) "Pasyon: the best known Filipino book," *Archipelago*, 4: 1–28.

Trimillos, Ricardo D. (1992) "Pasyon: Lenten Observance of the Philippines as Southeast Asian Theater," in: Foley, Kathy, ed., *Local Manifestations and Cross-Cultural Implications*, pp. 5–22.

Troeltsch, Ernst (1931) *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*. New York: Macmillan.

Turner, Bryan S. (1974) *Weber and Islam*. London: Routledge.

Turner, Victor & Edith Turner (1978) *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. New York: Columbia.

van Dülmen, Richard (1995) *Theater des Schreckens. Gerichtspraxis und Strafrituale in der frühen Neuzeit*. München: C.H. Beck.

Wach, Joachim (1944) *Sociology of Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago press.

Weber, Max (1965) *The Sociology of Religion*. London: Methuen.

Wendt, Reinhard (1997) *Fiesta Filipina. Koloniale Kultur zwischen Imperialismus und neuer Identität*. Freiburg: Rombach Verlag.

Wiegele, Katharine L. (2004) *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

—— (2006) "Catholics Rich in Spirit: El Shaddai's Modern Engagements," Philippine Studies, 54(4): 495–520.

Wilson, Bryan (1970) *Religious Sects*. London: Weidenfeld Nicolson.

—— (1982) *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—— (1990) *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*. Oxford: Clarendon.

PERFORMING MULTI-RELIGIOUS RITUAL IN SOUTHERN THAILAND:
POLYPHONY, CONTESTATION, AND TRANSGRESSION

Alexander Horstmann

Introduction

In this article, I explore the exchange of bodily expressions between Bud-
dhists and Muslims in ritual space as it unfolds in Southern Thailand's
shared neighbourhoods (see also Horstmann 2004). 'Multi-religious neigh-
bourhood' refers to the sharing of physical space, the development of local
knowledge, regular investments into relations beyond religious divides
and, consequently, a sense of belonging to a commonly identified social
entity.[1] The study of bodily expression and exchange in ritual space con-
stitutes a privileged terrain to understand the dramatic performances in
which social hierarchies and normative orders are symbolically expressed
and identities negotiated.[2] Ritual action, such as physical movements of
the body, gestures and chanting, comprise part of the cultural memory
that is inscribed in a participant's body and communicated in the context
of a performance. In ritual space, and through bodily performance, identi-
ties and social positions are legitimated, challenged, negotiated, reflected,
positioned and contested through markers of religious identity. My thesis
is, then, that the performance of bodily expressions in ritual opens a fas-
cinating window on the negotiation of Buddhist-Muslim relations in the
Songkhla Lake Basin, where multi-religious rituals occur on a regular basis
and have a long history. The exchange of prayer gestures in mortuary rit-
ual, in particular, connects to the moral economy of exchange between
Buddhists and Muslims and the rationality behind it. In the following,
I show that the exchange of bodily expressions of identity provides a

---

[1] Investing into relations can be conceptualized as "organic solidarity" (Gomes,
Kaartinen, Kortteinen 2007; Horstmann 2011).
[2] For the study of gesture, see, for example, Jan Bremmer and Hermann Roodenburg, A
Cultural History of Gesture. From Antiquity to the Present Day (Cambridge: Polity Press,
1991).

dynamic and highly indicative perspective on current competitive sharing
of religious sites evolving between Buddhists and Muslims in the Songkhla
Lake Basin, as identity is increasingly becoming separated along religious
lines.[3]

Despite a recent hardening of religious identities, southern Thai ritual
traditions continue to provide a forum in which the nostalgia of the past
can be reinvented and where relations from the past can be recovered.
Instead of representing unchanging values that are cosmologically legiti-
mated, I argue that the symbolism of ritual behaviour shows us how the
cosmological beliefs of the people in Southern Thailand articulate with
modernity.[4] It is this aspect of a construction of an alternative modernity
that shapes the identities of Buddhists and Muslims in Southern Thailand
today.[5]

I present two example cases in which embodied markers of identity
are dramatically exchanged and put on display. The first example comes
from 'the ritual of two religions' in Tamot, Patthalung; the second example
comes from the Manooraa tradition and concerns the performance of a
Manooraa dance-drama ceremony in the Buddhist temple of Ta Kura in
Satingpra, Songkhla province. I argue that the exchange of bodily expres-
sions such as prayer gestures between Buddhists and Muslims in Tamot
and of beliefs in a spiritual cure in the case of a Muslim mother who brings
her ill child for healing to a Manooraa master in a Buddhist temple, in very
interesting ways represent transgressions in a politicised inter-religious
environment that cannot be explained away by conceptualizing these
dramatic manifestations of identity as either syncretistic or hybrid. I argue
instead that these bodily expressions represent a dramatic performance of

---

[3] See Hayden for a comparative perspective on the competitive sharing of religious
sites (Hayden 2002). In these sites of multi-religious ritual, both antagonism and tolerance
are present.

[4] For a perspective on the articulation of tradition with modernity, see, for example,
Alexander Horstmann and Thomas Reuter (eds.) (2009): The Postmodern Shift. In: Asian
Journal of Social Sciences. Special Focus: Revitalization of Tradition and New Forms of
Religiosity: Perspectives from Southeast Asia. 37, 6, pp. 853–856.

[5] See Bruce Knauft, Critically Modern (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University
Press, 2002). Knauft suggests that alternative modernities "happen" in a "multivocal arena"
that is delimited and framed by local cultural and subjective dispositions on one side, and
by global political economies (and their possibilities and limitations) on the other. The
model thus emphasizes the interwovenness of local and global processes through which
political, economical, societal and cultural interests are articulated and negotiated. At the
same time, it underscores the dialectical relationship between *past* and *present*, or *tradi-
tion* and *modernity*, and thus allows modernity to become "spirited"—a feature that was
once thought to be modernity's very antithesis.

the cosmological beliefs regarding ancestor spirits that people of modern times continue to maintain. In putting forward this thesis of an entangled, alternative modernity, I am neither choosing the ahistorical perspective of a constant structure, nor the post-modern perspective, in which traditions simply dissolve or wither away, but I am interested in their adaptation to the forces of capitalism and to the commodification of religion. I argue that in the context of a politicisation of religion in southern Thailand, chauvinistic communal mobilizations and acute violence, the exchange of prayer gestures and the presence of a Muslim jilbab in a Buddhist temple provide telling transgressions against the process of normalizing and disciplining religious boundaries. These transgressions are not expressions of communal harmony or unchanging values, but show how autochthonous ideas and conscious strategies are used to communicate the processes of rationalization, normalization, social control, inequality, dislocation and cultural fragmentation. The re-enchanting of modernity revitalizes religious beliefs and keeps modernity spirited.[6] Religious traditions are here not simply reproduced or even reinvented, but provide a resource pool for enchanting the post-modern condition (Horstmann and Reuter 2009: 853–856). I regard embodied markers of identity as signs and symbols that are used to mark ethnic and religious affiliation and identity.

Both of these case studies involve symbolic exchanges that transgress the social order in very interesting ways.[7] First, in a cosmological sense, they would represent the traditional social order. But in recent years the normalization of religion has engendered a process, in which the boundaries of religion have been reinforced more rigidly and crosscutting ties between Buddhism and Islam have become taboo. In such a context—which Mary Douglas would call 'purity and danger'—these liminal spaces have become polluted and polluting (1979). It is very important to note that the actors who perform the ritual behaviour clearly identify and mark themselves as Buddhists or Muslims. In this sense, the exchange of prayer and healing bodily expressions represent transgressions in a public space where Buddhism and Islam are newly but clearly separated from one another.[8]

---

[6] By "spirited modernity" I want to say that spirits are revitalized in highly modern contexts.

[7] For a theoretical perspective on transgression, see Ursula Rao and John Hutnyk, Celebrating Transgression. Method and Politics in Anthropological Studies of Culture (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2006).

[8] Rituals are effective and transformative rather than stabilizing and traditionalizing. Köpping, for instance sees rituals as moments of intensified communication, which address
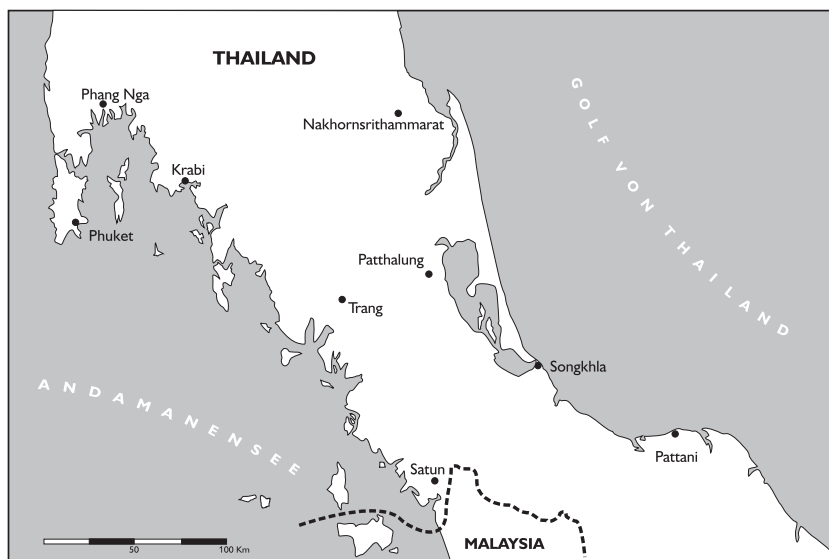
Figure 5.1   Map of Southern Thailand

In the following section of this article, I provide some background information on the area in which these ritual traditions developed and are taking place. In the principal section, the exchange of bodily expressions in the two cases will be discussed, before analyzing and interpreting these exchanges in the concluding section. I then engage in a theoretical discussion of the development of ritual space in Theravada Buddhism and Islam and argue that a focus on embodied identity markers adds new perspectives to this debate. A few remarks on transformative character of ritual in the completive sharing of the ritual space conclude this article.

The Research Context

The research area is located in the Songkhla Lake Basin, which is comprised of the provinces of Songkhla, Patthalung and Nakhonsrithammarat.

---

contingency in the human world and through their performance ope4n up contingent processes themselves that have the potential to transform perception. As rituals pronounce the relativity of any particular order, they may initiate meaningful transgressions that can only be partly contained within a set frame and may trigger radical reorganization of perception and social context. See Klaus P. Köpping, Shattering Frames, Transgression and Transformations in Anthropological Discourse and Practice (Berlin: Reimer, 2002).

Tambralinga, as the area was once called, is one of the oldest kingdoms in Southeast Asia. The Isthmus of Kra on the West Coast of Southern Thailand was a very important trade route from mainland to insular Southeast Asia and a Carrefour of culture.

The region is also a point where Buddhist culture and its sphere of influence meets and overlaps with Islamic spheres. With the centralization of the Thai state, the Songkhla Lake area came to be dominated by Theravada Buddhism and some of Thailand's oldest and most sacred temples can be found in this area. These temples played an important role in the process and narrative of state building in Southern Thailand. Muslims were settling in the Songkhla Lake area as migrants and sometimes as slaves and filled there a marginal and subaltern role. Thus, Songkhla, Patthalung and Nakhonsrithammarat are primarily Buddhist provinces with Muslim minorities. In some districts, though, Buddhists and Muslims are equal in numbers, live in mixed neighbourhoods in a context of day-to-day co-existence. However, in recent times, these communities have become more clearly separated internally along religious lines and increasingly, Buddhists and Muslims distinguish themselves from one another by adopting a more conspicuous religious dress code and identity. In Tamot, for example, Ban Tamot is a Buddhist community, while Ban Hua Chang is a Muslim community. But the history of these communities is intertwined. The Buddhist temple is constructed on the remains of a Muslim cemetery and surau (Islamic prayer hall), while Ban Hua Chang used to be a Buddhist settlement with a Buddhist cave. The cemetery of Tamot used to be a Muslim cemetery, but has gradually been taken over by the Buddhist villagers. Ban Tamot and Ban Hua Chang switched completely: The Buddhist villagers settled in the fertile valley, while the Muslims settled in the less fertile hills. In this sense, the religious landscape and the use of resources reflect the power relationships in the area. In Tamot, conversions in both directions did occur, from Buddhism to Islam and from Islam to Buddhism. However, I found that the noble elite in Tamot tended to convert to Buddhism at the time when the presence of the Thai state was growing. The reason may well be that conversion to Buddhism facilitated upward mobility and integration into the local power elite. Today, Islam, under the influence of transnational reformist forces, no longer accepts conversion to Buddhism.

Buddhism and Islam have coexisted in the Songkhla Lake region for several hundred years and they can both be considered as indigenous religions. Both of these world religions articulated with the earlier indigenous ritual and belief system of the Songkhla Lake region. Hundreds of years

ago, the villagers primarily believed in the power of nature and ancestor spirits and these beliefs in ancestor spirits hold until today. In the Thalesap Songkhla region, a very interesting tradition of Buddhist saints exists and some of these saints enjoy great popularity among Southern people, in the manner of prominent ancestors. Both Buddhism and Islam developed interesting syncretistic variations in the Songkhla lake region and incorporated ancestor spirit beliefs. In Southern Thailand, only the most recent ancestors are remembered except for individual persons who were known to have accumulated a great deal of merit. The anonymous ancestors are conceptualized as a collective who, on their way to heaven, help the living and keep away malevolent spirits. Only a few receive the title of "great ancestors." These great ancestors were known for their power, charisma and merit and are remembered by personal name. Buddhist saints, Muslim governors and the first teachers of the Manooraa count among them. Southern Thailand thus developed a unique ritual culture and arts that combined elements of local religion, Theravada Buddhism and Islam. However, the influences of the national Sangha and, more recently, the rise of transnational Islamic missionary movements have divided the villagers and sometimes forced them to live a contradiction. Some religious leaders have striven to continue old traditions, while also being under the strong influence of forces that claimed to represent modernity. People thus find themselves in a situation, where traditional beliefs coexist with newer, more orthodox ideas. In more recent times, the circulation of media images of inter-religious community violence in the three border provinces has engendered a discussion on the feasibility of Buddhist and Muslim co-existence in Thailand. On the one hand, Buddhist villagers express solidarity with the Buddhist minority in the border provinces, as Thai Buddhists continue to migrate to safer places in the Songkhla lake region. On the other hand, minority Muslims in the Songkhla lake region have joined Islamic da'wa movements, such as the Tablighi Jama'at and travelled to the Tabligh's centres in Yala and Bangkok. These developments have to be contextualised in a discussion of the dynamics of Theravada Buddhism and Islam in Thailand as a whole.

The Ritual of Two Religions in Tamot, Patthalung

In the fifth lunar month, the people in Tamot celebrate a ritual at the cemetery just after the important *phi may* New Year celebrations to symbolize the renewal of social relations. The feast is characterized by plenty

of activity, hundreds of visitors and much noise. The cemetery is a shared cemetery where Muslims and Buddhists are buried. Originally a Muslim cemetery, it was taken over by Thai Buddhist and Chinese villagers to the extent that the majority of tombs are now Buddhist. The tombs of the Thai and Chinese are very conspicuous with shrines and photographs, while those of the Muslims are very plain. The Muslims have established their own cemetery in Ban Hua Chang—a Muslim community that was formerly Buddhist, but has changed with Ban Wat Tamot, while the temple of Wat Tamot is built on the remains of a Muslim cemetery and a Muslim surau. The Muslim tombs are supposed to be very old.

While the Muslims are now very marginally represented at the common cemetery, their participation is necessary for the ritual of unity to function. Without their participation, the renewal of communal relations would not be complete and tensions and rifts would be possible. The guardian spirit of the community is believed to be Muslim from the Malay Archipelago and a religious elder, a pattern repeated in other localities in Southern Thailand. The founder of the community and owner of the land is a stranger and pioneer settler. Not much is known however, about him. A cohesive creation narrative of Ban Tamot is missing, although the Buddhist elders of Tamot began to write their version of the history of the temple and the history of the community only ten years ago.

Participants in the Ritual

The most conspicuous element of the ritual of two religions is the presence and visibility of the religious leaders: Buddhist abbots and Islamic imams, from Ban Tamot, Ban Hua Chang and surrounding communities. The Buddhist monks establish themselves in a large prayer hall on the hill and physically dominate the landscape, while the imams settle in a much smaller building. The day before the ritual, Buddhist and Muslim women begin actively cleaning the tombs, decorating them with flowers and candles and presenting offerings to the guardian spirit. Every family busily cleans the tombstone of the family lineage, replaces flowers and provides fresh water.

The guardian spirit is living at a Hindu fertility shrine, owned by God Shiva. The phallus symbol of Shiva (*lingam*) is decorated with golden ornaments, flowers, and lamps, and is covered by a Buddhist robe. A plate consisting of sticky rice, roasted chicken and sweets is also offered to the shrine. Betel and betel nuts are never missing, since betel is the item that

represents the ancestors. The ancestral spirits are welcomed with noisy fireworks, festive Manooraa-dance and music, creating a carnival atmosphere. The terrain of the guardian spirit is demarcated by four posts and a white thread, signalling a sacred space, and it is forbidden to enter this terrain during the ritual. Apart from the religious leaders, crowds of laypeople join in as families and gather around the tombstones to participate in the ritual. They join the prayers, exchange food and consume this food on site in a picnic-like atmosphere. Participating Buddhists and Muslims are distinguishable by their festive and religious dress. Whereas the Buddhist elders wear traditional cotton formal dress, the Buddhist laypeople dress in casual and informal clothes. Muslim men dress in Malay-Islamic attire, wearing sarongs and turbans. Muslim women on the other hand are dressed more formally and wear colourful veils. When the ritual prayers start, hundreds of people have congregated on the small hill, the large majority being Buddhist.

Note that this is not the only place in Southeast Asia, where Islam and other religions come together in ritual in this way. Islam also coexists with Hinduism in Northern Bali and in Lombok in very similar ways, with similar recent tensions and changes (see Reuter 2002).

Exchange of Prayers

The ritual of two religions begins with the chanting of the Du'a verses for the dead in the small building where the Muslims imams and their associates place themselves. Something spectacular happens in this ritual space at this point in time. When the Muslim imams and Muslim villagers chant their *Du'a* prayers in the Muslim shrine, the Buddhist elders and some Buddhist villagers who have Muslim ancestors join them and exchange praying gestures with them, holding up their hands to worship Allah and to praise the dead. However, the imams never join the Buddhist monks or Buddhist elders for their prayers, but walk in the early morning through the cemetery to greet the participating Buddhist families. While the Buddhist abbot never emulates Islamic prayer, he respects the transgression of religious practice by the Buddhist elders. The presentation of the Du'a chants is relatively modest and is even done in reduced form. After the chants in the small Sala, the imams also chant Du'a prayers at the graveyards where they assume their founder is buried.

The exchange of prayer is a dramatic manifestation of conciliation and solidarity and an acknowledgement of the fact that the Buddhist elders
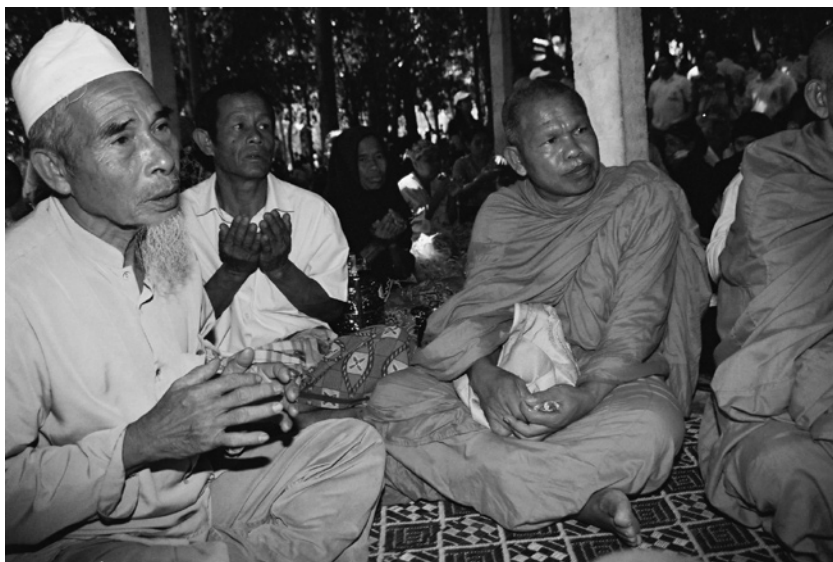
Figure 5.2   The Buddhist abbot joins the Islamic Du'a prayer for the ancestral spirits.

and even the abbot are linked by cross-cutting kinship ties to the imam in Ban Hua Chang. The exchange of habitual prayer gestures is embodied in the sense that is it is expressed through the emulation of physical prayer and bodily expression. After the Muslim prayer, there is loud chanting of Buddhist sermons in the Buddhist Sala propagated by huge loudspeakers. Hundreds of Buddhist people who have arrived and who sit in a picnic-like atmosphere around the graveyards join the Buddhist sermons in a Buddhist chorus. The Muslims remain silent.

Exchange of Foodstuffs

After the exchange of prayers, the most important act of the ritual takes place: the exchange of foodstuffs. Food is among the most important items to be offered to the ancestral spirits. Women are particularly active in the preparation as well as in the exchange of foods. The day before the ritual the women spend the whole day preparing delicious selected traditional dishes to be ready to serve and to exchange with other households. The food entails tasty curries, rice dishes, vegetables and fruit platters. Pork and every item associated with pork are carefully avoided as the Muslim

food taboo has gained in importance in recent years. A similar taboo concerns liquor, but while liquor is not on the list of exchange, nobody can really stop the youth from consuming beer at the graveyards. Women present their foodstuffs to their relatives, friends, and women groups. Buddhist and Muslim women groups actively exchange information about the foods prepared, which are then exchanged between the groups. There is a lot of joking, laughter and bargaining between the women's groups in a festive atmosphere, but also hard work, as the food has to be prepared in advance and in great volumes. The fact that the Muslim families accept the food of their Buddhist neighbours and consume it in the shrine should not be taken lightly, since food is one of the main boundaries between the groups. Apart from liquor and pork, there is no obstacle to food exchange and the food is consumed in a picnic style, whereby Muslims sit down with their Buddhist friends and relatives to enjoy the food. The food is first of all offered to the ancestors. People believe that the spirits have to be fed before the participants are allowed to consume the remainders. Second, food is offered to the religious leaders of the groups. While the imams and their associates consume the food together in a relaxed climate, the Buddhist laypeople have to wait until the Buddhist monks have completed their sermons and the subsequent consumption of all foodstuffs, fruits and desserts carefully presented on platters to the monks. Only then is the general feast allowed to start. During the picnic-style consumption of foods, the families are visited one by one by Buddhist monks and young novices who chant additional sermons. The family members stop eating during the chants and continue eating only after the monks have left for the next family. The selection of traditional foods is part of all important ancestral rituals: it is also offered to the great ancestors of the Manooraa-teachers on a special shrine constructed specifically on that occasion. Thus, food is indispensable for the reproduction of social relations in the village.

Declaration of Religious Harmony

Finally, one imam selected by the Muslim community—Imam Leb from Ban Klong Nui—is invited to address the audience in Southern Thai dialect in front of the Buddhist *Sala*. He begins his presentation by praising Allah (during which he is stopped by the Buddhist abbot). Interestingly, the Buddhist abbot refrains from giving a similar presentation, as this is not deemed to be necessary. "Dear Brothers and Sisters (*piinong*). We come

Figure 5.3   The Islamic Imam in front of the Buddhist Sangha.

together here to demonstrate unity. In Tamot, Buddhists and Muslims live in peace. There should be no separation of Buddhists and Muslims, because we are tied by common blood relations." After his speech, nowadays, journalists interview the imam as the "ritual of two religions" is considered unique and receives substantial media interest from outside. Local leaders and politicians visit the ritual of two religions to learn about interfaith dialogue in Tamot. Tamot is considered to be a model of peaceful co-existence. After the speech, the ritual of two religions is closed and everybody returns home.

Manooraa as Spectacle and Pilgrimage Centre

Manooraa Rongkruu literally means Manooraa-Stage-Teacher: The ancestors are elevated to the highest position of deities and teachers who transfer their knowledge to the living and who enter the stage from heaven. While Manooraa represents the general performance and art tradition, the Manooraa Rongkruu encompasses the full ritual cycle and spirit possession ritual. Typical occasions for this type of Manooraa ritual include social or family functions, conflict within the family, miraculous healing of an illness, or a vow fulfilment ceremony. The dances performed by the

possessed spirit mediums are also called vow-dances (cf. Butsararat 1992, 2003; Hemmet 1992: 276; Isaradej 1999). The Manooraa Rongkruu ritual will be prepared months or even years in advance, because it is crucial that all of the family members are present, and to complete all associated financial and organizational arrangements. The head of the family will set a date in the period from May to September with the trusted Manooraa master (*nairong Manooraa*). The Manooraa master seeks intensive communication with the host family, which is indispensable for the preparation of the ritual and especially its ancestor-part. He will inquire about every single deity and ancestor spirit in the house. Not all of the deceased have the privilege of receiving ancestor status and only very powerful people who accumulated a lot of merit receive the status of great ancestors. The *nairong Manooraa* is not able to contact the ancestor spirits of the house directly, but he can mediate between the ancestors of the first Manooraa teachers and the ancestor spirits of the house. He will also be responsible for the call to the ancestor spirits and for the control of harmful spirits who may enter the stage through the back door. During the consultations, which precede the performance, the *nairong Manooraa* also inquires about the motivation of the family to invite the Manooraa band. The host family will place photographs of their ancestors on the shrine in the house, prepare the offerings, food, and drinks for all the visitors for the three days and build a temporary ritual stage on a lawn near the house. The stage serves as a ceremonial space as well as a performing area for Manooraa. The *palai* (spirit shrine) is a small, elevated platform on the right side of the stage. It represents a high house where only *Manooraa* ancestral spirits reside; the shrine for the host family's ancestral spirits is in the main house. During the ritual, a white sacred string (*saisin*) will link the *palai* by the stage to the shrine in the host family's house. The *palai* serves as the link between the god-like realm of the Manooraa spirits and the host family's ancestors. The performance space for a Manooraa-dance-drama varies. Traditionally, it was a makeshift space on the ground, with only four bamboo pillars and a roof signifying the performance boundaries. The Manooraa Rongkruu is performed in the intimate compound of a private house and is available only for invited family members, relatives and good friends. The stage (*rong*) is constructed only for the duration of the performance and will be completely dismantled afterwards. Music and dance play a very significant role. A Manooraa dancer's costume is layered with a chest piece, a neckpiece, and a shoulder ornament; all are made from strings of colourful small plastic beads. Other unique features are

the golden crown (*soed*), the silver wing ornament, the birdlike tail, and the long, bent fingernail extensions. A *soed* crown is considered sacred; only those who have gone through a *krob soed* initiation ritual are allowed to wear it. It is not uncommon in the Lake Songkhla area to observe a multi-religious ritual, in which spirit possession blends with Theravada Buddhism or Islam (Horstmann 2004, 2008).

A public performance in Takae, which I witnessed in May 2007, attracted hundreds of participants and onlookers who hoped to benefit from the presence of Si Sata's spirit and his power to heal. In the first week of May, another grand ceremony attracted thousands of pilgrims who flocked in as families to participate in the merit-making activities at the temple of Takura in Satingpra. The ritual in Satingpra was also organised by a committee consisting of local bureaucrats and the Buddhist abbot of Takura. The ceremony transformed the sleepy village of Ban Wat Takura into a huge feast in which large crowds were attracted by the healing power of the Buddha image that is stored in a box behind two temple doors. The unwrapping of the small Buddha image under the music of the Manooraa musicians is the highlight of the festival.

The Manooraa Rongkruu in Takura was a hybridization of Theravada Buddhism and Manooraa. Basically, two mythological events happened in Takura at the same time: First, Takura is an important place in the Manooraa-myth. According to the old people, Mae Simmala donated the gold that an elephant had found in a bamboo tree to the temple of Wat Tatura to distribute it among the people in one narrative, or donated it to the abbot to have it transformed into the holy Buddha image according to another. The Buddha image was presented in a cage to the pilgrims who waited for hours to catch some holy water and sprinkle it on the Buddha image. Intensive chanting by Buddhist monks in Pali sacred language, and drum playing by selected Manooraa musicians located in the temple hall in front of the door preceded the unwrapping of the Buddha image. Male dancers wearing the ancestor Manooraa mask of the hunter danced wildly in the smaller pavilion. A special stage was again erected for the *Manooraa Rongkruu* performance. Hundreds bought a ticket for 50 Baht to enter the stage and to dance along the music transmitted by audiocassettes on loudspeakers. The dancers wear only individual parts of the Manooraa costumes or the hunter-masks. After 5 minutes, the music stopped and the *nairong Manooraa* sent the dancers from the stage. He got ready for the next ritual, the *yiap sen* (stepping on the sore). Again, people bought their ticket for 50 Baht and in this case mothers brought

their children onto the stage. Before curing the babies with his foot, the Manooraa master inquired with the mother about the illness of the child. Just as in Wat Takae, numerous families flocked to the temple in the hope of a cure.

Another event brought hundreds of young women to the temple festival at Takura. Young women were ordained as fulfilment of a vow they made to the mother of the Manooraa. In contemporary Thailand, women are marginalized with regard to ordination into the Buddhist *sangha*. In Takura, women had the special opportunity to be ordained for one day. The young nuns-to-be were eager to perform the ordination ceremony, but because of the sheer number, the ceremony was carried out in a very concise form. Every 30 minutes, ten women were ordained in a row. The young women identified with the female hero of the Manooraa epos. They regarded their ordination to the status of Mee Chi in Takura as a meritorious act and as a way to reciprocate their vows. The sprinkling of the Buddha image, the dancing in the viharn, the *yiap sen* on the stage, the healing activities of monks, and the mass ordination of young nuns all took place in an atmosphere of a popular festival with numerous market stalls selling food, drinks, Buddhist amulets, handicrafts, fake hunter-masks and musical Manooraa instruments. The commodification of the Manooraa Rongkruu, its hybridization and post-modernisation, was thus brought to a climax in Takura.

On the second day of the ritual, on Thursday, a striking scene unfolded: A young mother with a black *jilbab* pushed her way through the crowds. The *nairong Manooraa* nodded and ordered her baby on a pillow. He slowly rotated, put his foot into the holy water, the fire and on the face of the crying baby. In her desperate need for a cure, the young Muslim mother had come all the way from the province of Chumphorn. Ready to find her way to the *nairong Manooraa*, she ignored the Buddhist environment. Because of her veiling in a black *Hijab*, everybody recognized her as a modern Muslima. Some of the Muslim participants may have not put on Islamic clothes and were not recognizable as Muslims. This woman made a case in showing off her Islamic affiliation, but made a desperate move to find a cure for her baby. She was received by the *nairong Manooraa* who put his foot on the baby's face under loud music from the drums. The Muslim woman was unaware of the commercialization of the ceremony and deeply uncomfortable in the crowd. Finally, she bought the ticket and her right to see the Manooraa master for five minutes. This case shows that even as a modern Muslima, the woman hoped to receive a cure from the great ancestor spirits, in whose power she clearly believed.

Figure 5.4   The Manooraa master puts his bare foot on the children's face to cure the Muslim child.

Theoretical Considerations

Religion in Thailand today is characterized by contradictory trends: while conventional Theravada Buddhism seems to have lost much appeal with the younger generation, Buddhism is also being revived in new forms. The worship of Buddhist saints, the booming cult of Buddhist amulets, and the presence of magic monks show that a reconfigured Buddhism is able to thrive in particular niches in modern urban society (Jackson 1999; Kitiarsa 2005b; Taylor 1999). The expansion of the capitalist market economy in Thailand has resulted in a deeply polarized society and in a widening gap between the poor and the very rich. Religious forms are not essential phenomena, but have reacted with flexibility to the conditions of dislocation, rapid social change and social uncertainty, and developed niches in the religious market. There are religious forms catering to the poor, the lower middle class and also to the very wealthy (Guelden 2007 [1995]; Morris 2000). Taylor argues that Buddhism has been commodified (Taylor 1999; Kitiarsa 2008). In Bangkok, for example, wealthy patrons donate lavishly to the *Buddhist sangha* (order of monks) for the robe-presentation ceremony *kathin* and other ceremonies as a means to enhance their social prestige. Merit making is only possible for the wealthy.

Meanwhile Islam, the second religion in Southern Thailand, is rapidly globalizing. As a result of exposure to transnational Islamic missionary *da'wa* movements, many Muslims withdraw from multi-religious rituals, such as the Manooraa Rongkruu. They become involved in transnational flows, mobility and movement and consume Islamic images that are produced by the global media, such as the Internet. But Islam is also fragmented. The traditional group is rivalled by new Islamic movements, such as the *Salafiya* or the *Tablighi Jama'at* from North India (cf. Horstmann 2007). This fragmentation of Theravada Buddhism and Islam in Southern Thailand creates space for the rise of spirit mediums as a third force. While the capitalist economy and the growing nation-state weakened ancestral traditions and traditional authority in the village, the same forces also propelled the dramatic expansion, presence and visibility of spirit mediums in urban areas, that are often possessed by royalty and thus can speak to all manner of clientele, including the highest members of the political elite (Kitiarsa 2005b; Morris 2000; Tanabe 2002). These urban spirit-mediums and prosperity cults coexist and hybridize with the revitalized and fragmented Theravada Buddhism (Kitiarsa 2005a, 2008).[9] Morris (2000) ties the rise of spirit possession in contemporary Thailand to the political economy of a modernist Thai state that has commodified spirit possession, and re-packaged it through electronic mediation on video and television as an object of desire and longing. Morris shows that the process of mediation through new media technologies is crucial for the rise of new configurations of spirited modernities. Video technology and modern media images have also played a key role in the revitalization of public ritual in the local context.

Modern media images help to revitalize the autonomous tradition as an imagined community of the Southerners in which the Southern arts come to the fore. It is not the first time that Manooraa performances have been recorded by modern mass media. The state has attempted in the 1950s to instrumentalize the Manooraa medium for the mediation of government propaganda. Famous Manooraa artists were encouraged to

---

[9] See Pattana Kitiarsa (2005a): Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand. In: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 36, 3, 461–487. Pattana Kitiarsa develops his argument about hybridization by using the example of diversified and stratified order of hybrid religious beliefs becoming increasingly visible not only in the temples, but also in the media and in the marketplace. Apart from the articulations of prosperity and commercialized religiosity, it is however not quite clear to me how the concept of hybridity contributes to the understanding of the place of religion in modernity or negotiation, legitimacy, and conflict about it.

perform in military uniforms and were recorded by state television. While Manooraa today is part of the folklore by which the South is imagined as local culture in the nation, political liberalization and video-technology provide the means for an autonomous drive to enhance the confidence of modern Manooraa artists.

In Southern Thailand, regional differences in mediumship reflect the ethnic and religious composition and cultural diversity of the South. Thai Buddhist, Malay Muslim and Chinese mediums are being possessed by different classes of spirits. The issues brought to mediums concern adultery, financial problems, and various ailments that might be caused by black magic. Despite the existence of numerous clinics and hospitals in the South, healing of physical ailments, including chronic health problems, are still a major issue brought to mediums in parallel with mental problems (Golomb 1978, 1985). Such ailments are also the triggers that urge people to host a Manooraa Rongkruu performance. Again, the healing power of specific Manooraa masters is transmitted through media images into every corner of Southern Thailand. People thus bear the longest possible journey to the Manooraa ceremony, if they hope that the power of this master is sufficient to heal their ailments. This power of charisma transcends ethnic and religious boundaries.[10] Apart from the notion of hybridity, the postmodernist lens has been used by scholars to refer to current developments in Thai religion that already seem to have passed beyond the modern stage. Peter Jackson argues that "the modern phase in Thai religion refers to following a path of doctrinal rationalization accompanied by organizational centralization and bureaucratization whereas the post-modern one is characterized by a resurgence of supernaturalism and an efflorescence of religious expression at the margins of state control, involving a decentralization and localization of religious authority" (Jackson 1999). In other words, religion can assume many different forms, from being a commodity, political ideology, marker of identity or marketing technique to an object of worship (Jackson 1999).

Concluding Remarks

The revitalization of popular ritual traditions in Southern Thailand enables people to negotiate their synergies and interactions between religion and

---

[10] For a similar healing spirit possession cult in Sri Lanka, see Kapferer, Bruce (1983).

the informal and formal market economy (Kitiarsa 2008). I would like to highlight the effective and transformative type of ritual in which the authenticity of a ritual cannot be taken for granted but is culturally contested. I argue that the concepts of syncretism, hybridization and postmodernism lack a focus on agency. I therefore concur with Köpping that the exchange and encounter in ritual space is a moment of intensified communication, where the social order and modernity can be stabilized or contested (Henn & Koepping 2008, Koepping 2002). I concur with Parkin that rituals do not only correspond to the core values of society but that ritual is characterized by ambiguity and open-endedness and that every ritual is not the same, but leaves space for negotiation (Parkin 1992). I would like to add that my illustrations also show that the participants of the ritual cannot entirely control the ruling of the ritual and that the ritual is always good for unforeseen surprises and ruptures.

In the two-case studies I have presented, the multi-religious exchange of symbolic bodily interactions illustrates the articulation of ancestral power with the normalization processes of Buddhism and Islam. Lambek (2000: 70) has called this a process of "polyphony" in which people have to "navigate among the various claims that both ancestral power or modern religion makes upon them and in which they are not in a position to make a decision in favour of one or the other." I think that people in Southern Thailand very much find themselves in the same polyphony, in which they have to navigate between ancestral beliefs and the claims that normalized religion and the state makes upon them without being able to choose exclusively between them or to drop ritual traditions entirely.[11]

In the present case, the exchange of food and prayer gestures is a space in which religious boundaries are maintained rather than transcended. However, while the imitation of Islamic prayer is done by Buddhists (laypeople only) who want to contact their Muslim ancestors, this is not reciprocated by Muslims. The exchange of food is therefore not always singularly indicative of inter-group relations.

The continued presence of religious leaders in this transgressed space is remarkable in a context of growing orthodoxies. The exceptional practice of exchanging food, prayer gestures and other bodily expressions in ritual space transgresses the norms that operate in the space of everyday life, where cultural boundaries are now guarded more tightly. The ritual

---

[11] Barraud and Platenkamp (1990), for example, maintain that in East Indonesia, the system of social relationships corresponds to a system of circulation in which food circulates between the people involved.

emphasizes a sameness based on common ancestry, while the strengthening of boundaries in everyday life shows the growing relevance of religious difference. The tensions between orthopraxis and orthodoxy that characterize multi-ritual space in Southern Thailand mirror the encounters of the local and the global. The global has arrived in the form of revivalist movements and has not left the cosmology of the community untouched. People and religious leaders in the community have become deeply involved in global revivalist movements. Some of the religious leaders have withdrawn from the ritual as a result of their exposure to the global, while others remain committed to the ritual as they do not see a contradiction between local practice and global ideologies. Theoretically speaking, two different cosmological belief systems coexist, and the leaders of both religious communities compromise their dogma for the time of the ritual by giving priority to local political and cultural issues. The tensions between the local and the global are negotiated in Islamic ritual as well as in Buddhist ritual, whereas the national perspective manifests in Buddhist ritual. The ritual of two religions is just one ritual among many, and other rituals—global Islamic rituals and national Buddhist ones—exist in parallel. The ritual of two religions successfully resists the growing normalization and politization of religion in the public sphere. By participating in the ancestor cult, religious leaders do not necessarily compromise their orthodox understanding of religion, but see ancestral religion and world religion as being complementary. Whereas other works on Southern Thailand and beyond emphasize the localization of Buddhism and Islam, ritual practice in Tamot at once reflects the growing separation of religious life-worlds and the tireless efforts of religious leaders to maintain a peaceful relationship with the religious other. In many ways, the local art form represents Knauft's articulatory space of alternative modernity where customary production and exchange meets capitalism. The market economy brought new energy and in turn provided the means of keeping modernity spirited. This means that dramatic bodily expressions of identity that related to the spirits articulate with the forces of modernity and become re-enchanted and certainly transformed.

References

Barraud, Cécile and J. D. M. Platenkamp (1990) "Rituals and the Comparison of Societies." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 146/2–3: 193–225.

Douglas, Mary (1979) *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo.* London: Routledge.

Golomb, Louis (1978) *Brokers of Morality. Thai ethnic adaptation in a rural Malaysian setting*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii press.

—— (1985) *An anthropology of Curing in multi-ethnic Thailand*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Gomes, Alberto, Timo Kaartinen and Timo Kortteinen (2007) "Civility and Social Relations in South- and Southeast Asia." *Suomen Anthropologi*, 32, 3: 4–11.

Guelden, Marlane (2007) [1995] *Spirits among us*. Marshall Cavendish Editions: Singapore.

Hayden, Robert M. (2002) "Antagonistic tolerance. Competitive sharing of religious sites in South Asia and the Balkans." *Current Anthropology*, 43, 2, 2002: pp. 205–231.

Hemmet, Christine (1992) "Le Manooraa du Sud de la Thailande: un culte aux ancetres." *BEFEO* 79 (2): 261–82.

Henn, Alexander and Klaus-Peter Koepping eds. (2008) *Rituals in an Unstable World. Contingency-Hybridity-Embodyment.* Frankfurt a.M.: Lang.

Horstmann, Alexander (2008) "Lokale Kosmologie und religiöse Differenz: Versuch einer Typologie über buddhistisch-islamische Austauschprozesse im Süden Thailands". *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 133: 95–120.

—— (2007) "The Inculturation of a Transnational Islamic Missionary Movement: Tablighi Jamaat al-Dawa and Muslim Society in Southern Thailand." *SOJOURN*, 22, 1: 107–130.

—— (2004) "Ethnohistorical Perspectives on Buddhist-Muslim Relations and Coexistence in Southern Thailand: From Shared Cosmos to the Emergence of Hatred." *SOJOURN*, 19, 1 (April 2004): 76–99.

Isaradej, Thienchai (1999) *Social Implications of Manooraa Rongkruu: A Case-Study of Ban Bo-Dang*. [M.A. Thesis] Bangkok: Silapakorn University.

Jackson, Peter A. (1999) "Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods, and Magic Monks: Thailand's Boom-Time Religions of Prosperity" South East Asia Research." 7, 3: 245–320.

Kitiarsa, Pattana (2005a) "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (3): 461–87.

—— (2005b) "Magic Monks and spirit mediums in the politics of Thai popular religion." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6 (2): 209–26.

—— ed. (2008) *Religious Commodifications in Asia. Marketing Gods.* London/New York: Routledge.

Knauft, Bruce M. (2002) *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Lambek, Michael (2000) "Localizing Islamic Performance in Mayotte," in David Parkin and Stephen C. Headley eds., *Islamic Prayer across the Indian Ocean: inside and outside the mosque*. Richmond: Curzon, pp. 63–98.

Morris, Rosalind C. (2000) *In the Place of Origins. Modernity and its Mediums in Northern Thailand*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Parkin, David (1992) "Ritual as Spatial Direction and Bodily Division," in Daniel de Coppet ed., *Understanding Rituals*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 11–25.

Reuter, Thomas A. (2002) *Custodians of the Sacred Mountains. Culture and Society in the Highlands of Bali*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Taylor, J. L. (1999) "Postmodernity, remaking tradition and the hybridization of Thai Buddhism." *Anthropological Forum* 9 (2): 163–87.

A MOOD OF CRISIS: BALINESE RITUAL CULTURE
BETWEEN CREOLIZATION AND CRITICISM

Annette Hornbacher

Bali has fascinated generations of anthropologists, and beyond this it has become a global epitome of a timeless aesthetic culture based on rituals and surrounded by a lush tropical nature. As an icon of global tourism on its eternal way to one or another 'last paradise,' Bali attracts an ever increasing and, by its sheer number, threatening amount of tourists who visit the 'island of the gods' to watch the ritual performances of its inhabitants.

Notwithstanding this global success of Bali's ritual culture, the Indonesian government pursues a politics of religion that recognizes local rituals and cosmologies only inasmuch as they are reinterpreted in terms of a coherent theological doctrine, which implies the confession to monotheism and a holy scripture. The paradigm of this national idea of scriptural monotheism is of course Indonesia's majority religion, Islam (Ramstedt, 2004). According to this powerful framework of national politics, the Balinese were forced to reinterpret their ritual traditions in terms of a universal Hinduism. This entailed a marginalization of local rituals that combine Hindu theology and Buddhist philosophy in many different variations with local ancestor worship and cosmology, in favour of an orthodox Hinduism based on the Vedas and Bhagavad-Gita.

While many modernist and formally educated Balinese do support a shift from local ritual to Hindu theology (Bakker, 1993), it would be misleading to conclude that Balinese rituals are disappearing. Persistent western suspicions that Bali's ritual culture would disappear under the overwhelming influence of modernization and religious politics did not prove to be true. Rather, growing prosperity in the wake of the success of the cultural tourism industry has triggered a flourishing of ritual. This applies particularly to the last decade. Today, rituals are performed with more offerings and paraphernalia than ever and at an unprecedented level of splendour.

In view of this recent increase in ritualism, I would like to consider the consequences for Balinese ritual and cosmology of their participation in a global economy and national religious politics. I will particularly investigate whether the integration of Bali's ritual culture into the framework of a global tourism industry enhances local ritual and cosmology in counterbalance to Indonesia's politics of religion, and thus produces a form of economically invigorated "glocalization" (Robertson, 1997).

To begin with, in this paper I analyze several ambiguities and paradoxes emerging from the clash between Balinese ideas of ritual and cosmological efficacy and the reification of ritual as a cultural heritage on a global market. I argue that the Balinese way of dealing with these contradicting ascriptions can be understood as their specific interpretation—and negotiation—of modernity. My point of reference here is a 'crisis discourse' that evolved a decade ago in Bali and interprets the present as a threatening situation of cosmic disorder. I will relate this discourse both to an increasing suicide rate during the same period, and to the boom of ritualism that I witnessed during my fieldwork in the south of Bali.

I shall examine these interrelated aspects from three different perspectives that correspond to the local and global frameworks within which Balinese cosmology and ritual culture is economically and theoretically embedded: firstly, I will analyze the successful interplay of global tourism and Balinese ritual culture in light of ethnological globalization theory and its concept of "culture" as a creative resource for the negotiation between global and local forces, referring particularly to Ulf Hannerz' idea of "creolization." Secondly, I will describe the success of Bali's creolized ritual culture from the local perspective of a current Balinese crisis discourse and in relation to a dramatically increasing suicide rate on the island. Thirdly, I will examine this paradoxical coincidence of economic success and a sense of disorder, in view both of the political instrumentalisation of Balinese 'culture' and a recent boom in ritual activity that employs ritual extravagance as a means to restore cosmic balance.

I am not suggesting that this new ritualism indicates Balinese ritual traditions are preserved notwithstanding global influence. Rather, it displays an active but highly ambivalent and even aporetical attempt to resist the profound reification of Balinese ritual in terms of "culture." The point at issue is thus ultimately the range and meaning of "ritual agency" in a global context.

The Making of Balinese Ritual Culture:
Classical Explanations and Recent Doubts

Before examining the present transformation of Balinese ritual, it is worth recalling the anthropological discussion on ritual traditions in Bali, and to relate it to current concepts of globalization and the role of culture within this process.

Most influential in this regard was Clifford Geertz, who made Bali an exemplary case both for his method of "thick description" and for his corresponding concept of 'culture' as a coherent network of symbols that can be deciphered by the anthropologist as a 'text.' Geertz illustrated his theory referring to Bali's ideal-typical and classical "theatre state," as representing the essence of an—as it were—timeless Balinese culture that is epitomised by ritual performance. Following his interpretation, the almost static conservation of Balinese culture—even after the fall of the Balinese kingdoms—is an effect of this standardized Balinese ritualism, which functions as a replicator of the cultural text insofar as it pervades and structures Balinese everyday life with standardized symbolic meanings and role models. In the context of this interpretation, Balinese ritual is not merely a highly standardized and timeless performance in itself, but a means for the consequent denial of time, individuality and change in everyday life, inasmuch as rituals are aestheticised performances that provide a set of fixed metaphysical role models in an highly formalized way that inform Balinese everyday behaviour. This process can be understood—according to Geertz—as a form of ritual dance in itself. Therefore, Geertz draws the conclusion that in Bali ritual is simultaneously a model of, and for, culture and social behaviour, which implies that ritual, culture and social behaviour are mutually constitutive and ultimately identical (Geertz 1966, 1972, 1973, 1980).

This essentialist interpretation of Balinese ritual culture has been challenged in recent years by detailed investigations that highlight Bali's contested, flexible and self-reflexive discourse of cultural identity (*kebalian*) that differentiates between culture (*kebudayaan*) and ritual custom (*adat*) as well as between culture, custom and religion (*agama*) (Vickers 1989; Picard 1996; Ramstedt 2004; Hornbacher 2008). Additionally, ritual studies that have focused on specific ritual performances rather than on a presumably timeless symbolism of ritual, have described and analyzed the dynamic and creative potential of Balinese ritual in contrast to Eurocentric ideas of a static and repetitive ritual orthopraxy (Hornbacher 2005).

In addition, historical investigations do not support the ideal type of a static Balinese culture. Like many other parts of Indonesia, Bali has hosted and integrated very different traditions ranging from local nature and ancestor worship to different and even opposing concepts of Hindu theology, Buddhist philosophy and local Animism that have been integrated into Bali's ritual practice in the course of centuries (Swellengrebel 1960). Written historical sources such as the *Nagarakertagama* indicate that this flexible adaptation of different ideologies, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, was accomplished in Java and Bali both by the identification of the king with Buddha and Siva and by a highly integrative ritual practice. This is evident in Bali until today. Far from preserving a timeless or 'frozen' cultural identity since time immemorial, the Balinese have negotiated very different external influences and interests by means of an amazingly flexible ritual practice. Today, Balinese ritual integrates computers as well as holy lontar texts, and cars as well as holy daggers (*keris*). While computers and holy lontar receive offerings at the opportunity of *hari raya Saraswati*—the holy day of Saraswati, the goddess of lifelong learning—cars and ritual daggers are revered on another holy day for the blessing of metal weapons and other devices (*tumpek landep*). Instead of drawing a sharp line between profane modern life and sacred tradition that would correspond to our modernist distinction of transcendence and immanence, the Balinese interpret virtually everything in the world as a potential receptacle for spiritual beings and thus as a virtual agent of power: cars and computers as well as trees and springs. In all of these cases, ritual provides the common framework for the performative integration of these different entities, theories, epistemologies and ontologies, which are ritually incorporated—and reinterpreted—into the framework of local cosmology.

This creative integration can only be realized because Balinese ritual is open to transformation and adaptation to a certain degree. Far from being a rigid metaphysical structure, ritual adapts itself and helps people to adapt to new influences. We may therefore say that Balinese ritual culture is not the unchanged blue print or model for rigid repetition, as Geertz has suggested, but rather a flexible—and also contested—medium of reflexive adaptation to the challenges of globalization.

Michel Picard has shown that this is particularly evident regarding the negotiation of ritual for tourist purposes (Picard 1996). When the number of tourists dramatically increased in the 1970s, Balinese officials tried to delimit the commoditization of their ritual heritage. In a seminar, representatives of tourism tried to decide which of their ritual performances

could and should be promoted as cultural commodities on a global art market, and which of them should be preserved from commoditizing altogether. Since Balinese language does not categorically differentiate between ritual, custom, art and culture, sacred and profane, these officials introduced European loanwords along with the logic of its opposition: *profane* and *sacred*. However, these categories did not match Balinese ideas of cosmology and their form of world-immanent spirituality nor the integral tradition of dance and ritual, and thus the result was ambivalent again. While Balinese dancers from the newly established national academy of dance started to invent new creations (*kreasi baru*) with a purely profane meaning and entertaining function, they recombined the elements of ritual dance. Subsequently, villagers reintegrated some of these dances into their temple ritual, thus crossing the border between profane and sacred. On the other hand, purely sacred ritual dances like *rejang* may be performed outside the temple and even in front of political officials, if necessary, which indicates that the Balinese do not categorically identify sacred and profane but only according to a given situation.

Nevertheless, the field of ritual and dance has changed during the last decades and due to the commoditizing of Balinese ritual dance. While the first ethnographies describe ritual and dance as a seamless continuum, today most Balinese dances are understood by dancers and priests as art (*seni*) in the Western sense and thus as a representation of local culture (Spies, de Zoete 1938). Only a few dances are said to be holy (*wali*) and thus are still performed exclusively within the temples to honour the gods (Bandem, de Boer 1995). Even though profane dances are still performed at the opportunity of temple rituals, most of them are not danced within the temple court any more but on modern stages that have been built over the last years as new architectural structures beside temples but not as a part of them. These buildings are designed after the model of Western theatre stages, which means that they have raised platforms with a backstage that separate not merely the dancers from the audience in front of them but also annihilate the spatial positioning of the dancer within a cosmology that unfolds in Bali between mountain (*kaja*) and sea (*kelod*)— the dwelling place of gods and purified ancestors and the sphere of the ambivalent souls of those who shall be purified by the sea after cremation. The commoditizing of the dances has thus led to a significant loss of three dimensional cosmological orientation in favour of a two dimensional relationship between stage and audience, and this performative change corresponds to the functional shift from ritual to theatre.

On the other hand, this pervasive transformation of the ritual performances and particularly of their dramatic and artistic parts was the price the Balinese had to pay in order to preserve the cosmological significance of their rituals while selling its theatrical and artistic aspects to an ever increasing number of cultural tourists. Thus, the reinforcement of Balinese ritual dance in terms of a globally recognized culture implies the adoption of 'art' as another Western category. This term runs counter to the *sacred-profane* divide. However the promotion of ritual practices and paraphernalia as 'art' replaces the Balinese idea of dance as an unpaid service for the gods (*ngayah*), by the modern idea of dance as a culturally highly valued profession.

It is important to notice that these changing ascriptions did not destroy the Balinese dance tradition altogether, but rather helped the Balinese to preserve it as a unique cultural heritage, both in view of the economic and conceptual challenges of global modernity and vis-à-vis a national politics of religion. Today Bali is in a privileged position because it is virtually the only 'ritual culture' of the world that is paid and acknowledged for simply 'being in the world' as "the last paradise."

This stunningly harmonious interdependence of a local ritual culture and global interests had its price. Adrian Vickers reminds us that this re-interpretation of Balinese ritual in terms of an aesthetically defined culture has a long and violent tradition (Vickers 1989. Picard 1996): He and Michel Picard have shown that the idea of Balinese culture only emerged after the dramatic military defeat of the last Balinese kingdoms by the Dutch in 1908. Only after the Dutch had defeated the Balinese kings and their followers in a final blood bath that has become a traumatic turning point of Balinese identity, did they start to perceive "Bali" as a precious gem and remnant of an ancient Hindu civilisation that could be re-interpreted in European terms of "culture," which is to say, as a form of education and art that emerged in 19th century Europe—and particularly in Germany—as a normative bourgeoisie ideal. Since that time the Balinese have learned to develop their new identity as a coherent "culture" that could be internationally promoted.

In this process the formerly cosmological and political ritual practice of Bali became increasingly 'culturalized,' and this transformation was all the more efficient because the Indonesian state adopted the same idea of 'culture' as a politically neutralized model for its multicultural Pancasila nation. Indonesia promoted cultural diversity under one crucial condition: the many diverse traditions and societies of the archipelago had to con-

form to certain standards of modernity and development, and therefore the government marginalized local practices and cosmologies based upon animism and ancestor worship and classified them as backward customs (*adat terbelakangan*). On the other hand, the state supports the development of local cultures that conform to the normative European idea of civilisation. In the context of this politics, Bali became the paradigm and ideal of national culture because it combines political neutrality—or disempowerment—with an internationally appealing ritual aestheticism that could be—and still is—promoted by the government as the prototype of Indonesian cultural tourism. Since the fall of Suharto's totalitarian new order regime the discourse on Balinese culture has been reappropriated and repoliticized by Balinese groups who promote, for example, an essentially peaceful Balinese culture in contrast to a potentially militant Islam that is attributed to Java. This politicisation of Balinese culture is of course also informed by global ideas of Bali's aestheticist culture.

Balinese Ritual: A Successful "creole culture"?

While the construction of Bali as a coherent culture has been analyzed in view of the contested Balinese identity discourse (*kebalian*) (Picard 1999), I would like to examine this process of 'culturalization' in the framework of globalization theory. Balinese culture has not been preserved due to its static rituals, but rather, it has been 'invented' only inasmuch as Balinese rituals were adapted to a modern and ultimately western idea of art and performance. This process of preservation by transcultural reinvention and negotiation has been described by globalization theories in contrast to former attempts to essentialize 'culture' as an object of anthropological description (Appadurai 1995, Hannerz 1992, Wimmer 2005). The new theories imply that culture is described as a process of negotiation rather than a set of objects and structures, which is useful for understanding the Balinese case because it transcends the polar alternatives of a presumably original and authentic Balinese culture on the one hand, and a cultural identity discourse that emerges in relation to colonial and national interests in Bali as an aesthetic culture. Given that contemporary Balinese identity discourse emerged in the framework of colonial and national power relations, Balinese culture is in fact to be seen as the result of transcultural negotiations and thus it matches Hannerz' description of a transnational "creole culture" (Hannerz 1996). Hannerz has introduced the notion of

creolization in order to describe a phenomenon that runs contrary to classical social theory, according to which modernization involves a gradual assimilation of all cultural differences to an ultimately Western standard. In contrast to this, anthropological research indicates that globalization does not result in a homogeneous modern world culture that is shaped after the Western paradigm, but rather it triggers the revitalization and recombination of cultural interpretations in a global setting thus resulting in alternative or multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000).

Similarly, Hannerz underscores that even though global modernization has created a cosmopolitan 'metaculture,' this metaculture evolves from the negotiation and recombination of cultural difference. Following this theory, cosmopolitans are open to cultural difference. Instead of essentializing cultural or national identity, the prototype of this metacultural cosmopolitanism is of course the heterogeneous world cities as opposed to the conservative idea of nation states (Hannerz 1996). The notion of "creolization" does not ignore the political and economic gaps within a globalized world, but it highlights the fact that, despite global economic hierarchies and constraints, cultural diversity has not disappeared altogether but is constantly reinvented. This creative reinvention vis-à-vis powerful outside agents resembles creole languages that emerge from the clash between a dominating—and usually European—language that is conformed to the grammar of local languages. In this sense, Hannerz emphasizes that "culture is everywhere" as a creative medium of interpretation that is "fitted to new circumstances" (Hannerz 1996: 52). Cosmopolitan interrelations not only produce new "creole cultures," but beyond this peripheral "cultures" become influential and potentially powerful resources of global exchange if they are mediated with global technologies, thus answering global needs.

This has an important consequence for dealing with culture in a global context. From Hannerz' point of view, cultural tradition is no longer to be seen as an obstacle to modernity that can only be preserved if it is static, but rather local culture is seen as a potential advantage that equips economically powerless protagonists of a global "periphery" with a resource that can become a commodity and thus a cultural capital in a global market of exchange. Successful "creolization" therefore implies the chance for economic success, and it guarantees global agency. Hannerz exemplifies this thesis, referring to traditions of African music that gain global recognition and economic success once they adapt to the production and marketing strategies and of course to the auditory habits of a global music market—thus becoming an example of "world music."

I suggest that the same applies to the creation and branding of Balinese ritual in relation to western ideas of culture that range from colonial preservation to global tourism. Even though Bali is not urban in the sense of Hannerz paradigm of world cities, it displays what he describes as the crucial feature of 'cosmopolitan' centres: the explicit willingness to deal with cultural difference and to adapt local traditions to transcultural influence. What is globally branded and marketed today as "Balinese culture" by the Balinese themselves, as well as by Indonesian politicians, foreign tourists and anthropologists, is the result of this cross-cultural negotiation of interests and traditions within the framework of a modern world economy. In other words, 'Bali' is a "creole culture" that is not merely the result of local identity discourse nor of national politics, but rather reflects the positioning of all of these influences in a global context.

This means, in economic terms, access to substantial wealth and success. Today, around 3.8 million Balinese inhabitants host 2.2 million foreign and around 3.5 million domestic tourists every year, and most of them are attracted by the iconic nature of Bali's cultural image.[1] Bali has virtually become the most successful creole culture ever, and the Balinese are perfectly aware of this advantage. They know that they are paid in the first place for their unique ritual culture, and this awareness along with the economic prosperity it has brought to many Balinese has a positive impact on the cultural self-perception of many Balinese, all the more because most Balinese are working more or less directly for the tourist business. Around two-thirds of the Balinese are employed in the tourism industry upon which the wealth of the island is built. Even though many Balinese complain that most of the revenue from tourism is allocated to powerful foreign investors and to the Indonesian government that has exploited the island and its culture for decades as the national cash cow, they are aware of their culture's value. Since the breakdown of the totalitarian Suharto regime in 1999 and as a result of increasing regional autonomy, the Balinese have started to claim their portion of the profit, and this has become a political issue only recently when Balinese governor I Made Mangku Pastika demanded a larger amount of the revenue from

---

[1] Indonesian officials of tourism are well aware of the fact that the Millions of Bali tourists are attracted in first place by the global image or branding of Bali. (personal communication, October 2010, with the Balinese director of foreign promotion, I Gede Pitana, and the then minister of tourism and culture, Jero Wacik—both of them Balinese).

the Indonesian government in order to develop the island's infrastructure and environmental projects.[2]

Moreover, and notwithstanding the unequal distribution of profits, the Balinese economy was relatively firm even in recent years of financial, economic and political crisis. Between 1997 and 2002 Bali hosted the smallest number of inhabitants living below the poverty line (8.25% in 2002) in comparison to the Indonesian average (21.10% in 2002),[3] and this trend continues until today. In spite of a dramatic decrease in tourist arrivals immediately after a serious Islamist terror attack on the tourist spot of Kuta in 2002, the Balinese tourism industry had recovered only few years later, and it has reached annual record results in 2004 and from 2007 up to the present in spite of constant terror warnings and a second terror attack in 2005. Notwithstanding additional obstacles like terror, SARS, bird flu and earthquakes, the number of foreign tourists arriving is constantly increasing and so is the local tourism economy.

To sum up, we can therefore say that Bali's creolization is altogether successful in a global context.

A Mood of Crisis: Macrocosmic Aspects

Keeping in mind Hannerz' optimistic thesis that successful creolization implies cultural agency, I would like to turn the perspective at this point to examine this process from a local point of view—or, more precisely, regarding a current 'crisis discourse' in Bali.

In light of the substantial gains of Bali's booming tourism industry it seems puzzling that simultaneously a public discourse has emerged that reflects the present as a potentially threatening situation of cosmic disorder.

I met with this discourse on two levels among the Balinese public. Firstly, people in South Balinese villages where I conducted most of my fieldwork regularly brought up the debate on the present situation of cosmic disorder. Secondly, Balinese mass media—and especially newspapers and television reports—began a self-critical debate concerning their threatened cosmological framework after an Islamist terror attack

---

[2] See: http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/04/08/bali-wants-more-tourism-revenue.html-0.

[3] BPS, for more details see: *Indonesia: Strategic Vision for Agriculture and Rural Development.* Ed. By: Asian Development Bank 2006.

that had killed 202 and injured another 300 persons in the Balinese tourist spot Kuta in 2002. Many of the victims were Balinese working in the tourism industry, and thus it was obvious that the attack did not merely aim at libertine Western tourists but also at the Hindu-Balinese minority of Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country of the world.

Even though the Balinese felt politically marginalized in the Indonesian state and had become victims of Islamist terror, they did not blame the Muslim majority of Indonesia after the bombing but instead they raised a self-critical discourse, which was centred on the question as to where the Balinese themselves had failed to maintain the cosmic balance by means of their rituals. From this point of view, the Balinese themselves had unwittingly contributed to the success of violent Islamism since they had failed to guarantee cosmic balance (Hornbacher 2009).

In the following years, the focus of this self-critical debate shifted from inter-religious violence to a more general crisis discourse that today includes very different issues of modern life: ecological problems and natural disaster as well as social issues. In the framework of this discourse, violent inter-religious riots that hit the country after the fall of Suharto's new order regime and culminated in the Balinese terror attack were not isolated as a merely social or political problem, but rather they were understood as signs that referred to a deeper and more encompassing state of cosmic crisis, which in turn needed a spiritual interpretation and ritual treatment.

What I have so far described as a crisis discourse is by no means a debate on clearly defined concepts, but rather a flexible field of cosmological interpretations, criticism and practices. Even though it started as critical self-reflection on the Islamist terror attack, it has quickly shifted to other issues and prominently focuses on the ecological and social consequences of a global modernity. According to this view, cosmic disorder is diagnosed from the erosion of Bali's southern coast as well as an increasing water shortage due to mass tourism and the use of high yielding and water-hungry rice varieties following the green revolution. A similar interpretation is offered in response to the dramatically increasing number of natural disasters during the same period. The dramatic tsunami in Sumatra in 2004, serious earthquakes in Java and Bali in 2006, and heavy eruptions of Java's most active volcanoes, Merapi and Bromo, in 2010 and 2011, are perceived as proof of the same underlying crisis.

This diagnosis has ritual but also political dimensions. According to many Balinese, the accumulation of natural disasters indicates the deficient leadership of the ruling president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who

is not able to maintain cosmic stability and thus is denied by many Balinese an essential prerequisite of classical Javanese and Balinese ideas on leadership: the effective spiritual power to keep the world in order, which is in Balinese referred to as *sakti* (Anderson 1972, 2006).

Even though the present crisis discourse is a recent phenomenon arising in the aftermath of the Kuta attack, the diagnosis of the present as a state of cosmic disorder is not altogether new in Bali. The breakdown of the Balinese kingdoms and their submission to the Dutch military had already triggered an existential crisis among the Balinese, who referred to the pre-colonial period as to the time when "the world was still in order" or "steady" because the Balinese kings were seen as gods and thus as the guardians of a balanced macrocosmic order (*bwana agung*) and spiritual power (*sakti*).[4]

In light of this, the present discourse on cosmic crisis can be seen as the reflection of modern challenges in terms of a local cosmology, and thus as a platform for the critical negotiation of modernity from a Balinese perspective. What seems to be a list of incomparable problems—from the perspective of modern ontology—is, in terms of Balinese cosmology, a coherent cosmic crisis with different manifestations that are nevertheless basically interrelated.

Referring to Balinese cosmology implies many different and interrelated terms and concepts. I would like to concentrate here on the most comprehensive among these key terms, which are *sekala* and *niskala*: the tangible and intangible, or the visible and invisible dimension of the world. These notions refer to the different interrelated principles between which the entire world unfolds as a dynamic balance of spiritual and material agents and powers. This should not be confused with the western distinction of transcendence and immanence because *sekala* as well as *niskala* are immanent dimensions of a single reality that is seen as a flexible interplay of material and invisible but equally powerful agents. *Niskala* beings are part of the world like animals and humans, and should not be treated as projections of personal belief but rather as public manifestations of power. This means that even though *niskala* beings are invisible, they can

---

[4] The same applies to Javanese ideas of cosmo-political power: The above outlined natural disasters of the last years, particularly the eruption of the Merapi and the earthquake in Central Java, are interpreted as the result of the present Sultan's malpractice: The sultan of Yogyakarta neglects his ritual relationship to the goddess of the Southern Sea and prefers to play golf with the president in order to establish a more secular idea of politics, and in consequence of this, central Java is devastated by disaster.

be felt (*rasa*) in different ways by virtually everybody in a given situation, and have to be interpreted accordingly. In the framework of this dynamic cosmology, the above mentioned visible incidents—inter-religious conflicts as well as natural disasters—are interpreted as the result of invisible forces and agents that point at a comprehensive loss of cosmic balance rather than being isolated issues confined within different ontological fields. The only difficulty within this cosmological framework is the adequate interpretation of invisible agency in a given situation, and of course the proper human reaction to it.

Obviously, Balinese cosmology involves the necessity of a complex human interpretation and, moreover, it requires human intervention and responsibility regarding occurrences that are seen—from the standpoint of Western materialism—as effects of natural laws, not as meaningful actions of invisible agents.

The interpretation of the present as cosmic crisis is therefore not merely a theoretical issue in Bali but a practical and ethical one, because humans are responsible for the ritual maintenance or restoration of cosmic order that can be accomplished, according to most of my interlocutors, by ritual actions. The Balinese crisis discourse thus indicates that, in spite of the increasing impact of tourism along with the "creolization" of Bali on a global market, Balinese ritual still constitutes a cosmological framework of interpretation and agency for the Balinese themselves.

Microcosmic Aspects of Crisis

It is important to note that the discourse on crisis I have outlined so far is not simply a subjective impression or a phenomenon that is locally confined to the few villages where I did most of my fieldwork. This is evident from the prevalence of such discourses in the media. And beyond that, in addition to my localized fieldwork, an increasingly tense situation of Balinese society in general has become obvious in recent years. Simultaneously with the crisis discourse, and thus in the aftermath of the bomb from Kuta, a new phenomenon gained notoriety on the island: the number of suicides among Balinese increased significantly. This has been noticed by Balinese psychiatrists, in police reports and newspaper articles, but it has not yet become an object of anthropological investigation, as far as I know. However, I suggest that both phenomena are interrelated as macrocosmic and microcosmic aspects of a more general state of disorder.

Balinese psychiatrists like Luh Ketut Suryani have analyzed this disturbing trend and the Balinese government has organized an official seminar, but explanations still differ.[5] Suryani has emphasized that the dramatically increasing suicide rate dates back to the Islamist bombings in Kuta in 2002 and thus may have originated from a growing sense of cosmic disorder (Suryani et al. 2009).[6] After 2002, the figures for suicide in males had nearly quadrupled and in females almost tripled in Bali. First interpretations supported the idea that this trend was the result of the economic crisis following the bomb, which greatly reduced tourist arrivals and caused a major lay-off of workers in the industry. Newspaper articles in particular linked the development to economic problems, thus interpreting it in terms of political critique. However, the trend to suicide has continued—with smaller variations—until today, even though the tourist industry has not merely recovered but sets new records from year to year. The reasons for this disturbing coincidence of suicide and economic success are by no means clear. Suryani and other scholars have reflected on the issue in a recent article and come to the conclusion that there is no direct relation between suicide and the temporary decrease of tourism after the bombings.[7] She suggests instead that feelings of collective guilt and anxieties related to a neglect of ritual duties and personal life were more important than purely economic aspects of life.

This interpretation seems more convincing in light of the fact that Bali has one of the highest suicide rates in Indonesia despite having one of the lowest rates of inhabitants living beneath the poverty line. Moreover, a merely economic explanation contradicts the fact that the suicide rate was still alarming in 2010 even though the Balinese tourist industry was flourishing and has reached annual records since 2007.[8] Within this setting of a profitable tourism industry and successful creolization, the personal motivation for suicide is as puzzling and as complex as the individual examples that are mentioned in oral communications and in the newspapers: A boy commits suicide because his mother is not able to buy him a new ritual dress, or a girl attempts to hang herself because the

---

[5] http://www.baliprov.go.id/berita/2008/9/seminar-sehari-tpkjm-provinsi-bali.

[6] See: Suryani LK, Page A, Lesmana CB, Jennaway M, Basudewa ID, Taylor R: Suicide in paradise: aftermath of the Bali bombings. In: Psychol.Med, 2009 Aug;39(8):1317–23.
Online:http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19091162?ordinalpos=1&itool=PPMCLayout.PPMCAppController.PPMCArticlePage.PPMCPubmedRA&linkpos=1.

[7] Made Arya Kencana: Poverty Linked to Jump in Bali Suicides | September 26, 2010 In: The Bali Post online: http://www.thebalitimes.com/2010/10/20/man-commits-suicide/.

[8] http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/06/21/suicide-cases-rise-bali.html.

family cannot pay the school fee for her, but also: a man hangs himself without leaving any message to his confused family.[9] This has provoked different interpretations. Newspapers like the *Bali Times* and the *Jakarta Post* respond to the increasing figure of suicides with political criticism and emphasize that the high suicide rates result from a chronic poverty of many Balinese who try to compete with the global life-style standards of tourism on their island. They criticize the big profits of the tourism industry being made by foreign investors, while the Balinese have to grapple with an ever-increasing cost of living. According to this view, an increasing number of Balinese commit suicide because they don't find a way out of their debt spiral, which reminds us of reports of farmer suicides in India (Kencana 2010).

However, a closer look at empirical data suggests a more complex interpretation is required. Another group of psychiatrists (Kurihara, Kato, Reverger & Tirta 2009) has investigated the "risk factors" for suicide in Bali on the grounds of a sample of more than 60 families, which they studied through qualitative interviews.[10] Taking cultural aspects of Balinese Hinduism into consideration, these scholars conclude that the suicide rate might be even higher than officially reported. In the framework of Balinese Hinduism suicide is dropped as a public issue because it is considered to be a severe offence to the gods and ancestors, and this has serious consequences for the afterlife of an individual and for his family. Suicide therefore involves major socio-cultural problems in Bali inasmuch as it challenges religious convictions and violates social norms. The authors investigate the individual motivations therefore only within the context of families and in relation to different factors such as financial problems and social risk factors. Moreover, they pay particular attention to the relationship between suicide and individual religious involvement, which they define in terms of ritual activity. The investigation comes to the revealing conclusion that financial problems are not among the most significant suicide factors. Influential risk factors are "mental disorders," among which "depression" or a general "loss of energy" is the most prevalent. Another high risk factor, however, is a low degree of ritual activity,

---

[9] http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/10/09/bali-sees-increased-suicide-rate .html.

[10] Toshiyuki Kurihara, Motoichiro Kato, Robert Reverger, and I Gusti Rai Tirta: Risk factors for suicide in Bali: a psychological autopsy study. In: BMC Public Health. 2009; 9: 327.

Published online 2009 September 9. doi: 10.1186/1471–2458–9-327.

which is often followed by interpersonal problems. According to this investigation financial problems were much less significant. This result is interesting from an anthropological point of view not merely because the method of this investigation comes close to participatory ethnographic research but also because it describes the increasing suicide rate in relation to a decreasing religious involvement and ritual activity.[11]

   This observation matches with the interpretation of another Balinese psychiatrist, Made Sugiharta, the director of Bali's leading hospital for mental illness in Bangli, who links the increasing incidence of suicide and depression to the disturbing influence of a western materialism, and thus to a clash between opposing culture-specific value systems. Sugiharta suggests that the significantly increasing suicides and suicide attempts on Bali, along with a dramatically increasing incidence of depressions, can be interpreted as a local response to modernization and the "shifting philosophies" of life it implies or, in other words, to the experience of mutually contradicting cosmologies. He attributes the increase of depression in Bali directly to the island's expansive tourism industry and its disturbing effects for a local value system that clashes with the interests of a global market economy. Sughiarta mentions especially the aporetic clash of economic and cultural values with regard to the alienation of—ultimately sacred—family land, which is being sold off to satisfy an expansive tourism sector.[12]

   This interpretation supports the more general thesis that Balinese suicide risk is related to an alienation from ritual and matches the interpretations of my village interlocutors, who explained the rising suicide rates within their cosmological framework as a confusion concerning one's position within the cosmic order. My interlocutors—ranging from religious authorities such as local temple priests to young professionals—were well aware of the fact that suicide rates in Bali had risen in recent years, but they interpreted this fact as a result of intellectual and personal confusion (*kebingungan*) concerning the invisible dimension of

---

   [11] Today, many Balinese complain that rituals are increasingly expensive, from which we may conclude that a low religious involvement might conceal poverty. However, this investigation comes to the conclusion that there is a substantial difference between religious and economic motivations, because it deals with the involvement in public ritual activities rather than with the staging of expensive family rituals.

   [12] Sugiharta contributes to this discussion with regular articles in the newspaper and with TV reports. Some of them can be found online. See: http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/10/09/bali-sees-increased-suicide-rate.html and: http://bataviase.co.id/node/412733 (2.1.2011).

reality (*niskala*). They explained this confusion in a way that was quite similar to Sugiharta: as the result of a modern lifestyle that has imposed on Bali an increasing influence of materialism—or *sekala*—at the cost of diminishing relations to *niskala*. According to this cosmological interpretation, suicide is a microcosmic manifestation, but also a causal factor, of an overall cosmic imbalance.

While several of my interlocutors described this phenomenon with a western loan word as the outcome of "stress," they did not associate this notion in the first place with excessive labour and a lack of time, but rather with a state of social, spiritual and ritual disorientation, and thus with an existential crisis of meaning. In their view, the explicit individual motivations for suicides were confusingly diverse and even irrelevant or absurd and a deeper understanding was only possible within the more comprehensive framework of cosmology. Thus, from this cosmological point of view, the disturbing rise in depression and suicide perfectly matches a crisis discourse that interprets natural disasters and ecological issues ultimately as the result of a modern predominance of materialistic forces, at the cost of proper relations with *niskala*.

Agency or Alienation? Political, Economic and Cosmological Aspects of Balinese Creolization

Given this discourse on a threatened micro- and macro-cosmic balance, I would like to return to the question of cultural agency in a global context. Following Hannerz, we should assume that the Balinese, as successful brokers of their own 'creole culture,' have achieved what he describes as global agency of peripheral actors by means of an aesthetically appealing ritual culture. However, this optimistic expectation is at odds with the above-mentioned data on psychological problems as well as with local feelings of a cosmic crisis in Bali.

This paradox emerges, I would suggest, from the fact that Hannerz considers cultural agency above all in terms of economic rationality and thus as the successful adaptation of a peripheral culture to an economic centre. The *centre-periphery* distinction is borrowed from Immanuel Wallerstein's *world system* theory, which describes the fundamental economic asymmetries within the modern capitalist world system as a hierarchy between the—originally western—centres of modern capitalism and a non-western periphery. Unlike Wallerstein, Hannerz no longer defines the *centre-periphery* dichotomy in territorial terms. According to him,

centre-periphery relations can be found all over the world and especially in the global cities. And while Wallerstein understands "culture" as a secondary effect that conceals objective economic power asymmetries, Hannerz emphasizes that culture is not merely an ideological representation of socio-economic power. According to him, local culture rather should be understood as a social reality in its own right particularly if it becomes a powerful resource on a global market—as in the case of world music. In this case, cultural diversity persists in spite of a homogeneous global economy, and even becomes a resource of transnational agency. Following Hannerz, the *world system* thus does not result in cultural homogenization but rather in diversification and revitalization of cultural traditions to the extent that peripheral culture adapts to the requirements of the centre. In this 'creolized' form, culture may become a valuable good or 'capital' in the *world system*, thus offering an avenue for economic agency.

However, regarding the paradoxical Balinese sense of crisis that emerges simultaneously with economic success, it seems that the optimistic creolization theory ignores an important aspect. It describes culture and cultural agency in terms of capitalist centres or, in other words, as successful adaptation to the powerful rules and requirements of the economic *centre*, but Hannerz does not consider whether local concepts, cosmologies and actions provide a resource of intellectual criticism and performative resistance against these hegemonic rules of a 'central' economy. Therefore, cultural agency is only recognized insofar as it is successful in terms of the centre—but never if it resists and thereby possibly fails to succeed. In order to avoid a reductionist theory of culture as a local resource for global economy, I suggest that cultural agency should be considered as a dialectics of assimilation and resistance.

Given this ambivalence within the term of 'culture,' the Balinese crisis discourse can be understood as a local form of criticism and resistance against reified concepts of Bali's globally successful 'creole culture' as an aestheticised commodity on a world tourism market. While Hannerz identifies successful creolization with the agency of peripheral culture, the culturalisation of Balinese ritual involves political disempowerment and submission to external agents who have imposed their colonial, nationalist and economic interpretations and interests upon the island.

It is revealing that, today, this culturalisation is perceived by many Balinese as a highly ambivalent opportunity that offers a certain degree of wealth but only a very restricted form for agency because it implies the pervasive alienation of ritual meaning and function. It is therefore striking that Bali's ritual practice, which was a medium of ideological integration

for centuries, has become the object of public criticism and ambiguity over the last years. During this period, it has become obvious for an increasing number of Balinese that the willing adaptation to the requirements of a global market is inextricably linked to the reification and commoditizing of ritual and cosmology. The creolization of Bali's ritual culture can thus be interpreted—from a perspective of Balinese crisis discourse—as a shift from ritual efficacy to cultural reification that conforms local practices to a global economy at the cost of its significance and ritual agency.

Obviously, the Balinese became aware of this self-alienation and dispossession within the economic success of their 'culture,' because they started a public debate about Balinese identity and agency after the Kuta bombing that became a turning point in several respects. For the Balinese as a Hindu minority, this attack had proven that even their best efforts to integrate all opposing forces and to maintain cosmic balance by means of ritual practices could not guarantee harmony. Moreover, while most Balinese declared that they should be politically 'neutral' (*netral*) and trust in the integrative potential of their rituals, they had to realize that they too had become a victimized and threatened minority in a national milieu of increasingly orthodox Islam. Simultaneously, they felt marginalized by an Indonesian politics of religion that guarantees religious pluralism only inasmuch as religion is interpreted in terms of a strictly monotheistic and scriptural religion—such as Islam—as opposed to local animistic traditions and rituals (*adat*). This normative religious politics implies a marginalization of Balinese rituals, which are reinterpreted by most Balinese in terms of a doctrinal Hinduism (*agama Hindu*). Thereby, ritual traditions and effigies are increasingly downplayed as mere symbols of a supposedly universal Hinduism, the essence of which is found in holy books such as the Bhagavad-Gita and Vedas, which were formerly unknown in Bali. After the bombing of Kuta, many Balinese felt that, notwithstanding their efforts to conform to the paradigm of a proper religion, they were only selectively recognized in an Indonesian state that displays increasing religious polarizations and accepts Balinese ritual only inasmuch as it can be regarded as aesthetically pleasing and a consumable symbolic culture.

This awareness of their dependency on national and international interests and power relations became irrefutable when, in addition to political constraints, local tourism temporarily collapsed after the bombing of Kuta. This experience had paradoxical results in local and national frameworks. While the Balinese themselves started a fervent self-critical debate about the threatened spiritual and cosmological essence and efficacy of

their rituals vis-à-vis materialist influences, the Indonesian government launched a campaign that promoted—once again—the icon of an ever harmonious Balinese ritual culture in order to reassure tourists that Bali was still a tourist-friendly destination. The slogan of this campaign was "Bali for the World," and it obviously pursued the aim of promoting Balinese culture on the global market in order to retain the island as the cash cow of the Indonesian tourism industry. Of course, many Balinese had emphasized themselves that their idea of religion was aiming at cosmic balance and was thus essentially integrative, pluralistic, peaceful and opposed to the polarizing tendencies of Indonesian Islam, which they proclaimed in their own slogan: "orang Bali cinta damai"—"The Balinese are peace loving." However, clever agents of the Balinese tourism industry went a step further by evoking Balinese ritual as the *cultural capital* (*modal kebudayaan*) of Bali on a global market.

This blunt commoditization of Bali's cosmological concept of balance and the national instrumentalization of "Bali" as a commodity "for the world" triggered an explicit resistance to external culturalization on the part of Balinese opinion leaders. As a direct and critical reaction to the reifying and alienating promotion of "Bali for the world" a group of Balinese who were in control of local mass media such as the Bali Post or Bali TV started a campaign that is influential until today: the *ajeg Bali* or *upright* or *strong-standing Bali* movement. The local media started a public discussion on *ajeg Bali* culminating in a seminar under the title *ajeg Bali* and they arranged a series of publications on the issue. The papers of this seminar were published in an anniversary edition of the Bali Post on 16th of August in 2003 and in a book called *Ajeg Bali: Sebuah Cita-cita*, that was edited by the head of Bali Post group, Satria Naradha, and since then, a series of publications has been released. (Darma 2004. Naradha 2004. Allen, Palermo 2005. Titib 2005. Picard 2008. Reuter 2009)

Today, *ajeg Bali* has been adopted by very different groups ranging from educated religious leaders who identify *ajeg Bali* with the teachings of global Hinduism (Titib 2005) to villagers who are enthusiastic to revive local customs in the name of *ajeg Bali*.

It is not my intention to analyze this heterogeneous Balinese identity discourse in its contradictory details—rather, I would like to highlight one aspect that is important for the present discussion. The *ajeg Bali* movement indicates that the Balinese felt they had to resist certain influences of modernisation and especially a total commodification of their culture "for the world." Instead of this, they tried to reflect on their local and inalienable cosmological orientation and values under the condition of

modernization, change and religious polarization (Titib 2005). *Ajeg Bali* can thus be seen as another aspect of the crisis discourse that highlights and reflects the awareness that the cosmological, political and economic ascriptions of ritual and its corresponding forms of agency are increasingly polarized in Bali today.[13]

Balinese Ritual Practice: Revival or Ruin?

It seems obvious in view of this recent discourse that cultural agency is perceived as a highly ambivalent issue by the Balinese themselves in spite of the successful creolization of Bali's ritual culture. Nevertheless, the ritual heritage is not merely used as a passive object of commoditization by the Balinese themselves; beyond this it provides a frame for the active and critical negotiation of modern influence. I would like to describe this by referring to the recent boom of ritualism I mentioned at the beginning, which indicates—as I will show—a deliberate transformation and re-interpretation of Bali's ritual practice rather than a revitalization of tradition.

This transformation is not easy to see because it seems, at a first glance, that Balinese rituals are performed with more enthusiasm than ever. I suggest that precisely this explicit intentness indicates a substantial shift of the meaning and function of ritual: During the last decade—and as a result of economic prosperity and crisis discourse—temple rituals in the South Balinese region of my research, were deliberately performed with an ever increasing extravagance that required enormous amounts of time and money. From year to year temple communities decided to lift the level of the annual temple rituals, which implied the willingness of local residents to cover the ever-increasing costs. When I asked for reasons, my interlocutors in different villages unanimously asserted that the current state of comprehensive cosmic disorder, which was beyond question to them, had to be counterbalanced by increasing ritual activities, offerings and expenditures, because all of these issues ultimately indicated spiritual or cosmological disorder that could only be influenced by ritual agency.

---

[13] Thomas Reuter similarly argues that Balinese attempts to revitalize local traditions in terms of the recent "ajeg Bali" movement should not be dismissed as the merely ideological construction of a presumably timeless cultural essence but rather can be understood as a critical reflection of global modernity. (Thomas Reuter 2009: 225).

It was evident that, on the part of the local actors, the crisis discourse and its cosmological interpretation paved the way for an increase in local ritual activity that resulted in a profound transformation.

The sense of cosmic disorder corresponded to the feeling that more money than ever before should be spent for the temple rituals in order to restore balance. This led to an almost inflationary staging of large-scale rituals of unprecedented splendour which are normally expected to be staged only once in a century or every fifty years. Judging by old Balinese photographs and ethnographies in the first decades of the 20th century, rituals were always lavish performances in Bali, but the present trend does not merely sustain this local tradition. It is informed by the explicit intention to spend more than before in order to address a threatening situation.

Even though the necessity to lift the level of rituals is described in merely quantitative categories by the ritual actors, it implies qualitative changes. The decision to celebrate temple festivals in an unprecedentedly grandiose way does not indicate that local temple communities preserve their ritual traditions and cosmological knowledge but involves a profound re-construction of local rituals and an alienation from local meaning and agency.

This can be understood as a side effect of the deliberate search for magnificence, which requires the introduction of new and locally unknown paraphernalia and performances—including, for instance, big and complex offerings, additional rituals, or rare and prestigious dances. The introduction of these objects of ritual grandeur enhances the normal degree of a specific ritual tradition but the local actors are not familiar with its production and meaning. Innovations thus frequently lead to a disorientation among the local actors regarding sequence, design and meaning of new parts of their ritual, so that religious specialists have to be consulted who introduce their knowledge about the extent, formal structure, and meaning of new ritual effigies and the added performances. This implies not merely a latent alienation from meaning and interpretation but also from the local production of ritual elements. The specialists for new or bigger offerings and dances have to be invited from other places and are paid for their production of big sacrificial offerings, whereas usually, all ritual paraphernalia are manufactured by the villagers in teamwork and in voluntary service (*ngayah*), which actually represents an essential part of Balinese ritual.

This means that the sheer splendour of the boosting ritual practice implies its social and economic transformation including a creeping alien-

ation from local meanings and interpretations. The trend towards new and larger ritual events should thus be viewed less as a continuation of orthopractic local traditions and rather as their disparate re-construction that implies a partial alienation by way of extravagance.

Increased ritualism is not merely new in its form and motivation; it also creates paradoxical effects. Firstly, the quantitative leap emerges from the explicit motivation to integrate a cosmic crisis by an unprecedented splendour of ritual events, but it fails to integrate the ritual community because it is performed at the cost of poorer families who are forced to pay more than they can afford. As a consequence of this, an increasing number of Balinese complain of the socio-economic pressure of ritualism rather than experiencing their rituals as an integrating activity.[14] What is also new is the increased inclusion of paid specialists from other places, many of them introducing official interpretations of offerings that conform to a pan-Hindu doctrine rather than referring to local interpretations. Thus, the very fact that more and new ritual effigies are built indicates in many cases that the awareness of their meaning is decreasing rather than growing. Also new and ambivalent are, finally, the media representations and social implications of ritual mega-events which—far beyond their local meaning—become prestigious occasions that may turn neighbouring temple communities into rivals: The bigger the ceremony, the higher the probability of its being celebrated in newspapers and TV and of receiving a hitherto unknown importance. The latter may even be archaeologically substantiated, if village temples become research objects of archaeologists on the occasion of extraordinary ritual events. This causes the side effect that history may be reconstructed or invented, if archaeologists prove in newspaper articles that just this temple, because of its age, had played a central role for the whole of Bali since times immemorial. This irritates neighbouring villages and temple communities because it does not match actual power relations. This archaeological and ritual re-construction of traditions thus establishes new hierarchies and, along with it, creates local tensions among different temple communities that become competitors. A similar tendency of social polarization instead of integration is evident

---

[14] When I asked, whether it was possible to reduce the ritual splendour in favour of the villagers, a regular answer was: "Since we have more money and regarding the lost cosmic balance, we have to give more for the ritual—don't you remember the tsunami in Sumatra and the earthquake in Java? Haven't you seen the erosion on Bali's south coast? That's why; I have to give as much as I can."

within the temple community, where richer and poorer families may pursue different interests regarding the level of a ceremony.

Thus, instead of unfolding its traditional integrative power, rituals of this range have serious socio-economic impacts which result—as I have witnessed in the region of my fieldwork—in latent conflicts among villagers and even within families: These rituals are so expensive that they become a heavy burden for the respective temple communities, because the enormous amounts of money have to be collected by additional taxes imposed on all families in the ritual community. A special tax has to be paid by every household, which means, for less wealthy families a potlatch-kind of destruction of capital in which financial means are expended in a few days of celebration that in some cases would be urgently needed for education or health purposes. In consequence, rituals tend to become occasions for conflict rather than a medium for performative integration.

This exuberant ritualism is also felt to be new by many Balinese, and it is highly controversially assessed. Most of my interlocutors emphasized a cosmological necessity to transform a substantial part of their money into ritual splendour and thereby into a spiritual (*niskala*) form of energy in order to restore the balance between material and invisible agents and forces of the world. To them, the transformation of money and work into *niskala* agency was necessary in the face of an ever-increasing modern materialism—not merely for Bali, but for the balance of the world in general. This means that they interpreted their ritual agency in terms of a redistribution of resources to those cosmic agents that were the ultimate reason of all prosperity. There was however, a smaller group who complained that ritual practice itself had become a merely materialist and prestige-oriented ceremony and had lost its cosmological and spiritual meaning because of its materialist extravagance. Such objections were typically raised by members of an educated elite that criticised the new ritualism in view of a presumably universal and scriptural Hindu doctrine that represented the essence of Balinese traditions according to them. In this opinion Balinese rituals could at best be understood as a symbolic expression of the original Indian teachings, and thus its lavish paraphernalia was a religiously meaningless 'quantité négligeable' and even a waste of time and material with morally debatable features such as the traditional blood sacrifices, which are rejected by some reformist Hindus. While most of these persons still reluctantly participate in the rituals of their village temples in order to avoid social conflict, they do not share the conviction that these rituals are necessary and many of them privately join one of the

Indian-based sects or ashrams that have been established in urban areas, to focus on meditative practices rather than public rituals.

In any case, the boosting of Balinese ritualism is not simply the unconscious preservation of a ritual tradition, but rather a recent result of the reflexive and critical dealing with the ultimate reason for cosmic imbalance, from a Balinese perspective—that is to say: with the pervasive influence of modern materialism.

This criticism in terms of ritual practice displays ambiguous and paradoxical effects: On the one hand, the explicit motivation to intensify ritual activity in order to enhance the influence of *niskala* proves that ritual is still performed by the Balinese as a comprehensive frame within which issues of modernization can be interpreted in terms of a local cosmology. Moreover, ritual displays a form of agency that implies a critical negotiation—and even a restriction—of modern materialism. The enormous expenditures of money in favour of ritual can be understood as a resistance against the accumulation of private capital—and thus against the rules of the centres of global capitalism.

On the other hand, the escalating extravagance of rituals and the commoditization of ritual services, along with the creeping alienation of the ritual community from an active and interpretive participation in the ritual process, mirror the unresolved contradiction between economic and cosmological aspects.

These paradoxical innovations, along with the conflicts arising from ritual extravagance, indicate that Balinese rituals may even lose their capacity for communal integration, as a result of their increasing magnificence. Those who join Indian sects, for example, are suspected by other village members of being simply avaricious. In the light of these and other conflicts, it would be worth examining the correlation between suicide and low ritual involvement.

Conclusion

I have pursued different threads of argumentation in order to highlight some of the contradictions between local and global views on Balinese "culture" between ritual significance and global reification. Previous research has investigated the Balinese identity discourse (*kebalian*) and its results, namely, the adaptation of Balinese cosmology and ritual to the framework of a dominant global economy and its reinterpretation as an aesthetic

commodity (Picard 1996). I have argued in this chapter, that ritual and cosmology have been simultaneously retained—and reinforced—by the Balinese, not merely as an identity discourse but rather as a conceptual starting point and framework that offers the chance for critical reflection of modernizing influence in general and on the commoditizing of Balinese culture in particular.

In order to investigate this dialectical agency of Balinese ritual tradition in a global context, it is insufficient to analyze Bali as a successful "creole culture." Instead we have to distinguish between two aspects. On the one hand, the 'culturalization' of Balinese ritual can be interpreted, following Hannerz, as the result of a "creolization" starting with the relocation of Balinese ritual in the powerful frameworks of Dutch colonialism, national politics and global tourism industry. As a result of these shifting power relations, Balinese practices and knowledge have been redefined in relation to a modernization process that is ultimately informed by European ideas of culture and reality. Nevertheless, the Balinese have creatively transformed this situation of military submission and political disempowerment insofar as they successfully adapted to a global economy by promoting their rituals to global tourism as an artistic culture. Nevertheless, in my opinion this successful creolization is only half of the truth.

The current Balinese crisis discourse and the increasing incidence of depression and suicide on the island indicate that the economic success of Bali's ritual culture should not be identified with cultural or ritual agency in general but only with the limited field of economic wealth. Rather, this form of agency is perceived by many Balinese as a threatening alienation and crisis. What is lacking in the optimistic creolization theory is simply the perspective and interpretation of the actors themselves and this means, in our case, the Balinese criticism in a modern worldview and value system. Recent Balinese data suggest that the definition of cultural agency is reductionist and simplistic as long as it concentrates on successful adaptation to the standards and norms of global centres alone, but ignores the critical comments and assessment of local actors, among which I would count the resistance to successful creolization, a significant rise of failing biographies, and the performative display of paradoxical attempts to preserve local traditions.[15]

---

[15] To interpret failing adaptation as a culture specific criticism in the alienating forces of global politics and economy, is not totally new. Action anthropologists like Sol Tax have similarly interpreted the failing assimilation of American Indians as the result of their passive resistance based upon incompatible values; and Gerrit Huizer has similarly argued that a truly 'committed anthropologist' should take the perspective "from below

I suggest therefore that in Bali cultural agency is not merely evident in the reinvention and promotion of a ritual culture for global tourism, but beyond this—and even more so—regarding the active and critical resistance against the complete reification of ritual as a creolized construction and marketable product on a global market. Following this dialectical interpretation of culture, the Balinese discourse on cosmic disorder and the increasing rates of mental disorder can be understood as critical comments on, and individual resistance against, the increasing materialistic influences which threaten the cosmological orientation and life of Bali, and which are associated by many Balinese with modernity. This criticism is explicit in the current dialectics of ritual boost and criticism. It goes beyond the question of cultural or local identity and ultimately aims at the question of reality as a frame for practical decisions. The Balinese diagnosis of a cosmic crisis thereby implies and affirms that a local cosmology that corresponds to ritual traditions is more adequate to interpret the issues of modern life because it allows a critical interpretation of modern materialism and economy in terms of Balinese tradition. Thus the crisis discourse can be seen as an implicit and dialectical subversion of Bali's economic success story, which appears—in the framework of a balanced relation between *sekala* and *niskala*—as threatening overweight of modern materialism.

From this point of view, Balinese ritual and cosmology gain global agency not because they conform the powerful centres but rather inasmuch as they offer a conceptual framework within which the dominant narratives of globalization, including Hannerz' optimistic creolization theory, can be critically examined.

Balinese resistance against a complete reification of Balinese culture "for the world" similarly demonstrates that the Balinese themselves defend deliberately and reflexively their cultural agency as potential resistance to the seamless adaptation to global power, which does not of course mean that they can offer an overall solution. I have tried to highlight the dialectical aspect of culture as opposed to reification because only then are we able to distinguish between the two complementary dimensions of 'agency': On the one hand, the reified Balinese 'culture' that enables Bali's agency on the condition of global economy, but, on the other hand and simultaneously the culture specific cosmology that opposes global ideas

---

and within" local groups in relation to global power relations thereby understanding the passivity and indifference of a peasantry as a form of resistance against overwhelming political and economic power-relations. (Huizer, Mannheim 1979: 28).

of reality but allows a critical reflection on, and ritual restriction of, modern materialism which is interpreted as a cause for cosmic and individual disorder and as a challenge that requires ritual responses.

As a framework of Balinese cosmology, ritual is no longer a cultural commodity that conforms to the logic of profit but rather it resists the logic of global economy insofar as it requires amounts of money that seem irrational from a purely economic point of view in order to restore cosmic balance via the dissolution of private wealth. The struggle of village communities for the allocation of private capital into public ritual splendour is thus a highly ambivalent tightrope walk between resistance and assimilation: on the one hand, the increasing ritual extravagance threatens the integration of Balinese communities; on the other hand, it subverts and resists the logic of capitalist economizing. It provides an effective—and collective—restriction on private accumulation and thus on materialism. Ritual therefore functions, even in its contested form, not merely as a reified cultural heritage, as Geertz has assumed, nor as cultural capital on a global market, as Hannerz would put it, but rather as a form of agency that is based upon local cosmology and reflects in paradoxical ways the threatening influence of modern materialism. As a culture-specific answer to cosmic disorder, excessive ritual activity not merely evokes the superiority of Balinese cosmology over a merely materialistic worldview but also displays a collective critical stance against the rules of economic accumulation. Thus, Bali's excessive new ritualism does not indicate the preservation of a timeless Balinese culture; rather it can be seen in line with the cosmic and individual crisis discourse as a subversive comment on increasing materialism and as the performative negotiation of modernity in Balinese terms. This could explain why most Balinese are convinced that they have to transform enormous amounts of private money into public rituals for the benefit of the world, whereas refraining from ritual activity implies a loss of orientation and thus a remarkably higher suicide risk.

References

Ajeg Bali (2004) *Sebuah cita-cita*, Bali Post: Denpasar.

Allen, P. and Palermo, C. (2004) *If ajeg is the answer, then what is the question? New identity discourses in Bali*. University of Tasmania.

Anderson, Benedict (1972) "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," in: C. Holt, B. Anderson, J. Siegel (eds.), *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. Ithaca, London.

—— (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London, New York.

Appadurai, Arjun (1996) *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis, London.

Bandem, I Made; de Boer, Fredrik Eugene (1995) *Balinese Dance in Transition. Kaja and Kelod.* Oxford, Singapore.

Bakker, Frederik Lambertus (2003) *The struggle of the Hindu Balinese intellectuals: developments in modern Hindu Thinking in modern Indonesia.* Amsterdam 1993.

Couteau, J. (2003): "After the Kuta bombing: In search of the Balinese soul," Jurnal Antropologi XXVII (70).

Darma, P.N. (2004) "Bali Pascabom: Konflik, kekerasan dan rekonstruksi identitas budaya seputa Ajeg Bali," in W. Cika, GNK Putrayasa, W. Teguh and GAAM Triadnyani (eds), *Garitan Budaya Nusantara dalam Perspektif Kebhinekaan.* Denpasar: Pustaka Larasan.

Geertz, Clifford (1966) "Religion as a Cultural System," in: M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion.* London.

—— (1966) *Person, Time and Conduct in Bali: An Essay in Cultural Analysis.* Yale Southeast Asia Program, Cultural Report Series 14.

—— (1972) " 'Deep Play': Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." *Daedalus* 101 (1972).

—— (1973) *"Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture"* in C. Geertz (ed.), The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays. New York.

—— (1980) *Negara. The theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali.* Princeton.

Hannerz, Ulf (1992) *Cultural Complexity. Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning.* New York.

—— (1996) *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places.* London, New York.

Hornbacher, Annette (1995) *Zuschreibung und Befremden. Postmoderne Repräsentationskrise und verkörpertes Wissen im balinesischen Tanz.* Berlin.

—— (2009) "Global Conflict in cosmocentric perspective: a Balinese approach to reconciliation," in: B. Bräuchler (ed.), *Reconciling Indonesia. Grassroots agency for peace.* London, New York.

Huizer, Gerrit. Mannheim, Bruce (1979) *The Politics of Anthropology. From Colonialism and Sexism Toward a View from Below.* The Hague, Paris.

Kencana, Made Arya: *Poverty Linked to Jump in Bali Suicides | September 26, 2010 In: The Bali Post online*: http://www.thebalitimes.com/2010/10/20/man-commits-suicide/.

Picard, Michel (1996) *Bali: Cultural Tourism and Touristic Culture.* Singapore.

—— (1999) *"The Discourse of Kebalian: Transcultural Constructions of Balinese Identity,"* in: R. Rubinstein, L. Connor (eds.), *Staying Local in the Global Village. Bali in the Twentieth Century.* Honolulu.

—— (2008) "Balinese identity as tourist attraction: From 'cultural tourism' (pariwisata budaya) to 'Bali erect' (ajeg Bali)." *Tourist Studies 8: 155–173.* (*see*: http://tou.sagepub.com/content/8/2/155.full.pdf).

Ramstedt, Martin (ed.) (2004) *Hinduism in modern Indonesia: a minority religion between local, national, and global interests.* London, New York 2004.

Reuter, Thomas *"Globalization and regionalism: The rise of a new cultural movement in Bali, Indonesia,"* in: Reuter: Regional Minorities and Development in Asia.

Robertson, Roland (1995) *"Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,"* in: M. Featherstone, S. Lash, R. Robertson (eds.), Global Modernities. London.

Spies, Walter, de Zoete, Beryl (1938) *Dance and Drama in Bali.* London.

Sugihart http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/10/09/bali-sees-increased-suicide-rate.html and: http://bataviase.co.id/node/412733 (2.1.2011).

Suryani LK, Page A, Lesmana CB, Jennaway M, Basudewa ID, Taylor R (2009) *"Suicide in paradise: aftermath of the Bali bombings."* Psychol.Med 39(8): 1317–23.

Swellengrebel, J.L. (1960) *Bali. Studies in Life, Thought, and Ritual, Introduction.* The Hague, Bandung.

Titib, I Made, Pitana, I Gede et al. (eds.) (2005) *Dialog Ajeg Bali. Perspectif Pengamalan Agama Hindu.* Surabaya.

Toshiyuki Kurihara, Motoichiro Kato, Robert Reverger, and I. Gusti Rai Tirta (2009) *Risk factors for suicide in Bali: a psychological autopsy study.* In: BMC Public Health. 9: 327. Published online 2009 September 9. doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-9-327.

Vickers (1989) Adrian: *Bali. A Paradise Created.*

Wimmer, Andreas (2005) *Kultur als Prozess. Zur Dynamik des Aushandelns von Bedeutungen.* Wiesbaden.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND RELIGION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
STEPS TOWARDS EVOLUTIONARY LEARNING

Arthur Saniotis

Introduction

This paper examines how religion in Southeast Asia is responding to the challenge of climate change and other environmental issues. What does religion have to say about such issues? Are present religious teachings a hindrance to progress or a means for fostering evolutionary learning in order to tackle climate change? I contend that a fundamental change is needed in the ways in which human beings think about their societies and how information is communicated within them, and that such change is indeed being fostered by innovations that are occurring within traditional religions, in Asia and beyond.

The reality of global climate change has now been realized as an on-going issue that will affect planet earth for centuries to come. After years of scientific scepticism, argumentation and denial the reality of climate change has been accepted in both the scientific and political communities. The equation of climate change is simple: the planet is heating up due to greenhouse emissions, expedited by massive deforestation. Conservative estimates of temperature increments in the 21st century are between 1.4° C and 5.8° C. Temperatures in the last fifty years (1956–2005) have seen a rise of 0.10° C–0.16° C, and nearly twice that over the last century (IPCC Fourth Assessment Report 2007: 1). In addition, the current rate of carbon emissions in the atmosphere, at approximately 370 ppm, represents a steady rise since the Industrial Revolution, and is expected to peak between 540 ppm and 970 ppm by 2100 (Saniotis 2006a: 19). While these statistics are already alarming, present-day science simply does not have the mechanisms to accurately predict how nature will respond. A major concern is that nature will respond in an unpredictable fashion as temperatures rise to critical thresholds. Chaos theory purports that natural cycles do not act in a linear fashion but rather vacillate with regularity. The human species is thus faced with the alarming prospect of life in an

indeterminate world. The challenge now is to curtail further temperature increases. Even a 2° C rise, which is probably inevitable, will have devastating impact on terrestrial and oceanic habitats. Some writers suggest that temperature rises approaching 5° C or above will be apocalyptic for humanity and the natural world, and will unleash a sixth species extinction event (Leakey & Lewin 1995). Not since the end of the Cretaceous period has biodiversity loss been so pronounced as it is today.

The challenge of climate change is beginning to be felt in Asia. From 1960 to 1990 the annual mean temperature in Asia was 0.5% higher than for the period between 1930 and 1960 (Fu et al. 1998 p. 309). At the same time, Asia is also a major contributor to climate change. Since the 1970s all Asian countries have had a significant rise in greenhouse emissions (Fu et al. 1998: 309). Currently, China is number one in the world in terms of greenhouse emissions. In Beijing alone, there are approximately one thousand new cars introduced to the roads per day. A report by the International Energy Agency (IEA) predicts that global CO_2 emissions will rise by between 30% and 42% by 2010, with China and India accounting for an "increase larger than all OECD countries combined" (Fu et al. 1998: 312). Greenhouse emissions in Asian cities will also escalate due to increasing populations. Some 13 out of 21 Asian cities now exceed 10 million in population, putting increasing demands on fuel, food and water resources (Fu et al. 1998: 322).

The region of Southeast Asia includes 11 countries with a total population of approximately 522 million. By 2015 Southeast Asia will have three cities with populations exceeding 10 million: Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta (UNEP 2004). In 1999, approximately 38% of Southeast Asians lived in urban areas, with this number predicted to double by 2015 in most Southeast Asian countries (UNEP 2004).

Deforestation in Southeast Asia has incremented over the last thirty years to critical rates. Predictions state that approximately two thirds of species living in Southeast Asia will become extinct during this century. Deforestation in Southeast Asia releases approximately 465 million tonnes of carbon, or 29% of global carbon emissions (Phat et al. 2004) and since the 1970s Southeast Asia has led the world in the export of timber from tropical forests (World Rainforest Movement 1999). At the present rate most of Southeast Asia's rainforests will be cut down during this century, leading to massive extinction rates of flora and fauna, as well as, an exacerbation of evaporation due to tree reduction. In addition, smoke produced from forest fires can inhibit rainfall (Butler 2008). Van der Werfa et al. (2008) conclude that human deforestation practices may

act as a carbon–climate feedback mechanism, leading to future drying in the region. Any major drying of the land mass will have a critical impact on the amount of agricultural land available to feed large and growing human populations.

Climate change analysts predict various hazards for Southeast Asian nations during this century. These include major flooding in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia; sea level rises in Thailand, the Mekong region of Vietnam, and in Indonesia; droughts in north-western and eastern coastal regions of Vietnam, southern Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia; increasing cyclonic activity in eastern Vietnam and the Philippines (Yusuf & Francisco 2009: 6). In terms of minimal climate change hazards, most regions in Cambodia fare the best, while several regions in Java are most vulnerable. Java is prone to flooding and has very high population density (Yusuf & Francisco 2009: 13).

In short, Southeast Asia, and Asia as a whole, is facing severe challenges as a consequence of anthropogenic climate change, and it is a matter of great importance to the region and to the world at large whether the people and governments of this region will make a contribution to the fight against climate change or not. A major evolutionary step forward in our way of thinking will be required, and it may be that religion and traditional life are a necessary part of the solution.

Evolutionary Learning

According to Linder (2005: 249), "proximal social relationships" as offered in community are important as they shift the focus from individual behaviour to community-based relationships. Here, individual choices are made in the context of wider "social relationships and cultural practices" (2005, p. 249). Knowledge interest among social actors, thus, reduces the vulnerability of individual members. The convergence of individual knowledge into a collective proffers greater resilience and induces adaptive cooperation. As Linder points out:

> Part of this commitment follows an old script from the annals of community development, where self-sufficiency and other civic virtues are to be built and recovered. In the course of defining its own problems and devising its own solutions, so the argument goes, the community strengthens its existing capabilities and develops new ones (2005: 249).

The presumption is that individuals will assume "responsibility for their own communities" and that this will provide the impetus for social change

(Linder 2005: 249). A grass-roots collective empowers individual social actors. Collective consent is also the social driver for creating various feedback loops between the community and the environment. The question on how much community involvement is necessary for promoting positive social change is contingent upon socio-economic and environmental factors.

In addition, the degree of appropriate behavioural change is dependent on the ways of learning. Gregory Bateson's theory of learning is helpful here. Bateson contends that a major problem in present-day human learning is our persistence with habituated ways of thinking that are regressive, rigid and lacking in internal rigour (Bateson 1973). Evolutionary learning, he argues, is largely based on nature's principles of co-operation and integration. Whereas science privileges precision and empiricism, evolutionary learning emphasises the importance of integrating human experience into a narrative. David Polkinghorne provides the tie between human stories and social ecology when he says that: "Through the action of emplotment, the narrative form constitutes human reality into wholes, manifests human values, and bestows meaning on life" (Polkinghorne 1988: 159). Evolutionary learning is symptomatic of an emerging "evolutionary cognitive map" (Laszlo et al. 1996: 117) that identifies the positive possibilities within meta-patterns.

Bateson also links learning with flexibility. Flexibility can be defined as "uncommitted potentiality for change" (Bateson 1973: 473). The greater degree of flexibility within a social system the greater will be the capacity of the social system to respond to positive change (Bateson 1973: 472). As Bateson (1973: 474) notes: "Freedom and flexibility in regard to the most basic variables may be necessary during the process of learning and creating a new system by social change." Bateson's epistemology, then, sees evolutionary learning and flexibility as quintessential for generating cultural diversity. Cultural diversity can be likened to a cybernetic cycle of feedback loops—a dynamic process of inter-connected meta-patterns for finding solutions to problems (Volk et al. 2007). In the context of climate change and biodiversity conservation, social systems strive towards building cognitive systems or mental maps (Laszlo et al. 1996), for fostering Bateson's notion of evolutionary learning. This process encapsulates Bateson's term *Mind*. Mind is the integration of meta-patterns within a flexible system, and this system acts as an osmotic membrane whose interface integrates "diverse elements" (Laszlo 2001: 144). In this sense mind embraces a "holos consciousness" (Laszlo 2001: 126). Holos consciousness is posited

on a marked level of communication between people who make use of the "strands of connection that bind them to each other and to nature" (Laszlo 2001: 113). Awareness of this level of connectedness plays a vital part in human evolution (Laszlo 2001: 113).

The question now arises as to what extent evolutionary learning can be applied in the context of formalised religion? Clearly religion provides the kind of integrating narrative which helps people make sense of their lives and awareness of meta-patterns within their lived experience. But does it also allow for the flexibility that is a necessary condition for evolutionary learning?

In the context of Asian religions evolutionary learning has been observed throughout historic periods via syncretistic religious movements that triggered major modifications to traditional religion. From the dynamic syncretism of Balinese society to the various religious layers of Thai society, it appears that periods requiring evolutionary learning have often coincided with periods of change within religion.

In the next section I will first examine the basic ecological principles of Buddhism and Islam—two of the main traditions of this region—in order to determine to what extent these traditions lend themselves to fostering evolutionary learning toward a new 'ecological awareness' (Bergmann & Eaton 2011). Following this overview, recent shifts towards ecological awareness will become easier to identify, allowing us to better understand whether and how the principles of evolutionary learning are being employed in ecological religious movements in Southeast Asia.

Ecological Principles of Buddhism and Islam

Buddhism

The beginnings of Buddhism are interlaced with an ecological observance. For example, during his ascetic years the Buddha spent much time meditating in forests and studying beneath Banyan trees. His enlightenment famously occurred beneath a Bodhi tree, and he died before his disciples between a pair of Sal trees (Henning 2006: 12). Buddha also taught his students to meditate in the wilderness and in forests. In the *Dantabhumi Sutta* the Buddha states:

> Come you, monk, choose a remote lodging in a forest, at the root of a tree, on a mountain slope, in a wilderness, in a hill-cave, a cemetery, a forest haunt, in the open or on a heap of straw.

The fact that trees feature so prominently in Buddhism it is not surprising since one of the first tenets of Buddhism is not to destroy life, either fauna or flora. Furthermore, in relation to trees 2 species of trees were the sites of enlightenment for 25 previous Buddhas (Henning 2006: 13). Thus, Buddhism has a profound ecological ethic that has been synthesised over centuries. The protection of nature is important in Buddhism since all sentient beings are involved in countless incarnations. Nature is, therefore, the laboratory of reincarnation, and the loss of any species diminishes the potential for cosmic evolution. Buddhism teaches that all existence is inter-related and inter-connected in a universal matrix of unfathomable proportions. The famous story ascribed to this inter-relationality is Indra's Net. In this story the god Indra fashions the cosmos as a net. At each vertex of the net is a jewel that reflects all other jewels. Although, Buddhism deems a human incarnation as having special significance, since it is the only apparent incarnation from which one can attain enlightenment (*nirvana*), unlike the Abrahamic religions Buddhism deems the human species as only one species in the unitary web of life. The reason for this non-exclusive position regarding the human species is based on the teachings of Buddhism or *dharma* that emphasises the mutuality of all life forms. This is explained by the Thai monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, as follows:

> The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise . . . then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish.

Henning (2002), further links the ideal of Dharma with ecology:

> On the Dhamma in nature, Dhamma basically means that we (humans) are simply a part of life along with other beings and that we are included in nature as just another species or living being among other species or living beings. It also means that there are laws in nature like impermanence that operate and apply to nature.

The eightfold path of Buddhism emphasises compassion. Compassion does not simply comprise empathy for the other but is a way of interacting with all sentient beings. Compassion is fostered by vigilant meditation and adherence to non-violence (*ahimsa*). In *mahayana* Buddhism compassion is embodied by the *boddhisatva* (a self realised being) who assists others to achieve enlightenment. From an anthropological viewpoint the

ideal of the *boddhisatva* parallels a universal *communitas* in which all beings reach an awareness of unity and equality.[1]

In Buddhist thought, the mutually interpenetrating diversity of forms and expressions are recognised by the term *pratityasamutpada* (the mutually dependent arising of things) (Brown 1994: 125). A conjoining idea of *pratityasamutpada* is the theory of *tathagatagarbha* (unborn, pure, permanent undying reality) (Brown 1994: 128). The theory of *tathagatagarbha* includes the identification of the Buddha with the cosmic body (*dharmakaya*). This cosmic body is perfect self awareness, integral and universal essence (*dhatu*) (Brown 1994: 128). The next important concept is *sunyata*, which in *mahayana* doctrine alludes to emptiness. Here, emptiness should not be defined as a lack of substance, but rather, a point of origination of cosmic potentiality. As Brown suggests, *sunyata* is the very mode by which universal mutuality is manifested (1994: 131).

Lastly, Buddhism views human actions as intrinsically linked with the evolution of all other species. Similarly to indigenous traditions, Buddhism teaches that abuse of nature negatively returns to impact on humans as various kinds of suffering (Kabilsingh 1990: 8). In contrast, harmonious living with nature leads to a greater understanding of universal principles fostering peace and compassion. Traditionally, Buddhist temples and their surroundings were protected zones for flora and fauna, wherein trees could not be felled and animals were free to roam.

Islam

A study of Islamic understandings of ecology must begin with an analysis of the concept of *tawhid* (Divine Unity) that underpins Islamic science and informs Muslim social relationships. The philosophy of *tawhid* professes the oneness of God (Allah) and the unity of creation. According to Sharia'ti (1979), as the organisational principle of existence, *tawhid* extends to scientific and social domains whereby nature, humanity and knowledge are understood as unities. Nasr (1969), elegantly states this principle:

---

[1] Something similar to this Buddhist ideal of universal *communitas* has been noted in Myerhoff's work of the pilgrimage of the *Huichol* Indians to the sacred place *Wirrikuta* where, upon the ingestion of peyote, pilgrims are enabled to be united with all other species (Myerhoff 1974).

> The spirit of Islam emphasizes, by contrast, the unity of Nature, that unity
> that is the aim of the cosmological sciences, and that is adumbrated and
> prefigured in the continuous interlacing of arabesques uniting the profusion
> of plant life with the geometric crystals of the verses of the Quran.

In this scheme, the self's communion with nature is vital in order to
understand its relationship with the Divine. As Nasr notes, "Nature is a
fabric of symbols" or signs (*ayat*) "which must be read according to their
meaning," and which reveal the Divine presence. In addition, the impor-
tance of nature in Islam is testified by the many nature passages found in
the Qur'an, which serve to highlight the nature of God's attributes within
creation.

The social expression of *tawhid* is depicted in the Muslim community
(*umma*) who follow the five pillars of Islam that unite all Muslims. These
are: declaration of faith (*shahadah*) which affirms the Oneness of God,
daily prayer (*salat*), fasting during the month of Ramadan, charity (*zakat*)
and pilgrimage (*hajj*) to the holy city of Mecca.

Islam professes that human beings have been given stewardship of the
earth (*caliph-fil-ard*) (*Qur'an* 2: 30), a role that obligates them to act ethi-
cally between each other and the non-human world. An important con-
cept in Islamic ecology is *khalifah* (trustee). The Qur'an (2: 30) points out
that humankind has an exclusive place in creation and has been divinely
chosen to be God's vicegerent on earth. Implicit in *khalifah* is the need to
have an ecological consciousness. Any wanton destruction of the environ-
ment is expressly forbidden in Islam:

> Do not mischief on the earth, after it hath been set in order, but call on Him
> for fear and longing (in your hearts): For the mercy of Allah is (always) near
> to those who do good (Qur'an 7: 56).

The position of *khalifah* places on us an onus of responsibility for the non-
human world, and the maintenance of good human/non-human relation-
ships. Based on many testaments in the prophetic traditions (*hadith*),
the prophet Muhammad had a strong ecological awareness and was
concerned about the treatment of animals and the necessity in retaining
trees and cautioning against pollution. Early Islam implemented various
environmental principles that continued over centuries. Based on Islamic
concern for safe-guarding life, protective zones (*harim*) and conservation
zones (*hima*) were established (Saniotis 2004: 105). An office of public
inspection was established that was supervised by the public inspector
(*muhtasib*). The functions of the *muhtasib* were to enforce correct envi-
ronmental practices, animal care and protection, safeguarding *hima* and

harim, and controlling ethical conduct in commercial practices (Saniotis 2004: 105).

In short, both Buddhism and Islam contain principles that lend themselves to promoting ecological awareness. An important question is whether this ecological awareness is realised in practice, and if so, how this is achieved, specifically in the Southeast Asian context. This is a complex question, and there is as yet insufficient research to answer it conclusively. The following two examples, therefore, provide only a preliminary answer.

Buddhism and Ecology in Thailand

Like other parts of Southeast Asia, Thailand has encountered rapid social change over the last thirty years. Change was expedited by a high level of economic and population growth. This level of growth has had a concomitant effect on the environment, leading to increasing deforestation (Arbhabhirama et al. 1987; Sponsel & Natadecha 1988). The entrenchment of global styles of capitalism and consumerism among many Thais has further threatened forests. Large-scale deforestation has now affected all Thai forests whose hardwood timber is a globally sought-after commodity. This is in contrast to the nineteenth century where Thailand had been heavily forested (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel 1995). Deforestation rates in Thailand are very high in comparison to other Asian countries (Darlington 1998: 2). In 1961 forests covered approximately 53% of Thailand. By 1986, this figure had dropped to between 26–29% (Darlington 1998: 2). The processes of deforestation in Thailand are complex and include cultural views as to what is to be defined as wilderness, and what should be incorporated into public land for agriculture and other productive uses (Darlington 1998: 3). Unsurprisingly, deforestation has had deleterious ramifications for biodiversity and has led to increased flash flooding (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel 1995: 31). Failure at governmental level to sufficiently respond to ecological degradation has led to alternative responses arising from a community level.

Thai Buddhist monks who follow the *theravadan* tradition have a strong forest tradition, which was revived in Thailand during the 19th century, probably coinciding with the advent of deforestation. The growth of the forest tradition may also have been prompted by the meditational and ascetic tradition of *theravadan* Buddhism. The forest tradition may have been a call for a simpler life in adherence to the Buddha's teachings.

The forest revival movement was instigated by Phra Ajahn Sao Kantasilo Mahathera (1861–1941) and continued by his student Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta Thera (1870–1949).

Thailand possesses hundreds of monasteries and over thirty-seven thousand temples, many of which lie in or along the boundaries of forested areas. These monasteries and temples not only testify to the spiritual importance of Buddhism for Thais, but also reinforce the moral and mystical power associated with forests. Unsurprisingly, the link between forests and social change has been a concern to Thai monks as any encroachment on forests signifies an amelioration of Buddhist values and moral power. For example, the outspoken Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikku has explained that uncontrolled social change has a deleterious effect on Thai Buddhism as precious resources obtained in forests by villagers had diminished (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel 1995: 33). Bikkhu commented that earlier deforestation had been checked by the religious values of Thais—values which had apparently weakened in the latter 20th century as rampant consumerism and global capitalism had increasingly informed Thai villagers' attitudes and practices (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel 1995: 33).

Recent Thai Buddhist conservation practices use ideas synonymous with the principles of evolutionary learning such as flexibility, integration of social resources (e.g. knowledge of environment/human interactions, ecological knowledge) and challenging extant social norms. In the 1980's Abbot Pongsak Tejadhammo and other monks gathered local villagers to advocate forest protection and tree replanting practices. An area of 70 square kilometres was fenced off and regenerated. This conservation programme set the standard for future reforestation and conservation practices involving Thai monks (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel 1995: 33).

Since the 1980's Thai monks have organised themselves as a viable ecological movement. These monks are colloquially coined 'ecology monks.' This group has rapidly grown and includes both rural and urban Buddhist temples (Darlington 1998: 4). Most ecology monks are supported by national environmental NGOs. Thai monks have been adept in creating social networks with other monks involved with ecological projects. They share ideas and information on how to implement grassroots ecological and educational programmes (Darlington 1998: 5). Thai ecology monks' networking is synonymous with Bateson's notion of feedback loops that generate positive benefits. While incurring criticism from several social sectors, Thai ecology monks have been able to raise the consciousness of

Thai people in relation to their responsibilities to the environment (Darlington 1998: 5):

> This new approach to religion and monks in Thai society and the creative application of the ecology monks' philosophy to make Buddhist rituals tools for social action may change the concepts and practice of Thai Buddhism. (Darlington 1998: 6).

From the 1990's onward the ecology monks have instigated tree ordination ceremonies that incorporate Thai cultural and religious symbols such as Buddhist images, water, and prayers (Darlington 1998: 8). Since the 1980's tree ordination rituals have spread throughout Thailand, raising the ecological consciousness of Thai villagers (Darlington 1998: 8). The strong religious sentiments incorporated in the tree ordination rituals have proven to be highly meaningful to ordinary Thais.

An important feature of tree ordination ceremonies lies in involving local villagers. In 1991, for example, 12,000 seedlings were planted in the Nan province in Northern Thailand. In this collective ceremony villagers exhibited "their offerings and performed their skits on conservation and political culpability" (Saniotis 2006b: 70). Some villagers even performed skits based on conveying principles of forest preservation (Darlington 1998: 8). During tree ordination rituals a new monk may be presented his robes, while other monks wrap orange robes around designated tree trunks, "marking its sanctification" (Darlington 1998: 8). The robes stand as reminder that no harm should come to the tree or any other tree in the forest. Such ordinations may incorporate water, which is sprinkled on the participants as a blessing. Water, after it has been placed in front of the image of the Buddha, is also drunk by the headman of each village. The use of water is an innovation, which strengthens the moral sentiment of the tree ordination ritual (Darlington 1998: 10). The culmination of one such ceremony was the displaying of a tree plaque which read, "*Tham laay paa khee tham laay chaat*"—"To destroy the forest is the destroy life" (Saniotis 2006b: 71).

The ecology monk Phra Somkit has inaugurated an integrative ecological agricultural model for Thai villagers. Somkit's natural farm now houses over one hundred varieties of plants and has influenced villagers to also apply the same biodiversity principles to their farms (Darlington 2000: 8). This practice has also been at the heart of the monk Phra Pitak's conservation model, which is being implemented in many Thai villages (Darlington 2000: 8).

Indonesia's Pesantren and Islamic Ecological Principles

Up until the 1950s Indonesia was covered in forests. There is a saying that the level of forest density was such that an orang-utan could have traversed from one side of Borneo to the other side without having to touch the ground. In the last fifty years that percentage of forested land has declined from 162 to 98 million hectares. Moreover, since 1996 deforestation has increased to approximately 2 million hectares per year. Currently, Indonesia has lost approximately 72% of its frontier forest (Global Forest Watch 2011). This alarming loss has been expedited by legal and illegal logging, pulp and paper industries, mining, and industrial palm oil plantations. Lack of governance has enabled systematic deforestation to occur without implementing existing protective legislation. While the Indonesian government is taking measures to curb the rate of corporate plundering of rainforests, there is a lack of co-ordinated reforestation programmes. Moreover, the extensive deforestation of Indonesia's rain forests is threatening hundreds of fauna and flora species (CSIRO 2006; UNEP 1999; Sukumar et al. 1995).

The 1997–1998 fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan alone destroyed up to 5 million hectares of rainforest. The fires smouldered for many months releasing substantial quantities of stored carbon and impacted on the sensitive rainforest biotopes, wiping out "70%–100% of seedlings and 25%–70% of saplings" in Sumatra (Kinnaird & O'Brien 1998). Between 2000 and 2006 Malaysia and Papua New Guinea "released an average of 128 million tons of carbon (470 million tons of carbon dioxide)" (Butler 2008). Borneo released 74 million tons of greenhouse emissions for each year of this six-year period while Sumatra doubled its greenhouse emissions (Butler 2008).

In the face of such devastation there is now a new movement amongst Indonesia's *pesantren* (religious schools) to foster Islamic ecological principles. Currently, there are approximately 17,000 *pesantren* in Indonesia, of which 900 have implemented eco-friendly practices such as water, energy and waste management (Simamora 2010). Gelling (2009) has coined Indonesia as the home of 'eco-Islam' as many *pesantren* are now utilising Islamic ecological principles.

At the forefront of the 'greening' Islamic movement in Indonesia is Fachruddin Mangunjaya who worked as a research assistant on an orang-utan conservation project. Mangunjaya has co-authored a book called 'Exploring Islamic Traditions of Conservation' (Mohamed 2010). For Mangunjaya, being a good Muslim is about protecting the environment. He

believes that *pesantren* and religious leaders should work together to ensure that the environment is conserved (Mohamed 2010). One current *pesantren* project involves forest re-planting in Aceh, which suffered from decades of civil war and the 2006 tsunami (ARC 2008). Recognising that there are political, ecological and economic benefits in implementing eco-programmes, the Indonesian government is promoting an environmental curriculum for the *pesantren* (Gelling 2009). In 2009, the state environment minister Gusti Muhammad Hatta had announced that approximately 90 *pesantren* in Central Java would participate in the new eco-*pesantren* pilot programme. Hatta stated that the 4 million students of Indonesia's *pesantren* could be instrumental in assisting their villages to foster faith-based ecological initiatives.

The method of the *pesantren* corresponds with evolutionary learning in that it is based on a massive networking of many villages in order to find solutions to environmental problems. Communities are taking responsibility for the environment, and this collective impetus is a significant social driver for fostering beneficial behaviour change.

Conclusion

This paper has articulated evolutionary learning principles within Buddhist and Islamic environmental movements in Thailand and Indonesia. While Thailand and Indonesia are characterised by on-going westernisation it would be foolhardy to presume that cultural values do not hold a privileged place in the lives of their inhabitants. For example, religious traditions such as Buddhism and Islam are an important source of meaning and inspiration for Thais and Indonesians, as well as other peoples in Southeast Asia.

Having said this, it is perhaps helpful to examine some of the underlying differences between the western world and Asia. Nisbett's study of Western and Asian students is particularly insightful. Although it may overgeneralise in parts, Nisbett's study gives some indication of the nature of cognitive and perceptual differences between Westerners and East Asians. Firstly, Nisbett proclaims that western cognition has been heavily influenced by Greek thought (Nisbett 2003). For Nisbett the overarching features of western thought are: a linear time frame; thought is analytical; objects are viewed as separate entities (atomism); the onus is placed on human control of events; an understanding of the world as static (Nisbett 2003: 109). By contrast, East Asian societies (and South and Southeast

Asian societies) tend to be more holistic and cyclical in their time frame, viewing objects in relation to their environments, and understanding the world as complex, inter-related, and changeable (Nisbett 2003: 109).

This underlying principle has been discussed by Athanasiou & Baer (2002: 144–145). According to these authors, open access and regulation of commons is our right by virtue of our "common humanity." It is my contention that Thais and Indonesians, by virtue of their sociocentric practices and institutions, will be able to regulate and enforce a regime of common property in relation to ecology, which has hitherto been over-looked in the Western world. For centuries some Asian societies have set the standard of biodiversity conservation. For example, Nisbett (2003) points out that Asian Buddhist societies have never viewed humans as being at the top of the food chain nor has there been an emphasis on con-trolling nature as is found in the Western tradition. Arguably, the domi-nant cultural patterns of western societies have been historically framed by the idea of a "great chain of being"—that pivotal medieval map that depicts the universe as a vertical hierarchy. At the top of the chain is God, the angels and the spiritual domain (Bynum 1975). Lower sub-sets are the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms. At the same time, these kingdoms are allocated various moral and aesthetic elements based on their utility. Humans as mediators between spirit and matter are placed above these kingdoms (Bynum 1975, Lovejoy 1961). In short, this important cognitive map has informed western attitudes toward nature as being both inferior to humans and open to human machinations.

In Asian societies, metaphysical maps instead depict the inter-relational qualities of the universe. Hindu understandings of *purusha* or Chinese Taoist naturalism place humans in a cosmic web of life that is non-hierarchical and inter-relational. Significantly, the nuance of Southeast Asian Buddhism and Islam have been in exploring polyphasic aspects of consciousness such as dreams, visions and meditative states that by their very nature encourage greater inter-relationality with nature. Certainly, these societies fall into the category of polyphasic societies, whereas western societies are typically monophasic (non-encouragement of non-awakened states or intuitive states). I would argue that the polyphasic nature of these societies fosters evolutionary learning through faith-based ecological movements.

References

Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) Pesantrens inspire forest replanting in Aceh, Indonesia November 28, 2008. www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=280.

Arbhabhirama, et al., eds. (1987) *Thailand Natural Resources Program*. Bangkok: Thailand Development Research Institute.

Athanasiou, T. Baer, P. (2002) *Dead Heat: Global Justice and Global Warming*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Bateson, G. (1973) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind.* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

Bergmann, Sigurd & Heather Eaton (Eds.) (2011) Ecological Awareness: Exploring Religion, Ethics and Aesthetics. Berlin/London: Lit Verlag.

Brown, B. (1994) Toward a Buddhist ecological cosmology. In: Mary Evelyn Tucker & John A. Grim eds. *Worldviews & Ecology*. New York: Orbis Books. Pp. 123–137.

Butler, R. A. December 9, (2008) Drought and deforestation in Southeast Asia to contribute to climate change. http://news.mongabay.com/2008/1209-forests_drought.html.

Bynum, W. F. (1975) The great chain of being after forty years: an appraisal. *History of Science* 13: 1–28.

CSIRO (2006) *Climate Change in the Asia/Pacific Region*. October 11. Preston, B. L. Suppiah, R. Macadam, I. Bathols, J.

—— (1998) "The Ordination of a Tree: The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand." *Ethnology* 37(1): 1–15.

Darlington, S. M. (2000) "Rethinking Buddhism and Development: The Emergence of Environmentalist Monks in Thailand." *Journal of Buddhist Studies* 7: 1–13.

Fu, C. B. Kim J.-W. Zhao, Z. C. (1998) Preliminary assessment of impacts of global change in Asia. In: J. N. Galloway & J. M. Melillo. eds. *Asian Change in the Context of Global Climate Change*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 308–342.

Gelling, P. Indonesia: The home of "Green Islam." *Global Post*, November 16, 2009 http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/indonesia/091111/islam-environment-indonesia-green.

Henning, D. H. (2002) Buddhism and Deep ecology for Protection of Wild Asian Elephants in Myanmar: A Resource Guide. http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/elephants.pdf.

—— (2006) *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*. Buddha Dharma Educations Association Inc.

Horner, I. B. (1983) Dantabhumi sutta: The discourse on the 'tamed stage.' translated from the Pali. In: *Taming the Mind: Discourses of the Buddha* (*WH 51*), edited by the Buddhist Publication Society. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Climate Change 2007. The Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) of the United Nations.

Indonesia's Forests in Brief (2011) *Global Forest Watch*. http://www.globalforestwatch.org/english/indonesia/forests.htm.

Kabilsingh, C. (1990) Early Buddhist views of nature. In: *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. A. H. Badiner ed. Berkeley: Parallax Press. Pp. 8–13.

Kinnaird, M. F., O'Brien, T. G. (1998) Ecological effects of wildfire on lowland rainforest in Sumatra. *Conservation Biology* 12: 954–956.

Laszlo, E. (2001) *Macroshift: Navigating the Transformation to a Sustainable World*. San Franciso: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Laszlo, E. Artiagni, R. Combs, A. Csányi, V. (1996) *Changing Visions, Human Cognitive Maps: Past, Present, and Future*. London: Adamantine Press Limited.

Leakey, R., Lewin, R. (1995) *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Mankind*. New York: Doubleday.

Linder, S. H. (2005) The adoption of adaptation measures. In: Kristie. L. Ebie, Joel B. Smith & Ian Burton. eds. *Integration of Public Health with Adaptation to Climate Change*. Leiden, the Netherlands: Taylor & Francis. Pp. 242–257.

Lovejoy, A. O. (1961) *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mohamed, N. (2010) Raising the green banner of Islam. *IslamOnline.net*. February 2. http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1262372382567&pagename=Zone-English-HealthScience%FHSELayout.

Myerhoff, B. (1974) *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Nasr, S. H. (1969) Introduction, *Science and Civilization in Islam*. New York: New American Library. http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/nasr.html.

Nisbett, R. E. (2003) *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently*. NewYork: The Free Press.

Phat, N. K. Knorr, W. Kim, S. (2004) Appropriate measures for conservation of terrestrial carbon stocks—analysis of trends of forest management in Southeast Asia. *Forest Ecology and Management* 191: 283–299.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988) *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Saniotis, A. (2004) Nature as an expression of *Tawhid*: Islam and Ecology. *Interface: A Forum of Theology in the World* 7: 101–108.

—— (2006a) Ambiguous futures: global warming and the third world. *Journal of Futures Studies.* November, 11(2): 15–34.

—— (2006b) Gandhian ethics: non-violence, religion and communication. *Religion and Social Communication* 4 (1): 62–71.

Sharia'ti, A. (1979) *On the Sociology of Islam: Lectures by Ali Sharia'ti*. Translated by Hamid Algar. Berkeley, California: Mizan Press.

Simamora, A. P. Muslim countries to lead on green issues. *The Jakarta Post*, Jakarta. 04/12/2010. http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/04/12/muslim-countries-lead-green-issues.html

Sponsel, L. E. Natadecha, P. (1988) Buddhism, ecology and forests in Thailand: Past, present, and future. In: *Changing Tropical forest: Historical Perspectives on today's Challenges in Asia, Australasia and Oceania*. J. Dargavel, K. Dixon and N. Semple, eds. Canberra: Australian National University Center for Resource and Environmental Studies. Pp. 305–325.

Sponsel, L. Natadecha-Sponsel, P. (1995) The role of Buddhism in creating a more sustainable society in Thailand. In: Jonathan Rigg, ed. *Counting the Costs: Economic Growth and Environmental Change in Thailand*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Pp. 27–46.

Sukumar, R. Suresh, H. S. Ramesh, R. (1995) Climate change and its impact on tropical montane ecosystems in south India. *Journal of Biogeography* 22: 533–536.

UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) (1999) *Global Environment Outlook 2000*. Earthscan. London. United Kingdom.

United Nations Environment Programme Regional Resource Centre for Asia and the Pacific. Environmental Indicators: South East Asia. United Nations Environment Programme ISBN: 92-807-2473-8, JOB No. DRC / 0558/ BA.2004. (accessed on 14 January, 2011, at http://www.rrcap.unep.org/pub/indicator/Vertical%20South%20East%20Asia.pdf.

van der Werfa G. R. et al. (2008) Climate regulation of fire emissions and deforestation in equatorial Asia. *PNAS* Early Edition December 8, 2008.

Volk, T. Bloom, J. W. Richards, J. (2007) Toward a science of metapatterns: building upon Bateson's foundation. *Kybernetes* 36 (7/8): 1070–1080.

World Rainforest Movement. Workshop on Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation. Background document. Costa Rica, 18–22. January, 1999. http://www.wrm.org.uy/deforestation/Asiabackground.html.

Yusuf, A. A. Francisco, H. A. January, (2009) Climate Change Vulnerability Mapping for Southeast Asia. Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia (EEPSEA). EEPSEA Special and Technical Paper tp200901s1, Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia (EEPSEA), http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/12324196651Mapping_Report.pdf.

INVISIBLE BLOOD:
RITUAL AS INFORMATION PROCESSING IN LAOS

Guido Sprenger

Religious dynamics in Southeast Asia evolve from the interaction of states, localities and transnational institutions, in particular those related to so-called 'world religions.' These dynamics are forms of communication between different levels or modes of sociality. Rituals, religious discourse including laws and regulations, and religious organisations are media of these communications. This includes ethnically specific ritual systems, like the 'tradition of the Rmeet people' (*riid Rmeet*) in Laos and those of many other minorities, which are sometimes seen as isolated from the 'larger world' of states and trans-ethnic religions. As this chapter tries to show, ethnically specific rituals address both internal and external levels of sociality. Just as ethnicities in the Southeast Asian mainland are formed through trans-local interaction, so are ritual systems (e.g., Jonsson, 2005; Keyes, 1979; Leach, 2001 [1954]; Lehman, 1967; Tooker, 1996, 2004). Rituals serve the reproduction of central socio-cosmic relations and categories within a given group but also articulate relations between different groups who have otherwise distinct ritual systems. Some rituals, at least, facilitate interethnic communication and do not simply reinforce those seemingly fixed conceptual structures a society uses to define itself (see also Sahlins 2008). Ritual systems process information about new social environments, their changing ethnic composition, and other historical and socio-economic factors. In order to do this, they operate through semantics of reproduction that are specific to the system but adapt and change during their application.

The point of departure here are observations made among Rmeet (Lamet)—a population of about 20,000 Mon-Khmer-speaking non-Buddhists in Laos.[1] The Rmeet perform elaborate sacrifices addressed to

various spirits as the focal activity of their ritual system.[2] Most of these rituals consist of elements that appear in other rituals as well, both among Rmeet and among neighbouring groups. Yet, when visitors with a different ethnic background—in particular the Buddhist Lao—witness these rituals the Rmeet sometimes make certain alterations, in particular regarding the use of the fresh blood of sacrificial animals. These changes are regularly legitimated by 'being ashamed' of the visitors. One major question is why such performances and their transformations are connected with 'shame' or 'fear of exposure' (*kmäa*). The use of this Rmeet concept implies a reflective stance towards the inside-outside distinction as a determining factor of ritual. It indicates that rituals are being seen by outsiders, and this witnessing itself constitutes a value that is taken into account while designing the ritual. A particular ritual performance that processes the presence of external witnesses as one of the social relations it reproduces thus differs from a performance lacking them. Reflexivity in this context means that the external perception of a ritual feeds back into its internal workings.

It would be tempting to cast such self-censoring of rituals in a scheme that corresponds with Western dichotomies of 'civilised vs. primitive,' or 'world religion vs. animism.' In such a scheme, Rmeet transformations would simply amount to the acknowledgment of the superiority—at least, superior decency or degree of civilisation—of the ritual practices of outsiders (Lao). In this view, Rmeet would merely try to hide the more barbaric aspects of their own rituals.

Yet, to assume that these Southeast Asian uplanders minutely share the ethnocentrisms of Europeans and Americans—or even those of the Lao—would be a rather bold leap of faith. Certainly value judgments by both Lao and Rmeet, in regard to their mutual relationship, involve a revalori-

---

   [2] I prefer 'ritual system' to 'religion,' because in the present case, rituals can be distinguished from other activities much more easily than religious or metaphysical value-ideas can be distinguished from non-religious ones. The term religion implies an integration of practices, cosmology and moral value-ideas that does not serve well for the analysis of the Rmeet system. Certainly, a ritual system employs a semantic of value-ideas in order to work and these enable the system to process external influence. Yet, starting with rituals and then exploring the semantics used in connection with them makes it easier to establish analytical distinctions.

sation of Rmeet practices. While the socialist government used to decry upland ritual sacrifices as "wasteful," Rmeet themselves stress how uneducated they are compared to the Lao (Sprenger 2006a). However, these judgments emerge from a context quite different from modern Western classifications and, even more so, modern notions of cultural change. Therefore, I will approach the issue of self-imposed transformations of ritual by relating three different aspects: (a) the meanings and uses of the term *kmäa*, (b) the role of blood spilling in upland-lowland identities, and (c) shifts in the ethnicity of the audiences of Rmeet rituals.

   The theory applied here combines the hierarchical opposition of value-ideas employed by Louis Dumont for the analysis of specific ideologies (Dumont, 1980, 1991 [1983]) with Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems (Luhmann, 1984). While Dumont's notion of ideology is helpful for the analysis of the semantics of a system as a set of hierarchised value-ideas, Luhmann is crucial for understanding its relation with its environment. Ideologies consist of value-ideas as structural elements that are arranged in contextually reversible hierarchical oppositions. While in any context values are hierarchically ordered, the hierarchy might be reversed in a different context (or level in Dumont's nomenclature). The hierarchy of values is often contested in actual social situations, but this contestation is not just about which value should be given priority for a particular decision, but which context the situation (and the decision) belongs to (or evokes). Such ideologies provide a semantic that produces intelligible and connective action and communication. The system-specific semantic also enables the identification and processing of information from the environment for use within the system. That is, events in the environment are identified as information by their potential to be described in the terms of the semantic of the system. Any event that cannot be described in the terms of this semantic will not be information in Bateson's sense of "*a difference that makes a difference*" (Bateson 1972: 453). As information, however, an event triggers further communication within the system.

   'System' is not to be understood here as a set of fixed, abstract elements. Rather, the elements are actual communications, and the system steadily changes with their production (see also Sahlins 1985). It is framed by an evolving set of rules that produce connective communications (both words and acts) whose coherence lies in their connection with past and future communications. Thus, the idea of systemic coherence employed here should not be confused with the type of functional balance associated with functionalism. Classical forms of functionalism operate upon a basic analytical distinction of whole and parts, a distinction partially

accountable for the functionalist tendency to privilege homeostatic models and also one informing much of Dumont's work (but see Dumont 1994: 28). Luhmann's approach covers this distinction with the system-environment distinction. This way, the development of systems and the relations between them shift from a challenge to theory to being its central focus. The central problematic is not: How do parts fit together to produce a whole? It is rather: How do systems reproduce by relating to their specific environments? Environments and systems define each other, and in Luhmann's sense, the environment of a social system does not only consist of other social systems, but also of the psychic systems of the actors, the natural system and so on. For the present argument, however, the notion of environment only refers to other social systems outside the Rmeet ritual system. Accordingly, the central question can be formulated this way: if ritual reproduces constitutive relations of a social system, how is the constitutive relation between that system and other systems accounted for in the ritual?

In Laos, over 45% of the population belong to one of 48 officially recognised minorities. More than 30% are neither Buddhists, nor belong to any other trans-ethnic, dogmatic religion, but practice ethnically specific ritual systems (according to the 2005 Census). In this country, people are acutely aware of the specificity of their ethnicity and their rituals. In fact, many ritual systems and ideologies take this plurality into account and build on it. The most popular creation myths of the Rmeet, and many other populations, do not deal with the creation of the world, but of ethnic diversity. These rituals and ideologies explicitly address the double-nature of the kind of social reproduction they enable. On the one hand, they provide form and direction for the reproduction of social relationships within self-identified communities—a semantic framework for reproducing the 'inside.' This semantic usually employs ideas of kinship, relations with ancestors or social space. On the other hand, they address the 'outside' of these communities, sifting local reproduction out of an environment of different socialities. Indeed, processes of reproducing the 'inside' and dealing with the 'outside' seem to be part of the same system. Ritual and kinship, as well as trade and interethnic relations, are only some of the aspects of an overall system of social reproduction.

This does not mean that the difference between inside and outside is merely an artefact of anthropological theory, encoded in terms like 'culture,' 'societies as wholes' or 'intercultural relations,' that all assume such a dichotomy. It is also, in a different form, part of the semantic of the Southeast Asian systems themselves (Proschan, 2001; Sprenger, 2008a).

Communities or ethnicities are conceived as closed and bounded in particular contexts, while other contexts stress the continuity between them and other communities. Rituals, in particular, serve the emergence of local self-identified communities. Each ritual performance takes into account that, in a different time or place, things could be done in another way, but in the here-and-now, they must be done in this particular manner. The variation of rituals creates differences between groups, variously on the level of groups within villages (like clans or lineages), villages, ethnic subgroups or, most markedly, between ethnic groups. The process of the emergence of a ritual system is, thus, dialectical and reflective. Rituals provide markers of difference and discontinuity within regions and states, and as such serve as means of communication. They mark off differences in sociality by representing distinct forms of reproducing the social. Insofar as rituals need to communicate these differences within the multiethnic field which mainland Southeast Asia constitutes, external witnesses are implied in their proceedings (see Baumann, 1992, Platvoet, 1995). This even applies when the witnessing is restricted to the exclusion of outsiders, for example, from a village or household by proscriptions against entering during an important ritual. Village gates and ritual markers warding off spirits and unwanted visitors belong to the most conspicuous signs shared, in many varieties, by mainland ethnicities as means to communicate specificity and boundedness to the outside.

However, the relationship with external witnesses or participants is not restricted to their exclusion, but, as we will see, far more differentiated in kind and through time. Historical transformations in the social environment of a particular community feed into the reproductive patterns of that community, including its rituals. More specifically, a ritual system reacts to its environment just like any other subsystem that is defined by its relational position within an encompassing social system. In most contexts, a ritual system contains certain valorisations regarding its relation to other social and more specifically ritual systems in its environment. In the case of the Rmeet, the most important point of reference for reflecting the ritual system is the sociality of the lowlanders—mostly Lao and Lue—who are Buddhists, and who built stratified principalities with ranked titles and kings at the apex in the past. Even today, the Lao dominate state politics and Rmeet consider themselves inferior in many respects, ranging from education and economic skills to physical beauty (Sprenger, 2004, 2010). At the same time, socialist state ideology stresses the equality of ethnic groups. One of the major factors for the success of the Pathet Lao among uplanders before the revolution of 1975 was the

promise of a state without hierarchical distinctions between ethnicities (Evans, 2002: 212; Stuart-Fox, 1997: 79). While many Rmeet happily adopt this rhetoric when dealing with lowlanders, it still presents them with a paradox: while they perceive lowlanders as superior outsiders, they are supposed to be on equal terms with them, treating them as friends, even as possible marriage partners, and invite them to join their rituals.

Rmeet Villages

The differences between two Rmeet villages will serve to highlight the processes at hand here. One of them, Takheung, is a mountain village with no roads (until 2005), no electricity and mostly a subsistence economy of rice farming. Sales to the monthly market or to merchants and labour trips to the lowlands or Thailand are the major sources of income and goods made outside the village. Takheung is surrounded by other Rmeet villages, the nearest being a one-hour walk away. The village, thus, serves as an example of a mostly Rmeet-focused sociality, certainly regarding the affairs of everyday life. The other village, Hangdeun, is situated on the outskirts of a larger town, Ban Houeisay in northern Laos and on the border with Thailand, formed by the Mekong. The vast majority of households in Hangdeun are Rmeet and it is also defined as a Rmeet village by its village spirit which is addressed by means of annual Rmeet rituals. Non-Rmeet villagers also contribute to these rituals. Yet, the position of Hangdeun on the borders of a larger town—large by Laotian standards—defines the way Rmeet practice their sociality. The name of the village means 'tail of the airport,' due to its location near the airstrip. The road connecting Thailand and China, via northern Laos, runs through the village. The recent upgrading of the road and a Mekong bridge under construction will lead to a massive increase of traffic in years to come.

Most Hangdeun villagers originated from a village near Takheung, about 80 kilometres to the East. They had fled from fighting during the Second Indochina War in the late 1960s and first lived in several smaller settlements near Houeisay. Later, some returned to re-establish their old village, while others were resettled into a larger Lao village. Around 1996, Hangdeun realised its wish to become an administrative sub-unit of this village, defined as Rmeet.

The social environment has an immediate impact on Rmeet ritual practice. Takheung villagers meet other ethnic groups only through the occasional visits of civil servants, policemen, development workers or traders,

or when they leave the village. Hangdeun is part of a Lao village, together with a third sub-unit, a non-Buddhist Tai Dam community. There are Hmong and Khmu villages within walking distance, in an almost continuous series of settlements along the road. Thus, the foundation of the present village to date has been an act of reflective differentiation—a claim of identity.

This has meant that a number of rituals in Hangdeun that prohibit outsiders from entering ritually defined spaces had to be altered. As mentioned above, inside-outside relations in Rmeet ritual—be they on the level of the village (spirit) or the house (spirit)—are marked mostly by proscriptions barring entry to outsiders who might carry harmful spirits. The annual sacrifice to the village spirit is one example. On this occasion, mountain villages erect small gates at all village entrances, to keep strangers and spirits away for one to three days. There is no total isolation, however. In Hangdeun, though, the highway to China is not subject to such treatment. Similarly, entrance to houses in which sacrifices to house spirits are performed is less regulated. In the past, I was told, persons who did not belong to the grave cluster of the house (a patrilineal group defined by ritual participation) were forbidden during the ritual (Sprenger, 2008b) and, still today, unrelated people are not supposed to enter. A bamboo star ornament (*talaeo*) with fresh leaves erected on a stick near the house entrance signals such a prohibition. Yet, in present-day Hangdeun, everybody is able to join such festive occasions, while restrictions observed in Takheung are mostly nominal. In Hangdeun, this leads to an increased flow of non-Rmeet in Rmeet households—working buddies of the men, trade partners, neighbours and friends from other villages.

While the earlier version of the ritual regulated entrance with a few clear-cut rules like group membership and warning signs, the situation in Hangdeun creates a higher demand for semantics that regulate inside-outside relations. Yet, the semantic that recognises a more complex composition of guests and participants should be considered as a continuation of earlier forms. The modernist narrative of formerly strict and exclusive rules becoming more malleable under the influence of modernity does not apply here. Rather, the value of the boundaries has shifted, selecting differently what is allowed to trespass than in the past. Although the distinction between inside and outside is accentuated by entry restrictions, these rules do not simply serve isolation or create the fiction of self-sustained, hermetic social entities. They are better understood as defining socio-cosmic categories, like houses and villages, and relating them; and this relation is one of systematic linkage. The exclusion witnessed in entry

restrictions is just one contextual form that this linkage might assume, employed in order to reproduce particular relations constituting the social order. Other contexts demand a different valorisation of boundaries in order to reproduce other relations within that order. It is not by chance that the structures erected on pathways during the village rituals are not barriers, but gates. These gates, equipped with wooden weapons to ward off dangerous spirits, select what is going to enter and what is not. By a similar reasoning, trespassing is allowed providing that the visitor will present a small gift of liquor to the village spirit, thereby establishing the proper relation that redefines and subordinates the visitor to the type of relationship that is being reproduced during the ritual.

This conceptualisation of inside-outside relations establishes modes of communication as ongoing processes, not just reinforcements of structure. As in every communication, the process can shift from structural repetition to variation or transformative change at any point (Luhmann, 1984). Such changes reflect the conditions of communication between the inside and the outside. Changes in social structure, economy, place, etc., in the communities involved also affect the way inside-outside relations are semantically regulated. Reflexivity is therefore inherent in these changes of inside-outside semantics, a kind of reflexivity not only concerning the actual ritual or the persons involved in it, but the shape of the societies they represent—a shape conditioned by the way they relate to one another.

The same perspective holds for the reduction and the abolition of rituals, the attitude of 'self-censorship' toward certain elements. Through changes in the conditions of inside/outside communication, elements of rituals change their position within the ritual system (Sprenger, 2006a). This can be shown in regard to the sentiments which Rmeet articulate in the context of some of their rituals.

Ritual and the Fear of Exposure

One important category for describing relations with outsiders, however defined, is a sentiment called *kmäa*, translatable as 'to be ashamed,' 'to be embarrassed' or, perhaps most precisely, 'to fear exposure.' Most prominently, *kmäa* features in discourses that link status and erotics. For example, a man might be 'ashamed' to dance with his wife in public during feasts, regarding it as a behaviour appropriate for unmarried people. Here, the relative erotic disorderliness of unmarried behaviour impedes the

higher status of a married man.[3] Another man said he had been 'ashamed' to pursue girls as a youth, as he was poor and an orphan. Here, his low status contrasted with the requirements of generosity in courtship and the potential future husband/housefather role.

In certain contexts, *kmäa* borders on *ped*, also translatable as 'shame,' but meaning an act that jeopardises the integrity of a person and, therefore, demands compensation.[4] If somebody intentionally causes *kmäa* to somebody else, this might be understood as an act of *ped*. An example is breaking up an engagement—a marriage between the first, 'small' wedding and the final 'big' wedding. In this case, compensation is necessary, but it is higher when the girl leaves the relationship. The argument is that for a boy, it is more *kmäa* to be left than for a girl.

In all these instances, *kmäa* emerges from an inadequate use of value hierarchies. Marriage is regarded as a state superior to being unmarried; affable and promising suitors are superior to poor and orphaned ones; men are higher than women. In all the above examples, actors face the danger of violating the boundaries of the respective categories, causing 'shame.' Erotics is a field in which the potential disorderliness of pre- and extra-marital relations is continuous with the ordered reproduction of married, house-owning couples. Therefore, it is particularly prone to become a risk zone wherein categorical distinctions have to be carefully maintained.

Yet, *kmäa* is also often used in the relationship between Rmeet and lowlanders. The Rmeet are 'ashamed' about certain of their rituals and local behaviour, assuming that lowlanders would be upset about them. This functions as an important emotional marker of the perceived difference between the two ethnic categories. For lowlanders, Rmeet use the term *yam*, covering a whole range of associations with language and culture (state-building Lao or Thai) and geography (lowlands). The difference is hierarchically valorised, that is, upland and lowland, and Rmeet

---

[3] By contrast, Lao lowlanders do not seem to observe such a restraint when dancing the same type of dance. This might be explained by the fact that Rmeet allow premarital sex and Lao traditionally do not. Although children out of wedlock are no cause for a major scandal among Rmeet, unmarried mothers have difficulties finding a husband. Thus, forms of open premarital flirtation are more strongly marked as potentially disruptive, while no such marking takes place among Lao. Dancing is marked as appropriate for youngsters but inappropriate for parents.

[4] The two meanings of 'shame' in English are more differentiated in some other European languages: 'embarrassment,' 'fear of exposure' meaning 'Scham' in German or 'schaamte' in Dutch; the damage to somebody's social person meaning 'Schande' in both languages.

and *yam* are not only geographic or ethnic categories but value-ideas that inform actual relationships in an asymmetric manner. In most contexts—such as education, power, cultural sophistication, trade and physical beauty—Rmeet consider lowlanders superior to highlanders. They have a government and, in the past, a king, they have a script, white skin and technological skills, all of which the Rmeet lack. Even their ritual system is occasionally regarded as superior, as they employ Buddhist monks to take care of spirits that would otherwise bother everyone. Only in the context of origin myths do the Rmeet encompass the Lao as the ancestors of all mankind and the source of wealth. These myths resonate with a belief shared among most ethnic groups of Laos, that the Mon-Khmer speaking uplanders—Rmeet, Khmu, Kasak etc.—represent the original owners of the land, while the Lao majority and some other ethnicities like Hmong and Mien immigrated later (Sprenger, 2004, 2006c).

These latter ideas indicate the reversibility of the upland-lowland hierarchy, which implies the complementarity of its terms. There is a higher degree of mutual interdependence of terms when their hierarchy can be reversed, as reversibility points at a more complex embedding of the terms in the semantics of social reproduction. Rmeet society defines itself by its relation to the lowlands, even more than by its relation to the culturally similar and neighbouring Khmu, and certain aspects of identity, like original ownership of the land or ugliness, immediately come out of this relationship.

Kmäa indicates an inappropriate handling of hierarchical relations. In regard to rituals, the proper feeding of spirits and communication with the outside appear as conflicting values, both prominent and incompatible and, thus, need to be kept separate. In this context, what is it that makes people *kmäa*?

The Suppression of Blood-spilling

The aspect in ritual most subject to reduction when lowland or foreign guests are expected is the spilling of the blood of sacrificial animals. Sacrificial blood is used during all major Rmeet rituals. Two of these will be specifically addressed here: wrist tying, a common blessing ritual, and the sacrifice to the house spirit. In all cases, the blood of chickens, pigs or buffaloes is considered food for the invisible components of persons, be it the 'soul' (*klpu*) of the living or the spirits themselves.

Blessing rituals (*dondeii*, 'to tie hands') are performed on occasions when the person as a socially-integrated being is in danger—be it through illness, the return or beginning of a journey, a shift in residence or marriage. In such situations there is a danger that the *klpu* and the physical body might separate, ultimately causing death. The ritual aims at securing the *klpu* in the body by tying it with strings applied to the wrists and feeding it. The feeding has two steps: Firstly, blood from a freshly-killed animal (a pig or chicken) is smeared on the shins of the addressee; secondly, after the animal has been cut up and the meat boiled, certain portions, in particular the liver, are placed on the hands of the addressee together with steamed rice.

When foreign visitors, especially lowlanders, are welcomed to the village with this ritual, the blood smearing is usually left out. For example, after I received a room of my own in my host family's house in Takheung, I was usually included in the blood-smearing, but when my wife came to visit, it was not done. My wife is, incidentally, Buddhist. The reason for the difference was *kmäa*. Particularly in Takheung, similar modifications were made when Lao officials visited from the lowlands. These men were also honoured with a wrist-tying but, again, no blood was applied to their legs. Indeed, the Rmeet blessing ritual is a transformation of the *sou khouan* or *baci*, the most regular and distinctive ritual of the Lao lowlanders and other Buddhist Tai-speakers. In this bloodless ritual, strings are wound around the addressee's wrists and an elaborate gift bowl with flowers, fruit and rice is prepared. Among the foodstuffs that attract the *khouan* there is a boiled chicken, but the killing of the animal is not part of the ritual, and the blood plays no role in it (Mayoury, 1990; see also Izikowitz, 1941).

Thus, the ritual functions as a transcultural communication device very much in the sense of a common "ritual language" as conceptualized by Leach (2001 [1954]: 102). The Rmeet and Lao versions of wrist-tying do connect differently to the ritual systems of the two societies in question, one being performed in a context of animal sacrifice, the other against a Buddhist background. However, the two are immediately recognizable as similar by the actors involved and therefore being connective across the boundaries of the specific ritual systems.

In a different context, the relocation of a house spirit sacrifice from the house to the outdoor kitchen was legitimated with 'being ashamed of the lowlanders.' The house spirit (*phi ña*) is a composite of the spirits of lineal agnatic ancestors and their wives (F, M, FF, FM, FFF, FFM etc.). It

watches over the living members of the house and receives sacrifices on
certain occasions, particularly illness among the residents and changes
in residence or the architecture. Some of these are the same occasions
as for wrist tying, but here the house spirit is included in the range of
recipients, making it a much larger event. During these rituals, the site
of the spirit in the house—a sometimes-unmarked spot on the wall—is
smeared with blood. For small sacrifices, a pig or piglet is killed, and the
ritual takes place in the course of a single day. Larger sacrifices demand
buffaloes and this ritual spans three days, as well as a series of subsequent
dates (Sprenger, 2005).

House spirit taboos in the past most prominently prohibited outsiders
from entering the main room, and the prohibition of certain actions and
objects is still observed today. Otherwise, the house spirit would withdraw
his protection or actively punish residents, causing illness. Yet, with an
increase in inter-ethnic visits and traffic, as well as better availability of
modern medicine and medical services, house taboos have been reduced.
This means that the values of distinction and exclusion that maintained
the house as a separate socio-cosmic entity have been diminished. While
in Takheung house spirits are located in the main room of a house, in
many recent buildings in Hangdeun housefathers have relocated the spirit
to the kitchen. This has several interrelated reasons, among them the
diminution of his power and the accompanying reduction of the taboos
(Sprenger, 2006a). This is particularly important in a setting like Hang-
deun, where non-Rmeet visitors frequently enter houses. According to
present-day informants, this would have been unacceptable or at least
risky in the past, as it would have provoked sanctions by the spirit (see
also Izikowitz, 1979: 63, 72–73).

In a house spirit ritual, the sacrificial animal—a pig or buffalo—is
killed outside the main house first and then brought inside to the site of
the spirit. In case of the much larger buffalo sacrifices, a day is spent in
advance erecting ritual posts and creating various ritual objects and trays.
Also, the spirits of the dead in the graveyard are called from the edge of
the village to participate. After entering the house, the blood of the animal
is smeared directly on the house spirit's location. Immediately after cut-
ting up the animal, a few raw pieces of meat are hung there as well. After
the preparation of minced meat, meat soup and steamed rice, it is first the
housefathers of the patriline—the male descendants of the ancestral line
represented by the spirit—who share a small meal with the spirit. Then

everybody else, women, children and visitors, may begin to eat and feasting often continues until late at night. In case of buffalo sacrifices, another ritual meal occurs on the second day and on a series of days sometimes covering a 60-day period. Yet, the conspicuous killing and blood smearing only occurs on the first day (Sprenger, 2005, 2006b).

On the occasion of a renovation, a housefather in Hangdeun told me that the sacrifice would not be performed inside the house but in the adjacent kitchen building. While his house was a modern-style brick construction with whitewashed walls inside, the kitchen was a shack made of small tree trunks and bamboo, reminiscent to upland countryside buildings. The reason he gave for the relocation of the sacrifice to the kitchen resonated well with the common idea that a house spirit's powers are weaker in the kitchen and the spirit is less demanding in terms of taboos and sacrifices. He said he was *kmäa yam*, ashamed of the lowlanders. In particular, the lowland girls would be annoyed to see the blood spilled on the walls and would keep away.

In this context, the feast is conceived as a representation of Rmeet ethnicity to a non-Rmeet public. Buddhist lowlanders do not worship house spirits with animal sacrifices, and therefore the occasion communicates difference, no matter which part of the ritual is accessible to the guests. Yet this difference is also coded in terms of a hierarchy between Rmeet and lowlanders, lowlanders being considered superior. At the same time, a relationship based on equality is desirable for Rmeet. The fear of exposure invoked by my informant parallels the one of the poor youth ashamed to flirt with the girls. Socialist state ideology claims the equality of all ethnic groups in Laos—an important argument against an earlier order which distinguished between noblemen, Lao commoners and upland 'slaves' (*kha*, see below). The uplanders' desire to accept this ideology is undermined by a difference in ritual that cannot remain unvalorised. As ritual is a major way to establish hierarchical relations between values (Iteanu, 2005), the relation between various rituals cannot be left untouched by this process. This also applies to relations across ethnic boundaries if these are marked by a common ritual language, as mentioned above. In these cases, the values and relations reproduced in a ritual include those with outsiders. In confrontation with the beautiful Lao girls, the Rmeet housefather conceived his position in terms similar to a poor suitor. Rmeet ritual practices thus become, at least in some respects, hallmarks of 'inferiority.' Erotic shame and ethnic difference are matched.

Blood Spilling and Identity

But why is blood spilling the reason for shame? The answer needs to be tentative. The hesitation to let Buddhist visitors witness bloodletting reflects the uplanders' experience with this aspect of Buddhism. Buddhism, of course, prohibits the killing of animals. When Buddhist villages in Laos sacrificed buffaloes for their annual village spirit rituals, they sometimes hired non-Buddhists for the task. In these cases, the uplanders became necessary Others, fulfilling an important role in the ritual reproduction of lowland communities that was ambiguous for lowlanders themselves. As outsiders they were used to mediate a value conflict inherent in Buddhist village society: on the socio-cosmic level of the village, animal sacrifices were needed, but on the cosmological level of Buddhism, the very same acts that support the community of sacrifiers would damage the position of the sacrifiers in the cosmos. At least, this is the understanding of Izikowitz, who reports that Rmeet were hired by Buddhist Lue as ritual butchers in the 1930s (Izikowitz, 1985 [1962]: 65). While recent research by myself, and also by Olivier Evrard (personal communication) among Khmu in the same area, could not corroborate Izikowitz' account, similar relations between Mon-Khmer uplanders and Buddhists were reported by Archaimbault in southern Laos (Archaimbault, 1956: 844).

Another possible interpretation relates to the notion of lowland village spirits being conceived as spirits of the earth among both Lao and Lue (Condominas, 1998: 100–101; Tanabe, 1988). Therefore, the Rmeet as the original owners of the land are the ones to communicate with them. This interpretation fits with the role assigned to Mon-Khmer speaking uplanders elsewhere in Laos, for example, during the former Royal New Year ceremonies in Luang Prabang. On these occasions, the king invited representatives of these groups to take place on his throne, in order to renew the relationship with the land and thereby to legitimate his own rule over its fertility and well-being (Platenkamp, 2010; Trankell, 1999: 194). Recent political-ideological attempts to level out the hierarchical relations between ethnic groups in Laos would then support a structural 'forgetting' of the ritual butcher-relationship of the past. Yet, for the present purpose, the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive; Rmeet appear as 'killers,' as we will see below. In such a system, the outsider is valorised for the reproduction of the system *as* an outsider. Such positions in a system function as relay points between system and social environment.

Such experiences also communicate a particular value to the Rmeet themselves, marking the difference between lowlanders and uplanders as

one of sacrifiers (on whose behalf a sacrifice is made) and sacrificers (in this case, the actual killers of the animal), with sacrifiers hierarchically superior—a pattern, by the way, that is reinforced by Rmeet buffalo sacrifices where the subordinated wife-takers perform as sacrificers, while the ritually superior wife-givers are the ones whose house-spirits benefit from the ritual. This dichotomy probably worked well as a semantic means to unify the Buddhist/non-Buddhist divide into a single complementary opposition.

> Rmeet :   wife-givers > wife-takers ⇒
> Shared: sacrifiers > sacrificers ⇒
> Shared: lowlanders > uplanders ⇒
> Lao/Lue: Buddhists > non-Buddhists

The perception of the Rmeet as 'killers' by the Lao is also encoded in Rmeet representations of the relationship. Like other uplanders on the periphery of Tai-speaking principalities, the Rmeet were called *kha* by the Tai-speakers, a term both implying ethnic and status difference; it is usually translated as 'slave' or 'serf' (Turton 2000). The Rmeet themselves, though, associate the origin of the term with the phonetically similar Lao word for 'to kill, to slaughter.' They relate this etymology to the myth of the vanished Rmeet king. In the past, they say, the Rmeet had a king who, in some versions of the story, was killed by the Rmeet themselves due to their manipulation by the Lao. Since then, the Rmeet were called *kha*. Again, the difference appears as a complementary opposition, as the Rmeet also say that the Lao king was of Rmeet ancestry. How this statement relates to the murdered king is quite unclear. In any case, there is a mythic shift of kingship from the Rmeet to the Lao and the shift was again marked by blood-spilling on the part of the Rmeet. This is where the image of the Rmeet as killers, and its negative valorisation, arises from.

Splitting Sacrifice and Feasting

The killing of animals and the smearing of their blood shift their position in the meaning system of the ritual. Initially, and most prominently, they constituted an act of communication and exchange with the spirits and *klpu*-souls. Exchange distinguishes and thereby creates differentially-identified parties of givers and takers. The distinction it articulates here is the one between the bodily aspect of persons and the immaterial, mostly invisible existence of spirits. Bloodletting is the opening of a body, and

the application of what is inside, blood, to a surface—skin and the house walls are used to enable that exchange—indicates that the sacrifices imply a linkage of inside-outside categories as well.

However, the ritual in its entirety is also a communication between people. In particular, when the ritual is a *dondeii*, a wrist-tying ritual, on a somewhat larger scale (as in pig sacrifice), people from other houses and other villages are welcome. The more people are engaged in someone's social networks, the more strings will be tied to his or her wrists. Thus, the larger the number of strings on the addressee's wrists, the more prestigious the event and the more effective in tying the *klpu* to the body. Often all members of a particular house, with one or two exceptions, may become addressees of wrist-tying on these occasions. Insiders, residents of the house who receive strings, profit from the outsiders who tie them. Thereby, wrist-tying encompasses the inside-outside distinction and operationalises it as a crucial aspect of the efficiency of the ritual. The difference is maintained but put to positive effect, not acted out as exteriorisation.

As wrist-tying incorporates the public, it is more susceptible to change along with changes in the attendants—that is, the composition of social networks. This makes wrist-tying the most important ritual interface between the Rmeet and the lowlanders, not least because of its close similarity to Lao *sou khouan* rituals, as mentioned above. The major difference is the smearing of blood on the shins of the addressees; what is more important is the potential of the ritual to address non-Rmeet as well, and paradigmatically Buddhist lowlanders. Therefore, a ritual whose basics are shared with lowlanders but whose function is to include outsiders at least temporarily into Rmeet sociality is perfectly fit to function as a relay point and a communication device between the Rmeet ritual system and its environment. To fulfil this role efficiently, the wrist-tying ritual allows for variation according to the addressees; when these are not Rmeet, in particular Lao, the blood-smearing part will not be performed.

The variability of wrist-tying in regard to blood-smearing probably functioned as a model for the transformation of certain aspects of the house spirit ritual. The logic of the transformation of the latter corresponds to the former. House spirit rituals became increasingly more open to non-members of the patriline. While the central act of offering food to the spirits is still exclusively performed by patriline members, the subsequent meal is open to other guests as well, expanding the periphery of the agnatic core from women and children to exclude ethnic outsiders as well. Apart from this distinction between general public and patriline, there

is a corresponding differentiation between socio-cosmic exchange (sacrifice) and more secular feasting. Exchange here happens between spirits and people, but feasting is neatly integrated into the proceedings, only marked off through the sequence of events: first patriline members share food with the spirit; then everybody partakes in the meal. Yet, the aspect of feasting grows in importance as the number of witnesses increases and the composition of the public diversifies. The somewhat indeterminate nature of the relations produced by feasting—in contrast to the more narrowly defined ones of sacrifice proper—now includes new types of relations, like members of multi-ethnic work teams in contexts of paid labour, neighbours from ethnically different villages etc. It also assumes additional meaning. It is not only part of a ritual for spirits, but also an occasion for the display of Rmeet identity. Thus, the demands for semantics of display become more urgent, or at least, become an item of reflection.

This development is apparent in Hangdeun, where non-Rmeet, in particular Lao, might be among the guests. If the public, the outside, is a functional part of the ritual, then the change in audience composition instigates a change in the ritual itself. This of course means that the change of audience is recognised as significant in terms of the ritual. No significant reaction by the ritual system is required when, say, instead of the Rmeet attendants of past occasions, their sons show up instead, or even if Khmu, a neighbouring group with very similar sacrifices, come to visit. This is hardly information in the above sense. However, the Lao practice a markedly different ritual system, and their recognition as participating outsiders appears to the ritual system as relevant information that causes a shift in the way this information is processed.

The transformation in this case reflects the self-image that the Rmeet derive from historical interactions with the lowlanders. In these interactions, the Rmeet are marked as 'killers'—killers of sacrificial animals for lowland village rituals, and killers of their own king. The fact that—I assume—hardly any lowlander knows the tale of the Rmeet king does not affect the way the Rmeet ritual system acknowledges the presence of lowlanders. Blood letting and blood smearing is removed from the major setting of the ritual in the main room of the house. This amounts to a more reflective separation of the aspects of exchange/sacrifice and display/feasting, not just in time, but also in space.

Fear of exposure, *kmäa*, is the emotional-categorical operator that drives a wedge between sacrifice and display. In the earlier form of the rituals, blood-smearing was done for Rmeet or Rmeet spirits and was also witnessed by Rmeet. The inside-outside distinction between Rmeet and

lowlanders was beyond its scope. As soon as the line between lowlanders and Rmeet shifted to differentiate the public witnessing a ritual, the parallel distinction between sacrifice and feasting shifted as well. Also, the latter distinction was partially redefined. Before, and still to a degree in the mountain villages, it separated patriline members from other villagers during the house spirit ritual, and residents from visitors in blessings. Yet, this separation is weak compared to that between Rmeet and lowlanders: every attendant may witness blood spilling. However, in Hangdeun, it separates Rmeet patrilines or families and a multiethnic public. In this new configuration, fear of exposure becomes important—the 'inside' of Rmeet socio-cosmic reproduction is sealed off from public witnesses, as the blood-smearing rituals are either avoided (as in wrist-tying in both villages) or moved to the kitchen (as in house spirit rituals in Hangdeun). Here, the weak separation of ethnic groups goes along with a stronger separation of aspects of ritual.

How, then, is the social hierarchy between Lao and Rmeet articulated? The hierarchical distinction between blood-spillers and lowlanders has been mentioned already. The separation in ritual works towards levelling this hierarchy. Probably more to the point is the unequal relation between witnesses and performers: lowlanders enter Rmeet rituals, and the Rmeet react with self-censoring, turning specific elements invisible. As far as I know, nothing similar happens in lowland villages when Rmeet come to visit—for example, public dancing of elderly women or married couples, an occasion for Rmeet to feel *kmäa*, is performed by Lao. The asymmetry suggests that the Rmeet have more consciously included Lao cultural representations into their own than the other way around.

The Rmeet thus locate themselves at the receiving, maybe the needy, end of cultural transmission. A display of this subordinate status by blood-spilling would hurt the assumed friendship and equality, which is the background of the visits of Lao to Rmeet rituals.[5] It is telling that, concerning cultural change, the construction of hierarchy in the present privileges the Lao, while the reverse hierarchy is projected into the past. In Rmeet myths, the origin of all humanity and even the source of lowland wealth itself are the Rmeet (Sprenger, 2004, 2006b, 2006c). Again, we are confronted with the friction between a nominal, official equality of ethnicities, enabling close interaction, and their actual hierarchical valorisa-

---

[5] Similar ambivalences occur in Thailand between Thai and upland minorities (Trankell 2003) and Indonesia (Ellen 1988: 123).

tion. This way, the transformation of Rmeet ritual appears as a function of hierarchically structured communication between ethnic categories. Ritual thus does indeed reproduce constitutive relations of sociality, like relations between kin and between humans and spirits. But relations with other ethnicities are just as constitutive, and historical and contextual changes in these relations feed into the ritual system so that they are reproduced on this level as well.

References

Archaimbault, C. (1956) "Le sacrifice du buffle à Vat Ph'u (Sud Laos)". *France-Asie* 12(118,119,120): 841–845.

Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an ecology of the mind*. New York: Ballantine.

Baumann, G. (1992) "Ritual implicates 'Others': Rereading Durkheim in a plural society." In D. de Coppet (ed.), *Understanding Rituals*. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 97–116.

Condominas, G. (1998) *Le bouddhisme au village*. Vientiane: Éditions des Cahiers de France.

Dumont, L. (1980) *Homo Hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications.* Complete Revised English Edition. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

—— (1991) [1983] *Individualismus: Zur Ideologie der Moderne.* Trans. Una Pfau and Achim Russer. Frankfurt/New York: Campus. (Orig.: *Essais sur l'individualisme. Perspectives anthropologiques sur l'idéologie moderne*. Paris: Seuil).

—— (1994) [1991] *German ideology: From France to Germany and back.* Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press. (Orig.: *Homo aequalis II: L'idéologie allemande, France-Allemagne et retour*. Paris: Gallimard).

Ellen, R. F. (1988) "Ritual, identity and interethnic relations on Seram," in H. M. Claessen and D. S. Moyer (eds.), *Time past, time present, time future: Essays in honour of P. E. de Josselin de Jong*. Dordrecht/Providence: Foris, pp. 117–135.

Evans, G. (2002) *A short history of Laos: The land in between*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm.

Iteanu, A. (2005) "Partial discontinuity: the mark of ritual," in D. Handelman and G. Lindquist (eds.), *Ritual in its own right: Exploring the dynamics of transformation*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 98–115.

Izikowitz, K. G. (1941) "Fastening the soul: Some religious traits among the Lamet, French Indochina." *Göteborgs Högskolas Arsskrift* 47(14).

—— (1979) [1951] *Lamet: hill peasants in French Indochina*. New York: AMS Press (reprint [2001]: Bangkok: White Lotus).

—— (1985) [1962] "Notes about the Thai," in *Compass for fields afar: Essays in social anthropology*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, pp. 59–92.

Jonsson, H. (2005) *Mien relations: Mountain people and State Control in Thailand.* Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press.

Keyes, C. F. (ed.) (1979) *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: The Karen on the Thai frontier with Burma*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.

Leach, E. (2001) [1954] *Political systems of Highland Burma: A study of Kachin social structure*. London and New York: Continuum.

Lehman, F. K. (1967) "Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems," in P. Kunstadter (ed.), *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations, Vol. I*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 93–124.

Luhmann, N. (1984) *Soziale System: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp.

Mayoury, N. (1990) "Individual soul, national identity: The *Baci-Sou Khouan* of the Lao."
    Sojourn 5(2): 283–307.
Platenkamp, J. D. M. (2010) "Political change and ritual tenacity: The New Year's Ritual of
    Luang Prabang, Laos," in A. Iteanu (ed.), *La cohérence en anthropologie sociale: Mélanges
    en hommage à Daniel de Coppet*. Paris: Editions des La Maison des sciences de l'homme,
    pp. 193–233.
Platvoet, J. (1995) "Ritual in plural and pluralist societies: instruments for analysis," in
    J. Platvoet and K. van der Torm (eds.), *Pluralism and identity: Studies in ritual behaviour*.
    Leiden: Brill, pp. 25–42.
Proschan, F. (2001) "People of the gourd: Imagined ethnicities in Highland Southeast Asia."
    Journal of Asian Studies 60(4): 999–1032.
Sahlins, M. (1985) *Islands of History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
—— (2008) "The Stranger-King or, Elementary Forms of the Politics of Life." *Indonesia and
    the Malay World* 36: 177–199.
Sprenger, G. (2004) "Encompassment and its discontents: Rmeet and lowland Lao relation-
    ships," in G. Baumann and A. Gingrich (eds.), *Grammars of identity/alterity: A structural
    approach*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn, pp. 173–191.
—— (2005) "The way of the buffaloes: Trade and sacrifice in Northern Laos." *Ethnology*
    44(4): 291–312.
—— (2006a) "The end of rituals: A dialogue of theory and ethnography in Laos." *Paideuma*
    52: 51–72.
—— (2006b) *Die Männer, die den Geldbaum fällten: Konzepte von Austausch und Gesell-
    schaft bei den Rmeet von Takheung, Laos*. Berlin: LitVerlag.
—— (2006c) "Political periphery, cosmological center: The reproduction of Rmeet socio-
    cosmic order and the Laos-Thailand border," in A. Horstmann and R. Wadley (eds.),
    Centering the margin: Agency and Narrative in Southeast Asian borderlands. New York/
    Oxford: Berghahn, pp. 67–84.
—— (2008a) "The problem of wholeness: Upland Southeast Asian cosmologies in transi-
    tion." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 133(1): 75–94.
—— (2008b) "Do the Rmeet have clans?" in M. Lorrillard and Y. Goudineau (eds.), *Recher-
    ches Nouvelles sur le Laos*. Paris: Ècole française de l'Extrême-Orient, pp. 559–578.
—— (2010) "From power to value: Ranked titles in an egalitarian society, Laos." *Journal of
    Asian Studies* 69,2: 403–425.
Stuart-Fox, M. (1997) *A history of Laos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Tanabe, S. (1988) "Spirits and ideological discourse. The Tai Lü guardian cults in Yunnan."
    Sojourn 3(1): 1–25.
Tooker, D. (1996) "Putting the Mandala in its place: A practice-based approach to the spa-
    tialization of power on the Southeast Asian 'periphery'—The case of the Akha." *Journal
    of Asian Studies* 55(2): 323–358.
—— (2004) "Modular modern: Shifting forms of collective identity among the Akha of
    northern Thailand." *Anthropological quarterly* 77(2): 243–288.
Trankell, I.-B. (1999) "Royal Relics: ritual and social memory in Louang Prabang," in
    G. Evans (ed.), *Laos: Culture and Society*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm, pp. 191–213.
—— (2003) "House and moral community among the Tai Yong in Northern Thailand," in
    S. Stephen and S. Howell (eds.), *The house in Southeast Asia: A changing social economic
    and political domain*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 133–149.
Turton, A. (2000) "Introduction," in A. Turton (ed), *Civility and Savagery. Social identity in
    Tai states*. Richmond: Curzon, pp. 3–31.

KHMER SPIRITS, CHINESE BODIES: CHINESE SPIRIT MEDIUMS AND SPIRIT POSSESSION RITUALS IN CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIA[1]

Erik W. Davis

Introduction

Every year in the Khmer month of *Māgh* (January and February) the ancestral spirits of Cambodia walk in the bodies of living humans, and confront their living children.[2] They inhabit the bodies of men and women all over the country, dancing, undergoing ordeals, exorcising spirits, inscribing talismans, and above all, healing.

These are the *neak tā*—spirits of place—widely portrayed and understood as ancestral spirits (Holt 2009). The words *neak tā* means 'grandfather,' and while these *neak tā* cults do possess many aspects of ancestor veneration, attention to the mode of establishing and maintaining relationship with these spirits reveals significant components of the cult overlooked by its characterization merely as an 'ancestor cult.'

The primary examples for my argument come from two *neak tā* possession rituals I witnessed in 2005. What made these possession rituals stand out to me was the extravagant display of symbols of ethnic Chinese identity that dominated both events, a display that would have been unthinkable as recently as the 1980s, when the government implemented many sinophobic decrees.

If one wishes to say something about Khmer spirit cults, why focus on Chinese examples? If, on the other hand, one wishes to focus on Chinese

[2] I use a modified version of the transliteration system for Khmer language originated by Saveros Pou (Lewitz). This system would render the spirits' name as *anak tā*; in this article I render the term as *neak tā*, in accordance with the dominant Anglophone usage. (Huffman 1992; Lewitz (née Pou) 1969).

religions, why focus primarily on their versions of Khmer rituals? Indeed, I want to do both. The use of the two Chinese *neak tā* spirit possession examples allows me to pursue three lines of argument simultaneously— one about the Khmer cult in general, a second point about the Cambodian Buddhist notion of moral development and its relationship to spirit possession, and a third about the differences between the two Chinese possession rituals, which allows me to comment on the nature of diasporic ritual.

First, as regards the Khmer spirit cult of *neak tā* in general, the use of the Chinese examples allows me to discuss and characterize the *neak tā* spirits and their cult, including possession. These are cults that have received little discussion in English, but which are understood within Cambodia as the ancient religion of the Khmer prior to their contact with Indic religions such as Brahmanism or Buddhism (Forest 1992; Ang Chou-lean 1986; Holt 2009).

The *neak tā* cults became strongly associated with the nation-state during the Independence period: in a familiar sequence of events, nationalists studied traditional culture and practices for evidence of the soul of the nation. A close link was forged during this period between the cult of *neak tā*, and ideas of the Khmer nation (Harris 2005; Hansen 2007).

However, Cambodia has a substantial population of people of ethnic Chinese descent, some of whose ancestors may have been present in Angkorean times (Zhou Daguan 1993; Edwards and Chan Sambath 1996; Wilmott 1969). While there are variations in the degree to which the various Chinese groups have assimilated into Khmer society—there are at least five different Chinese linguistic groups with differing practices— most participate in a wide range of practices that became understood as part of the "Khmer nation" during the nationalist period. While the term Sino-Khmer is often used by foreigners, the Khmer terms more commonly identify a person of Chinese descent simply as 'Chinese,' (*cin*) or as 'Half-Chinese' (*kūn kāt' cin*). Yet both these examples of *neak tā* spirit possession involve Chinese Cambodian spirit mediums, and are accepted by Khmer. This ethnic difference allows me to use these two different Chinese *neak tā* possession ceremonies to clarify how the relationship between the *neak tā* and their children is created, and maintained.

I claim that, although *neak tā* cults have often been presented as ancestral cults—the words mean 'grandfather,' and female spirits in this class are titled 'grandmother'—the cults are imagined as relationships between *neak tā* spirits and living humans that are intended to mirror the moral

and ontological dependency of children upon their parents. That is, they employ kinship as a key metaphor for a hierarchical relationship. This extension of kinship to other types of relationship is typical of Khmer culture, including politics. I also show that it is central to notions of moral development.

Supplementary to the above point is a broader characterization of Cambodian Buddhist notions of moral development. In Khmer kinship practices, and in Cambodian society generally, kin-making is quite flexible, and a very wide variety of adults, with or without biological connection, can establish a parental relationship with a child, by providing for and instructing the child; that is to say, through adoption.[3] I argue that adoption, the practice of affiliation without a biological basis, is important to understanding the notion of moral development in Cambodian society. I describe a Cambodian idea of moral development that relies on the progressive transfer of personal dependency to superior people, or spirits. This transfer of personal dependency affects one's ontological status and physical well-being. I term this 'ontological ascent,' and show that it explains the basis of the powers of the *neak tā* to physically harm and heal, in order to discipline their children in the ways of morality.

Third, as regards Chinese diasporic ritual, exemplified in two examples of spirit possession, the differences between the two spirits, their practices, and their localization, say interesting things about the self-conception of the Chinese actors.

The historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith has examined spirit possession, and argued that spirit possession develops primarily among diasporic communities such as the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia, whose distance from older sites of localized religious authority require spirit possession as a means of accessing the spirits from a distance. Smith distinguishes between early diasporians, whose religious relationship to the original 'homeplace' of sacred authority is one of nostalgia, and the 'thoroughly diasporic,' for whom freedom *from* place became *the* central religious category" (Smith 1978: xiv).

The first example I investigate in this respect is the spirit of *Bentougong* (a.w. *Ben Tou Gong*), an ethnic Chinese spirit whose origins on the island of Hainan have resulted in a diasporic spirit possession cult that can be found around the world. The specific cult in Cambodia, while it has

---

[3] Similar practices of kin-making exist in other Southeast Asian groups, such as the Shan (Eberhardt 2006: 95).

undergone some localization in the country, seems to fall acceptably in the range of Smith's category of the 'thoroughly diasporic.'

However, the second example does not fall neatly into Smith's typology. This is the example of the "Savage Healer of *Huk Tic*." This *neak tā* spirit's origin story is in the very place where the ritual of possession took place. Nostalgia for a distant place does not appear in this ceremony, nor is the possession 'thoroughly diasporic.' Instead, I believe we should modify Smith's typology to include the possibility of a 'relocalized' diasporic community with a third type of relationship to place.

In summary, I will sequentially pursue three goals: First, to describe and characterize the *neak tā* spirit cult in Cambodia for an Anglophone readership. Within that description, I make one contribution to the existing characterizations: that despite the description and widespread understanding of this cult as 'ancestral,' both by Khmer and others, the means of coming into relationship with these spirits takes place through an adoptive paradigm.[4]

Supplementary to that first point, I will characterize the Cambodian Buddhist idea of moral development as significantly influenced by paradigms of adoption and affiliation into a hierarchical relationship, which is understood to have transformative capacities; capacities which explain the power of the *neak tā* to both harm and heal in the defence of moral propriety—one of their key duties (Ang Choulean 1986).

Finally, I wish to identify a diversity of Chinese Cambodian varieties of spirit possession cults, and in so doing modify the important typology of spirit possession in diasporic communities originated by Smith to include the possibility of a relocalized diasporic community—a community which has not assimilated into the dominant regional community to the point where it has ceased to maintain signifiers of difference, but where the cult fits neither the 'nostalgic' nor 'thoroughly diasporic' categories Smith inaugurated (Smith 1978).

The Khmer Cult of Neak Tā

To describe the Khmer cult of *neak tā*, I touch on the following aspects I consider important to understanding them as a class of spirits: first,

---

4 In this I have been influenced by Richard O'Connor's work in the region on 'Founder's Cults,' though I have not used his formulations explicitly in this article (O'Connor 2003).

the *neak tā* are material and localized; second, the *neak tā* exist at the top of a complex but rarely explicitly described set of networked hierarchies in which other classes of spirits are also in relationship; third, Cambodian culture, under the influence of Buddhism, contains the idea of transformative rebirth, which introduced the possibility of ontological transformation, a transformation I argue is conceived in part as a transferred dependency linked to moral development. Finally, *neak tā* spirits gain a history through possession: possession is what makes it possible for the spirits to be known as individuals with peculiar, localizable differences, and to change over time.

Neak Tā are irreducibly spirits of place (Holt 2009). Every *neak tā* spirit is explicitly associated with a particular location in Cambodia. Moreover, the vast majority of *neak tā* spirits are materialized in unworked stones, or fragments of stone from ancient stones of the Angkorean empire.[5] Their origin stories usually tell of a particularly heroic, skilled, brave, or virtuous individual, and also, the appearance or discovery of the material object in which they are manifest (Forest 1992).

Described with ancestral titles—'Grandfather' or 'Grandmother'—the *neak tā* spirit is also explicitly the spirit of a politically prominent person, usually the founder of a particular village; often a general or noble who ruled a district (O'Connor 2003; Ang Choulean 1986: 205). The relationship between the living villagers and the local *neak tā* spirit mirrors the ideal relationship between the living villagers and the King of Cambodia; the king and the *neak tā* possess explicitly analogous forms of authority.

It is clear that a filial connection with a *neak tā* may be established by choice, rather than being a matter of descent. People who move to a new village will address the *neak tā* of their new locale as their ancestor, just as the Cambodian king frequently refers to his subjects as his children.

The *neak tā* is always the pre-eminent, authoritative, non-Buddhist, spirit in any given location, with effective power of command over all other spirits, especially the malevolent forest spirits that cause disease (Ang Choulean 1986: 215). *Neak Tā* spirits and their cults mirror the political system of kingly authority that underpins traditional Khmer hierarchies (Bertrand 2004: 165). Other spirits such as benevolent *pāramī*, or malevolent spirits such as *brāy*, are sometimes thought to be able to rise to the status of *neak tā*, in a process that I call 'ontological ascent,' and which appears closely tied to the Buddhicization of the *neak tā* cults,

---

[5] This is true in spite of the fact that for some spirits, multiple locations may exist.

where "to be *neak tā* becomes a kind of rebirth in a Buddhist mode" (Bertrand 2004: 159; Forest 1992: 212).

Buddhism's influence has clearly reorganized much of Khmer spirit life; whereas the non-Buddhist Khmer approach to spirits does not appear to allow for transformation from one type of spirit to another, this is precisely one of Buddhism's specialties (Egge 2002). Buddhist rituals are frequently and centrally concerned with transforming one kind of ancestral spirit into another: the most important collective Buddhist festival of the year, for instance, is explicitly intended to transform one type of miserable spirit—the *preta*, or 'hungry ghost'—into a different species of spirit, sometimes called a *devatā* (Davis 2009).

This ability of human action to impact the spirit world reverses the standard narrative of Khmer spirits and their interactions with humans, which imagines that spirits have all the agency and power, and humans are subject to their whims, authority, and sometimes, cruelty. It explicitly subjects the *neak tā's* political and social authority to the power of Buddhist morality located within Buddhist monks. This ability also introduces a connection between morality and sickness that includes the *neak tā*. *Neak Tā* possess the same sort of authority that living village elders are imagined to have: the authority to advise and to condemn. As protectors of communal moral order, the *neak tā* can see improper behaviour and punish his 'children' for it. This results in various misfortunes. However, *neak tā* are often imagined to be fickle and 'savage' in character, and likely to dish out punishments for obscure or even occasionally senseless violations of taboos or common morality.

The imagination of the *neak tā* is primarily about spirits who can affect the lives of humans. Typically, they first cause a misfortune, as punishment for some improper behaviour, and then they heal that misfortune. In contrast, it is almost paradigmatic of Buddhism that it focuses centrally on humans making an impact on the lives of spirits. The central act of Buddhist devotion is to make merit and dedicate that merit to the dead, for example, by offering gifts to Buddhism monks. Moreover, Buddhist monks are commonly imagined to be immune to the powers of the spirit world, as a consequence of their work to conquer death. Human action is also implicated among spirit mediums in the taming and mastering of malevolent spirits, such that, for instance,

> a demonic spirit…is summoned, trained, and pacified by a master medium,…[who] can then transform the bad spirits into small *pāramī* and give them a name. Thus the distinction made in other Theravāda societies

between good and bad spirits does not appear to be permanent in Cambodia (Bertrand 2001: 32:41).

As Bertrand points out, demonic spirits may become *pāramī*, which may then join the ranks of *neak tā*, through a process in which the human medium masters and domesticates the spirit. Moral transformation of the spirits is equated to their ontological transformation. The spirit is spoken of as a wild, malevolent beast captured and tamed by a spirit master. Once this is achieved and the spirit becomes 'virtuous,' the relationship is reversed, and the human 'master' becomes the spirit's 'royal consort' (*snāṅ*), in a metaphor of domination and royal fertility.

This ambivalent attitude toward *neak tā* spirits brings us to a discussion of the *neak tā* possession ritual itself, for it is precisely through possession that spirits gain a history. It is possible to talk to devotees of various *neak tā* and hear discussion about the spirit's latest actions and possessions, and to learn of changes in that spirit's attitude or demeanour. Of all Khmer spirit classes, only the *neak tā* are consistently localized and materialized (Ang Choulean 1986: 202). The word *neak tā* refers to both the spirit and the object in which the spirit is housed, which is in turn placed in a building for ongoing worship (Hang Chan Sophea 2004: 113). It is only during possession that the *neak tā* may be said to move (Thompson 2008).

The Khmer Neak Tā Spirit Possession Ceremony

The *Loeṅ Neak Tā* ritual occurs in the months of *Māgh*, which overlaps January and February in the Western calendar, and opens a three-month period of rituals of purification and healing, which are brought to a close with the Khmer New Year in mid-April (Porée-Maspero 1962: 233). Many Cambodians, especially ethnic Chinese, place such a high premium on entering a new year without stain or problems from the previous year, that funeral programmes will be drastically foreshortened so that they are fully completed prior to the New Year.

The *Loeṅ Neak Tā* ritual is not the only rite of purification to take place with reference to the New Year. Like New Year celebrations all over the world, this is often a time for social reversal—for 'turning the world upside down' (Le Roy Ladurie 1979; Hill 1972). During the actual three days of celebrations, children splash water on adults in public, play tricks on their friends, and engage in behaviour that would be highly inappropriate during the rest of the year.

The purification rituals of the *Loeṅ Neak Tā* open this season. These rituals express a deep-seated criticism of social structure, predicated on relationships of a deeply hierarchical nature in Cambodia. They are temporary reversals, of course, and always end with a restoration of order. However, in the meantime, some striking defeats occur.

These rituals produce valuable results—healing, lucky objects, and advice—through the possession of a human being by a *neak tā* spirit. But although these spirits are necessary and authoritative in these contexts, the rituals frequently express not only ambiguity, but also open hostility—even prescribed hostility—to the *neak tā*. One of these is the tradition of Royal Exorcism. During this celebration, practised in the court until the nineteenth century, a temporary king was installed for a period of days, during which all the misfortunes of the kingdom became his responsibility. Spirits were brought into the king's body, and then violently exorcized (Thompson 2004: 109). This royal exorcism was performed by Buddhist monks, under the direction and presence of the chief of Cambodian monks, further demonstrating the way in which the cults of Cambodian spirits have been subordinated to Buddhism, precisely in the occupation of the Buddhist monk as chief exorcist.

The Element of Violence, and Diverse Sacrifices

The three-month period opened by the *Loeṅ Neak Tā* ritual follows the annual rice harvest, and features many rituals of sacrifice and violence. This period traditionally overlaps conveniently with the traditional dry-season pursuit of warfare or large public works, both of which, whether under indigenous or colonial control, required massive amounts of corvée labour. Many of these rites of violence overlap in the cultural imagination and perhaps in historical reality. I will limit myself to buffalo sacrifices, understood by Khmer as substitutions for human sacrifice, neither of which are unique to Cambodia, but instead shared widely throughout mountain South and Southeast Asia, an area recently recast analytically as "Zomia" (Holm 2003; Scott 2009; van Schendel 2001).

I have personally witnessed no buffalo sacrifices during *Loeṅ Neak Tā* rituals, though Porée-Maspero describes them as an integral part of the ritual in former times, as does Ang Choulean (Ang Choulean 1986: 210; Porée-Maspero 1962: 241). But even these buffalo sacrifices are presumed by most Khmer to be substitutions for an earlier, human sacrifice—

something that is not only imagined, but also a historically observed and reported practice.[6]

Porée-Maspero and Ang Choulean both report that during *Loeṅ Neak Tā* rituals in the mid-twentieth century, the buffalo sacrifice was the culminating act of the entire possession. The *neak tā* would possess the medium, and the attendees would divide into two hostile camps: the side of the *neak tā*, and the side of the humans. The humans were supposed to retreat about seventy metres from the *neak tā*'s hut, and then charge on a signal, firing guns into the air, and holding weapons. Porée-Maspero reports that spirit medium under this assault would physically shake, and that when the human camp shouted "victory!" the "*neak tā*'s camp acted as if beaten by a real army" (Porée-Maspero 1962: 236–237). The buffalo was sacrificed after the defeat of the *neak tā*, and the village chief, assimilated to the *neak tā* politically and symbolically, was laden with taboos, which appear to further buttress the symbolic aggression toward authority, which can be found in the rituals of this season. Ashley Thompson sees 'regicidal' aspects in another ritual of this period, called *truḍi* (Thompson 2004: 109). During the New Year's celebrations buffalo racing is now becoming increasingly common, but this appears to have little connection to the role-played by the buffalo during the possession rituals three months previously.

The *Loeṅ Neak Tā* involves central elements of violence and sacrifice, both of which are directed at the supreme non-Buddhist deities in Cambodia. In Porée-Maspero's account, both communal and individual healing and purification are the goals. This ambivalence continues in the rituals I witnessed in 2005, though it is variably expressed.

The Chinese in Cambodia

Chinese in Cambodia are very diverse and have similarly diverse histories of arrival and residence, though there have been Chinese in Cambodia since at least the Angkorean Empire (9th–14th centuries). Their status

---

[6] (Porée-Maspero 1962: 244; Chandler 1996; Means 2000). There are records of human sacrifice in Cambodia, and the idea of historic human sacrifice is widespread among Cambodians. However, there is little archaeological evidence, to date, of a widespread practice of actual sacrifice, in spite of the nearly universal interpretation of different rituals as human sacrifices in which a substitute has been introduced.

and security has varied widely according to the gyrations of history: they suffered mightily under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979), receiving more attention as Chinese than they would have as Khmer, and the subsequent regime of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–1989) enacted many discriminatory laws prohibiting the use of Chinese language or the display of Chinese symbols. Since the establishing of a constitutional monarchy in 1993, the nation's borders and trade practices have opened up rapidly, and Cambodian Chinese currently enjoy a considerable degree of status and relative wealth in the country. Indeed, in my research on Khmer funerary customs, I found many urban, middle-class Khmer adopting Chinese burial customs out of a desire to approximate the middle-class status of ethnic Chinese.

In 2005, two separate Chinese community associations arranged for two back-to-back *neak tā* spirit rituals. The first spirit had travelled all the way from the distant city of Pailin, near the Western border with Thailand, and a notorious former Khmer Rouge zone. This spirit was a Tiger spirit, who had in life been a greedy Chinese general, and who possessed an elderly Sino-Khmer man dressed in white.[7] The second spirit was the Master of the Land immediately around the nearby Chinese temple, who was to possess his medium for the first time that day.

Bentougong—The Tiger From Pailin

The first of the two *Loeṅ Neak Tā* ceremonies involved the most famous of Chinese Spirits in Cambodia, Bentougong. Bentougong is understood today in Cambodia as a *neak tā*, located primarily in the southern coastal province of Kampot, with a large community of Hainanese Chinese Cambodians (Edwards and Chan Sambath 1996: 50–51). The cult of Bentougong combines elements of traditional Chinese Taoist and ancestor veneration practices, along with practices apparently peculiar to the cult of Bentougong in Hainan, which was long a sort of prison colony held by Mainland Chinese authorities until the communist revolution. Bentougong is revered in overseas Chinese communities around the world, from Laos and Cambodia to Los Angeles. Importantly, Bentougong cult activity simultaneously affirms a separate Chinese identity, while encour-

---

[7] These 'mobile' possession ceremonies appear to break the rule on localization, but are apparently relatively normal, as noted by Ang Choulean (Ang Choulean 1986: 212).

aging localized identity in a ritual that exceeds purely ethnic identification. As noted by Penny Edwards,

> Worship of Bentougong thus reinforces 'Kampot-ness'—a sense of belonging to Kampot, and by extension, Cambodia—as much as Chineseness. The fact that Khmers also worship Bentougong underscores the inherent difficulty in assigning ethnicity in Cambodia (Edwards and Chan Sambath 1996: 4).

This particular manifestation of *Bentougong* originated in the western border district and town of Pailin, an area notorious as one of those held for the longest period by the Khmer Rouge, and identifies with the spirit of the Tiger.

My assistant Oeurn and I arrived around 10:30 AM, as the first spirit medium and his assistant were preparing. Chinese-style flags with the Chinese character for an official command or order flapped throughout the site, organized around a statue of a tiger, a throne made out of swords, and a table covered with offerings.[8] Aside from the raw meat stuffed into the mouth of the tiger statue, most of the offerings were arranged carefully on a table, including fruit, cakes, and hundreds of small lion statues, later to be taken home by members of the Chinese community association that organized and sponsored the event.[9]

The flags are used to invite the spirit of the *neak tā* into the body of the medium and are wielded by young male assistants. Assistants will physically move the possessed medium around during the ceremony, making certain he has access to his requirements, such as paper, sword, incense, and lots of lots of rice wine liquor. The consumption by the spirit medium of massive amounts of alcohol is simultaneously one of three primary means by which possession is effectuated, along with the already-mentioned flags and the beating of spirit drums (Porée-Maspero 1962: 237). One of Buddhism's central five precepts is the precept against the consumption of alcohol, and it is this, more than any other practice, that identifies the spirits and their rituals as non-Buddhist.

After consuming a staggering amount of rice liquor, with the heat rising, the drums beating, and the flags waving, the medium grasped the

---

[8] The Chinese character in question is *lìng*, meaning generally "command," or "order," but usually only found as a prefix. Its meaning in this context remains obscure to me, though one intriguing possibility connects it directly with the *hū*, since one of *lìng*'s meanings is a measure word for 'ream of paper.' Thanks to my Macalester colleague Frederik Green for his help on this front.

[9] Note that I follow Khmer and Sino-Khmer custom here in referring to the statues as Lions (*to*).

edges of the table while his eyes rolled backwards into his head. His body began to shake uncontrollably, the evident forces within his body seeming to simply batter the medium's body, until suddenly the energies found a direction, and the medium began to run around the site. He danced throughout the crowd, until he finally ascended the throne made of swords, in his bare feet. Thoroughly insensate, the medium jumped up and down on the swords, and once seated, bounced up and down on the seat made of them. The swords were indeed sharp, as I was invited to observe later, though the medium was not cut.

Descending from his throne, the medium processed in much more control and with a clear sense of authority, to the table where stacks of yellow paper were awaiting him. His primary assistant handed him a sword, and while the drums continued, and with additional swigs from his bottle of liquor, the medium used the sword to cut open his tongue. The liquor's anti-coagulant properties made it possible for the blood to continue to flow freely, a crucial aspect of the ritual: the blood of Bentougong (via the possessed medium) is used as the ink to empower these papers, called *hū*.[10] These *hū* are the primary reason that most people were in attendance.

After the *hū* are empowered, by being inscribed with the *neak tā*'s blood, those in attendance will take them and paste them to the walls in their homes and businesses. Many Sino-Khmer also believe in the existence of *cuṅ*, which refers to ill-starred combinations of astrological signs. The 12-year animal, Chinese calendrical cycle is quite important in Cambodian society generally, and many of these signs are supposed to be ill-matched, such as, for instance, the Rooster and the Rabbit (the upcoming New Year was to be the year of the Rooster). Therefore, if we are about to enter the year of the Rooster, those born in the year of the Rabbit will experience *cuṅ*, and should keep a *hū* on their person at all times during that year, in order to avoid the misfortunes and dangers to which they would otherwise be unusually vulnerable.

There were thousands of *hū* to mark with the *neak tā*'s blood, so the drums and flag-waving proceeded for a considerable period while the medium did his work, occasionally taking additional swigs of liquor, and often spitting it out. When the last of the *hū* were marked, the medium

---

[10] *Hū* is a Chinese word glossed in Khmer as "*kradās' yantra*". The ritual of tongue-cutting and inscribing *hū* with 'Chinese characters' (oftentimes, this is denied in favour of a theory that the inscription is not Chinese, but the 'language of the gods') appears to be peculiar to the cult activity of Bentougong. The blood is thought to be that of the *neak tā*, rather than that of the medium whose body is possessed.

returned to the inside of his hut, and 'opened the eye' of the largest of the small lion statues. When he had successfully opened the lion's eye by painting the pupils with the blood of the *neak tā* flowing from his tongue, the drums increased the pace of their rhythm, and the medium began to shake violently again. Shouts began to rise from the crowd, and then with a great outcry, the medium was released from his possession, and his body appeared to be forcibly thrown back into the waiting arms of his assistants. The ritual was over, and the crowds quickly dissipated.

We should not underestimate the aesthetics and the communal experience of the ritual as a major attraction to those assembled. However, when asked why they were here, all spectators mentioned the *hū* first: "We came to take a *hū* home with us, to help us do business this year," was the most consistent response. The possession of an ethnically Chinese Cambodian spirit medium by an ethnically Chinese spirit appears to be intended primarily to produce objects of fortune, bringing luck to the possessors of these objects. Violence and sacrificial components were on full display, and are an integral part of the ritual: from the slashing of the tongue, to bouncing up and down on a throne made of swords, the effect is simultaneously hostile and reverential to the *neak tā* spirit. Although this spirit is localized, identified as 'from Pailin,' it is one of many similar possession cults focusing on *Bentougong* in existence throughout the Chinese diaspora.

The Savage Healer of Huk Tic

My research assistant Oeurn and I had time to interview the second spirit medium at length, both just prior to his possession, and on later occasions. Uncle Luṅ is the master (*mcās' rūpa*) of the *neak tā*, who is the master of the land on which the nearby Chinese temple of *Huk Tic* rests. Like the vast majority of Cambodian spirit mediums, Uncle Luṅ went through an extremely difficult period prior to accepting his role as spirit medium (Bertrand 2001: 33). Unusually, however, Luṅ knew the reason for his suffering; he had refused to allow the spirit to possess him. Uniquely in my experience, Luṅ described the spirit that possessed him as a lineal spirit, possession by which was passed from father to son.[11]

---

[11] I have not encountered this sort of lineage possession elsewhere. Luṅ and the other attendees and participants were unanimous in insisting that this spirit was a *neak tā*. It

Figure 9.1   Uncle Luṅ, the 'Savage healer of Huk Tic'

When his father passed away twelve years previously, Luṅ refused to allow the spirit to possess him, and became ever more ill over the subsequent years. Indeed, Luṅ's body was painfully thin to look at, despite his middle-class profession and family background. He had just emerged a few months previously from a three-year illness that had nearly taken his life, and which doctors had been unable to diagnose or treat. Yet once he agreed to permit the *neak tā* spirit to possess him, his symptoms immediately began to recede.

The ceremony we witnessed was to be the first time he allowed the spirit to possess him in public, and he was very nervous. For one thing, he was deeply embarrassed about his role as spirit medium; for an educated man of Cambodia's Chinese middle-class, spirit possession smacked to him of the 'superstitious' beliefs and practices that he had consistently rejected personally, and which—even when held unanimously amongst one's peers—seemed to be a source of shame. Indeed, he had only allowed the spirit to possess him once previously—the night before—in private with his wife and a few members of the association.

He was scared, he said, of the spirit, for he knew that the spirit was particularly savage and powerful. *Neak Tā* are frequently described as 'cruel' or 'savage' by their mediums, a characterization which simultaneously highlights the personal sacrifices made by the mediums, which can indeed by substantial, and the power of the *neak tā*, which if properly domesticated and mastered, is a particularly potent source of blessings and healing.

---

may be of interest to some that Luṅ reports that his father continued to experience spirit possession throughout the Khmer Rouge period, though it was done 'secretly.'

An interview with the president of the temple committee revealed more history. *Neak Tā* discovery narratives, like those of Buddha image discoveries, often take place in moving bodies of water. In 1911, the president told us, the *neak tā* image floated down the Mekong River—the temple is near the banks of the river—coming to rest on a sandbar. When local villagers attempted to free it and send it on down the river, they found it had returned to the same location the next day. This happened three times, until finally the villagers decided to place it in a thatched hut and perform offerings to it as the local *neak tā*. In 1937 the thatched hut was replaced with a stone structure, and since the end of the 1980s they have allowed the *neak tā* to possess again.[12]

The preparations for the possession ceremony itself were similar: offerings to the *neak tā* were laid out on nearby tables, spirit flags flapped in the wind and were held by assistants, and Uncle Luṅ imbibed copious amounts of rice liquor—spitting much of it back out—while the spirit drums tattooed a rhythm into the incense smoke. There was much more interactive drama: the earlier *neak tā* produced objects of ongoing protection and blessing that attendees could take away; Uncle Luṅ's *neak tā* healed the sick and cursed.

Although we were outside under a large tent, smoke from the incense was nearly blinding at times, causing Uncle Luṅ, once possessed, to simply close his eyes the entire time, though he moved as if his eyes were open. Bare-chested in red pants and headband, Luṅ's spirit treated over fifty people in succession, ranging from apparently healthy young men and women whom I suspected of needing help with love lives, exams, and careers, to elderly and disabled people brought by their adult children. Each was attended by the *neak tā* through his medium, Uncle Luṅ. Treatments included the burning of incense sticks, offerings of fruit, and of course, Uncle Luṅ spitting rice liquor onto their bodies. The crowds were very excited and apparently pleased by the possession; it was so popular that a second possession was scheduled for the temple later that evening.

Where attendance at the possession by *Bentougong* was apparently primarily about the production and distribution of objects of fortune,

---

[12] The dates are interesting, and correspond with other Sino-Khmer building enterprises, such as the Sino-Khmer temple near Oudong, which was rebuilt in 1911. One possibility is to consider the massive overseas Chinese fundraising that was happening during 1911 and the year prior, to support Sun Yat-Sen's revolutionary army; the vast majority of financial support for Sun Yat-Sen came from overseas Chinese.

attendance at the possession by *Huk Tic* was quite clearly primarily about healing. The violence of the ritual drama of the *Huk Tic* possession appears less in the ritual performance than in its back-story of Uncle Luṅ's suffering and healing at the hands of *Huk Tic*. Finally, while the *Bentougong* cult appears both localized and globalized, the cult of *Huk Tic* is extremely local: there are no other locations of cults for this *neak tā*.

Conclusions

The *neak tā* cults and their rituals are imagined as Khmer rituals, bound to the land of Cambodia. They participate in the ancestral kinship model of obeisance to the authority of elders (especially 'super-elders' like the *neak tā*), but as I have shown, this kinship is quite flexible, and adoption through participation and obeisance to ancestral spirits is ubiquitous and does not require a renunciation of personal ethnicity.

There are a myriad ways of appropriately addressing, or even answering this question, but I will focus on one possible response: the cult of *neak tā* permits the religious and cultural expression of local loyalty and affinity to a multi-ethnic society, properly subordinated to Buddhist moral authority. The multi-ethnic nature of the *neak tā* cult thus allows for a multi-ethnic nation, subordinated to a common, Buddhist, morality. Didier Bertrand writes of the multi-ethnic nature of *pāramī* cults (which applies with equal force to that of the *neak tā* cults) that:

> *Pāramī* are not only of Cambodian nationality. They are also Indian, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese, Thai, Laotian, Javanese, and Chinese. I was even told of a French *pāramī*, but I never met them. (Bertrand 2001: 43)

Neak Tā cults do not require a change in ethnicity, but rather a uniform subjection to the localized authority of the *neak tā*, which is expressed as a type of kinship. This is part of the well-understood fictive kinship enterprise, which is such an important part of the Khmer cultural realm. The *neak tā* themselves, in turn, require a subordination to Cambodian Buddhism's moral authority—often expressed through the power Buddhist monks have over the spirit world.

As I have argued elsewhere, the ubiquitous use of filial language (especially maternal) to refer to political authorities is more than a quaint custom whose origin or import is lost to time. Rather, it is the predominant means by which Cambodians enter and participate in the networks of power that determine their lives (Davis 2008a–b, 2009).

Most Chinese Cambodians adhere at least nominally to some form of Buddhism. Minority groups in the highlands, however have *neak tā* spirits and do not typically practice Buddhism. Discussing the existence of *neak tā* spirit mediums among Highland ethnic minority groups, Bertrand mentions that highlanders are not Buddhists, but only concerned with *neak tā* spirits. They descend from the highlands once a year to bring gifts to representatives of the Khmer. They are powerful spirits, but foreign in a way the Chinese *neak tā* are not. The identification of *neak tā* spirits as powerful but morally ambiguous authorities subject to Buddhist domestication replicates the way in which the Khmer ethnicity itself was built up, by enslaving and incorporating groups over time (Chandler 2008: 84–85). Bertrand notes that it:

> is very interesting to see how much inter-ethnic relations between the Khmer and non-Khmer groups are reproduced at the level of *pāramī* society (Bertrand 2001: 43).

Through this process of subordinating local spirit cults to Buddhism, a moral assumption that grounds the possibility of these cults, they are transformed into useful components of an inclusive moral community—one predicated on the hierarchical authority of the *neak tā* and, by extension, the king—and the moral authority of Buddhism. The ontological mobility of the *neak tā* made possible by the Buddhist context provides a template for moral, transformation, based on a dependency upon a superior being, and without the requirement of biological descent. Throughout, the religious language and prestige of Buddhism is employed to legitimize the spirits, and with them the process through which individuals and communities localize their aspirations and identities. The histories of *neak tā* spirits are generally political histories that focus on local sovereignty and localize outsiders by enforcing submission to the authority of the spirit, which is in turn submissive to Buddhist morality. Submission to the spirits is usually accomplished through illnesses or misfortunes sent by the *neak tā*, which the *neak tā* later heals.

It is the localizing practices of the cult that dominate and permit us to make sense of the remaining issue of the types of diasporic possession ritual. Jonathan Z. Smith has argued that spirit possession develops primarily among diasporic communities, such as the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia, whose distance from older sites of localized religious authority require spirit possession as a means of accessing the spirits from a distance. Smith distinguishes between early diasporians, whose religious relationship to the original 'homeplace' of sacred authority is one of nostalgia,

to the 'thoroughly diasporic,' for whom "freedom *from* place became *the* central religious category" (Smith 1978: xiv). The Chinese spirits and practices examined above confirm this idea in part, while challenging another aspect of it, and it is this point I would like to emphasize as I conclude.

Following Smith's argument, we may confidently say that many of the Chinese spirits in Cambodia are means of accessing Chinese spirits whose origins, both historical and imagined, are physically distant from the place of residence of their Sino-Khmer adherents. The practices of spirit mediums possessed by explicitly Chinese gods fits this pattern nicely. However, this approach neglects the way in which these rituals incorporate central components of pre-existing Khmer cults, and which identify the spirit not as elsewhere, but instead as very local: these cults are not mere substitutes for a lost or distant site of sacredness. These spirits are no longer Hainanese, for example, but definitely Cambodian, in spite of their ethnicity or origin. The Sino-Khmer cult of Bentougong, as an example, is indigenous to locations within Cambodia, regardless of its origin in Hainan. This leads us to consider not only the relationship between one predefined community ('Hainanese in Cambodia') and their community of origin ('Hainan'), but also the process of installation and affiliation that takes place through these ritual possessions.

Similarly, accommodating the 'Savage Healer of *Huk Tic*' in Smith's typology requires an additional category; one that can be added without also losing communal markers or practices of ethnic difference. That category is the relocalized diasporic—those diasporic communities that emphasize a completely local spirit. In this case *Huk Tic*'s origin is Cambodia, and he is found nowhere else.

The ethnic Chinese spirit possession rituals called *Loeň Neak Tā* appear to be Cambodian, not solely Khmer, rituals, which make powerful spiritual forces accessible and useful in everyday life. *Neak Tā* spirits themselves usually have a history of progress, in which they transform from lower—potentially even malevolent—castes of spirits, into the dominant authoritative spirit in the region. I have argued that this transformation is informed by Buddhist notions of rebirth and moral transformation, and that furthermore, the moral and ontological transformations that are part of the *neak tā's* history are made possible through their successive dependencies on superior spirits, eventually including the Buddha in the form of the Buddhist monkhood. The universal moral authority of Buddhism encompasses the local, proximate, power of the *neak tā*. In the same way, nominal acceptance of Buddhist morality seems, for the moment at least, to secure acceptance in Cambodian society while accepting ethnic dif-

ferences that may be on display in spirit possession. Finally, while some Chinese spirit cults seem truly thoroughly diasporic and placeless, others appear to attempt a relocalization of a community within the overall pantheon of Cambodian spirits and places.

References

Ang Choulean (1986) *Les êtres surnaturels dans la religion populaire khmer*. Paris: Cedorek.

Bertrand, Didier (2001) The names and identities of the 'Boramey' spirits possessing Cambodian mediums. *Asian Folklore Studies* 60 (1):31–47.

—— (2004) A medium possession practice and its relationship with Cambodian Buddhism. In *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, edited by J. Marston and E. Guthrie. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Chandler, David P. (1996) Royally-sponsored human sacrifices in Nineteenth-century Cambodia. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press.

—— (2008) *A history of Cambodia*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO.: Westview Press.

Davis, Erik W. (2008a) Between forests and families: a remembered past life. In *People of virtue: reconfiguring religion, power and moral order in Cambodia today*, edited by A. Kent and D. P. Chandler. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.

—— (2008b) Imaginary conversations with mothers about death. In *At the edge of the forest: essays on Cambodia, history, and narrative in honor of David Chandler*, edited by A. R. Hansen and J. Ledgerwood. Ithaca: Southeast Asian Program Publications (Cornell University).

—— (2009) Treasures of the Buddha: Imagining Death and Life in Contemporary Cambodian Religion, Divinity School, University of Chicago, Chicago.

Eberhardt, Nancy (2006) *Imagining the course of life: self-transformation in a Shan Buddhist community*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Edwards, Penny, and Chan Sambath (1996) *Ethnic Chinese in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: The Preah Sihanouk Raj Academy.

Egge, James R. (2002) *Religious giving and the invention of karma in Theravāda Buddhism*. Richmond (UK): Curzon Press.

Forest, Alain (1992) *Le culte des genies protecteurs au Cambodge. Analyse et traduction d'un corpus de textes sur les neak tā*. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan.

Hang Chan Sophea (2004) Stec Gaṃlaṅ' and Yāy Deb: worshipping kings and queens in Cambodia today. In *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, edited by J. Marston and E. Guthrie. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hansen, Anne Ruth (2007) *How to behave: Buddhism and modernity in colonial Cambodia, 1860–1931*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Harris, Ian (2005) *Cambodian Buddhism: history and practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hill, Christopher (1972) *The world turned upside down: radical ideas during the English Revolution*: Viking.

Holm, David (2003) *Killing a buffalo for the ancestors: a Zhuang cosmological text from Southwest China*. DeKalb (IL): Southeast Asia Publications, NIU.

Holt, John (2009) *Spirits of place: Buddhism and Lao religious culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Huffman, Franklin E. (1992) *Cambodian system of writing and beginning reader*. Ithaca, NY: SEAP.

Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel (1979) *Carnival in Romans*: George Brazilier.

Lewitz (née Pou), Saveros (1969) Note sur la translittération du Cambodgien. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 55:163–169.

Means, Gordon P. (2000) Human sacrifice and slavery in the 'unadministered' areas of Upper Burma during the colonial era. *Sojourn* 15 (2):184–221.

O'Connor, Richard A. (2003) Founder's cults in regional and historical perspective. In *Founder's cults in Southeast Asia: ancestors, polity, and identity*, edited by N. Tannenbaum and C. A. Kammerer. New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies.

Porée-Maspero, Eveline (1962) *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*. Paris: Mouton & Co.

Scott, James C. (2009) *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. Edited by J. C. Scott, *Yale Agrarian Studies Series*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Smith, Jonathan Z. (1978) *Map is not territory: studies in the history of religions*, *Studies in Judaism in late antiquity*. Leiden: Brill.

Thompson, Ashley (2004) The suffering of kings: substitute bodies, healing, and justice in Cambodia. In *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, edited by J. Marston and E. Guthrie. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

—— (2008) Performative realities: nobody's possession. In *At the edge of the forest: essays on Cambodia, history, and narrative in honor of David Chandler*, edited by A. R. Hansen and J. Ledgerwood. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications (Cornell University).

van Schendel, Willem (2001) Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia In *Locating Southeast Asia: geographies of knowledge and politics of space*, edited by P. Kratoska, R. Raben and H. Nordholt. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Wilmott, W. E. (1969) Congregations and associations: the political structure of the Chinese community in Phnom-Penh, Cambodia. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11 (3):282–301.

Zhou Daguan (1993) *The customs of Cambodia, by Chou Ta-Kuan, translated into English from the French version by Paul Pelliot of Chous' Chinese Original*. Translated by J. G. P. d'Arcy. Third ed. Bangkok: The Siam Society.

TRADING TRADITIONS: MODERNIST ISLAM AND AGRICULTURAL RITUALS IN BUTON, INDONESIA

Blair Palmer[1]

The past two generations of eastern Indonesian people have seen extensive economic, political and social change. This includes the eclipsing of systems of traditional authority and the rise of the Indonesian nation-state; the increasing penetration of capitalism and concomitant shifts in livelihoods; the emergence and new patterns of mobility which have contributed to the region's rapid urbanization; and changing dynamics in how world religions interact with local belief systems. This article traces a process of religious change in a remote village in Buton, Indonesia, whereby agricultural rituals have fallen out of favour and been discontinued alongside increasing adherence to a modernist version of Islam. It explores the historical, political and economic context of this religious shift, arguing that a key factor is changing patterns of mobility of villagers in their search for livelihoods. Many villagers have for decades engaged in circular migration to urban centres in eastern Indonesia, and their religious beliefs and practices have shifted towards a modernist version of Islam. These shifts have in turn been transmitted from the urban centres back to the home village, with particular efficacy given that many of these urban migrants became the most successful people in the village. Nevertheless, although the overall direction of religious change in the home village is clear, there remain alternate views that do not agree with this trend, thus highlighting the contested nature of religious change.

Introduction

In past generations, residents of the seaside village of Liwuno, in Buton, Southeast Sulawesi, were fishers and farmers. From 1950–1975 many residents

---

[1] This article is based on two years of field research, from 2001–2003.

engaged in sailing cargo throughout the Indonesian archipelago on wooden *lambo* ships. But during the 1970s, migration to urban areas became the most popular way to seek a livelihood, and many villagers ended up in the city of Ambon, Maluku, either migrating back and forth from Liwuno or settling in Ambon with their families. Some worked as porters, labourers, or pedicab drivers, but many became traders, with varying degrees of success. Liwuno people are Muslim, and most lived in the dense urban neighbourhoods near the port and market, which were populated almost entirely by Muslim migrants from Sulawesi, Java and other places. Several decades of life in Ambon led to shifts in their religious beliefs and practices, and due to their close connection with the village they had come from, these religious shifts were also transmitted back to their home village, Liwuno. One highly visible shift in Liwuno has been the prohibition of traditional harvest festivals and protection rites, which involve the propitiation of territorial spirits (M: *miendo wite*)[2] using offerings, and which, up until the 1960s, used to be considered a vital part of village life. Many Liwuno people, who may be called modernist Muslims and include in their ranks most of the urban migrants, now consider these rituals to be in contradiction with Islam (*syirik*[3] or 'idolatrous'). This opinion has achieved dominance in the village, and these rituals are no longer held openly, and are rarely discussed or even mentioned at public gatherings.

In Southeast Asian history Islam has consistently been related to new economic opportunities and the potential for challenging old hierarchies, as described by Ellen:

> From the very beginning...[Islam] was associated and identified with trade and change, and signified individualism and social mobility. It provided a justification and channel for the acquisition of new forms of wealth and power, and a reservoir of new leaders....It rejected tribalism and the ossified hierarchy and theatricality of traditional Hindu states....Trading groups, organised into separate ethnic quarters, focussed on the mosque and market rather than the court. Islam provided a means by which the beneficiaries of material change could acquire status...(1983: 75).

---

[2] Indonesian language terms are indicated in italics. The local language in Liwuno is called Muna, and Muna language terms are indicated with an 'M' upon first usage. Note that Liwuno people speak the 'Gulamas' dialect of Muna, not standard Muna (see van den Berg 1996).

[3] *Syirik* means a belief in other powers that is against *tawhid*, which is the central principle of the Oneness of God. As such it is a profound contradiction to a cardinal principle of Islam.

Travellers, in particular, have often found an urgent need to adapt or de-emphasize their locally specific religious beliefs in order to gain networks for solidarity and economic opportunities in new places. Those coming from rural areas where Animist-type beliefs focused on spirits anchored to specific local geographic features, for instance, might discover a need to appeal to more universal belief systems:

> Once away from his own familiar landscape, the traveler was at the mercy of unknown spirits manipulated by his enemies . . . . Those who left the village world for trade, warfare, cash cropping, or service to a new lord were in need of universally valid values and identity . . . . animism is not readily portable (Reid 1993: 159–160).

A similar need to adapt one's religious beliefs may have been experienced by those migrants moving to the urban centres of eastern Indonesia since the 1970s, even if they already identified as Muslim. As Butonese Muslim migrants settled in the mixed Muslim neighbourhoods in Ambon, for instance, seeking to build networks of solidarity and obtain livelihoods, they may have found it expedient to de-emphasize those locally specific religious beliefs and practices which set them apart from other Muslims. They may also have found their new urban environment, filled with inanimate objects, unsuitable for Animist beliefs and practices. This may have meant a move towards modernist Islam and away from traditionalist[4] or 'syncretic'[5] versions of Islam. With the burgeoning economies of these

---

[4] I will use the labels 'modernist Muslims' and 'traditionalist Muslims' (or 'modernists' and 'traditionalists' for short), following Bowen, as follows. Modernists believe in a single correct interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadiths (the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), with deviations from this interpretation being considered improper innovation (or *bid'ah*). Traditionalists, by contrast, feel that scripture is ambiguous and multiple interpretations are possible, meaning that one should accept variety in the form of rituals—and this means that traditionalists may be tolerant of seemingly non-Islamic ritual behaviour (Bowen 1993: 21–5). I use these terms as ideal types, in that people do not always fall neatly into one category or the other; a range of views are present, with some individuals sharing characteristics of both camps. Nevertheless, for most villagers it is clear in which camp their commitment lies, especially when considering a particular issue such as the permissibility of agricultural rituals featuring propitiation of territorial spirits.

[5] Use of the term 'syncretic' to describe variants of Islam which retain pre-Islamic beliefs and practices has been criticized for implying that there is a 'pure' form with which other elements 'mix'; in fact the idea of a universal Islam, or even a uniform authentic Islam in the Middle East, is problematic (Aragon 2000: 46; Newland 2001: 324; Hooker 2003). Incidentally, religious diversity in Buton is not easily mapped onto Geertz's *santri*/*abangan* distinction for Java, for the same reasons as Pelras has indicated for the Bugis: the situation is more complex, with variations in the extent to which particular individuals endorse pre-Islamic religious traditions and/or Muslim traditions of various streams, and to what extent their religious practices conform to those ideas (Pelras 1985: 129–30).

towns, many Muslim migrants became traders, which may have strength-
ened the shift towards modernist Islam. It has been argued that there
is a particular affinity between 'the social logic of small-scale trade and
modernist Islamic ideas' (Bowen 1993: 34), similar to what Weber (1958)
argued for Protestantism and capitalism.[6]

   This paper focuses on the process of religious change—not in these
towns where Liwuno people migrated, but in the home village to which
they regularly returned. Although Butonese migration patterns, and their
social impacts, have not been well described, significant academic atten-
tion has been devoted to describing the social impacts of long-term migra-
tions to rural areas by the Bugis of Sulawesi, including, most prominently,
the PhD theses by Acciaioli (1989) and Lineton (1975). Since the 1970s,
though, the economic development of eastern Indonesian towns has
led to increased migration flows to urban areas rather than rural (Tirto-
sudarmo 1997). The lowered costs of inter-island transportation has also
increasingly enabled circular migration, where the migrants frequently
travel back and forth between the home village and the migration loca-
tion rather than merely undertaking the journey once. In eastern Indone-
sia the Bugis, Makassarese and Butonese were the primary ethnic groups
taking advantage of these new economic opportunities through migration
(ibid.; see also Aditjondro 1986), but the social effects of circular migration
to urban areas are not well understood for any of these populations (see
Hugo 1982). In order to contribute toward addressing that gap, this paper
focuses on religious change in the home village and how it is related to
recent patterns of circular migration to urban areas.

   Much has been written about tensions between modernist and tradi-
tionalist Muslims in Indonesia, especially those tensions focusing on rit-
ual practices related to the propitiation of spirits.[7] Some level of conflict

---

   [6] Ellen argues that comparing the influence of Islam on trade with Weber's argument
about Protestantism and capitalism is misleading, because early Islam was less egalitarian
and more mystical than Protestantism, and had a different morality of commerce (more
collectivist rather than individualist) (1983: 71–2). He concludes that Islam did not promote
commerce to the same degree that Protestantism promoted capitalist development. In
any case, I am not arguing that modernist Islam assisted people in becoming traders, but
rather that Liwuno traders tended to also become modernist Muslims, and then later were
in a position to spread those beliefs in Liwuno.
   [7] Examples abound of religious disputes focusing on spirit beliefs in Sulawesi (Lineton
1975: 131; Acciaioli 1985; Nourse 1999; Aragon 2000: 162; Pelras 2002: 131; Bigalke 2005: 125,
296; Gibson 2005: 217) and in the wider region (Bowen 1993: 173–4; Schiller 1997; Chambert-
Loir and Reid 2002: xxvi). On similar religious tensions during the Dutch period see Aragon
(2000: 229) and Rodenburg (1997: 48).

between Islam and spirit beliefs in the region has been going on for centuries (Reid 1993: 158), and attempts at Islamic purification in many places have focused on the prohibition of agricultural ceremonies. This has been the case in Indonesia throughout the twentieth century, with widespread conversion from 'traditional' religions to Islam, as well as various stages of 'purification' of Islam undertaken by 'modernist' Muslims pushing for the removal of 'impure' elements of Indonesian Islam. However, while the shift towards modernist Islam may be common in Indonesia, the causes of the shift, its particular form, and its impacts upon social relations in the village are often unique to a particular context. In order to interpret religious change in a particular context, one needs to pay attention to the local context of power and inequality, as well as the broader economic and political context (see Reuter 2001: 327; Reuter 2002) and to how the shift is contested by those with opposing views (see Nourse 1999).

In Liwuno the shift towards modernist Islam has manifested in efforts to prohibit agricultural rituals. The present paper explains this process by focusing on economic, political, and social dynamics particular to Liwuno. Specifically, I highlight three processes which have influenced the form of religious change in Liwuno: the decline of farming in Liwuno, the end of the Wolio Sultanate and weakening of its politico-religious ideology, and new patterns of mobility in which Liwuno people have engaged over the past generation. I also draw attention to the plight of the farmers in Liwuno who have contested this change, and suffered lowered status as a result of it.

Liwuno Islam: Past and Present

The beliefs and practices that constitute Butonese religion have emerged from centuries of diverse influences from such ideologies as Animism, Hinduism, Sufism and various waves of Islamic modernism.[8] Ancestor cults, territorial spirits, and birth spirits have long been prominent in Liwuno religion, as has been the case in the traditional religions of most other

---

[8] Gibson (2000) has described a similar series of 'global flows' which have over the past centuries influenced ritual practice and belief in South Sulawesi, and has described how contemporary ritual practice continues to make use of various elements of these historical influences.

Austronesian-speaking societies.[9] During the fourteenth century, Buton was in the sphere of influence of the Majapahit empire, and this brought Hindu Javanese ideas to the island. Some of these ideas are still widespread in Buton, such as the belief in reincarnation (see Schoorl 1985).

The Majapahit Empire shifted towards Islam around the year 1500 and according to local oral histories, the 6th King of Wolio (which was the name of the Butonese polity) converted to Islam in 1540 (see Madu 1983, Zahari 1977) under the tutelage of Syeik Abdul Wahid (Yunus 1995). Both Zuhdi (1999) and Yunus (1995) record this claim, and Yunus also cites evidence that Islam was present in Buton by the early 1400s (ibid.: 19). An alternate, and more likely, account is that Sultan Baabullah of Ternate conquered and converted Buton to Islam in 1580 (Vonk cited in Southon 1995; Ligtvoet cited in Zuhdi 1999: 73; Reid 1993: 166; Yunus 1995). Although Buton has been an Islamic Sultanate since the sixteenth century, the adoption of Muslim beliefs and practices was neither instantaneous nor complete. As was the case elsewhere, the adoption of Islamic beliefs and practices in Buton was intimately related to power hierarchies and political interests. In the beginning, adoption of Islam may have improved the Wolio Sultan's position with respect to local chiefs (Vermeij 2000) and over time, the Sultanate's embrace of Islam also weakened the position of the lower nobles of the *walaka* rank who controlled *adat* (Schoorl 2003: 154). Islamic influence in Buton spread from the Wolio Sultanate in Baubau outward to the villages in a slow and partial manner, given that Islamic knowledge was used as a tool of power by Sultanate officials (ibid.: 147–50).

During the early stages of Islamic influence, Sufism had a particularly strong impact on both religion and local conceptions of power in Buton. A Sufist version of Islam was used to bolster the power of the Sultanate over the masses (Yunus 1995), according to the Sufist concept that the Sultan was the 'perfect man' (*insan kamil*) who could do anything he wished (ibid.: 112). Sufist Islam, it has been noted, 'allowed Islam and spirit possession to coexist' (Schiller 1997: 205; see also Woodward 1989; Howell 2007).

Later waves of Islamic influence included many attempts to 'purify' pre-Islamic elements from Butonese religion. For instance during the reign of Sultan La Umatti (1688–1695) a brief attempt at purification was made, influenced by the teachings of the Sufi, ar-Raniri (Yunus 1995: 69).

---

[9] See Nourse (1999) on birth spirits, and Chambert-Loir and Reid (2002) on ancestor spirits.

Between 1825 and 1851 Sultan M. Idrus also pushed to purify local Islam, working with his military chief Haji Abdul Ganiu to ban the use of figurines at graveyards and other practices, following the influence of the Wahabi school (Schoorl 2003: 146), though both men apparently retained their belief in reincarnation (ibid.: 167–8). In the early twentieth century a modernist Muslim movement took hold in Indonesia, and local spirit beliefs that had been tolerated by Sufist Islam were one of their main targets (Howell 2007). In 1926 the modernist group Muhammadiyah arrived in South Sulawesi (and was likely established in Southeast Sulawesi shortly after), and this group worked to limit the power of the nobility and to cut out certain practices which its members saw as 'superstition' (Rossler 1997: 277).

The most recent purification effort arrived in Liwuno village during the 1950s and 1960s. A central role was played by two Butonese *haji* men who came to live in the Liwuno region and were instrumental in encouraging observance of the five pillars of Islam and the cessation of spirit-propitiation rituals.[10] During the following decades a variety of contrasting views persisted regarding modernist Islam and spirit worship. The situation in Liwuno shared the dynamic described by Gibson for nearby South Sulawesi, '[t]he period since 1965 is best characterized as a 'cold war' between the adherents of the old spirit cults, traditional Sufism and Islamic modernism' (Gibson 1994: 61). Gradually, through this period, the modernist Islam has gained the upper hand in Liwuno. The agricultural rituals, largely discontinued in the 1960s, are now considered by a majority of villagers to be Animist relics that are in contradiction with Islam. In practice these rituals are informally prohibited by the village leaders as well as by the majority opinion.[11]

By the early years of the new millennium (when fieldwork was undertaken), the Muslim identity of the village was strikingly apparent, and Islamic events formed the core of Liwuno social life. All Liwuno people are Muslim. Many of the men attend prayers at the mosque for all five sessions each day. The mosque is the pride of the village, rebuilt in 2000 with donations from successful urban migrants; its splendour rivals that of the large mosque in the district capital of Baubau. Muslim ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and prayer sessions for departing pilgrims are

---

[10] The men, Kyai Haji Agus Syukur and Kyai Haji Ashari, were said to be from Binongko (in the Tukang Besi Islands) and to have studied Islam extensively in the Middle East.

[11] Note that because Animism is not recognized as a religion by the state, there is no protection under Indonesia's freedom of religion act.

frequent and well attended. Every afternoon and evening, groups of children study the Koran at various Koranic schools (TPA, *Taman Pendidikan al-Qur'an*) in the village. The fasting month of Ramadhan is the most important time of the year, and the Lebaran celebration at its end is the festive occasion of the year. Having a reputation for strict observance of Islamic rituals augments one's image in the village. Signs of personal piety which can contribute to this positive Islamic reputation include praying at the mosque five times per day, fasting during the fasting month, frequently wearing Islamic garb (usually a sarong, formal collared shirt, and a Muslim cap or *songko*), being able to chant the Koran skilfully, ensuring one's children study the Koran, and hosting frequent prayer gatherings at one's house. The *hajj* pilgrimage is considered the peak Islamic achievement and those villagers who have undertaken it are highly respected.

This plethora of Muslim observances, however, is relatively recent. While by 2001 the majority of villagers were aware of, and largely followed, the five pillars of Islam (the confession of the faith, praying five times per day, fasting during the fasting month, giving alms, and going on the pilgrimage if able), Liwuno people described the Islam of their parents' generation as 'not deep' or 'in name only,' and said that they did not observe the pillars. During the previous generation, a variety of other rituals were more important, including agricultural rituals, village cleansings, ancestor rituals, and others. While some of these rituals continue, others are now considered to be in contradiction with Islam and have been officially discontinued, in the sense that they are not held openly.

The prohibited rituals include most rituals of the agriculture ritual cycle including harvest festivals (M: *bongka ta'o*—the 'opening of the year'),[12] and protection rites such as the *kaagono liwu* (M: 'healing' or

---

[12] The main harvest festival was the *bongka ta'o* ('the opening of the year'), celebrating the beginning of the maize harvest. It involved the preparation of various dishes made with maize, the distribution of offerings to feed the territorial spirits, and other activities such as the *pokalapa* (M) augury, in which elders would throw an *anjelai* stalk against two crisscrossed stalks to see where they would break. This gave a sign as to where planting would be most successful in the following season. It was forbidden to harvest corn before the *bongka ta'o*, since the spirits had not been given their 'share' yet and this could incur their wrath.

'cleansing' of the village)[13] and the use of *sahiga* (M: household shrines).[14] The main objection to these rituals concerns the fact that they involve offerings being given to territorial spirits in order to ask for something in return. The *kaagono liwu* has not been held openly as a public affair since the late 1960s. Similarly, the *bongka ta'o* is no longer held, although the maize harvest is often celebrated informally through feasting, without the propitiation elements which were the vital part of the *bongka ta'o*. *Sahiga* shrines were used by every household before the 1950s, but by 2000 no houses displayed them prominently, and modernist informants stressed that they were a thing of the past—and one which they evidently found embarrassing.

Beliefs concerning territorial spirits underpin the prohibited rituals (aside from territorial spirits, traditional Liwuno cosmology admits of at least three other kinds of spirits: malevolent spirits, ancestor spirits (M: *sumanga*), and birth spirits (M: *yisano*)). The Muna language term for territorial spirits, *miendo wite*, literally means the 'people of the land,' but a better gloss would be 'spirits of the land.' The Indonesian gloss for *miendo wite* is *tuan tanah*, meaning 'lords of the land.' Territorial spirits are said to 'own' (*punya*), 'guard' (*jaga*), 'wait at' (*tunggu*), or 'control' (*pegang*) particular places, such as the gardens and the forest where Liwuno people go to get firewood.[15] *Miendo wite* are also present at places that are perceived to be spiritually powerful, such as caves, water springs, and large or

---

[13] The *kaagono liwu* ('healing of the village') ceremony was a vital protection ritual (*tolak bala*) carried out by *adat* leaders, in order to feed, and thereby 'respect' and propitiate, the territorial spirits. Its central focus was the preparation and distribution of offerings for the spirits, along with accompanying mantra (M: *batata*). It used to be held twice yearly, at the changing of the seasons (from west monsoon to east, in May, and from east monsoon to west, in November), to ask that the spirits not cause illness or misfortune in the coming season. These are also the times of planting corn, so the ritual served as protection for the crop about to be planted. The offerings, consisting of particular foods laid out on leaves atop woven bamboo dishes, were set down in particular potent places around the village.

[14] Household shrines, called *sahiga* (or *sariga* in standard Muna and bahasa Wolio), were used to respect and feed spirits in order to protect the members of the household. The *sahiga* consisted of a small table and a wooden box, placed on a white cloth. The box contained offerings of betel nut and associated condiments, and tobacco, replaced monthly. Household rituals were also held yearly, with additional offerings, *batata* recitations, and a ceremonial meal with some neighbours called a (M) *haroa sahiga*.

[15] When speaking Indonesian, people often refer to these spirits as '*yang pegang tempat ini*' (the one who controls this place), '*yang punya tempat ini*' (the one who owns this place) or, in the Muna language, *kofewa'ano* (M: the one who owns). *Miendo wite* are also sometimes referred to as *sangia*, a Muna word which also refers to the sacred sites which they guard, or *nabi*, an Arabic (and Indonesian) word meaning 'prophet.'

unusually shaped trees. The entire landscape is controlled by such spirits, which have the power to grant bountiful harvests or to cause crop failures (through either poor weather or attacks by pests), and to guarantee good health or to inflict illness and misfortune upon humans.

'Owning' a place does not refer to ownership in the western sense of private property (see Aragon 2000: 168), but more to a responsibility of care, combined with an authority and power which must be respected. Since the *miendo wite* own/control particular places, anyone passing through or using these places must act respectfully towards the spirits, including rendering offerings (of betel nut, tobacco, and particular types of foods), or risk punishment. Failing to give appropriate offerings will render *miendo wite* angry. A farmer harvesting crops is taking something from a realm controlled by the spirits, and so must render a tribute to the spirits in order to placate them.

If *miendo wite* become angered, there can be disastrous consequences for humans. The harvest can fail, the crops can be destroyed by pigs and monkeys, or people can fall ill, suffer accidents, or die. Thus it is of the utmost importance that humans respect the *miendo wite* by giving offerings. As one informant explained, regarding a spirit based at a tree: 'if you climb the tree, the *miendo wite* can get angry . . . you have to give it its due [i.e. its share of food] so that it doesn't bother you.' The prohibited rituals were the key methods of delivering offerings to the territorial spirits which surround Liwuno, in order that the village be free from sickness, and so that the farmers would enjoy prosperous harvests.

Rituals to propitiate these spirits, although carried out by the entire village as late as the 1950s, are now deemed by many villagers to be inappropriate and sinful. Modernist Muslims in the village hold that the rituals are *syirik*, never give offerings themselves, and also deny the existence of *miendo wite*. In fact, though, there are other views on these prohibited rituals. Traditionalists (and especially farmers among them) believe in the existence of the *miendo wite* and feel that it would be misguided and dangerous to fail to propitiate them through the appropriate rituals. Others take a more intermediate position, where they acknowledge the existence of the *miendo wite* (or are uncertain of their non-existence) but feel that it would be *syirik* to actually give offerings to them. Some of these, although not delivering offerings, still think of the *miendo wite* if there is an unexplained illness in the family, believing that it may be caused by angry spirits.

Among these different views, the modernist view has achieved dominance in Liwuno. Importantly, this view is dominant not just by virtue

of being held by more people, but because it is held by most of the most powerful and high status people of the village, which primarily consist of the migrants who have achieved success as traders in the towns of eastern Indonesia. The dispute about whether the prohibited rituals should be held or not was rarely pursued in open debate or argument during the time I conducted fieldwork in the village (2001–2003). Rather, it was well known that the modernists considered rituals involving offerings for spirits to be *syirik* or *haram*—not allowed under Islam. Since the elite of the village were almost all modernists, traditionalists, who were either not against the rituals or actively desired to hold them, were a silent and marginalised minority. Traditionalist views persist only on the sidelines, as their adherents realise that they have lost the public debate. The reactions of these marginalized traditionalists will be discussed further below.

The Decline of Agriculture

Liwuno modernists have not attempted to prohibit all religious practices with elements that might be seen as in contradiction to (modernist) Islam. Rituals such as *posumanga* ancestor rituals and rituals for the protection of a newly built house (which incorporate auguries and offerings), for example, continue to take place with the participation of large numbers of villagers (albeit with some modification), whereas the rituals most closely associated with an agricultural livelihood have been stopped outright or at least pushed out of mainstream public life. This may be partly because territorial spirits represent a sharper challenge to Islamic cosmology than do ancestral spirits. Another important reason that agricultural rituals have become the focus of purification efforts in Liwuno is the fact that the majority of Liwuno people, and especially the elite, are no longer farming.

During the 1960s, a majority of Liwuno households had gardens, and many lived exclusively from agriculture. However, since that time agriculture has been largely abandoned as a livelihood. By 2006 only 8% of workers were farming as their primary livelihood, and very few farmed as a supplementary economic activity. The few remaining farmers in Liwuno are mostly elderly and poor.[16]

---

[16] The agricultural crops in Liwuno are primarily maize and cassava. Both are planted near the beginning of the rainy season in November. The corn is ready to harvest by

Farming has declined not only in terms of the number of people engaging in it, but also in terms of its status as a livelihood. The few remaining farmers are all of very low status. There are no wealthy farmers in Liwuno, and farming is now seen as a livelihood which has no potential to bring wealth and success. Farming has come to stand for poverty, and is avoided by the young who prefer to migrate to chase their dreams of achieving wealth and success. The move away from agriculture is by no means particular to Liwuno, of course, being a widespread phenomenon in Indonesia (Booth 2004: 29) and indeed globally. However, the decline in Liwuno has been very rapid, with an almost total abandonment of farming over three decades.

The primary reason for the decline of agriculture was the increasing availability of more economically lucrative migration opportunities. Agriculture in Buton has long been difficult, with its rocky infertile land and lack of rivers for irrigation. Butonese people have thus sought maritime livelihoods over the past centuries, when regional conditions have permitted. As more migration opportunities arose, dependence on farming and fishing decreased, and more and more families lived from the remittances of migrants.

Before the 1950s, the gardens maintained by most Liwuno people were large, producing food for subsistence and often an excess which could be traded. The middle part of the 20th century was an insecure time in the region, with World War II followed by a number of armed struggles in eastern Indonesia after the declaration of Indonesia's independence.[17] During the 1950s and 1960s, many Liwuno men left the village to earn money, but the popular form of migration during those years was to sail on wooden sailing ships transporting people and cargo throughout the archipelago. While their husbands were absent, women maintained gardens, often sleeping in garden huts to keep watch over the crops. Farming was an essential part of the household livelihood, providing the women with subsistence while the men were away, and allowing the family to survive in case the man's voyage did not result in earnings.

February or March and the cassava by approximately July. A form of rotating-fallow cultivation is used, wherein gardens are used for three years and then left fallow for 5 to 6 years.

[17] During the late Sukarno period, the outer islands of Indonesia were not yet fully integrated into the new state of Indonesia, and political upheavals in the 1950s and 1960s in Sulawesi and Maluku made the region unsafe. In the 1950s the Darul Islam rebels were driven out of South Sulawesi and came to Southeast Sulawesi, where they were seen as '*gerombolan*,' or gangs of bandits.

It was not until the 1970s that the region was safe and politically stable, and at this time the economy of Ambon began to boom and provide economic opportunities which attracted many migrants. A large proportion of Liwuno men migrated to Ambon for work during the 1970s. The economy of Ambon was increasingly able to offer stable employment to these Liwuno men, and many brought their families from Liwuno to be with them, subsequently returning to Liwuno only for short visits, when they could afford it. Agriculture in Liwuno went into steep decline at that time.

When Liwuno people began settling in urban Ambon in the 1970s, many left their gardens in Buton to grow over. As economic opportunities in Ambon became increasingly reliable, even those women who remained in Liwuno while their husbands worked in Ambon mostly stopped gardening by 1990, since their husbands could provide regular remittances from their earnings in Ambon. Thus for sailor families, agriculture was first relegated to a secondary occupation to provide subsistence while the men were away, and then dropped altogether as opportunities in Ambon became reliable. There were also families who did not sail during the 1950s and 1960s, instead remaining entirely dependent on farming in Liwuno, or migrating to Ambon and setting up gardens outside the city. Their children, however, did not continue to farm, instead finding urban jobs as labourers in Ambon. Thus by the 1990s, and whether in Liwuno or in Ambon, almost all young Liwuno people were pursuing livelihoods other than farming.

This turn away from farming is not entirely due to the availability of other occupations with higher earnings. For most Liwuno people, labouring is preferable to farming, even when the earnings are similar. Labouring yields a daily wage, whereas farming only pays after the harvest. Also, farming has come to be stigmatised in Liwuno, and is associated with low status, persistent poverty and backwardness; Liwuno people tend to avoid working as farmers if they have any other option.

Several other factors have also contributed to the decline of agriculture in Liwuno. One is diet. In the 1960s most Liwuno people ate cassava and rice as staples, and only the rich ate rice, which cannot be grown in Liwuno's infertile soils and hence must be purchased. Now most Liwuno people prefer rice and are able to afford it. This has lowered the demand for cassava and maize, and thus the prices for these products, and this in turn makes farming even less lucrative.

A second factor is that once farming began to decline, the need to continually watch over gardens in order to prevent pests from eating crops

intensified (pigs attack the gardens by night, monkeys by daylight). With many people gardening, the burden of watching the gardens was shared, but as some people left farming behind, fewer people were watching the borders and these pests managed to destroy substantial portions of each year's crops. This drove more people out of agriculture.

In 1999, a large-scale Christian-Muslim conflict erupted in Ambon, and large numbers of Butonese people working there returned to Buton. In Liwuno itself, over a thousand people returned at that time. For several years they received aid from the government because their livelihoods had been disrupted by the conflict, but ironically, this aid acted as a further blow to agriculture in Liwuno. Rice was distributed every three or four months to all returnee families and many returnees treated this rice as a commodity, selling it in order to obtain cash and satisfy their other needs. Thus the market was flooded with rice, the price dropped, and this in turn pushed down the price of cassava and maize (since people preferred rice to those products). The lowered prices of cassava and maize drove some of the last remaining farmers out of agriculture.

The decline of agriculture was a key factor in the process of religious change in Liwuno whereby the rituals have become prohibited. These rituals had been deemed necessary by farmers, who felt that their harvests depended on propitiating the spirits, but by the late 1990s, the farmers were not only a small minority; they were also a stigmatised group with low status and a lack of power in village affairs. Thus it is no surprise that the modernists of the village, themselves no longer engaged in farming, felt no need for the rituals, and succeeded in marginalising them as inappropriate historical relics.

From Sultanate to Nation-State

The religious ideology underpinning the prohibited rituals was also undercut by important political changes which occurred in Buton after World War II. Not only was Buton integrated into the Indonesian state (officially in 1945 but in practice over a decade later) but in 1960 the Wolio Sultanate was officially discontinued, upon the death of the 38th Sultan. Processes of political integration coincided with, and further reinforced, the shift towards modernist Islam, by weakening the earlier ideological framework out of which the rituals grew.

The end of the Sultanate deeply undermined the entire politico-religious ideology in Buton, in which the Sultan was the protector of physical safety

and good harvests in the realm. Harvest rituals and protection rites were carried out by village leaders who also performed political functions under the Sultanate (Schoorl 2003), and once the Sultanate was no longer in existence, and Buton was integrated into the new nation-state of Indonesia, the authority of the traditional village leadership was eviscerated. The traditional village leadership councils which had existed under the Sultanate (the '*Sara*' and the '*Hukumu*'(M)) fell apart gradually, as outgoing leaders officials were not replaced. The Village Government Law of 1979 then formally extinguished their authority. This meant that many villages were led by a *lurah* (village head) appointed by the local bureaucracy. *Lurah* generally originated from other parts of the province, and often had little desire to support local rituals since these rituals did not legitimate their power (Bartels 1977: 138–9).

These political changes, occurring alongside the spread of influential new ideologies of democracy and modernity, weakened the traditional system of rank (differentiating nobles, commoners and slaves), reduced the status of the remaining traditional village leaders, and eroded the value of particular types of customary knowledge (*adat*) including that related to agricultural rituals (see Palmer 2010).

When the Sultanate was officially discontinued, its role as arbiter of local Islam was taken over by the Department of Religion. The Indonesian government was interested in promoting its short-list of permissible 'world religions' (*agama*) over local religions, in order to strengthen and promote its modernist, nationalist and developmentalist agenda. This meant that modernist Islam was prioritised at the expense of more locally inflected forms, such as that promoted by the Wolio Sultanate, and the authenticity of local religions was questioned or dismissed (see Lineton 1975: 131). Nationalism and modernist Islam were taught at the same time through government schools, using the Indonesian language (see Bowen 1993: 327) and this had a further integrative effect. Islam now functions to integrate Butonese people into the Indonesian nation (Schoorl 2003: 156). In Liwuno, modernist Islam has acted as a vehicle for expressing nationalism (see Ellen 1983: 73), and to distinguish oneself from other villagers who were less 'Indonesian' and less 'modern.'

In its early years the Indonesian state attempted to stamp out spirit-based rituals throughout the archipelago (Lineton 1975: 67), and during the late 1960s utilised the spectre of communism to encourage villagers to distance themselves from local religions and more fully embrace one of the five officially sanctioned world religions. Those lacking a world religion could be portrayed as atheist, and thus communist, and

this was extremely dangerous as during this period thousands of alleged communists were executed.[18] In Liwuno, villagers wanting to carry out agricultural rituals or visit important ancestors' graves in the hills above the village were well aware of the dangers of being branded a communist due to these activities. The military had a strong presence down to village level and many village heads during this time, including Liwuno's, were military officers. Citizens could show their commitment to modernity and nationalism by eschewing such local religious practices and adopting modernist Islam. Facing this dynamic, many people, as Bartels (who did research in Maluku) put it, 'embraced Islamic universalism over ethnic parochialism' (2003: 138).

   The notion of modernity has also lent support to modernist Islam in its struggle with local religion. Those who have adopted modernist Islam often present themselves as 'modern' in contrast to 'traditional' villagers who retain parochial religious beliefs and rituals. Indeed villagers in Liwuno often dismissed the prohibited rituals as 'the things that old people do,' implying that they have been superseded by modern religious developments. It has been pointed out that aspiring elites sometimes 'perform modernity' (Schein 1999) by, for example, proclaiming their lack of belief in traditional things, in order to be seen as cosmopolitan and modern (see Pigg 1996 in Schein 1999: 363). Schrauwers, writing on the Pamona of central Sulawesi, found that local elites presented themselves as modern in contrast to 'traditional' farmers, whose traditionalism kept them in poverty (2000: 21). A similar dynamic occurred in Liwuno, where farmers, and things associated with farming such as the agricultural rituals, acquired a deeply negative stigma of backward traditionalism.

Mobility and Trade

The migration patterns of Liwuno people have been a key factor in the process of religious change in the village. As mentioned earlier, migration to urban areas, and especially to Ambon city, became very common during the 1970s. While some Liwuno migrants established gardens on the outskirts of the city, most lived within the city and sought urban liveli-

---

[18] As Beatty put it, 'Religious identity became a life and death issue for many Indonesians…in the wake of the violent anti-Communist purge of 1965–1966' (Beatty 1999, cited in Reuter 2001: 331).

hoods. Many worked as porters, labourers, or pedicab drivers, but a large number worked as traders in the fish market. The Ambon fish market was an economic niche filled mostly by Butonese migrants, and thus it became relatively easy for newly arrived Liwuno people to find employment there. Over the decades, some Liwuno migrants continued as labourers or as fish traders, but those who managed to accumulate some capital often went on to trade other goods such as clothes. Trading clothes was more lucrative than trading fish, and often necessitated a move to other regions in order to find less competitive markets. Liwuno clothes traders sold their wares in the towns of Papua (such as Biak, Serui, Timika, Manokwari and Merauke), especially from the 1990s onwards. Other successful Liwuno traders remained in Ambon and expanded into other businesses. By the year 2000, there were dozens of Liwuno people successful enough to go on the *hajj* pilgrimage (the cost of which may be approximately US$4000).

Much of this migration was circular, with migrants going to Ambon for periods of between 4–12 months, then returning to Liwuno. Some moved their families to Ambon and rarely returned to Liwuno; however, the most successful migrants were especially likely to retain a close connection with the home village and visit often. The 1999 Ambon conflict led to a shift in these patterns, with many of the settled migrants returning to Liwuno and undertaking circular migration back to Ambon afterwards, leaving their families in Liwuno where it was safe.

Liwuno migrants in Ambon city mostly lived in the neighbourhoods of Waihaong and Dok—densely populated suburbs located in between the city's main mosque and the sea, near both port and market. Residents of these neighbourhoods were mostly Muslim migrants of Butonese, Bugis, Javanese, or other ethnicity. Liwuno migrants living there would have interacted with these others around their homes and in the mosque, and depended on them for social solidarity, community safety, and job opportunities. A shared Muslim identity would have been one of the primary factors which bound people together.[19] In these situations, village-specific ritual observations and celebrations would weaken this common Muslim identity and would often be de-emphasised over the long term. Thus Bowen found that migration practices were linked with a 'sense of detachment from place' that 'characterized the new socio-religious ideas'

---

[19] Note that migrants have a heightened need for solidarity in cases where they are excluded from local forms of social solidarity, as is the case with the '*pela gandong*' system of alliances in Ambon (see Bräuchler this volume). This may lead them to place even more emphasis on religious networks, further driving processes of religious change.

(1993: 33). Over time, the urban migrants of Liwuno adopted a more mod-
ernist form of Islam.[20]

   Migration affects religious change not just because people live in close
proximity with Muslims of different ethnicities, however. Even more pow-
erful religious change results from the economic transformations brought
about by new migration-based livelihoods (Gardner 1995: 234). Economic
transformation in Liwuno was significant from the 1970s, with hundreds of
migrants becoming urban traders and some achieving significant wealth.
The economic success of traders attracted others to their (modernist)
version of Islam, in the same way that Reid identified in discussing the
17th century:

> The process of religious change, therefore, was in part the natural attraction
> of the ritual practices of those who seemed most successful in the new world
> of commerce (1993: 160).

In Liwuno, the economic success achieved by those who converted to a
trading lifestyle further strengthened the shift towards modernist Islam,
not only through their example which others sought to emulate, but also
through the central role they came to play in Liwuno society. The success-
ful traders achieved high status in Liwuno and became the most respected
people in the village, and their opinions on religious matters (as well as
other topics) came to be taken very seriously. Social relations in the vil-
lage are to some extent organised around patron-client links, where the
wealthiest traders are the patrons with the most clients and therefore
the most influential people in the village. This has meant that they have
exerted a strong influence on the direction of religious change in Liwuno.
Their experiences of migrating and converting to non-agricultural live-
lihoods helped to determine the particular focus of Islamic purification
efforts in Liwuno—namely the farming rituals of which they no longer
had any need.

---

[20] This is not the case for Liwuno migrants who established gardens on the outskirts
of Ambon. Their continued dependence on farming and their practice of living in kin-
clusters with other Liwuno people facilitated the persistence of beliefs and practices
related to territorial spirits.

Dissenting Views

As noted above, not all Liwuno people agree with the shift towards modernist Islam which has seen these agricultural rituals prohibited. Traditionalists—and especially those who continue to depend on farming for their livelihoods—see them as an essential part of *adat*; essential to their well-being. Speaking of the prohibited rituals, one farmer and *adat* leader explained:

> According to those who are fanatical[21] about religion, these rituals are heretical [*bid'ah*], or false. But for us, there is *adat* and there is *agama* [i.e. Islam].[22] The rituals are not in contradiction with Islam, even though some people think they are. We stopped the rituals for a while in the past, but many people got sick, so we had to hold them again, in secret.

Thus although the rituals could not be held openly, and were not supported by the majority of Liwuno people, a few farmers felt that their livelihoods would be endangered if they were discontinued completely, so continued to hold the ceremonies on a much-reduced scale and in secret.

Similarly, traditionalist informants indicated that some villagers continued to use *sahiga* shrines, covertly and in restricted ways, for instance foregoing the feast with neighbours and instead merely preparing the offerings for the *sahiga* inside the house, and storing the *sahiga* in the attic afterwards. While no longer arguing their case in public, traditionalists defended this secretive use of *sahiga* as vital to their health: 'most people disposed of their *sahiga* when they came to be seen as *syirik*, but then we were forced to make new ones, since everyone was getting sick.' That is, the spirits brought sickness upon the people until they resumed their *sahiga* practices.

Traditionalists who felt the rituals were still important no longer argued their case publicly, but when questioned in private would defend the rituals and complain about the oppressive version of Islam which now held

---

[21] The word which I render as 'fanatical' is the Indonesian '*fanatik*'; it has a different sense, though, to that of the English 'fanatical,' which carries a negative connotation of 'going too far.' The Indonesian '*fanatik*' has the more value-neutral sense of '*sangat taat*' or 'following all the rules.'

[22] Although the Indonesian word '*agama*' is often translated as 'religion,' I do not do so here, since the sense is not the same. *Agama* in Indonesia refers only to world religions such as Islam and Christianity, and excludes local *adat* traditions, some of which would be included under the English term 'religion.'

sway in the village and considered the rituals improper. Traditionalists tended to point out that they themselves are Muslims also, and that the rituals in question are a vital part of *adat*, and that both Islam and *adat* are important in life. This is what was meant by the farmer quoted above when he said 'there is *adat* and there is *agama*,' implying that *adat* is separate and complementary to *agama* (which refers to Islam). In Liwuno the term '*adat*' has a number of meanings. It can refer to local customs and practices, the old ways of doing things, and especially to rituals that are clearly not of Islamic origin. It can also be used to refer to something like 'good manners,' or to bride price payments (*mahar*), and modernists tend to use the term in these latter ways rather than to refer to pre-Islamic rituals.[23] Thus a debate about what is allowable under Islam has implicitly become a debate about what constitutes *adat*. In other words, modernists agree that *adat* is important, but they do not consider the prohibited rituals to be *adat* (or at least not the kind of *adat* which should be recognised and valued).

Traditionalists feel that it is essential to respect the territorial spirits in order to enjoy good health, safety, and prosperous harvests, just as Islam is important for entering heaven. As one traditionalist farmer put it: 'actually, the two [Islam and *adat*] are the same—the mosque is for the afterlife, but what about *this* world?' This implies that just as Muslim prayers can assure a comfortable afterlife, rituals to propitiate spirits are necessary in order to safely be able to carry out one's activities in this life. In a similar vein, one traditionalist told me: 'some people are against the rituals; they say they are *haram* [forbidden]...but they are our life.' He was bitter that the modernists had managed to portray the rituals as improper, since this was jeopardising his health and prosperity. In this view, the modernists are disregarding important aspects of village *adat*, and by disrespecting the territorial spirits, risking serious consequences to health and livelihood.

Modernists, for their part, do not denigrate *adat*, and they do not cast the dispute as being about the proper role of *adat* and Islam. Instead they portray the dispute as being between an Islam mixed with archaic *syirik*

---

[23] *Adat* can mean 'good manners' such as in the following examples: 'we have different *adat* to Muna people; when they are leaving a group they shake the hands of everyone present,' or, 'that child doesn't know *adat*' (meaning 'that child is impolite'). *Adat* can mean 'bride price' such as in the sentence: 'how much was the *adat* for that wedding?' The Muna language word for *adat* is *adhati*, which has been defined as: 1. proper behaviour, traditional customs, customary law; 2. total dowry (van den Berg, 1996).

practices and a modern and correct version of Islam. The modernists see the rituals as indicative of 'weak' Islam; an Islam mixed with Hindu or Animist elements (relics from Buton's pre-Islamic history) that need to be purified out. Modernists thus seek to associate these rituals with an unenlightened past. Due to their power within the village context, they have been largely successful in removing these rituals from social life, with the exception of pockets of resistance amongst a dwindling and powerless group of farmers.

Conclusion

This paper provides one example of how global processes have affected a local culture, considering the interests of particular villagers in changing economic, political and social conditions, in the midst of particular local power struggles. Liwuno patterns of migration were a key factor underlying many of the processes described above, including the decline of agriculture and the rise of trading as a successful livelihood. All of these dynamics, including the erosion of the politico-religious ideology underpinning the Wolio Sultanate, influenced the direction of religious change in Liwuno and the focus on the agricultural rituals. The religious shift in Liwuno, then, is tightly connected to the pattern of circular migration to urban areas undertaken by Liwuno migrants.[24] Migration has thus provided a mechanism by means of which processes of Islamization can reach out to remote regions.

The prohibition of the agricultural rituals is an effect of an ideological shift which may be referred to as the disenchantment of the Liwuno landscape. Liwuno people a generation ago saw the landscape around the village as imbued with mystical potency, represented by territorial spirits, and concentrated in particular sites. This mystical potency required people to be careful in how they moved and behaved in particular places, but it also offered the possibility of utilising this potency to access desirable outcomes such as health and prosperity. Now, many people no longer

---

[24]   Post-1998 political decentralisation has been accompanied by a resurgence of pride in local history and *adat* in many parts of the country, with numerous Sultanates revived and discontinued rituals resurrected. Some villages near Liwuno have seen attempts to revive traditional harvest festivals or cleansings, but no such efforts have been made in Liwuno itself. Given the large scale abandonment of agriculture in Liwuno, and the domination of the modernists there, it is unlikely that such attempts would have any success.

believe in these spirits, and the move away from farming combined with the prohibition of the rituals is eroding such beliefs where they still persist. This signals a fundamental shift in religious ideology, removing power from the land and placing it in the hands of God, to be accessed through proper modernist observances.

This shift has not been uncontested, however. While many modernists came to see the agricultural rituals as contradicting Islam, and thereby prohibited, traditionalists describe the two as complementary. This position recalls Lambek's (2000) concept of polyphony, referring to how people navigate claims upon them made by several different religious traditions without choosing exclusively between them. Horstmann, in this volume, highlights a case of polyphonic navigation in southern Thailand. In Liwuno, however, we have a case where, at least on the issue of agricultural rituals, the majority of villagers are not persisting with a 'polyphonic' approach; rather, they have explicitly chosen global modernist Islam over local beliefs about territorial spirits. Those who do persist in attempting to negotiate tensions between local practice and global ideology by accommodating both have found themselves on the bottom rung of the village social hierarchy.

Social status was a key factor in mediating processes of change. The end of feudalism meant that traditional rank (i.e. the nobility) and official positions within the administration of the Sultanate were less important for status, and economic success became relatively more important (Palmer 2010).[25] Liwuno migrants who achieved wealth as traders in Ambon (or other urban centres in eastern Indonesia) could achieve high status upon their return to Liwuno. Successful migrant traders emerged as wealthy, capitalist, nationalist, modern, urbanised elites, and their Islam is modernist. Given that they are not interested in farming, they do not seek to defend harvest rituals but rather are leading the struggle against them. Their status and power means that they have a disproportionate influence over the direction of religious change in Liwuno.

These changes have led to a decline in the status of ritual knowledge regarding territorial spirits, and in the status of farming as an occupation. Farmers do not achieve financial success or high status in Liwuno. Trading is seen as the most desirable occupation; farming is the least

---

[25] Islamic revivalism has often been linked to political resistance and inequality (Gardner 1995: 240), and modernist Islam in particular frequently empowers people to challenge traditional hierarchies (Errington 1989: 173), as has happened here.

desirable—a last resort, only for those who have no other options or skills. The trader/farmer distinction is important as it overlaps with the modernist/traditionalist one: although many Liwuno people are neither farmers nor traders, farmers are generally traditionalists and traders are generally modernists.

The trader/farmer distinction is important in Liwuno identity in another way. For many Liwuno people, farmers represent the past; a past that is characterised by agriculture, poverty, and spirit-based beliefs, in contrast with a future characterised by trading, wealth, and modernist Islam. Both farming rituals and farmers themselves are considered to be slightly embarrassing relics of the past, representing everything that most Liwuno people wish to progress beyond. Underpinning the prohibition of the agricultural rituals is the fact that many Liwuno people have made a transition (or perhaps conversion) to a new life of capitalist accumulation and modernist Islam. Those who have *not* made this transition, especially traditionalist farmers, have come to be marginalised in terms of wealth, status, and power.

References

Acciaioli, G. (1985) Culture as Art: From Practice to Spectacle in Indonesia. *Canberra Anthropology* 8: 148–172.

—— (1989) Searching for Good Fortune: the Making of a Bugis Shore Community at Lake Lindu, Central Sulawesi. PhD thesis, Australian National University.

Aditjondro, G. J. (1986) *Datang dengan Kapal, Tidur di Pasar, Buang Air di Kali, Pulang Naik Pesawat.* Jayapura: YPMD.

Aragon, L. V. (2000) *Fields of the Lord: Animism, Christian Minorities, and State Development in Indonesia.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Bartels, D. (1977) Guarding the Invisible Mountain: Intervillage Alliances, Religious Syncretism and Ethnic Identity Among Ambonese Christians and Moslems in the Moluccas. PhD Thesis, Cornell University.

—— (2003) "Your God is No Longer Mine: Moslem-Christian Fratricide in the Central Moluccas (Indonesia) After a Half-Millennium of Tolerant Co-Existence and Ethnic Unity," in *A State of Emergency: Violence, Society and the State in Eastern Indonesia.* Edited by S. N. Pannell. Darwin: Northern Territory University Press. pp. 128–153.

Bigalke, T. W. (2005) *Tana Toraja: a Social History of an Indonesian People.* Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Booth, A. (2004) "The Changing Importance of Off-Farm Income for Agricultural Households in Indonesia," in *The Indonesian Rural Economy: Mobility, Work and Enterprise.* Edited by T. R. Leinbach. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. pp. 15–37.

Bowen, J. R. (1993) *Muslims through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Chambert-Loir, H., and A. Reid (2002) "Introduction," in *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints, and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia.* Edited by H. Chambert-Loir and A. Reid. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. pp. xv–xxvi.

Echols, J. and H. Shadily (1989) *An Indonesian-English Dictionary*. Jakarta; Gramedia.

Ellen, R. F. (1983) "Social Theory, Ethnography and the Understanding of Practical Islam in South-east Asia," in *Islam in Southeast Asia*. Edited by M. B. Hooker. Leiden: E.J. Brill. pp. 50–91.

Errington, S. (1989) *Meaning and Power in a Southeast Asian Realm*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Gardner, K. (1995) *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gibson, T. (1994) Ritual and Revolution: Contesting the State in Indonesia. *Social Analysis* 35: 61–83.

—— (2000) Islam and the Spirit Cults in New Order Indonesia: Global Flows vs. Local Knowledge. *Indonesia* 69: 41–70.

—— (2005) *And the Sun Pursued the Moon: Symbolic Knowledge and Traditional Authority among the Makassar*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hooker, M. B. (2003) *Indonesian Islam: Social Change through Contemporary Fatawa*. Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawaii Press.

Howell, J. D. (2007) "Modernity and Islamic Spirituality in Indonesia's New Sufi Networks," in *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*. Edited by M. v. Bruinessen and J. D. Howell. London: Routledge. pp. 217–240.

Hugo, G. (1982) *Sources of Internal Migration Data in Indonesia: their Potential and Limitations*. Honolulu: East-west Center.

Lambek, M. (2000) "Localizing Islamic Performance in Mayotte," in *Islamic Prayer Across the Indian Ocean: Inside and Outside the Mosque*." Edited by D. Parkin and S. C. Headley. Richmond: Curzon, pp. 63–98.

Lineton, J. (1975) An Indonesian Society and its Universe: a study of the Bugis of South Sulawesi. PhD thesis, University of London.

Madu, L. O. (1983) "Merintis Buton Wolio Morikana." Unpublished manuscript.

Newland, L. (2001) Syncretism and the Politics of the Tingkeban in West Java. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12: 312.

Nourse, J. W. (1999) *Conceiving Spirits: Birth Rituals and Contested Identities among Laujé of Indonesia*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Palmer, B. (2010) Big Men and Old Men: Migrant-Led Status Change in Buton, Indonesia. PhD Thesis, Australian National University.

Pelras, C. (1985) Religion, Tradition, and the Dynamics of Islamization in South Sulawesi. *Archipel* 29: 107–135.

—— (2002) "Ancestors' Blood: Genealogical Memory, Genealogical Amnesia and Hierarchy among the Bugis," in *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints, and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*. Edited by H. Chambert-Loir and A. Reid. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. pp. 117–131.

Reid, A. (1993) "Islamization and Christianization in Southeast Asia: The Critical Phase, 1550–1650," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*. Edited by A. Reid. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. pp. 151–179.

Reuter, T. (2001) Great Expectations: Hindu Revival Movements in Java. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12: 327–338.

—— (2002) "Indonesia in Transition: Concluding Reflections on Engaged Research and the Critique of Local Knowledge," in *Inequality, Crisis and Social Change in Indonesia: the Muted Worlds of Bali*. Edited by T. Reuter. London: RoutledgeCurzon. pp. 203–219.

Rodenburg, J. (1997) *In the Shadow of Migration: Rural Women and their Households in North Tapanuli, Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Rossler, M. (1997) "Islamization and the Reshaping of Identities in Rural South Sulawesi," in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*. Edited by R. W. Hefner and P. Horvatich. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. pp. 275–306.

Schein, L. (1999) Performing Modernity. *Cultural Anthropology* 14: 361–395.

Schiller, A. (1997) *Small Sacrifices: Religious Change and Cultural Identity among the Ngaju of Indonesia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schoorl, J. W. (1985) Belief in Reincarnation on the Island of Buton, S.E. Sulawesi, Indonesia. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde* 141: 103–134.

—— (2003) *Masyarakat, Sejarah dan Budaya Buton*. Jakarta: Djambatan.

Schrauwers, A. (2000) *Colonial 'Reformation' in the Highlands of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, 1892–1995*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Southon, M. (1995) *The Navel of the Perahu: Meaning and Values in the Maritime Trading Economy of a Butonese Village*. Canberra: Dept. of Anthropology, Australian National University.

Tirtosudarmo, R. (1997) Economic Development, Migration, and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia: a Preliminary Observation. *Sojourn* 12: 293–328.

van den Berg, R. (1996) *Muna-English Dictionary*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Vermeij, J. (2000) The Formation of the Butonese Sultanate: Dutch Political Involvement in the Creation and Maintenance of the Butonese Sultanate. MA thesis, Australian National University.

Weber, M. (1958) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Scribner.

Woodward, M. R. (1989) *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Yunus, A. R. (1995) *Posisi Tasawuf dalam Sistem Kekuasaan di Kesultanan Buton pada Abad ke-19*. Jakarta: Indonesian-Netherlands Cooperation in Islamic Studies.

Zahari, A. M. (1977) *Sejarah dan Adat fiy Darul Butuni (Buton)*. Jakarta: Proyek Pengembangan Media Kebudayaan, Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan.

Zuhdi, S. (1999) Labu Wana Labu Rope: Sejarah Buton abad XVII–XVIII. PhD thesis, Universitas Indonesia.

SPIRITS AND CITIZENS: THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE IN INDONESIA

Daromir Rudnyckyj

In 2002 managers at state-owned Krakatau Steel in western Java contracted a Jakarta-based leadership consulting firm to introduce a moderate "spiritual training" programme based explicitly on Islamic principles in an effort to enhance the religious piety of the company's 6000 employees. The managers reasoned that through cultivating the spirituality of the workforce they could enhance company productivity, eliminate corruption, become more internationally competitive, and perhaps prepare employees for privatization of this state-owned enterprise. This unprecedented initiative required staff to attend spiritual training sessions totalling 40 hours over three days. These dramatic and emotionally evocative programmes drew on a stirring, if sometimes unwieldy, mix of Qur'anic recitation, business leadership and life-coaching theories, examples from the life of the prophet Muhammad, and popular psychology. Known as Emotional and Spiritual Quotient (ESQ) training, the programmes combine Islamic tradition and Euro-American management knowledge to elicit a more disciplined and less corrupt corporate employee.

Spiritual reformers argued that Islam was conducive to business success and to competing in an increasingly global economy (Rudnyckyj 2010, 2011). Thus, the project explicitly invoked Islam as a means to facilitate globalization even though the employees of Krakatau Steel and the other institutions where it was deployed were not exclusively Muslim. This chapter addresses the religious politics of Islamic spiritual training at a critical site of nationalist modernization in Indonesia. I explain why, in wake of the 1998 collapse of the authoritarian Suharto government, the message of Islamic reform was well received by corporate employees and middle-class Indonesians.

This chapter further examines the tensions that emerge when a particular version of Islamic spiritual reform is introduced in a multi-ethnic and religiously plural labour force. I argue that plural and mixed identities that were possible under the authoritarian Suharto state are becoming more

Figure 11.1   Clerical employees from Krakatau Steel listening to a Friday
sermon (khotbah).

contested in contemporary Indonesia. The nationalist pluralism that was
an important tenet of Indonesia's New Order[1] regime under the state's
motto of "unity in diversity" (*bhinneka tunggal eka*) is under increasing
pressure as new religious institutions and practices precipitate political
conflicts. I further argue that national belonging in Indonesia is under
reformulation as some corporations and citizens in the country simul-
taneously seek to integrate into emerging global economic regimes and
claim membership in a wider global Islamic community (*ummah*). Indo-
nesia has long been a key site for understanding the emergence and
political force of nationalism (Anderson 1972; Boellstorff 2005; Kahin 1952;
Rutherford 2003; Siegel 1997, 1998). The ability of previous generations of
Indonesians to forge a single, common identity out of a stitched-together

---

[1] The New Order refers to the period in Indonesia's history that coincides with Suharto's
tenure as national leader—roughly the years from 1965 through to 1998. Suharto coined
the term to contrast the period of his rule with the "Old Order" under Sukarno. Suharto
sought to stabilize the Indonesian economy, which suffered from rampant inflation and
low productivity in the last years of Suharto's tenure as president.

collection of over 500 languages, multiple religions, and disparate ethnic affiliations has given the country a prominent position in accounts of nationalism.

Islamic spiritual reformers propose a Muslim worker as a model employee of state-owned companies. I argue that the project of Islamic spiritual reform marks a transformation in how belonging is cast in state-owned companies. Thus, at Krakatau Steel and other state-owned enterprises an older pluralist "*Pancasila*" identity[2] that embraced five official religions recognized by the Indonesian state is giving way to increasing pressure on those of mixed heritage to proclaim Islamic faith. This is demonstrated by the emergence of explicitly Islamic spiritual training programmes that have become popular at state-owned enterprises and elsewhere. Whereas a religiously plural national identity was a cornerstone of both Sukarno and Suharto-era Indonesian nationalisms, Indonesian pluralism is under threat as the unifying ideals of nationalist pluralism give way to a fragmentation of identity that is occurring in concert with a set of economic reforms in Indonesia.

The project of spiritual reform is further significant because for most of the 32-year authoritarian regime of the former president Suharto, the state had explicitly discouraged discourse about "ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group relations" (van Dijk 2001, 4) except for that which the state controlled.[3] Operating under the official dictum of "unity in diversity," the Indonesian state under both Sukarno and Suharto advocated an ethnically and religiously plural nationalism (Hefner 1998; Hadiz 1998). To be sure, Indonesia was no picture of harmonious liberal multiculturalism. The state had strategic reasons for adopting a politics of citizenship premised on religious and ethnic pluralism and ensured peace through the threat of violence (Pemberton 1994). Indeed, as many analysts have shown, the political transition initiated in 1997–98 following the Asian financial crisis precipitated conflicts between religious and ethnic groups on an unprecedented scale (Peluso 2006; Sidel 2006; van Klinken 2007).

---

[2] Pancasila is the official state ideology of Indonesia, first formulated by Indonesia's first president, Sukarno. It is similar to the Constitution or Declaration of Independence in the United States in that it is viewed as the founding principles of the nation, although more vague than the American documents. Translated literally as "the five principles" the Pancasila can be found inscribed into edifices or hung on walls in village squares, schools, and government offices throughout the archipelago. It is a textual definition of both Indonesia as a nation-state and what constitutes a citizen of the state.

[3] These translations of the Indonesian words *suku, agama, ras, antar-golongan* were grouped under the acronym "SARA" in the media and everyday discourse in Indonesia.

Furthermore an emphasis on Islam as a unifying force in a fragmenting nation did not spring wholesale out of the rubble of the New Order. As Robert Hefner has shown, the Suharto regime changed its governing strategy from viewing Islam as a threat to state power to openly courting Muslim causes in the 1990s (Hefner 1998: 35–36). Thus, while the conditions of possibility for the purification of religious identity were evident during the Suharto years, Indonesia's democratization has created a new political and social space in which citizens are increasingly compelled to proclaim pure identities (George 2009; Jones 2010).

In conjunction with the elimination of protective tariffs and a decline of massive state-led investment under a nationalist programme of import-substitution industrialization, a parallel transformation in the way in which employees understand their position in the nation is also taking place. In conforming to neoliberal policies in which the economy is no longer defined in strictly national terms (Dicken 1998; Harvey 2005), there is a parallel transformation in nationalist identity, in which the state's former motto of "unity in diversity" is giving way to a configuration in which citizens are forced to publicly choose sides and proclaim pure identities.

Islam, Nationalism, and Spiritual Reform

Krakatau Steel is located in Banten at the western end of the island of Java. Banten is a new province founded in 2000, but based on the boundaries of an early modern Islamic sultanate, which was a critical node in 16th and 17th century Southeast Asian trade networks (Reid 1988). Thus, long-distance exchange and Islam have long connected the region to other parts of Asia and the Pacific. The first iteration of Krakatau Steel was funded with Soviet development aid and technological expertise. Its strategic location on the Sunda Straits was likely an important consideration for the Soviet advisors who favoured this site over other possibilities in East Java. Although the company went dormant following the military coup of 1965 that brought Suharto to power, it was resuscitated in the early 1970s as a centrepiece of national development under the import substitution industrialization prong of Indonesia's "New Order" development strategy (Rock 2003). Krakatau Steel produces a material that was absolutely critical to the state's development project and the factory was considered an icon of nationalism. Today, the company is the largest steel factory in Southeast Asia and site for the production of half of the total steel produced in Indonesia.

Due to the affirmative action-style hiring policies of the Suharto state, many state-owned enterprises in Indonesia have an extremely high percentage of Muslim employees. Muslim Indonesians were economically disadvantaged during the colonial period and Dutch policies had favoured the ability of Chinese inhabitants of the archipelago to participate in colonial capitalism (Rush 1990). Thus, the post-colonial state sought to redress this historical economic inequality by giving priority to Muslim Indonesians for salaried jobs in both the civil service and the expanding network of state-owned enterprises. Therefore, at many state-owned companies like Krakatau Steel the proportion of Muslim employees exceeds the proportion of Muslims in the national population as a whole.

With a Muslim population of roughly 200 million, the country contains the world's largest number of Muslim citizens. Today the state officially recognizes six religions (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism) and proclaiming adherence to one of these six faiths is an essential criterion for citizenship. Each Indonesian citizen has one of these six possible religious affiliations inscribed on their state-issued identity card (*Kartu Tanda Penduduk* or KTP). Although Islam arrived in Indonesia relatively recently compared to Hinduism and Buddhism, ascription to Islam is often considered a key criterion in defining which citizens are considered indigenous and which are not. Indonesians of Chinese descent are a primary group excluded through this system of ethnic and religious classification, as many consider Islam and Chineseness incommensurable in spite of abundant historical evidence to the contrary (Sumanto 2003). Indonesia's Muslim community constitutes roughly 90% of the total population and dwarfs the country's other religious groups. Yet at state-owned enterprises the percentage of Muslim employees is even higher than the national rate because these companies were used by the regime as vehicles for enhancing the living standards of so-called "pribumi" (indigenous) Indonesians.

Over the past four decades Krakatau Steel has been the recipient of billions of dollars in state development aid. However, the Asian financial crisis and the end of the Suharto regime have presented the company with a set of pressing challenges. These challenges are associated with *reformasi* (reform), which is how Indonesians refer to the political and economic transformations that have occurred in the country since 1998. *Reformasi* simultaneously refers to political changes in the form of increasing democratic governance and economic changes in the form of greater transparency, free markets, and merit-based systems of compensation and promotion.

Reformasi had broad impacts on Krakatau Steel. State funds that for years guaranteed the company's viability were eliminated in 1998 after the near bankruptcy of the Indonesian government. Tariffs on imported steel that had long protected the company from international competition were fully eliminated in April 2004. Furthermore, China has emerged as a global steel superpower and employees fear that once the Chinese economy slows down, China will flood the Indonesian market with cheap steel. Finally, new legal protections for workers offered unprecedented possibilities for political mobilization by factory employees, including the formation of a new (and for the first time quasi-independent) labour union.

Krakatau Steel contracted a Jakarta-based company, the ESQ Leadership Center, to implement Emotional Spiritual Quotient (ESQ) training at the company. The creator of ESQ, Ary Ginanjar, has developed an elaborate system—called the "ESQ model"—that suggests that a work ethic conducive to capitalism is present in the five pillars of Islam and the six pillars of the faith (*iman*). He has drawn other ideas for the programme from business management and life coaching sessions, like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, that have greatly expanded in North America, Europe, and Asia in recent decades (Thrift 1998, 1999). Through the multi-day training sessions that his company offers, Ginanjar and his subordinates stress that Islamic piety should not be simply restricted to religious worship, such as during one's daily prayers. Rather, drawing on the principle of *tauhid*, or the unity *of* and faith *in* God, Islam should animate all of one's worldly activity, from interactions with one's family to everyday work in the world. These training sessions run for two, three, or four days and last from early in the morning until after sunset. They appeal primarily to an educated audience of middle- and upper-middle class participants. At Krakatau Steel mid- and lower-level managers were the primary targets of spiritual training. However, the company also sought to include employees at lower levels of the company hierarchy, such as foremen and operators, in the training programme as well.

Ary Ginanjar has isolated a market for ESQ training among employees at state-owned enterprises and government bureaucracies. In addition to Krakatau Steel, this training programme has been initiated at some of Indonesia's most prominent state institutions and state-owned enterprises including the Directorate General of Taxation; Pertamina, the national oil company; Telkom, the largest telecommunications company in Indonesia; and Garuda, the nation's flag air carrier. Current and former military generals are also avid participants in spiritual reform. Several ESQ

sessions were held at the Army's officer candidate training school in Band-ung (*Sekolah Staf Komando Angkatan Darat* or SESKOAD).

Since 2005, ESQ has become a nationally prominent institution advo-cating for spiritual reform. In addition to offering programmes at some of Indonesia's largest companies, the company does a brisk business in so called "public" trainings, which are largely attended through individual initiative and not at the behest of one's place of work. Recently ESQ has met its goal of operating at the national scale in Indonesia, establishing branch offices in 30 out of 33 provinces.[4] As of late 2010 over 1 million people had taken part in ESQ training.

Indoctri-Nation: Pancasila Training

Training programmes for employees at state-owned enterprises are not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. Employees at Krakatau Steel and other companies were long acquainted with the patterns of behaviour demanded by these programmes. During Indonesia's New Order, the Indonesian state required all civil servants, including government and university employees and workers at state-owned enterprises to complete a programme entitled *Penataran Pedoman Penghayatan dan Pengamalan Pancasila* (Training for the Realization and Enactment of *Pancasila*). This programme, referred to by Indonesians as "P4 Training," was a means of enacting the principles of the *Pancasila*, the official state ideology of Indonesia. Initially formulated by Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, *Pancasila* comprises the founding principles of the nation. Translated literally as "the five principles" the *Pancasila* is found inscribed on edifices and displayed on posters in vil-lage squares, schools, and government offices across the archipelago. It is a textual definition of both Indonesia as a nation-state and the prin-ciples guiding citizenship. The five principles are: a belief in one God, a just and civilized humanitarianism, the unity of Indonesia as a territorial unit, democracy guided by wisdom through representative deliberation, and social justice for the whole of the Indonesian people (Darmodiharjo, Dekker, Pringgodigdo et al. 1970, 31).

---

[4] The three Indonesian provinces with no ESQ presence were Gorontalo, Maluku Utara, Nusa Tenggara Timur. These are among the poorest and least developed provinces in Indonesia.

Significantly, Sukarno proposed *Pancasila* in 1945 specifically in "opposition to the demand that the independent Indonesian Republic be an Islamic state" (Morfit 1981, 844). This is evident in the first principle, a belief in one God. Hinduism and Buddhism were creatively reinterpreted as monotheistic religions in order to be recognized as comparable to the nation's other three official religions Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism.[5] Muslim leaders were disappointed when the Jakarta Charter, an amendment to the five principles, which would have enshrined a requirement that all Muslims in the country abide by Islamic *syariah* law, was dropped in late August 1945 (Feener 2007, 101–102; Ricklefs 1981, 213). This is one factor that led to Muslim rebellions like that of Darul Islam that threatened the viability of the nascent Indonesian state in the 1950s.

In 1978 the authoritarian Suharto government developed the P4 training programme as a technique to effectively conjoin the state to the Indonesian nation. The course was required of all civil servants, including employees of state owned enterprises like Krakatau Steel, and involved a training programme of one or two weeks in which participants were instructed in each of the five *Pancasila* principles. Emphasis was placed on how the authoritarian New Order government of Suharto complied with *Pancasila* and on the duties of *Pancasila* citizens (McGregor 2001, 47). During the 1980s the domain of those required to participate in the *Pancasila* education programme was broadened to include religious leaders and students at all levels (Weatherbee 1985). Kitely, citing the government's 1983 five year development programme REPELITA, has described how a children's television programme on the state-owned channel TVRI was one means the state used to extend the P4 programme to Indonesian children (Kitley 1999, 130–131). As McGregor notes *Pancasila* "became the prescribed set of guiding principles for the press, the law, the economy, industrial relations and morality" (McGregor 2001, 48).

P4 training was devised in the late 1970s and early 1980s by senior government officials including the Minister for Economics, Finance, and Industrial Affairs, the Minister for State Security and the Minister for Administrative Reform. The P4 training lasted from 8 A.M. until 6 P.M. and participants were required to complete assignments and a final test

---

[5] Catholicism and Protestantism are categorized as distinct religions in Indonesia. Protestantism is referred to more generally as "Christian religion" (*agama kristen*) whereas Catholicism is recognized separately.

on the last day of training. Grades were awarded to participants based on performance and were filed in an employment file. These were later factored into promotion decisions (Morfit 1981). The P4 programme was consistent with the Suharto regime's strategy of presenting itself as an alternative to both political Islam, which advocated the implementation of *syariah* law and communism that advocated the redistribution of material wealth. After the fall of Suharto in 1998 the P4 training programme was terminated.

Before the reforms ushered in following the 1997–1998 economic crisis, employees at Krakatau Steel were required to participate in P4 training, which lasted for one week. Universities served as "laboratories" for the development of "*Pancasila* indoctrination" (*santiaji Pancasila*). Thus, the state teacher's training college (*Institut Keguruan Ilmu Pendidikan*) in Malang had a "*Pancasila* laboratory" (*Laboratorium Pancasila*) in which Indonesian academics formulated techniques for, in their own terms, "indoctrinating" the five principles in order to produce loyal subjects of the Indonesian state (Darmodiharjo, Dekker, Pringgodigdo et al. 1970). By the time my fieldwork started in 2003, the Indonesian state no longer required P4 training for public employees. My understanding of P4 comes from books put out by organizations like the P4 laboratory in Malang, the recollections of participants, and finally the writings of earlier scholars who had analyzed P4 (McGregor 2001; Morfit 1981; Weatherbee 1985).

Both proponents of and participants in Islamic spiritual training contrasted ESQ with the P4 *pancasila* training programme that preceded it. Most had concluded that the P4 was a failure. Sutiono told me that he thought what he called "the theory" of the P4 programme was "good, but the problem was that it was never properly implemented." Employees and spiritual trainers at Krakatau Steel derided the programme. In the second morning session of an ESQ training session in May 2004, Rinaldi (Ary Ginanjar's brother who also delivered training sessions) compared ESQ to P4:

> Why did P4 fail? Was the project [*proyeknya*] successful? The procurement [*pengadaan*] of the book was successful! If you make a programme the *manggala* will benefit [*berhasil*], isn't that right ladies and gentlemen?...The programme was implemented across Indonesia, but was the goal achieved or not? No! Why? Because it went against divine characteristics [*berlawanan dengan sifat ilahiayah*]! What did they hope to build? The characteristics of Allah! Do you agree or not? They hoped to build these characteristics of Allah: honesty, justice, love, and affection. But they forgot to ask for permission from He who possessed those characteristics!

Rinaldi suggested that the P4 programme failed because it was not suf-
ficiently Muslim. This was reflected in the fact that he used the term
manggala—a Sanskrit term meaning chief and given to officials licensed
to give the P4 training. He claimed that although P4 sought to inculcate
proper moral values, it did so in a manner inconsistent with Islam, which
were represented in the ESQ training as the ultimate source of those val-
ues. Thus, while ESQ training drew on Indonesia's Muslim present and
recent past, P4 was premised on the country's more distant Hindu and
Buddhist history. Although Rinaldi noted that officials sought to imple-
ment the programme on a national scale "everywhere in Indonesia," he
suggested that the failure of the P4 programme was at least in part due to
the fact that it invoked the wrong religious and historical tradition.[6]

Further, Rinaldi alluded to the fact that P4, like many programmes
associated with Suharto's discredited New Order, was corrupt (Pember-
ton 1999; Schrauwers 2003). In contrast, ESQ was specifically intended
to redress the problem of chronic corruption at state-owned enterprises.
Rinaldi's allusions were conveyed through the words "*proyek*" (project)
and "*pengadaan*" (procurement). Among factory employees, the "procure-
ment" of equipment for the company from outside suppliers was widely
known to provide opportunities for corruption by senior and mid-level
managers who held the authority to sign off on purchase orders. Rinaldi
insinuated that P4 was corrupt by using the term *proyek*, which is often
used in Indonesia to refer to illicit and quasi-licit business dealings, such as
government contracts obtained through political connections rather than
through open bidding. Although P4 was developed by the state, Rinaldi
suggested that the programme was a moneymaking scheme rather than
an attempt to bring about moral reform in the nation as a whole. Thus,
his claim that the programme achieved the goal of "procuring" books, but
fell short of fostering national development by implementing the virtues
(honesty, justice, love, and affection) that ESQ asserted were conducive
to business success.

While P4 was disparaged by most of those who had participated in it
at Krakatau Steel, ESQ was much more popular. The P4 programme was
viewed as a propaganda mechanism for a corrupt state, but many employees

---

[6] Roughly two percent of the population of contemporary Indonesia is Hindu, but this
population lives overwhelmingly on the island of Bali. At Krakatau Steel the percentage of
employees identified as Hindu was less than one percent.

had more positive things to say about ESQ. This was at least partially due to the fact of its association with Islam, as members of religious traditions tend to hold their religions in high esteem even if they are not the most devout observers. ESQ appeared to be dedicated most explicitly toward enhancing individual Islamic piety, as opposed to serving the interests of the state.

Further evidence for the popularity of ESQ can be drawn from the fact that whereas P4 was a state directed programme, ESQ is successful in the marketplace. P4 was designed and implemented as a state-project of forging loyalty among civil servants and other state employees. It was devised by the state, for the state and therefore would not have existed but for the fact that the New Order state invested heavily in it. ESQ on the other hand, while supported by state institutions, was created by a private businessman. Its mode of dissemination is primarily through the market and it operates as a for-profit company without direct state sanction. In addition to offering programmes paid for by some of Indonesia's largest companies, many participants enrol in so-called "public" trainings. Participants in these programmes pay between $100 and $300 out of their own pockets to participate in these programmes. Ary Ginanjar told me that these events, which attract as many as 1000 participants at a time, are his biggest growth market. Bureaucrats, employees of state-owned enterprises, and other public employees like teachers in the national educational system at all levels were required to participate in P4 training. Some of these constituencies are likewise "recommended" to participate in ESQ training, but many others use their own money and time to complete the programme.

Spirits and Citizens

To understand how explicitly Islamic spiritual reform represents a challenge to notions of nationalist identity in Indonesia, it is useful to locate both Islam and nationalism in relation to Chineseness, which was produced as foreign during the colonial period. Prior to Dutch colonial rule, historians have argued that conceptions of identity in the Indonesian archipelago were fluid as sea-going traders from other parts of Asia and beyond would establish households in the diverse commercial cities of the region as they waited for the trade winds to shift (Reid 1988; Wolters 1999). Only with the onset of colonial rule and the formation of what James Furnivall called "plural societies" (Furnivall 1948) were fixed ethnic and religious

categories created, in part as a means of furthering the project of colonial rule (Roff 1985; Stoler 2002).[7] "Chinese" as a distinct category emerges with colonial rule and subsequently Chinese nationalism (Vasantkumar 2012). According to the Dutch colonial civil law codes they were classified with "natives," but in commercial matters they were subject to laws for Europeans. There were also strict codes regarding personal appearance that required Chinese men to wear their hair in a long braid and clothes in a "Chinese" style (Schulte Nordholt 1997).

After the formation of the Indonesian nation in 1945, the colonial construction of "Chinese" as a distinct ethnic category persisted (Mackie 1976; Purdey 2006; Suryadinata 2007). In fact, culture was a critical site of political intervention for Suharto's government. Programmes of state multiculturalism tightly controlled public discourse about ethnicity, religion, and race under the national motto of "unity in diversity." However, Chinese was (and still is) a particularly fraught category in Indonesia. Although economically influential those marked Chinese were viewed as a special category by the Indonesian state. Policies during Suharto's rule put strict limits on the public practice of activities marked as Chinese. All but one Chinese language newspaper was closed, Chinese-language schools were contracted and all were shuttered by 1974, and Chinese script was banned from public places like storefronts (Schwarz 1994). The downfall of Suharto was simultaneously accompanied by widespread violence directed at those identified as "Chinese" and somewhat later followed by the lifting of restrictions on Chinese cultural practices. Confucianism, never previously recognized as a religion by the Suharto-led state, was given status equal to Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Hinduism in the pantheon of religions that received official sanction (Friend 2003, 468).

These complex politics of Chinese and plural identities were dramatically illustrated in the ninth cohort of ESQ participants at Krakatau Steel, when Arfan, a 17-year employee of Krakatau Steel, experienced a particularly intense episode of spirit possession during the "self-confession" session of the training. As will become clear, his experience is particular to his personal biography and one could not claim that it is necessarily representative of the experiences of every Indonesian of plural heritage who encounters spiritual training. However, many of the elements of the complex tensions between Islam, nationalism, and Chineseness in con-

---

[7] See Cohn 1987 for a classic explication of the role of colonial knowledge in furthering the project of colonial rule in South Asia.

temporary Indonesia are richly demonstrated in Arfan's biography and experience of undergoing ESQ spiritual training. Thus, this ethnographic vignette is used more for illustrative rather than representative purposes.

This session in which Arfan experienced spirit possession was modelled on the traditional Islamic ritual of *talqin*[8] and trainers referred to it as the "climax" (*puncak*) of the ESQ training programme. It occurred on the last day of the training, and involved a role play in which the 250-odd participants paired up and took turns reciprocally playing the role of an angel of death and the role of the corpse. The one playing the angel of death screamed, "Who are you? Who is your God? What is your book? Who is your prophet?" The one playing the corpse responded by affirming his or her Islamic faith to these interrogations while heavy metal music blared at ear-splitting decibel levels in the background. These oscillated between "*Laa ilaa ha illallah* . . . there is no God but Allah . . . wealth can lie . . . children can die . . . Allah is my flesh . . . Allah is my destination . . . put Him into your heart . . . put Him in your body . . . put Him into your marrow . . . my God is not property . . . my God is not money . . . *Laa ilaa ha illallah* . . . there is no God but Allah." The session was extremely haunting as the participants were reminded that the interrogation they suffer during the simulation is identical to that which will be experienced when the angels Mungkar and Nakir visit their corpse after the last mourner is three steps from their grave. According to members of the Krakatau Steel ESQ committee, it is during this session when the most extreme physical reactions to the training take place.

It was during this session that Arfan found himself possessed by the spirit that had long tormented him. He fell to the ground in a set of spasmodic paroxysms. His body moved in such violent fits that it took a group of eleven programme "alumni" to restrain and remove him from the hall in which the session was taking place. His legs and arms flailed against those attempting to subdue him and unintelligible words that some described as "Chinese" poured from his lips.

Some months later I met Arfan and his wife Sri at their home in a middle-class neighbourhood where a number of Krakatau Steel employees owned

---

[8] The *talqin* ritual is well documented in accounts of Islamic practice in Indonesia. Geertz provides an account of delivering the *talqin* in eastern Java (Geertz 1960, 71) and Bowen describes a similar ceremony in the Gayo region of Aceh (Bowen 1984, 24–25). However, the accounts of Geertz and Bowen both occur during an actual funeral ceremony, whereas in the scene described here the *talqin* was invoked as a role play in which participants simulated the experience as a means of preparing for their own eventual experience of death.

houses. I had witnessed his episode of spirit possession, but when we finally met in person I found him to be both energetic and thoughtful. Arfan reads avidly and a pile of *Kompas* newspapers, Indonesia's leading daily, were piled beside him as we chatted. He alluded to the complex politics of religion in contemporary Indonesia by joking that Kompas actually was an abbreviation for "*komando pastor*" (priest's command), alluding to the Christian ownership of the paper. In so doing, he made an oblique reference to how he was complexly positioned within the ethnic and religious frames through which Indonesian citizenship is constituted, in so far as he is a member of the imagined community constituted through a Catholic-owned newspaper (Anderson 1991). He mentioned that he found *Republika*, the country's most recognizable Muslim newspaper associated with ICMI (the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals), oriented too strongly toward a Muslim perspective.

Arfan explained to me the long history behind the violent episode of spirit possession that I had witnessed some months prior. He was originally from Jakarta and like many Indonesians born in the plural societies along Java's north coast claimed a mixed ethnic heritage. He called himself Betawi, which is the appellation considered appropriate to people native to Jakarta. Betawi people are regarded as ethnically heterogeneous and can often trace ancestry to the Arabian peninsula, India, and China in addition to other parts of the Indonesian archipelago, including Javanese, Sundanese, Bugis, Ambon and others (Jellinek 1991). Arfan told me that although his mother's father was Chinese, he had gone to Muhammidiyah[9] Islamic schools through junior high school, but a state school for high school. Arfan said that although he had received an Islamic education as a child, he had not been a particularly devout observer as an adult.

Arfan's invocation of a "Chinese" grandparent was further significant, as to be Chinese in Indonesia is by implication to be non-Muslim. The "sedentarist metaphysics" (Malkki 1997, see also Li 2000) at work in Indonesia identifies *pribumi*, or supposed "sons of the earth" as properly Muslim in contrast to Chinese who are commonly considered newcomers to the archipelago. One operator at Krakatau Steel who identified himself as Chinese explained that it is not an "ethnic" category in Indonesia because there is no Chinese "territory" in the country (Peluso and Harwell 2001). He

---

[9] Muhammidiyah is a "modernist" Islamic organization that was founded as a response to both the increasing activity of Christian missionaries in the early 20th century Dutch East Indies and reforming traditional Islamic practices in Indonesia. The organization administers schools, hospitals, and orphanages throughout Indonesia (Noer 1973; Peacock 1978).

argued "an ethnicity is like Javanese, Balinese, Batak, Sundanese, Ambon. An ethnicity (*suku*) must have its own territory (*wilayah*). Chinese is just a lineage of descent (*keturunan*), we are newcomers (*pendatang*) here." This suggests how "Chinese" is produced as a marginal category of belonging in Indonesian. Although some families identified as Chinese can trace ancestors that first came to the archipelago more than five generations ago (and thus long before the nation itself even existed) a common perception is that they are still somehow "newcomers." Furthermore, as many Indonesians who identify as Chinese live in urban areas they do not hold agricultural land, which, following the Herderian isomorphism of blood, soil, language, and culture (Herder 1969), is viewed as a critical attribute in constituting identity in contemporary Indonesia.[10]

The project of spiritual reform at Krakatau Steel intersects with Arfan's personal biography in a critical way. Upon graduating from high school in the early 1980s he left Jakarta for Kalimantan where he worked as a manual labourer for the French oil conglomerate Total, which at that time was developing oil fields in the Makassar straits. He was living in informal worker's dormitories adjacent to the home of a more prosperous local trading family. Arfan told me, "one Sunday evening, it was right around *maghrib*. I heard the maid for the family next door start screaming. I wanted to help out, so I went to see what I could do. As I held her, it was like there was a movement, or something mysterious (*ghaib*), and suddenly it entered inside of me. I didn't even know it but . . . suddenly I didn't feel good, I felt something heavy here [gestured toward his shoulders]." As it turned out the maid had accompanied her employers to a beach that was adjacent to what was locally known as a "Chinese" cemetery. Arfan concluded that a magical being had entered the maid's body while she was near the cemetery and then in turn entered and inhabited his body as he tried to calm her from her emotional outbreak later that day.

For the next twenty years this spirit periodically occupied his body and would manifest itself occasionally. Arfan said that the spirit was particularly active around the time of Chinese New Year. This is noteworthy as Chinese New Year is a holiday that could not be observed publicly in Indonesia for a period of 30 years during the Suharto regime. Only under the Presidential administration of former Muslim cleric Abdurrahman Wahid in 2000 were Chinese New Year's celebrations again permitted publicly.

---

[10] See Moore, Pandian and Kosek 2003 for an overview of theoretical approaches to how identity is constituted through territory and nature.

Arfan suggested that the spirit that haunted him was disturbed by state policies restricting recognition of Chinese ceremonies and cultural practices during the New Order.

Arfan returned to Jakarta from Kalimantan in 1985 and shortly thereafter began to work at Krakatau Steel as a dispatcher in the newly established cold rolling mill. Upon returning his parents were increasingly concerned about the episodes of spirit possession that occasionally seized Arfan. They brought him to several shamans (*dukun*), but no one was able to exorcize the spirit. Even some of the most renowned shamans in Jakarta and West Java were incapable of expelling the spirit from Arfan's body. Arfan said that the shaman he visited told him that he had to take responsibility to exorcize the spirit that inhabited him and that no one else could do it for him.

Arfan and his wife Sri said that the spirit inhabited his body emerged in the guise of a Mongol emperor (*kaisar Mongol*).[11] In addition to Chi-

Figure 11.2   A day shift inside the cold rolling mill at Krakatau Steel.

---

[11] When explaining his experiences of spirit position, Arfan failed to differentiate Mongolian from Chinese. From his perspective they were equivalent.

nese New Year the spirit is prone to making its presence felt when Arfan becomes angry or irritated. Sri mimed the behaviour that Arfan's body made while his body experienced inhabitation. When the spirit comes, he falls to the ground and then starts to grind his teeth while he slowly rises into a kneeling position. Sri told me that when he is possessed his hands "shake like a tiger's" and he throws his heavy, coke-bottle glasses to the side. From a kneeling position, he bows forward in the manner of "someone praying at a Chinese temple." This involves a repeated set of prostrations from a kneeling position. She imitated his movements and showed me how, when possessed, he stands up and begins to stroke an imaginary handle bar moustache with floppy ends, flutters an imaginary pig-tail (*kuncir*) and reaches for an imaginary "samurai" sword attached to his back. Several other employees mentioned to me that while Arfan is in a state of possession he is able to speak what they asserted was Chinese, although he claimed no knowledge of the language otherwise.

Sri was told by one of the shamans that Arfan's family had visited that she should try to bring him out of his states of possession by reading him Qur'anic verses. She found this somewhat effective, but occasionally she would whisper the Qur'anic verses in his ear while he was possessed and Arfan would reply, "I will get my revenge on you [*gue dendam sama lu*]." It is important to note that pronouns that Arfan used while possessed were not the standard Indonesian forms, but "*gue*" and "*lu*" which are widely associated with the southern Chinese dialects that have influenced Betawi speech which is identified with inhabitants of Jakarta.

In another instance of his affinity to his Chinese heritage, Arfan said that he formerly would feel "refreshed" when he went to the historical Buddhist temple in the nearby historic city of Banten Lama, which was once the seat of the Banten sultanate in the early modern period. After he visited the Chinese temple (*klenteng*) he said felt "better there than" he did "at the mosque." Sri immediately commented, "Strange isn't it? Before he didn't pray (*sholat*) at all." She said that he would only pray at home, never at the mosque. She would pester him about this and he would dismissively reply that praying at home "is enough to quiet the Creator [*menghening pencipta*]." Sri then told me that since he attended ESQ "he is much more diligent at praying and diligent at *zikir* (ritualized chanting), if he is home on Friday he goes to the mosque." Sri formerly prayed that Allah would "open the door of [Arfan's] heart [*bukalah pintu hati*]."

Arfan said that he had postponed attending ESQ three times even though he had been repeatedly invited because he was scared that it would agitate

the spirit that had intermittently possessed him for over 20 years. He said that he finally decided to do it, because he thought that it might be a way to rid his body of these recurring episodes. So he decided that perhaps the ESQ training would offer techniques that would allow him to finally eradicate his spiritual tormenter. He said that the spirit was dormant for first two days of the training and only became active on the third day when the group was performing the *talqin* simulation. At this point, Sri said he ran amok (*mengamuk*). He said that as he was calling out for forgiveness from God the spirit became active. At that time he wanted to be healed, but the spirit became angry when Arfan exclaimed Arabic phrases such as "*Allahuakbar,*" "*subhanahu-wa-taala,*" and "*astaghfirullah.*"[12] He was under the control (*dikendalikan*) of the spirit and because of this he collapsed. After he collapsed, he awoke, got up, and ran amok. His wife, Sri, was called from home to restore him to full consciousness (*sadar penuh*). She told me that she was the only one who could bring him out of the state of possession. She did so by whispering the throne verse (*ayat kursi*)—a Qur'anic passage[13]—into his ear.

Arfan told me that after he attended ESQ, he was able to control the episodes of spirit possession that had previously seized him unsuspectingly. He also was much more diligent about praying at the mosque, read the Qur'an regularly, participated in Qur'anic study groups (*pengajian*) in his neighbourhood, and fasted during Ramadhan. In the year since he participated in ESQ the spirit has not seized him unexpectedly any longer. It might be concluded that this spirit had been successfully reformed through the training programme. However, after one conversation we had, he asked me if I wanted him to call the spirit. Sri pleaded that I decline the offer, explaining that it was difficult to rid him of the spirit once it had inhabited his body. She said that after ESQ he was occasionally inhabited by the spirit but, in addition to greater devotion to pious

---

[12] These exaltations respectively translate as "God is great," "praise be unto thee the almighty," and "may God forgive me."

[13] The throne verse is believed by some Indonesian Muslims to be one of the most powerful passages in the Qur'an. Memorizing this one verse is sometimes considered equivalent to memorizing one quarter of the Qur'an. The verse reads: "Allah, there is no god except He, the Living, the Everlasting. Neither dozing, nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Who is he that shall intercede with Him except by His permission! He knows what will be before their hands and what was behind them, and they do not comprehend anything of His Knowledge except what He willed. His throne embraces the heavens and the earth, and the preserving of them does not weary Him. He is the most High, the most Great" (Qur'an 2: 255).

practices, he was also more able to control the episodes in which he experienced possession.

Arfan's account of his recurring spirit possession episodes illustrates the tension between nationalist pluralism that characterized Indonesia prior to the end of the Suharto era and the introduction of programmes for avowing and intensifying a normative Islamic identity at key sites of state-directed production in the country. Arfan's plural identity is a result of the fact that although he could justifiably proclaim himself to be Muslim in so far as he was brought up in the religion and went to Islamic schools, he also claimed a Chinese grandmother. The fact that Chineseness and Islam are widely held to be opposites in contemporary Indonesia precipitated an existential drama. This tension is illustrated by the fact that episodes of spirit possession in which a spirit, that he and others recognized as Chinese, inhabited his body. Hybrid identities were not contentious during Indonesia's period of authoritarian pluralism, when the government sought to play down religious and ethnic differences and emphasize national solidarity. However, today national solidarity is being challenged on a number of fronts and perhaps ironically, pluralist identifications are less possible in the wake of Indonesia's democratization.

Religious Pluralism and the Politics of Spiritual Training

Arfan's dramatic experience during ESQ is a manifestation of broader tensions and anxieties over religion and religious identity in contemporary Indonesia. To understand these complex politics, it is instructive to place Arfan's experience with ESQ in the broader context of tensions at Krakatau Steel over the place of religion in an industrial workplace. Many non-Muslim employees were anxious about the fact that public visibility of Islam at Krakatau Steel had increased after the onset of the political changes associated with *reformasi*. In this section I detail the reactions of Christian employees to the programme of spiritual reform and the increased role of Islam in factory life.

However, managers were keen to stress that ESQ training was spiritual "rather" than Islamic. Several times I was corrected when I attributed my interest in the implementation of ESQ at Krakatau Steel to the fact that I was researching the relationship of "Islam to economic development." The managers I was interviewing at this point argued that ESQ was "universal" spiritual training programme and not a Muslim one. They asserted that

spirituality was a universal attribute of human beings of which Islam was
but one manifestation. One illustration of this was apparent in a recorded
conversation I had with Sapto, who had at one time had been the director
of the company's education and training programmes.

> DR: So, other than ESQ what other methods are used to support the reli-
> gious activities of employees?
> Sapto: I'd rather speak in terms of spirituality [as opposed to religion].
> Krakatau Steel has already tried trainings like "Yes I Can." The foundation
> of all these programmes is that we must truly behave in a disciplined way.
> ESQ is a continuation of these programmes. It is also done with programmes
> like the Seven Habits, an American production. I've done the Seven Habits
> and I've done ESQ and it turns out that they are the same. They teach us
> that a good person will allow another person to win first, so that he himself
> will win later. This principle that is in the Seven Habits, is also in religion,
> and in Islam too.
>
> DR: Oh, so are you saying that the Seven Habits is the same as ESQ?
> Sapto: Well, it's only that they use different literatures. In ESQ the Qur'an
> and the hadiths are used; in the other [Seven Habits] it is the management
> training literature. But the essence is the same: start with a happy family,
> don't deceive people, be honest in your work . . .
>
> DR: Why does Krakatau Steel wish to promote [*memajukan*] Islam among
> its employees?
> Sapto: Because the majority of the employees are Islamic . . . Actually,
> though, Krakatau Steel does not want to advance Islam but wants to make
> it so that the employees of Krakatau Steel have a high level of spirituality.
> So it is not only Islam. Like Seven Habits is for everybody, ESQ is not only
> for Islamic people.
>
> DR: I see. So, why does the company want to raise the employees' level
> of spirituality?
> Sapto: Well, it's because someone who has good spirituality will certainly
> act in accord with the example of Islam. If someone already knows what the
> actual meaning of *sholat* is he will be more disciplined to follow the exist-
> ing stipulations. If he already knows the meaning of fasting [*puasa*] he will
> know how to have tolerance for others.

Sapto here represents the training as representing "universal" values
that can be found in any religion and even in presumably non-religious
"management training" like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. By
invoking a discourse of spirituality as opposed to that of a particular reli-
gion, Sapto is able to argue that ESQ is appropriate for all employees at
state-owned enterprises in a still plural nation because it seeks to make a
connection between a supposedly universal spirituality—a propensity for

which Ary Ginanjar argues is common to all human beings—and a work ethic of self-discipline.

Christian employees disputed this argument. For example, Aji, a 20-year veteran of the company who had moved up from line work as an operator into corporate accounting, thought that the company should have a version of ESQ that drew on Christian teachings. Importantly, he went in to the training with an open mind, receptive to the possibility that the training drew on universal values. However, after attending a three-day training session in May 2004, he concluded that in spite of claims to the contrary, ESQ was a specifically Muslim project. He said:

> From the point of view of Muslims, ESQ is excellent if only they themselves would follow the contents of ESQ! But for those who are non-Muslim, according to me, there should be an ESQ especially for non-Muslims . . . The ESQ that is held at the company is only relevant to Muslim religious teachings . . . Teachings from the prophet Muhammad, from Qur'anic verses, are explained. The point is that these should be implemented in the lives of Muslims in connection with the company where they work. But for non-Muslims there is no connection because what is explained are the holy verses [*ayat suci*] of the Qur'an!

This desire for a training programme that would link management knowledge to Christian ethics was a commonly expressed sentiment on the part of the small minority of Christian employees at the factory. However, when this was brought to the attention of company managers, they fell back on the explanation that the training was grounded in a universal "spirituality" rather than a specific religious tradition.

Aji continued, explaining that he felt that the notion that ESQ appealed to a universal spirituality was patently disingenuous.

> Of course according to [Ary Ginanjar], he thinks that it is universal! But in reality for the most part what is presented is the teachings of the prophet Muhammad that is espoused [*dituangkan*] in the holy Qur'an. The general portion is only a very small bit that refers to the Pharaoh's kingdom, this is the material that is not exclusively Muslim that could be said is for Protestant people. What is explained there is the greatness of what is given by God. Certainly that accords with what is in other holy books [*kitab yang lainnya*]. But I mostly saw the connections with the holy Qur'an. Because I saw that even though Mr. Ary and Mr. Rinaldi say that it is universal, the lectures are given in an Islamic style [*gaya Islam*]. It's somewhat strange [*agak aneh*] when he says, 'the others are welcome to pray according to their own teachings.' But for the most part [the training] has a connection [*berhubungan*] with Islam and only a very small bit is general [*umum*].

Aji referred to portions of the training that could be considered appropriate to Christians, specifically the portion of the training that invoked the story of the persecution of Hebrews in Pharaonic Egypt and Moses leading the exodus out of the kingdom. This story, illustrated by a video clip from *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston was related as an illustration of the "star principle," the first of six principles introduced during ESQ and based on the six pillars of the faith (*rukun iman*).[14]

Aji had been first invited to ESQ in mid-December 2003, but he had declined to attend. He said that he did this not because he was not interested, but because he was busy preparing for Christmas holidays and that attending a three day training session would have forced him to work longer hours, than if he did not attend. Eventually he participated in the May 2004 training programme. There was a definite general sense of excitement about ESQ among Krakatau Steel employees and Aji went partly out of curiosity. He expressed how he had initially attended the programme expecting to find that it represented all religions. He said:

> I wasn't really impressed with ESQ, because I only wanted to know what ESQ was. I had heard that ESQ was universal and that there was no problem for someone of any religion to attend. It turned out that although it was claimed to be universal, in fact it was heavily inclined toward the Islamic religion. Almost everything that was presented [*dijabarkan*] there was quoted from the Qur'an . . . at the end there was a simulation of the *hajj* performed. So that isn't general, but especially for Muslims!

Among Christians at Krakatau Steel who had experienced ESQ training, the sentiments expressed by Aji were commonly held. In fact, many saw ESQ as part of a broader inclination toward Islam at the company in the recent years. This had taken place at both the official factory level, but also at the level of individual piety of employees. Christian employees were sensitive to the fact that the company was encouraging Muslim religious practice through ESQ, but also through the construction of more mosques adjacent to the plants. In the hot strip mill, Christian employees invoked a decision in December 2003 by a new plant manager to close the factory during Friday prayers as further evidence of an "Islamicization" (*Islamisasi*) of the company. However, they

---

[14] The star principle is based on the first principle of the faith, "faith in one God who is unique, infinite, and the creator of all that exists." The star principle states that one should "have an intrinsic feeling of security, high self-confidence, strong integrity, a wise disposition, and possession of a high level of motivation, all based and built from a faith toward Allah" (Ginanjar 2001, 83).

Figure 11.3   The Baitul Muslimin mosque outside the hot strip mill.

noticed that this trend toward enhanced Islamic practice at the company was not solely a management-sponsored programme. Several employees who had started working at the plant in the 1980s described how *pengajian* (Qur'anic study groups) had become more and more popular among their Muslim colleagues in the 1990s. Several said that even colleagues who were formerly not very interested in Islam when they began employment at the company, had become so over the period during which they worked at Krakatau Steel.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how the contemporary project of spiritual reform articulates with a history of religious and ethnic pluralism in Indonesia. Whereas pluralism was a state technology of rule during Suharto's reign, it began to erode in the latter years of the New Order, particularly as Suharto personally embraced Islam (Hefner 2000). I examine pluralism on two scales: the scale of an individual employee and that

of the corporate workforce as a whole, and show the conflicts that each experienced as a result of Islamic spiritual reform. While official state limits on expressions of Chinese cultural practice have been reduced in the post-Suharto period, other technologies of belonging have produced new definitions of citizenship. Limits on expressions of Chinese cultural identity have been largely withdrawn officially, but other mechanisms, like spiritual reform, draw new boundaries around what configurations of identity are possible.

In this new configuration of national membership employees are compelled to publicly affirm their participation in a spiritual community based in Islam, rather than the nation. Previously they had been asked to affirm their membership in the national community through the P4 Pancasila indoctrination programme. Now, managers and other elites do not say, as they might have in the past, that one should work hard and avoid corruption as part of building the Indonesian nation and furthering the project of national development. Rather one should be productive and avoid corruption because this is what is required of good Muslims. To demonstrate subjection to these new technologies of belonging, Arfan must publicly affirm his Islamic identity and exorcize his Chineseness.

I also propose that this demonstrates how Islam is compatible with transnational economic integration in contemporary Indonesia. The elimination of economic borders defined in national terms, the dissemination of management training, and the increasing importance of identities cast in religious terms (to name just a few) are creating new modes of belonging. Thus, the state-owned enterprise Krakatau Steel has replaced nationalist P4 training with spiritual training "based on the 5 pillars of Islam and the six pillars of the faith." The two are similar in form but espouse different configurations of individual and collective identity. New technologies of belonging suggest a common denominator that is no longer membership in the imagined community of Indonesians. Instead, it is in the community of Islamic practice. Further, in the turn toward Islam, the espousal of an identity that precedes the formation of the nation calls into question identities founded on national boundaries.

Importantly, with the emergence of democratic institutions, the country has increasingly been a site in which conflicts emerge precisely because the absence of a brutally repressive state has enabled many in the society to advocate notions of "pure" identity. This is how I have interpreted Arfan's existential crisis when he found his plural identity confronted with explicitly Islamic spiritual reform. Whereas pluralism was once a technology of an authoritarian state, today new technologies of belong-

ing are facilitated by the onset of democratic reforms and the dispersal of formerly centralized power.

References

Anderson, Benedict (1972) *Java in a Time of Revolution; Occupation and Resistance, 1944–1946.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

—— (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso.

Boellstorff, Tom (2005) *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bowen, John R. (1984) "Death and the History of Islam in Highland Aceh". *Indonesia* 38: 21–38.

Darmodiharjo, Darji, Nyoman Dekker, A.G. Pringgodigdo, M. Mardojo, Kutjoro Purbopranoto and J.W. Sulandra (1970) *Santiaji Pancasila.* Surabaya: Usaha Nasional.

Dicken, Peter (1998) *Global Shift: Transforming the World Economy.* New York: Guilford Press.

Feener, Michael (2007) *Muslim Legal Thought in Modern Indonesia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Friend, Theodore (2003) *Indonesian Destinies.* Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Furnivall, John S. (1948) *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India.* Cambridge: University Press.

George, Kenneth M. (2009) "Ethics, Iconoclasm, and Qur'anic Art in Indonesia." *Cultural Anthropology.* 24(4): 589–622.

Geertz, Clifford (1960) *The Religion of Java.* Glencoe: Free Press.

Ginanjar, Ary (2001) *Rahasia Sukses Membangun Kecerdasan Emosi Dan Spiritual ESQ* [*Secrets of Success in Developing Emotional and Spiritual Intelligence ESQ*]. Jakarta: Penerbit Arga.

Hadiz, Vedi (1998) "Mirroring the Past or Reflecting the Future? Class and Religious Pluralism in Indonesian Labor." In *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, 268–290. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Harvey, David (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hefner, Robert W. (1998) "Introduction: Multiculturalism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia." In *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, 1–58. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

—— (2000) *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Herder, Johann G. (1969) Yet Another Philosophy of History. In *J.G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, ed. F. M. Barnard, 181–223. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jellinek, Lea (1991) *The Wheel of Fortune: The History of a Poor Community in Jakarta.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Jones, Carla (2010) Materializing Piety: Gendered Anxieties About Faithful Consumption in Contemporary Urban Indonesia. *American Ethnologist* 37(4): 617–637.

Kahin, George McTurnan (1952) *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kitley, Philip (1999) *Pancasila* in the Minor Key: TVRI's *Si Unyil* Models the Child. *Indonesia* 68: 129–152.

Mackie, J. A. C. (1976) *The Chinese in Indonesia: Five Essays.* Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.

Malkki, Liisa (1997) National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees. In *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, 52–74. Durham: Duke University Press.

McGregor, Kate (2001) Commemoration of 1 October, "*Hari Kesaktian Pancasila*," A Post Mortem Analysis? *Asian Studies Review* 36(1): 39–72.

Moore, Donald S., Anand Pandian and Jake Kosek (2003) The Cultural Politics of Race and Nature: Terrains of Power and Practice. In *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*, eds. Donald S. Moore, Jake Kosek and Anand Pandian, 1–70. Durham: Duke University Press.

Morfit, Michael (1981) Pancasila: The Indonesian State Ideology According to the New Order Government. *Asian Survey* 21(8): 838–851.

Noer, Deliar (1973) *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900–1942*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Peacock, James L. (1978) *Purifying the Faith: The Muhammadijah Movement in Indonesian Islam*. Menlo Park: Cummings.

Peluso, Nancy (2006) Passing the Red Bowl: Creating Community through Violence in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. In *Violent Conflict in Indonesia*, ed. Charles Coppel. New York: Routledge.

—— and Emily Harwell (2001) Territory, Custom, and the Cultural Politics of Ethnic War in West Kalimantan Indonesia. In *Violent Environments*, eds. Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Pemberton, John (1994) Recollections From "Beautiful Indonesia" (Somewhere Beyond the Postmodern). *Public Culture* 6(2): 241–262.

—— (1999) Open Secrets: Excerpts from Conversations with a Javanese Lawyer, and a Comment. In *Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam*, eds. Vicente L. Rafael and Rudolf Mrazek, 198–209. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University.

Purdey, Jemma (2006) *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Reid, Anthony (1988) *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ricklefs, M. C. (1981) *A History of Modern Indonesia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rock, Michael (2003) The Politics of Development Policy and Development Policy Reform in New Order Indonesia. William Davidson Institute Working Papers. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Business School.

Roff, William (1985) Islam Obscured? Some Reflections on Studies of Islam and Society in Southeast Asia. *Archipel* 29(1): 7–34.

Rudnyckyj, Daromir (2010) *Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalization, and the Afterlife of Development*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

—— (2011) Circulating Tears and Managing Hearts: Governing through Affect in an Indonesian Steel Factory. *Anthropological Theory* 11(1).

Rush, James R. (1990) *Opium to Java: Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860–1910*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Rutherford, Danilyn (2003) *Raiding the Land of the Foreigners: The Limits of the Nation on an Indonesian Frontier*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Schrauwers, Albert (2003) Through a Glass Darkly: Charity, Conspiracy, and Power in New Order Indonesia. In *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, eds. Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, 125–147. Durham: Duke University Press.

Schulte Nordholt, Henk (1997) *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Schwarz, Adam (1994) *A Nation in Waiting: Indonesia in the 1990s*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Sidel, John T. (2006) *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Siegel, James T. (1997) *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—— (1998) *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-Revolution Today*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stoler, Ann (2002) *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sumanto, Al Qurtuby (2003) *Arus Cina-Islam-Jawa: Bongkar Sejarah Atas Peranan Tionghoa Dalam Penyebaran Agama Islam Di Nusantara [the China-Islam-Java Flow: Deconstructing the History of the Role of China in the Spread of Islam in the Indonesian Archipelago]*. Jakarta: INSPEAL & INTI.

Suryadinata, Leo (2007) *Understanding the Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Thrift, Nigel (1998) The Rise of Soft Capitalism. In *An Unruly World?: Globalisation, Governance and Geography*, eds. Andrew Herod, Gearóid O'Tuathail and Susan Roberts, 25–71. London: Routledge.

—— (1999) The Globalisation of the System of Business Knowledge. In *Globalisation and the Asia Pacific: Contested Territories*, eds. Kris Olds, Peter Dicken, Philip F. Kelly, Lily Kong and Henry Wai-Chung Yeung, 57–71. London: Routledge.

van Dijk, Kees (2001) *A Country in Despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

van Klinken, Gerry (2007) *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small Town Wars*. London: Routledge.

Vasantkumar, Christopher (2012) What Is This 'Chinese' in Overseas Chinese? Sojourn Work and the Place of China's Minority Nationalities in Extraterritorial Chinese-ness. *Journal of Asian Studies* 71(2):423–446.

Weatherbee, Donald E. (1985) Indonesia in 1984: Pancasila, Politics and Power. *Asian Survey* 25(2): 187–197.

Wolters, Oliver W. (1999) *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Publications Southeast Asia Program Cornell University.

GOD IS THE GREATEST: MULTIPLE FORMS OF
MUSLIM RELIGIOSITY IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

Gerhard Hoffstaedter

Introduction

In my field, which is the middle-class in urban Malaysia, religion plays a significant role in people's everyday lives, even though that may not be apparent or even acknowledged. There are few outright religious enactments; however, Islam forms a backdrop and framework for much of everyday life. This chapter is essentially about meaning and how people can derive meaning for their lives, in this case through religion and religiosity.

Religiosity combines being religious and enacting religion. Religiosity is the way religions become enacted, performed and ultimately transformed. Thus, religiosity can be hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic. Religiosity has been on the rise both amongst Muslims and non-Muslims with Muslims increasingly turning to the neo-fundamentalism of Salafism and with Pentecostalism gaining much ground amongst non-Muslims (Ackerman & Lee, 1988; Lee & Ackerman, 1997). This rise in religiosity goes hand in hand with the decoupling of religion and ethnicity in these new religious movements (Roy, 2010).

The postmodern shift was one towards the revival of identity politics. Universalisms such as communism after the fall of the Berlin wall and the Soviet empire and to some degrees liberalism—that is small 'l' liberalism—in the wake of anti-terror legislation and a curtailment of civil liberties in most Western democracies have diminished their appeal and seem to be on the wane.

Conflicts are now played out through ethnic and religious identity politics. In Malaysia, Malayness and Islam are seen as repositories of a primordial identity and meaning. These identity politics are nurtured by the capitalist expansion and subsumption of prior flexible and universal notions of identity in the Malay world (Kahn, 2006). Faced by this onslaught of instrumentalism and caught in identity politics, the spiritual

world has become detached from the rapidly modernising urban popu-
lace. This detachment has only invigorated the appeal and mystique of
what is the unknown, scary and unseen 'other' world. This other world
is not explainable by the modern instrumental logic of Western moder-
nity nor by the modernist streams of Islam, which purport to be purifying
and elementary forms of Islamic praxis and thought. Traditional, hybrid
and alternative forms of praxis and thought are rallying to fill the void and
make sense of this other world. Poisoning and falling victim to sorcery,
which are often related to the insecurities of modern life such as love,
job prospects, contracts, health etc., are dealt with through age-old rem-
edies and new age explanations. This has repercussions far beyond the
self: "These fears and anxieties attest to heightened concerns with bodily
vigilance, the integrity of the Malay social body, and the stability of the
Malaysian body politic" (Peletz, 2002: 237).

Not only is the entire social fabric challenged by recent changes, inter-
nally and externally, but also core identities and the sense of self. This
identity crisis, which affects both the internal sense of self and external
identity-giving social bodies (religious, ethnic, racial, class), maintains a
constant anxiety about being.

Indeed, I found that it is precisely this *being* which was contested, in
particular *being* Muslim. In the eyes of many legal scholars, religious schol-
ars and ordinary Muslims, the behaviour of many Muslims today disquali-
fies them, theoretically, from being Muslims; they have ceased to submit
to a God-given and God-governed decree, opinion or norm. In some cases,
this can be because these Muslims drink alcohol, have extramarital affairs
and/or engage in deviant sexual behaviour. How can we deal with this
pluralism of Muslimness in practice?

Islam in Malaysia

Religion in Malaysia is a hotbed of political and social tension as well as a
source of identity and meaning for many people. This ambivalent status of
religion as both a liability for social peace and source of existential secu-
rity goes back a long way in the history of the Malay world. As is usual,
much of the blame can be laid at the feet of colonialism and its urge to
maintain power, often at a heavy cost to those it ruled over.

The British in Malaya, following their experiences in British India,
came to the conclusion that in order to adequately rule over a people,
they ought to know as much as they could about them. This did entail

some anthropological work, but was mainly pursued using statistical means. The British instituted a census of their Malayan possessions (the Straits Settlements) and later included the Federated and Unfederated Malay states. The census served to categorise and order the plural society the British were increasingly administering and incorporating into their empire. Religious identity became part of this exercise. However, unlike in India, where the division along religious lines created religious communities, in Malaya it was racial categories that delineated people and severed the often flexible and multiple identities that had preceded them.

'Muslim' became a synonym for Malays—the dominant and at times expansive identifier of peoples from Sumatra, Java and the Malayan peninsula. This process was intensified by the British encroachment on, and subsequent diminishment of, the political powers the traditional rulers of Malaya enjoyed. In the end the British left them only with the administration of what the British had no interest in: Islam and customs. The rulers and religious leaders were quick to jump on the (last) legal-political sphere open to them and a series of administrative apparatus mushroomed across the peninsula with *muftis*, chief *kadis* (magistrates) and religious bureaucracies being set up under the direct control of the state's ruler.

These administrations mirrored British administrative bureaucracies and represented the most sophisticated and centralised mode of religious and cultural administration hitherto enacted in the region (Roff, 1967: 72). Court officials and members of the ruler's family staffed the administration in virtually all states of Malaya. This group of conservatives constituted what was to become known as the *kaum tua* or old generation that sat at the apex of power over religious and cultural authority in their respective states.

At the same time an increase in steam boats between Southeast Asia and the Arab peninsula made the voyage to Mecca faster, cheaper and less arduous, resulting in many more Muslims making the hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca and one of the key pillars of Islam. With the accelerated and increased traffic in people came an increase in the traffic of ideas.

The pilgrims were exposed to a radical new wave of interpretation of Islam that had taken hold over the Arab peninsula: Wahhabism[1] and this

---

[1] Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, an Islamic scholar who called, in the eighteenth century, for the purification of Islam and entered an alliance with the house of Saud in 1740, which formed the basis for the modern state of Saudi-Arabia. It made Wahhabism the national religious doctrine whilst installing the house of Saud as the state's leaders.

contact and subsequent flirtations with Wahhabism led to a new group of *kaum muda* or 'young generation' of modernists to be formed. They had been educated in places like Al-*Azhar* University in Egypt and followed Muslim reformers such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. They called for a reinterpretation of Islam that should go back to the fundamentals of the Qur'an and hadiths (sayings of the prophet) whilst also modernising praxis to take account of the rapidly industrialising and changing world. The modernists espoused the importance of reason in taking decisions and argued for the purification of Islam.

In the Malay Archipelago, Islam had spread mostly through peaceful means of trade and Sufism, both extremely adept at including pre-existing forms of religiosity in a more open and syncretic interpretation of Islam. This had spawned a range of anomalies in the practice of Islam in the region, such as *adat Perpateh*[2] allowing for matrilineal inheritance of land in contravention of Islamic inheritance laws. Such anomalies existed (and still exist) across the archipelago, making for a patchwork of Islamic praxis that had often incorporated local traditions and beliefs.

The project of the modernists was to purge Islam in the Malay archipelago of such superstition and localised Islamic practices, especially the syncretic practices where local *adat* (culture) had impacted on Islam, rather than the other way around. The idea that adat can supervene Islam was seen as going against Islamic orthodoxy. Traditional leaders were highly suspicious of the kaum muda movement and tried to extinguish it as best they could as it presented a challenge to their authority.

Some prominent kaum muda leaders were expelled from the Malay states and could only work in the Straits Settlements, which were directly governed by the British. The famous dog spittle debate set the tone for the confrontation between the two groups. In Kelantan in the 1930s the Kelantanese crown prince sought advice on whether he could keep a dog, which is contrary to orthodox Islamic rules. The arguments by the chief modernists at the court enunciated a mode for change within Islam that

---

Between 1803 and 1813 this alliance had taken possession of the holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, from the Ottoman Empire augmenting their prestige in the region and beyond.

[2] *Adat perpateh* is a set of local customs of the Minang people who started emigrating from the Minangkabau heartland in central Sumatra to the West coast of the Malay peninsula around 500 years ago. It still operates in Negeri Sembilan and Naning in Melaka and is distinguished from other adat by its principle of matrilineal descent. It has a continued relevance for its adherents and has managed to adapt and survive, albeit weakened in Negeri Sembilan (Peletz, 1988).

neither advocated a strict return to the Qur'an and *sunnah* (practice of the Prophet) nor the application of potentially uncontrollable use of individual reasoning (*ijtihad*). Instead they argued for reason within *taqlid* (unquestioned imitation) and for choice between mazhabs or Islamic legal schools (Roff, 1983: 332).[3]

Taqlid is of utmost importance in the Shafi'i mazhab, the predominant legal school in Southeast Asia, and accords great power to the role of *ulama* (learned scholars) and thus to state Islamic institutions. This has resulted in a modern-day kaum tua—kaum muda divide. Modernist scholars and religious leaders continue to challenge Islamic state authority. The state authorities have at their disposal an array of tools to shut down what they call 'deviant teachings.' This can be done through a fatwa from the state mufti, which becomes law once the Sultan gazettes it. It is interesting to note that "the concept of 'deviationism' as such is unknown to any orthodox formulation of *Shari'a*" (An-Na'im, 1999: 163). Nevertheless, they are used to control and circumscribe Islamic praxis and orthodoxy in Malaysia.

Forging a State Islam

Islam is a universalistic project as proclaimed by its theological basis (Qur'an, Sunnah and hadith), yet it provides the impetus and vehicle for an array of particularistic identities as it becomes embedded (Shamsul, 2005a), syncretised (Geertz, 1976) and takes roots in its new surroundings. Today the Malaysian state tries to curtail particularism and define its universalism within the nation state boundary. Its religious bureaucracy operates to define and police the religious sphere. This policy has a long tradition and it was not only colonial powers who were apt to use the divide-and-rule principle to change power relations as Lubis, amongst others, has shown (Lubis, 2005) in the case of Mandaling in Malaysia and Indonesia. There, by centralising religion and religious authority under the stewardship of an official Islam or state Islam, 'indigenised Islams' were marginalised and the authority associated with them, most notably that of leaders of ethnic groups or sects, was eroded.

---

[3] No resolution transpired in Kelantan, so the case was brought before Al-Azhar University in Egypt, which ruled in favour of dog keeping (Roff, 1983: 315).

Centralised and rationalised national Islam thus displaced alternate localised versions. In some cases these localised versions were seen as a threat to Muslim unity in Malaysia, which is equivalent to a threat to the Malaysian state (at least the way the state, i.e. government, interprets it). One incident that has remained in public consciousness was the 1985 Memali incident. Deviationism here was tied in with the (perceived) threat of violence against the state.

Ibrahim Mahmud, a former PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, Pan Malaysian Islamic Party) candidate, had set up his own Islamic sect and was killed by police forces in a stand off in the village of Memali, along with several of his followers. The group had been associated with rumours of an armed insurgency. The government further accused Ibrahim of abusing Islam and inciting violence against the state. In such cases, the state comes down hard on anyone it deems to be a threat to national security. This is at times applied very freely to shut down political opposition.

The spectre of sectarian violence has haunted the government since the ethnic riots in May 1969 that cost hundreds, if not thousands of lives— the official record speaks of 196 dead. This fear of intra-Muslim conflict also explains the Malaysian authorities labelling Shi'ite Islam deviant and therefore forbidden.[4]

The secular state apparatus found itself facing many of the same challenges the sultans and rajas had faced before them at the turn of the last century: what to do with Islamism—the political ideology that propagates a form of Islam that is all consuming and all encompassing—especially in the light of the secular state's[5] dependency on non-Muslim electoral support? The solution thus far has been to either co-opt or crack down on potential threats to state authority. Mahathir initiated a move to appease Islamists with a state-led form of Islamisation that led to Anwar Ibrahim's co-option into the UMNO-led government in 1982. This in turn brought ideological parts of the *dakwah* movement into government and subsequently into the UMNO state apparatus.

---

[4] There are several gazetted fatwas that constitute Islamic law to this effect, e.g. for the state of Penang http://www.e-fatwa.gov.my/fatwa-negeri/fatwa-mengenai-fahaman-syiah-0 and Malaysian Federal Territories http://www.e-fatwa.gov.my/fatwa-negeri/membendung-pengaruh-syiah-di-malaysia-1.

[5] The state in Malaysia has, since independence, been ruled by a coalition of the dominant UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and a range of smaller, often ethnically-based, parties such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).

Islamisation increasingly was performed and instituted by the state. Islamic think tanks, such as the *Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia*, were created to provide the intellectual foundation and institutional framework for the absorption of *dakwah* and Islam in general. An instrumental logic to control self and other began to replace the multiple and fragmented *dakwah* movements and incorporate the main tenor into an all-subsuming national narrative of Malaysia as Islamic, if not an Islamic state.

Those movements and sects who are deemed a threat that cannot or should not be incorporated are shut down, such as the Al Arqam sect that operated in Malaysia from the 1970s to the 1990s and was closed down by the government in 1994 citing security fears of an armed insurgency and infiltration of government offices. Interestingly, Islamic law was not used in this instance—rather the ISA (Internal Security Act) was applied to incarcerate and affect a 'confession' from the group's leader.[6]

Such radical groups that challenge the state belie a majority that have been schooled in 'the way of the Prophet and the majority' and are firmly embedded in *Ahli Sunnah Wal-Jama'ah*, the national orthodox tradition of basic Islam.[7]

What is noteworthy here is the reaction or, rather, lack thereof these events provoked. Generally, state Islamic authorities and government rhetoric and opinion about deviant sects are followed and not disputed. I asked this question and was most frequently told that the government was there to protect Muslims from people who were teaching and practising deviance. They see the government as a benevolent protector that must have adequate means at its disposal to carry out this task, and the task at hand was to secure Muslims' sense of place in the Islamic landscape. This requires certainty and surety, which a universalised and rationalised government Islam can achieve.

One key way of spreading this version is through Islamic education establishments, which regained a foothold in the mainstream education system with the absorption of madrasah schools into the national school system in the 1980s in response to the success of the *dakwah* movement.

---

[6] The ISA is a remnant of the colonial legal framework and permits detention without trial for 2 years, which is renewable indefinitely. The government makes continued use of this repressive tool to curb dissent and opposition.

[7] Incidentally, it is shared by the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia as a key identity marker for Muslims. Malaysians learn the way of Islamic orthodoxy in government schools, Islamic schools and in mosques.

The state took control of the infrastructure and maintenance of schools and teaching staff to a larger degree and was also now paying for them. Islamic schools had existed in the Malay world for a long time; however, the introduction of British schooling during the colonial times restricted career opportunities for pupils of Islamic schools. Indeed, the British found that rural Malays especially continued to prefer Islamic schools for their children, as an education in Islamic studies carried prestige for the parents as well as providing for job security in the community. As commercial prospects widened, the British style of schooling became more attractive and as Christian schools expanded beyond the major cities, Islamic schools found it hard to compete.

Only with the renewed Islamisation of society with the *dakwah* movement and the subsequent government-led Islamisation did Islamic education offer new opportunities and possibilities (Shamsul, 2005b: 467). Students were then offered scholarships to further their studies in South Asia and the Middle East. The process culminated in the establishment of an international Islamic University in Malaysia in 1983—a strong signal that Islamic education was a serious endeavour the state supported.

Indeed, education has a lasting impact on people's identity, as Samad, one of my interviewees, told me. He went to an Islamic boarding school when he was a young child and this was when he:

> learnt most about Islam and its meaning; when I was a child. At the school we learnt the rules, the regulations of Islam. People know most about the faith when they are young. When I was at primary school I was a good Muslim, then we moved to KL [Kuala Lumpur] and in high school I became less Islamic. Hanging out with friends, you know, drinking, going out sometimes; not doing Muslim things—praying, fasting, not drinking, not doing bad things such as lying, cheating.

He saw this early habituation as the key to his Muslim identity and he regretted having lost so many of its virtues. Islam to him is "to have to believe in one God and to have to follow his rules."[8] This sense of obligation and observance of rules is deeply ingrained and leads to the belief in authority as long as it can continue to claim to be legitimate. The tenor is that Muslims must listen to 'authority,' but who exactly is this authority? Who can speak for and about Islam?

----

[8] My informants in the urban and suburban Klang valley grew up attending a range of schools and their religious knowledge varied as a consequence, with those attending Islamic schools knowing more, and more crucially, knowing why they were supposed to do some things and not others.

These are vexing questions and many people have differing answers. Islam as a religion does not have the hierarchical global governance architecture that the Catholic Church, for example, has. As a result, its fragmented power is contested on a regional, national, associational and denominational basis between groups, sects, organisations and individuals, all vying to be the one to assume authority on a given topic or a given people.

In Malaysia the state has offered a range of visions and state Islam(s) over the years in order to create, maintain and nurture its foremost role as protector and shaper of Islamic discourse. An internal Islamic landscape for Muslims and an external Islamic identity are maintained. The landscape is important as it functions as the environment that dictates and shapes discourse, spaces of being and identity.

The legal framework is part of this landscape and is often accorded a lot of weight in terms of curtailing and marking the boundary of the actual rules that determine what it means to be Muslim in Malaysia. Court cases around who is Muslim and who is not, such as the recent Lina Joy case, where a Muslim Malay woman had converted to Christianity and wanted this fact reflected in her identity card, do enter the consciousness and sometimes even arouse debate. However, for most people I spoke to, their own sense of being Muslim was not affected. Some wondered about the issue of religious freedom for themselves, but would not agitate for loosening the rules to allow them to convert or even behave in a manner that runs counter to Islamic law, even if they often acted in such ways. This continues to be a key paradox of the 'silent majority' that is moderate and open to debate, yet allows fringe groups to take over the airwaves and public discourse.

The social fabric is increasingly divided between Muslims and non-Muslims. This can take banal shapes, as in the form of lunch. I went to see some friends at their workplace in central Kuala Lumpur. My Chinese friends agreed to meet me at their usual lunch place—a small stall offering fried noodles and fried rice with all sorts of meats (including pork) behind an office tower with shaded seating. The clientele was predominantly Chinese. On another occasion, I followed a Malay friend to work and subsequently lunch in a derelict colonial house, couched between office towers. Inside a makeshift kitchen was serving a range of curries, fish and vegetable dishes with rice. Here, the clientele was mostly Malay. I asked my friend about this ethnic segregation during lunch and he replied that many of his co-workers want to eat pork or have a beer with lunch, so he cannot join them at the places they frequent. This happens

organically as people congregate around their own cultural, religious and social milieus for lunch, therefore replicating a larger phenomenon of social segregation.

The Malaysian politico-religious landscape is increasingly situated "between mosque and market" (Fischer, 2008: 8) and my informants straddle adherence to Islamic ideals on the one hand and a Western way of life on the other.

Fischer describes the halalisation of society and the state as "the embedding of Islam in a series of everyday practices that necessitate reference to fundamental principles or a moral codex" (Fischer, 2008: 63). He argues this process fosters good citizens, who "shop for the state" (Fischer, 2008: 34). Judging by the increase in the direct selling of Islamic products, the prominence of halal certification of restaurants and the vast array of Islamic clothing available, there is certainly a trend towards halalisation.

I would venture that this process forms a backdrop to everyday life and is not as pervasive nor as reflexive as is often claimed. Many Muslims I encountered adhere without questioning to their belief. This passive mindset is not universal and I hasten to add that there are many thinking Muslims engaging in theological and political discussions. Nevertheless, there is a volatile silent majority in the nation that either is not sufficiently interested or wishes not to get involved in discussions they fear they know little about. There is a continual struggle for the "elusive balance which people try to strike between being acted upon and acting, between acquiescing in the given and choosing their own fate" (Jackson, 2000: 123). The danger is that many are willing to go along with whatever sounds, seems or is labelled Islamic.

Facing Deep-Seated Ontological Anxieties

Colonialism and Western supremacy over Muslim lands triggered ontological insecurities that spawned reformist movements as outlined above. At the same time, westernised Muslim elites maintained many insecurities and structural inequalities from colonial times and thus were (and are) seen as part of the problem by reformists and those Muslims wishing not to partake in the westernised lifestyle that has swept over the world in terms of popular culture, consumption patterns and general lifestyle. World capitalism, too, remains intrinsically tied to the elites and makes them obvious targets, which explains Mahathir's drive to Islamise UMNO and the nation from the 1980s onwards.

Indeed, the use of Islamic ideology and theology in counter-hegemonic struggles offers historical continuity to anti-colonial struggles (Tehranian, 1991: 343). There are four distinct Islamic modes of social and political action: "conservative (traditionalist strategies), the reformist (strategies of reform), the revolutionary (strategies of transformation), and the separatist (strategies of withdrawal from the secular world)." (Tehranian, 1991: 344). Fundamentalism can be a response to insecurities but it can also serve to build and nourish for its adherents a secure and internally consistent worldview and a sense of meaning of the world.

Many of my interlocutors bought into a form of fundamentalism that required no immediate engagement and negotiation of faith, but relied on merely following, as outlined above. Fundamentals they were interested in provide solace from the tyranny of the choices of (post-)modern life and also act as a sort of modern-day buffer against insecurities. Fundamentalism packages modern questions in age-old answers that are also couched within a discourse of authority, which is bequeathed by religious manifestations such as holy books, religious staff with training in Holy Scriptures, and religious symbolism.

The Malaysian Islamist political party PAS has been touted as fundamentalist in its demands for an Islamic state and it is true that its administration of Kelantan, a state that has been ruled by PAS for the last twenty years, is awash with Islamic imagery and practice. However PAS has consciously moved away from fundamentalism towards a more moderate image and policies (Stark, 2004).

Islamic fundamentalism builds on an imagined dualism between Islamic and Western forms of governance. It depends on this dualism to show that Western forms of government and rule are especially failing Muslims and that the effects of colonialism have been to subvert and distort Islamic self-realisation and emancipation. It presents itself in various guises as a better alternative to the often authoritarian or unjust rule of Western style democracy and/or the predominant Western popular culture.

In Malaysia, the Al-Arqam sect practised this most visibly by segregating itself from the rest of society it saw as misguided and urging its members to dress in Arabic garb to distinguish themselves from the other Malaysians largely dressed in Western style. Segregation is one response, but the government identified Al-Arqam as a threat and disbanded the sect in the 1990s, only recently allowing them to regroup as an economic entity called Rufaqa.

In the state of Perlis another form of fundamentalism has taken root. The state has for a while now professed to follow Wahhabism, the

puritanical branch of Islam that emerged in Saudi-Arabia in the nineteenth century and advocates a return to the practices and policies of the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Perlis Wahhabism is sometimes referred to as Sunnah Perlis. This is deemed to be a form of exceptionalism that goes against Malaysia's national Islamic ideology—the 'Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah' orthodoxy or the tradition of the people of the Prophet.

Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, the former Perlis mufti supports questioning the status quo, mainly because he is one of the young Turks opposing the conservative religious powers in Malaysia. For instance, he has come out in support of a Chinese mosque for Chinese Muslims, he supports the progressive Muslim NGO Sisters in Islam, and he fears that the conservatives are putting many Muslims off their religion. He sees this bifurcation among Muslims as twofold: "One is the *Salafiyyah* movement; the second, if things continue, is that of liberal Muslims" (quoted in Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, 2006).

My young urban middle-class informants were too scared to follow the liberal Muslims and their views as that would entail taking a position that must be argued and defended against the mainstream. The Salafi answers are packaged in such a way that is difficult for the theological novice or those not well versed in Qur'anic exegesis to argue against them. Indeed, the reformist approach of relying heavily on the Qur'an and Sunnah and making them relevant to today's world makes liberals seem to be opposing the Qur'an.

Asri claims for the Salafis an authority over and for Islam: "To me, being a *Salafi* is about going back to the fundamentals of Islam, going back to the foundations—the Quran and the Sunnah. That is what separates the *Salafi* from other reformists" (quoted in Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, 2006).

At a lecture at a Penang mosque in 2006, he drew attention to how he envisages adherence to this fundamentalist and reformist way of Islam:

> Gentlemen, Islam is not possibly wrong. But we must ask, is the Islam we practise the same as the Islam that started during the prophet's days? Or has something happened, a misunderstanding towards Islam? What the prophet taught, we teach the same way, but we understand it differently.
>
> Maybe, it is the same word, but a different sound, a different understanding. *Tuak* in Kelantan isn't the same as *Tuak* in Penang. So if people in Kelantan drink tuak and don't get drunk, so what's wrong with people in Penang drinking it?
>
> Gentlemen, this is the campaign we have worshipped from way before. We have to go back to the original Islam. Islam isn't what the ustaz says, or what the Perlis mufti says, or what this imam or that imam says. We can't just follow whatever they say. We have to ask them all, how was Islam back

in the prophet's day? There are 7 muftis, so probably 7 different interpretations. 10 different ustaz, 10 different interpretations. We don't want to hear all these different interpretations. We want to know the original answer. The one that is exactly the same as back in the day.

   You say: "How are we supposed to know? We never lived in that era." But we have the Qu'ran, the Sunnah.

This demonstrates the importance of the primacy of texts for the modernist project. And it is this enclosed frame of reference that neither allows for questioning nor alternatives that is so ingrained in many young people today. Therein lies the power religious leaders like Asri have: they control the access to the texts, or rather their 'correct' interpretation.

   Although the state as an organiser and controlling instance remains strong in Malaysia it has had profound difficulties in maintaining control over Islam and the way it is practised, choosing instead to crack down intermittently on groups it deems dangerous or in some way a challenge to the state itself. It must be noted that the religious authorities in the individual states of the federation go after numerous sects, study groups, self-proclaimed gurus and religious teachers every year (US Department of State, 2009), although many groups can stay under the radar for a longer time, sometimes because of their clandestine activities, sometimes because of their influential patrons.

Resistance and Avoidance

There is always room for acts of resistance and circumvention of rules. Marsden (2005) has shown the paradoxes, beautiful modes of resistance and accommodation of people in Pakistan in the face of a resurgent Islamism and moves to purify traditions. Such manoeuvres to live with rules and laws that are deemed restrictive is commonplace. Having a drink after work to wind down and be a 'bad Muslim' for a while is one such example. People know that it is against Islamic law to drink alcohol but they do it anyway. They know where they can go and be less likely to get caught by the religious police.

   Tactics such as this are used in everyday life and are plentiful but their impermanence and, in many ways, futility are symbols of Augé's supermodernity, where people no longer seek to overthrow or even challenge a dominant system or hegemony (Augé, 1995). It is in their individual interests to find hidden spaces that allow them to be different for a little while, escape the 'oppression' temporarily, but not radically change who

they are and what they are. Thus, tactics such as drinking alcohol do not challenge their Muslim identity, nor would they want to make a case that drinking could be allowed within Islam. They are acutely aware that they are outside Islam for the time they drink. This suspension of their onto-logical status of Muslim is not real, of course; they remain Muslim and as such subject to the laws that bind them. In the state of Selangor that would cost them a fine of up to 3000 RM (approx $1000) and/or up to two years' imprisonment.

Strategies require organisation but the majority of people who readily employ tactics are not willing or able to conceive of this as a struggle over rights, resistance to power or another systematic outlet for their frustra-tions. Thus, being a bad Muslim for some of the time is not a problem, as long as the greater scheme of things remains untouched and unchal-lenged. Ironically it is therefore a self-reinforcing catch-22 situation. The more the majority sit idly by when their own human rights are eroded, the less likely they will ever be able to stop this process.

There are more elaborate and systematic forms of resistance to the dominant state-led Islam by film makers and artists, be they in the tradi-tional arts or contemporary performance or new media arts (Hoffstaedter, 2009). For example, Muslim feminists such as Sisters in Islam continue to use Islam as a basis for a fight for equality and justice. Their latest attempt at breaking the patriarchal and institutionalised monopoly on authority over Islam in Malaysia has been the launch of 'Musawah: For Equality in the family.' This framework for action encompasses a range of tools and resources, both academic and practical, to push for change. The coalition is made up of an international group of women activists and academics.[9]

What Sisters in Islam do is try to offer alternative interpretations to Muslims, especially for the empowerment of women. They have been highly influential due to their extensive networks within the elite as well as some grassroots outreach. Many of my informants knew of their exist-ence, yet had never read any of their material, attended their lectures or otherwise engaged with matters pertaining to Islam and women's rights. In fact, one young commercial lawyer told me that, "it's ok for them to do their work. I respect it. But I don't have to do it. I am ok, I don't have to fight for anything." She was content with her position, career prospects and rights as a Muslim. She saw a point to the struggle Sisters in Islam was engaging in, but saw no immediate need to get involved herself.

---

[9] http://www.musawah.org.

She did not see her being-Muslim in jeopardy nor something that required to be re-negotiated.

Religion as Security

In a world that is portrayed as increasingly insecure, maintaining or creating a sense of meaning for one's life is very important. Some people have chosen the path of re-traditionalisation and re-Islamisation to give themselves meaning and a sense of belonging and security. In contemporary Malaysia the causes of insecurity are plentiful. Even though it ranks as one of the most developed and richest countries in the region, the economic situation for many remains precarious. Moreover, those who have become middle class fear for their status and wealth in a country that is acutely aware of underlying ethnic tensions and the dangers of political instability.

Some young urbanites respond to these fears by retreating into the bosom of the traditional authority pertaining to the realm of the unknown and unseen, and often explore forms of magic. The traditional healers, or so-called bomohs, represent an authority based on tapping into dark magic and hidden realms of power, often offering esoteric solutions to their clients' problems. But this is not experienced as esoteric, as any solution that is out of the ordinary is in fact deemed special and its explanation must necessarily be outside 'normal' realms of knowledge and practice.

Health remedies based on Islamic chants and herbal medicine are widely popular amongst the Malay urban as well as rural middle class. Access to Western medicine is also often sought but cannot provide the cultural and religious explanations needed to fit into their worldview. Those who go to see the bomoh for advice on matters of the heart, health issues, financial guidance, or even revenge, require access to a cultural framework that is beyond the instrumental logic even of a state Islam. However, many bomohs still rely on the Islamic landscape that features as backdrop to the everyday life. Therefore, many bomohs invoke Allah, and the help of angels and spirits and incantations made up of surahs from the Qur'an.

On one occasion, a bomoh channelled spirits to advise a client on what sort of investments she should make, acting as a sounding board for her proposals. Spirits were amongst the community of the prophet Muhammad and therefore held the aura of truest and purest Islam—something the client was clearly eager to soak up and commune with. This invocation

of Muslim ideal types and Islam in general ties in with a desire for things to make sense in one's life, to answer the questions of where we are going, why things happen to us. This Islamic gloss on cultural practices such as ritual healing offers insight into how indispensable the Islamic landscape has become in order to make sense of the world.

Many of my Western orientated and educated interlocutors were experiencing another ontological crisis: One that was triggered by their boundary walking between worlds, worldviews and understandings of themselves. There is the globalisation of a Western lifestyle that largely goes against Islam or the Islam they have grown up with and encountered through *dakwah* movements, the media and other sources such as online fora.

Many among this group of people—the children of middle and upper class parents—have been educated in the West and have returned with ideas and conceptions of the world that do not find adequate representation in Malaysia. Many feel trapped—neither here nor there—oscillating between piety and hedonism in an attempt to live two lives. One told me that he had returned from Australia because he "need[s] the strictness of JAWI [the religious authority in the Federal Territories], to keep [him] in line." He wants to be policed as a means of fitting in, allowing the state and its agents to set the game rules for his own good. He knows that he cannot escape the game itself and neither does he want to.

People like him are in it for the long haul and Islam may come to the fore or take a back seat in their everyday lives depending on circumstance and life stage. Many talked of their youth being a time of experimentation, saying that their Islamicity may be subdued for a period of time. This neither meant that they ceased to be Muslims nor that they wished to be, but rather that they could be, 'bad Muslims' for a while before returning to the fold in their later years, when they had 'calmed down' or 'settled down.' The idea of family seemed to go hand in hand with a return to a stricter and more meaningful engagement with their religion.

In the West, postmodernity is associated with ideas of individuality and the fragmentation of meaning. This can either be interpreted as more freedom to create and be creative in the relations in which we invest ourselves and the meanings we attribute to them. On the other hand, it can spur meaninglessness, nothingness and nihilism. It is the latter that reactionary forces are targeting, whilst ignoring the former. This process leads to a crisis of otherness.

> The crisis of modernity, which some see as a crisis of identity, should to
> my mind be imputed instead to the fact that one of these two languages—

the language of identity—has won out against the other—the language of otherness. In fact, the crisis of modernity would be better described as a crisis of otherness (Augé, 1999: 58–59).

Augé argues that we are neglecting the relations between us and the other by concentrating on the individualisation of mediating cosmologies and the supposed universalising and homogenisation of the whole. Thus, an atomisation and homogenisation tendency that is shaped by neo-liberalism traps people in contemporaneous worlds where we are deemed responsible for our own salvation, our own life and its meaning.

'I' become the centre of, and for, identity discourse, but the grand narrative of Islam and being Muslim remains in the background. This narrative itself changes but remains as a powerful reminder of quasi-primordial ties to something bigger than the 'I.' Being Muslim is something that is linked to family and ethnic affiliations and just as those ties are intrinsic and require no further articulation, being Muslim is often seen as primordial and eternal.

The West is equated with moves towards a fragmented postmodernity that entails a void in meaning and an emphasis on pleasure, transience and disorientation of the individual. However, as Ahmed points out, "[i]n Muslim society postmodernism means . . . a shift to ethnic or Islamic identity" (Ahmed, 1992: 32). Thus, fragmentation and internal disintegration are translated into a reactionary force, reimagining traditions and primordial identities in juxtaposition to the West. In Malaysia, Malayness and Islam have become the repositories of this shift, with elite politics chiefly interested in maintaining Malay Muslim supremacy and not allowing much debate of the two key identifiers.

References

Ackerman, S. E. and Lee, R. L. M. (1988) *Heaven in transition: Non-Muslim religious innovation and ethnic identity in Malaysia.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Ahmed, A. S. (1992) *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and promise.* London: Routledge.

An-Na'im, A. A. (1999) "The Cultural Mediation of Human Rights: The Al-Arqam Case in Malaysia," in Daniel Bell and Joanne R. Bauer (eds) *The East Asian challenge for human rights.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 147–168.

Augé, M. (1995) *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity. Translated by John Howe.* London: Verso.

—— (1999) *An anthropology for contemporaneous worlds. Translated by Amy Jacobs.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fauwaz Abdul Aziz (2006) "Mufti: Religious leaders can be challenged." Malaysiakini.com. November 27th.

Fischer, J. (2008) *Proper Islamic consumption: Shopping among the Malays in modern Malaysia.* Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Geertz, C. (1976) *The religion of Java. Chicago:* University of Chicago Press.

Hoffstaedter, G. (2009) "Contested spaces: Globalization, the arts and the state in Malaysia." *Ethnicities* 9(4): 527–545.

Jackson, M. (2000) *At Home in the World.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Kahn, J. S. (2006) *Other Malays: Nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the modern Malay World.* Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Lee, R. and Ackerman, S. E. (1997) *Sacred tensions: Modernity and religious transformation in Malaysia.* Columbia S.C.: University of South Carolina Press.

Lubis, A.-R. (2005) "Mandailing Islam across borders." *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies.* 2(2): 55–98.

Marsden, M. (2005) *Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan's North-West frontier.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Peletz, M. G. (1988) *A share of the harvest: kinship, property, and social history among the Malays of Rembau.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

—— (2002) *Islamic modern: Religious courts and cultural politics in Malaysia.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Roff, W. R. (1967) *The origins of Malay nationalism. New Haven:* Yale University Press.

—— (1983) "Whence cometh the law? Dog saliva in Kelantan, 1937." *Comparative Studies in Society and History.* 25(2): 323–338.

Roy, O. (2010) *Holy ignorance: when religion and culture part ways.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Shamsul, A. B. (2005a) "Islam embedded: 'Moderate' political Islam and governance in the Malay world," in K. S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali (eds) *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, social and strategic challenges for the 21st century.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 103–120.

—— (2005b) "Making Sense of the Plural-Religious Past and the Modern-Secular Present of the Islamic Malay World and Malaysia." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 33: 449–472.

Stark, J. (2004) "Constructing an Islamic model in two Malaysian states: PAS rule in Kelantan and Terengganu." *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 19(1): 51–75.

Tehranian, M. (1991) "Islamic fundamentalism in Iran and the discourse of development. In Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds) *Fundamentalisms observed.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 341–373.

US Department of State (2009) *International Religious Freedom Report 2009* [*online*]. Available: http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127277.htm. (Accessed: 1.11.2010).

FIRE AND WATER: RITUAL INNOVATION, TOURISM, AND SPONTANEOUS RELIGIOSITY IN HAT YAI, SOUTHERN THAILAND

Jovan Maud

Introduction

In April 2000 the streets of Hat Yai, southern Thailand's largest city and "commercial capital," were packed for the celebrations of Thai New Year, or Songkran. Best known internationally as a carnivalesque water festival cum water fight, Songkran had become the city's biggest annual tourist event. A mixture of local residents and tourists were out on the streets enjoying the party atmosphere. Brandishing large brightly coloured water pistols, buckets, hoses and other weapons, they battled each other on foot or traded shots with people riding on the backs of pickup trucks that crawled along the city's streets. Techno music pumped from the foyer doors of some hotels and crowds of soaking wet revellers gathered to simultaneously dance and douse. As a rite of reversal (see Davis, this volume), social norms and hierarchies were relaxed and everyone on the streets was a legitimate target. With the usual taboos regarding public inter-sex touching largely suspended, many participants, especially young Thais, smeared the faces of other revellers with a perfumed rice-flour paste and the air was full of the scent of jasmine.

For its part, the city's Municipal Council had organised a procession through the central commercial district of town. Comprising mainly community groups or Municipal organisations, the procession was supposed to be an expression of the city's civic identity and to provide extra colour to the celebrations. Included amongst the representatives of municipal government was one somewhat more anomalous group: a number of religious practitioners who were parading statues mounted on elaborately decorated red palanquin chairs (*kiao*).[1] The use of such chairs to parade

---

[1] In some Songkran celebrations—for example in Chiang Mai—Buddha statues are processed. In 2000 I saw no evidence of this in Hat Yai, although each year the Municipality

deities is usually associated with Chinese folk Taoist rites in southern Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore alike, and is one of the most visible aspects of folk Chinese religiosity in the region. However, in this case it was not Chinese deities but famous Theravada Buddhist monks who were mounted on the palanquin. Furthermore, the ritual participants were not associated with any Chinese shrine or foundation but instead belonged to a group specialising in the tattooing of sacred designs (*sak yan*)[2]—a popular religious tradition connected with "tantric" elements of Theravada Buddhism and mainly focused on protection from danger and bad luck (Tannenbaum, 1987; Reynolds, 2011). This ritual performance therefore combined an unusual blend of elements of Theravada Buddhist saint worship, popular Thai ritual practices, and Chinese folk religion.

If anyone on the streets of Hat Yai seemed to be surprised by this juxtaposition, however, it did not show. Indeed, most people showed more surprise and delight at the western anthropologist walking with the group, pointing and calling out "John!" or "*farang*!" if Thai, to attract my attention before gleefully letting me have it with a squirt of water between the eyes. By contrast, bystanders reacted to the procession of statues in more accustomed ways, though with equal enthusiasm. Immediately recognising the statues as sacred objects, many people interacted with them, the palanquin, and their bearers. These actions, while sometimes similar, also differed according to the ethnic background of the people involved. Both Thais and tourists pressed their palms together in gestures of respect towards the passing statues, though the way they performed this action—the graceful *wai* of the Thais or the stiff-armed gesture of Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans—clearly indicated ethnic and national differences. Thais also tended to approach the palanquin to gently pour water over the statues or place jasmine garlands around their necks. By contrast, a number of Malaysian or Singaporean Chinese men rushed to the palanquin bearers and offered to help carry them for a time.

---

sets up a Buddha statue for lustrations (*song nam*). These were not, however, a part of the procession. This lustration of Buddha images marks Songkran as not only a national but also a Buddhist event. The equation of "Thai" with "Buddhist" is so taken for granted that it generally goes unnoted in Thailand. This is a point worth remembering in the southern Thai borderland, where Muslims make up a substantial proportion of the population, and indeed make up the vast majority in four borderland provinces.

[2] The term itself refers to the tattooing of sacred patterns or *yantra*. This is often rendered in English as "sak yant," which reflects the spelling in Thai. In this chapter I prefer a transliteration that reflects Thai pronunciation.

Others rubbed their hands over the wet statues and then through their hair, transferring the now sacralised water to themselves.

Notably, even people armed with the giant "Super Soaker" water pistols or garden hoses used these devices to interact with the statues in a ritual fashion. This, however, involved a slight modification of their shooting technique. Instead of aiming directly at their targets as they did while "fighting," they raised their guns and sent the water in an arc so it rained down upon the statues in a continuous stream. The palanquin bearers responded in turn by positioning the statues underneath the cascade and vigorously bucking and heaving. This interaction was strongly reminiscent of folk Taoist processions common in the region, in which chains of Chinese firecrackers tied to the end of long bamboo poles are lit so that they cascade down, exploding, while palanquin bearers manoeuvre underneath and filled with the energy of the deities buck and heave wildly. Watching the events during Songkran I was struck by the way a subtle shift in behaviour—raising the angle of the stream—could instantly transform a playful, touristy "fight" into an act of religious significance and the ease with which the various participants—bearers and tourists alike—were able to make do with the materials at hand in a moment of spontaneous religious *bricolage*.

At first glance, the interactions described above could be read as an example of inauthentic tourist culture—a postmodern pastiche of elements without deeper cultural roots. Indeed, this interpretation would fit well within a widespread discourse in Thailand that interprets the development of Songkran into a tourist event as a prime example of cultural commodification and the decline of tradition. Furthermore, the mixing of cultural forms—Thai Buddhist monks paraded on Chinese palanquins—would seem to challenge the integrity of national and religious categories. However, instead of treating this as case of cultural "loss" or trivialisation, I view it as a form of cultural production, and a genuine attempt at religious (re)vitalisation that cannot be understood according to the logic of commodification and touristification alone.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 1999–2001 and subsequent visits to southern Thailand, along with internet-based research, I focus on the above mentioned tattooing group and the strategies its leader, Ajan Praphon,[3] has used to carve out a modest niche in the city's

---

[3] A pseudonym.

religious scene.[4] Praphon, a Teochiu-speaking Sino-Thai resident of Hat Yai, belongs to a lineage of ritual tattooists centred on Wat Chang Hai in Pattani Province. This monastery is most widely associated with the cult of Luang Pho Thuat, the semi-mythological Buddhist saint who is at the centre of a thriving "cult of amulets" (Tambiah, 1984) and is far and away the most prominent popular religious figure in southern Thailand.[5] Each year Wat Chang Hai holds lustration (*song nam*) rites in honour of Luang Pho Thuat which coincide with Songkran festivities. Corresponding to this, Ajan Praphon began his own version of *song nam* rites in Hat Yai and had been doing so for several years before I met him. His use of the term "*song nam*" to describe these rites suggests continuity with general practices of paying homage to Buddha images and other sacred objects at Songkran time through the use of lustral water (Swearer, 2004). However, as the above description illustrates, Praphon's group also engage in a variety of practices that are not usually associated with Songkran and have more in common with Chinese folk Taoist rituals. Along with parading their "deities" on palanquins in the Songkran parade, they also perform rites of fire-walking (*lui fai*) in which devotees carry the statues over hot coals, and incorporate lion dances, firecrackers, and other Chinese elements into their practices. They therefore combine elements of Theravada Buddhism, folk Taoism, as well as other elements of Thai popular religion. As a result, they are positioned in such a way that they do not fit easily within the institutions of either mainstream Buddhism or established Chinese religious forms. Nevertheless, the particular conditions in Hat Yai, including the prevalence of ethnic Chinese tourists from Malaysia and Singapore, many of whom are interested in accessing sources of sacred power during their stay, and the activities of both the city's Municipality and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) to attract these tourists, have allowed the group to find a modest place within the local religious scene.

---

[4] The title Ajan (Pali: *acariya*) conveys the sense of mastery of sacred knowledge, though the title is also used for university lecturers as an equivalent to "professor." It is often translated as "master" by Malaysian and Singaporean devotees of Thai religious specialists. While Wong (2001) argues that *khru* (teacher) contains a more mystical sense than *ajan*, many *sak yan* ritual specialists use this title. Also, the term *keji ajan* for monks considered to have supranormal powers also links the title to the possession of esoteric knowledge.

[5] Luang Pho Thuat can be literally translated as "Venerable Father Great-grandfather." "Thuat," however, refers to a class of ancestral spirits worshipped in parts of southern Thailand. Lorraine Gesick has therefore translated the name as "Venerable Ancestor Spirit" (Gesick, 1985).

This paper thus considers the intersection of the socio-political forces that have created Hat Yai as a commercial, touristic space oriented towards visitors from Malaysia and Singapore with specific attempts to use the qualities of this space in projects of religious (re)vitalisation. It is useful here to make the distinction between what Setha Low (2000) calls the social *production* and the social *construction* of space. The former refers to broader social, political, economic and ideological forces and how they manifest in particular places, while the latter refers to the actions of those who inhabit spaces to make them meaningful. This is to say that the meaning of space is not simply determined by macro processes from above but is also subject to intervention and reinscription by a variety of local actors. Moreover, I argue that the fluid interactions described above can be taken as a moment in which both local religious practitioners and tourists become co-creators of particular "scenes and actions that convey meaning" (Low, 2000: 128).

As this suggests, this paper emphasises the active role of the tourists in producing this moment of ritual exchange. Rather than being mere observers or spectators to an already fully constituted, "local," religious practice, I argue that tourists are in fact a necessary and indeed constitutive part of it. That is, the success of the above mentioned rituals depends upon the receptivity of the transient tourist population to them and their ability to recognise and participate in the event. The ability of people to shift spontaneously from being bystanders to ritual participants is integral to the ritual performance rather than being a by-product, and thus allows it to become something other than mere spectacle. It is this intrinsic involvement of tourists which means that the ritual event in question needs to be thought of as inherently translocal (Appadurai, 1996). This focus on the ritual involvement of tourists challenges the assumption that cultural forms produced in touristic contexts is inauthentic and merely existing for the benefit of the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990). It also problematises the stable dyad of "host" and "guest" which has dominated the study of tourism (Salazar, 2010) and instead seeks to convey a more dynamic sense of cultural forms produced and sustained in the interstitial and commercialised spaces at the intersection of cross-border tourism and popular religion. This approach also challenges the assumption that tourism is essentially "modern" and disenchanted and can be contrasted with modes of travel such as pilgrimage. Instead, it opens up to a more complex understanding of the way secular and sacred elements may combine in travel, and the different roles both tourists and "hosts" may take, depending on context. I argue then, as Oakes and Sutton have stated in

relationship to tourism in China, "the spaces of touristic and spiritual practice cannot be so neatly distinguished from one another" (Oakes and Sutton, 2010: 1; see also Weller, 2006).

As with chapters by Horstmann and Davis (this volume), I am interested in the role ritual plays in situations of intercultural contact. In such situations ritual does not merely serve to reproduce a "social whole" understood as a bounded entity but instead forms the basis for engagements across difference. Moving from a Durkheimean model that understands ritual primarily as a mode of constituting social wholes, this approach follows work that emphasises ritual's boundary crossing qualities and its role in the negotiation of difference (Robbins, 2010; Seligman et al. 2008).

This raises the issue of the "meanings" of symbols involved. The Songkran parade described above shows various sliding of symbols, where Thai monks seem to fill the place of Chinese deities, and streams of water can produce a similar effect to cascades of firecrackers. To assign set meanings to ritual forms would be problematic as this would require a coherent cultural system in which to locate them. In this discussion, however, I want to evoke something more labile than the notion of culture as a bounded whole. In this context, it is more the qualities of fire and water to overflow boundaries and disturb distinctions, to create bridges and connections, as opposites that can also in a sense collapse into each other, which are appropriate guiding motifs for this discussion.

This paper also engages with scholarly writing that in recent years has increasingly focused on the fluidity and commercialisation of cultural forms in Thailand. Largely working within a framework of postmodernity, this literature has emphasised the rise of cultural marketplaces that have challenged the supposed stability of local and national cultural forms (Kasian 2002). With regard to religion, this literature has shifted from focusing on the relationship between the state and the orthodox Theravada Buddhist monkhood (Sangha), to the proliferation of unorthodox religious forms, sectarian movements, and the development of markets of sanctity (Jackson, 1999a, 1999b; Pattana 2005a; 2005b, 2008; Taylor, 2008). Much of this literature fits within a teleology of "withering centre and flourishing margins" (Jackson, 1997) in which a centralised and state-controlled Theravada Buddhism has been increasingly challenged by a proliferation of heterodox, often commodified, religious forms. A prevailing theme has been the anxieties about the future of the nation-state and a sense of cultural crisis (Tanabe and Keyes, 2002). I also seek to capture something of the play of popular religious forms that sit uneasily with attempts to produce a stable national culture. However, rather than leav-

ing the analysis at the recognition of fluidity and instability, I also seek to show how hybrid practices can also form the basis for the assertion of identity. In this sense I take up Jean and John Comaroff's (2009) insight that it is precisely the process of producing culture for consumption by the Other that may lead to new experiences of self. In a similar vein, scholars of tourism have also argued that touristic encounters can form the basis of new claims to, and experiences of, identity rather than being purely corrosive of cultural forms (Picard and Wood, 1997).

In order to pursue these themes this paper is divided into four sections. In the first I briefly consider the development of Songkran into both a national holiday and tourist attraction and the sense of cultural crisis that these two elements have engendered. I then move to a consideration of the South and how religion features in tourism there, particularly among the ethnic Chinese of Malaysia and Singapore. This section points to a broader realm of cross-border inter-ethnic religious interactions in which tourism is just one feature. The next section focuses on the apparent equivalence of "symbols" of fire and water in the context of the Songkran parade. However, I argue that it is the flexibility and openness of the cross-border environment which means we should not think in terms of symbols with set meanings but instead consider them as technologies that facilitate sacred exchanges. Finally, I turn to the Luang Pho Thuat tattoo group itself, the strategies it has used to produce its novel Songkran rituals, and the way these have leveraged both the openness of the cross-border religious field and the marketing of Songkran as a tourist event to further their own goals and to produce a religious trajectory that is not encompassed by processes of commodification.

Songkran, Tourism, and Cultural Crisis

Songkran, or "Thai New Year," has emerged as both an important national holiday and symbol of Thai-ness and a primary tourist event for both domestic and international tourism. Although not unique to Thailand and having a long history in mainland Southeast Asia, with similar events celebrated in Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Yunnan, it has also become emblematic of national Thai culture. Songkran is clearly most at home in the North of Thailand—a celebration of Lanna[6] New Year—and the event

---

[6] Lanna is the name of a kingdom that was incorporated into the Thai nation state at the end of the 19th century. It possesses a distinctive culture which both underpins a

is still most famously associated with Chiang Mai (Poranond and Robinson, 2008). Taking place in April, the hottest and driest month, the event has a clear connection to the cycle of seasons and notions of seasonal and social renewal (Swearer 2004). During the twentieth century, and particularly in the post-war period, the Songkran festival in Chiang Mai became increasingly popular with first domestic, then international, tourists. The success of the festival in Chiang Mai as a tourist attraction has meant other cities around the country have "shamelessly imitated" its features (Poranond and Robinson, 2008: 19). It has now become a nation-wide celebration and has been readily taken up as both a tourist event and "the focal point of Thai culture," and where "an undercurrent of nation-building seems to be accompanying the increasingly elaborate patterns of Songkran development" (Poranond and Robinson, 2008: 319; see also Cohen, 2001b).

Songkran has a dual character in which social hierarchies are both affirmed through rituals but also playfully undermined through its carnivalesque qualities. Water plays an important role in both sides of the event. On the one hand, the pouring of (often scented) water over Buddha images, and the hands of the elderly and Buddhist monks (*rot nam phu yai*), serves to affirm respect for morally superior beings and provides the opportunity for the collective veneration of shared symbols. On the other hand, the event has become known internationally for its carnivalesque water fights in which all sense of social hierarchy is relaxed for a time. This dual character can be found even in non-touristic contexts (Terwiel, 1994) where paying respects to monks and elders shades into more playful splashing, but the differences between these two sides of the festival have become increasingly fraught as it becomes at once a national symbol *and* an international touristic event. This tension is evident in the manner in which Songkran is promoted both locally and internationally with equal emphasis placed on "traditional" notions of cleansing and renewal, Buddhist imagery, and fun water fights. In its efforts to market Songkran, Thai state imagery reinforces mixed messages, portraying aspects of Songkran as both transgressive and exciting, but also as a traditional and wholesome "harmless display" (Wood, 1997:9).

In tourist centres such as Bangkok's Khaosan Road area, Phuket, Pattaya, Chiang Mai and Hat Yai, the overwhelming sense during the festival

---

sense of regional identity in northern Thailand and has also provided much material for the production of a national Thai culture.

is that nothing and no one is sacred. As a classic rite of reversal (see Davis, this volume), usual deference to authority is itself deferred and everyone, including the police, is a target. Tourist guidebooks and websites emphasise that if you don't want to get wet, you shouldn't go out on the streets. The carnivalesque character of the celebrations is also expressed in its erotic overtones, with the usual prohibitions about touching members of the opposite sex greatly relaxed. In my conversations on the subject, Thai girls—as well as their parents—often complain that boys often go too far and touch them inappropriately. Correspondingly, young men have described to me the titillation they feel when touching the wet bodies of young women.

Not only hierarchies and differences between Thais themselves are temporarily overcome during the water fights but also those between locals and tourists. As one observer of Songkran in Bangkok has noted, differences in status between local workers in the tourism trade and tourists themselves are also broken down, where locals have the chance to compete with tourists as equals rather than servants (Parthasarathy, 2009).

The transformations in the festival as well as the dropping of taboos have led to public controversy and hand wringing. Over the years there has been controversy over perceived danger to "Thai Culture," moral panics about youth out of control, and concern over the massive road death toll during the festival due to drunk driving.[7] As a result, elite guardians of Thai-ness (*khwam pen thai*), including the Ministry of Culture, have attempted to regulate behaviour of the young, including the dress of females involved in the festival (Pravit 2004). The dominant critique of the way Songkran has developed since the mid-twentieth century portrays increasing processes of commercialisation, trivialisation and profanation as "traditions" are reworked in order to generate income from tourism. However, it is also important to note that the "sacred" aspects of the festivals, such as the parading of Buddha images through the streets, are relatively recent innovations that are the result of both entrepreneurs and state authorities seeking to expand the appeal of the event and generate tourist interest (Poranond and Robinson, 2008: 314). Moreover, affirmations of

---

[7] This tension has been very well illustrated during the 2011 Songkran celebrations, when several teenage girls were filmed dancing topless and the clip was circulated on the internet. This led to a furious response from the official guardians of Thai identity who saw this act as damaging "a traditional Thai ceremony." The Minister of Culture himself stated that the girls should repent for their deed by reading books about traditional Thai celebrations to kindergarten children (http://www.smh.com.au/world/topless-dance-in-public-triggers-thai-furore-20110419 Accessed 19 April 2011).

the "local" and "traditional" are just as much part of the brand that the TAT markets to international audiences as the images of watery fun overflowing all social boundaries. So while the critiques place tourism and commercialisation on the side of an unstable capitalist modernity which is corrosive of tradition and the sacredness of religious symbols, this very environment may also provide the conditions for the production of sacred space and genuine religious exchange. As Jean and John Comaroff have noted, "while the commodification of identity is frequently taken as prima facie evidence of the cheapening of its substance, the matter has never been quite so straightforward" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009:28).

Songkran and Sacred Tourism in Hat Yai

As stated, Songkran is most at home in the North of Thailand. In the South, where April is neither the hottest nor driest time of year, the water symbolism seems a little more out of place.[8] Nevertheless, Songkran has become one of the most important annual tourist events in Hat Yai, southern Thailand's largest city. Every year it attracts tens of thousands of foreign tourists, virtually all of them Malaysians and Singaporeans.[9] According to officials at the Hat Yai TAT office, Songkran in the year 2000 was already the biggest event in the city's tourist calendar and its popularity has continued to increase since then, especially since the TAT began a major promotional blitz since 2004 (Poranond and Robinson, 2008). Although set back by a series of bombs that hit the city in 2005 and 2006, numbers have recovered. In 2011 the city's hotels reported full occupancy.

In its efforts to promote Songkran around the country, the TAT has clearly set out to give each city's event a distinctive "brand." While "fun" is always an integral aspect of the festival's image in all parts of the country, in the North and Northeast the procession of famous Buddha images and other religious practices such as the creation of sand pagodas feature prominently (Swearer, 2004; Poranond and Robinson, 2008). Hat Yai has been primarily promoted in recent years as the site of a distinctive "mid-

---

[8] This "foreignness" was brought home in during the 2000 festival, when there were a number of torrential rain showers that almost made it impossible for the tattoo group to hold their fire-walking rites. The organisers were only able to light the coals by using a large amount of petrol.

[9] In 2011 one source estimated that Songkran would attract around 50,000 mostly Malaysian and Singaporean tourists to Hat Yai (http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v5/newsworld.php?id=579113 Accessed 14 April 2011).

night Songkran" as its "unique selling point" (USP). Now resembling mardi gras, the night procession features floats on which dripping wet dancers on the backs of flat-bed trucks bedecked with flashing lights and blaring disco music and spraying water in every direction, machines that spew foam onto the streets, mock fighting on poles suspended above vats of water, "dunk a young lady" games, Thai boxing bouts, and a fireworks display. In scenes reminiscent of a street rave, various bands and DJs perform into the night on stages set up in the centre of town.[10]

In many ways Songkran is emblematic of the widespread sense that Thailand is a space of relative permissiveness compared to Islamic Malaysia and hyper-regulated Singapore (Askew, 2006, 2008). For example, one Singaporean commented to me that such a waste of water would never be tolerated by the government in Singapore. Another smiled at the general chaos and shook his head. "You can do anything you like in Thailand," he said. However, in addition to a sense of permissiveness, the sacred also plays a prominent role in southern Thai tourism, especially that involving the ethnic Chinese (Askew, 2002, 2006, 2008; Askew and Cohen, 2004; Cohen, 2001a; Hamilton, 2008; Maud, 2005, 2012). For many Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans, Thais and Thailand more generally have a reputation for sacred potential. Cross-border religious exchanges exhibit similar dynamics and ethnic Chinese tourists often include visits to sacred sites or participation in religious rites as a normal part of their holiday experience. Buddhist monks in particular who have a reputation for supra normal powers are particularly sought after, but religious specialists from a number of traditions, including *sak yan* tattooists are also popular. Similar patterns pertain in Malaysia and Singapore, where ethnic Chinese are the most prominent and generous sponsors of Theravada Buddhist monks and other ethnic Thai rituals specialists and their involvement has a strong influence on visible expressions of Thai religious iconography, architecture and so on (Johnson, 2008; Golomb, 1978).

The proximity to Malaysia and Singapore and the prevalence of ethnic Chinese tourism from the South mean that the sacred dimension of tourism is proportionately high. Furthermore, cultural continuities between ethnic Chinese of Malaysia and Singapore and southern Thailand also contribute to many cross-border religious interactions. Events such as

---

[10] Note that many of these descriptions are not based on my personally attending Songkran in all these years but on descriptions by locals as well as viewing a large number of videos and photographs made by tourists and posted online. These sources are far too numerous to reference here.

the Chinese Vegetarian Festival, Chinese New Year or Festivals associated with famous local deities such as Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao in Pattani also attract many religious tourists (Cohen, 2001a, 2008; Hamilton, 2008). The contours of religious tourism therefore do not easily fit within a single ethnic or religious tradition but are instead representative of a more variegated and diverse religious complex. Thus while the Hat Yai Songkran Festival is not marketed as a religious event, it takes place in the context of long-standing perceptions of the South as a site of spiritual potential and multiple religious interactions which are, for many Chinese tourists in particular, an integral aspect of their tourist experience.

Recognising the desire among many tourists to have religious experiences, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and Hat Yai Municipality have both been active in building upon this image of sacredness as one element of their marketing strategies. Religious imagery is a common feature of Hat Yai Municipality's branding of the city and it has also been engaged since the 1980s in a project of building, in its Municipal Park, religious statues which are designed to serve as both tourist attractions and genuine sources of sacred power (Askew, 2006; Maud, 2007). Statues of Chinese and Hindu deities as well as a large standing statue of the Buddha now form some of the most prominent tourist attractions in the city and are central to its branding.

It is not only the Municipality and TAT that seek to leverage widespread interest in Thai spirituality. Various religious specialists also seek out and nurture transnational networks of patronage. Many religious specialists could be thought of as religious entrepreneurs in the sense that they seek to promote themselves to a diverse range of potential "customers" and they show a willingness to adapt to and accommodate the tastes of their clients. This competition, the omnivorous tastes of many tourists and the short time they stay in town, mean that religious specialists need to find ways to stand out from the crowd. One way to do this is in public ritual performances, of which parades are a prominent form. Ritual processions in the context of Hat Yai, then, could be understood as being directed at multiple, and often translocal audiences rather than being primarily an expression of local identity.

Mixing Fire and Water

The long history of religious connections across ethnic and national boundaries helps to contextualise the description of the Songkran procession

above. It suggests that rather than experiencing a completely novel event, participants were drawing on a number of precedents and shared assumptions. Although tourists attending the Songkran rites did not necessarily encounter the precise combination of ritual components and activities, they had a robust enough toolbox to construct an adequate *bricolage.* This fact however does not require ritual participants to inhabit the same cultural world in order to effectively interact in a ritual encounter.

First it is important to note that the elements of both fire and water have numerous ritual uses and associations in both Thai Buddhist and Chinese ritual contexts. Both tap into the aesthetics and embodied practices associated with purification and renewal that are shared to some extent by both Thai and ethnic Chinese in the region. They are also both media for interacting with sacred objects and beings. In popular Thai religious practice, the pouring of water is a common method of transferring sacred power between sacred objects and devotees or between the living and the dead. Monks spray the heads of devotees with holy water (*nam mon*) which has been ritually enchanted. The living pour water (*truat nam*) while monks chant in order to make merit for the dead (Swearer, 2004: 106–107).[11] In Chinese ritual contexts, paper money and objects are burnt to make offerings to ancestors, trials of fire—such as walking over hot coals—are frequently used as "miracles" to demonstrate the power of deities, and firecrackers are let off to prepare ritual spaces.

Fire and water are also often paired in Chinese ritual contexts (deBernardi, 2004: 87, 107). For example, rituals in Pattani associated with the popular goddess Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao and which involve Chinese shrines from throughout the city, involve the paired activities of carrying deities across water—in this case through the river—and then over fire (Hamilton, 2008: 176–180).[12] Indeed, the Songkran rituals of Ajan Praphon's tattooing group also reproduce this pattern: during the course of the ceremonies the statues are first carried through water in the streets of the city and then later that evening they are carried over hot coals in a fire-walking ceremony.

These ritual practices are also not exclusive to each group. Instead, Thai Buddhist and Chinese ritual forms have a long and complex history

---

[11] Regarding controversies surrounding notions of merit transfer through holy water, see Olson (1991).

[12] Hamilton states that the crossing of water symbolises an aspect of the legend of Lim Ko Niao, a Chinese princess who crossed the sea from China to join her brother in Pattani, southern Thailand (Hamilton, 2008:177).

of interaction (Hill, 1996, 2001). In southern Thailand it is not only ethnic Chinese who burn objects at funerals and the letting off of crackers has become a common method of making good a vow (*kae bon*) after a boon has been granted. Conversely, Chinese religious tourists to Thailand are often keen to be sprinkled with holy water while visiting Buddhist monasteries and some even travel to particular monasteries specifically to undergo a purificatory bathing.

The intention here is not to provide a fine-grained understanding of the "meaning" of fire and water but instead to emphasise that they possess similar qualities of purification and of connecting sacred and mundane, between devotee and object of devotion. So while for example DeBernardi (2004) notes that in Chinese contexts fire and water represent opposing *yang* and *yin* principles, I do not seek to attach them to any enduring meanings that can be understood independently of context. Instead, I want to show that the elements of fire and water both draw on multiple resonances and long histories of interactions between ethnic Chinese and Thai Buddhists. Furthermore, it is not so much what they mean as symbols but what they *do* as ritual technologies that is important. It is not exegesis of symbols but the contagion of indexes that I try to evoke.

Staying with the themes of praxis, improvisation and "good enough" communication, the metaphor of language, not as a structural whole but, as James Scott has put it, a dynamic "polyvalent institution . . . that is never still and ever open to the improvisations of all its speakers" (Scott, 1998: 357) is useful. I view the interactions on the streets of Hat Yai in a similar way: not as the expression of a static culture—or even the mixture of two static cultures—but as involving the deployment of a language of sorts in an improvised, open ended moment of communication. This is to say that different participants do not need to agree on the meaning of a practice for some sort of satisfying transferral to take place. This is to move the focus, in a sense, from *langue* to *parole*, from the interpretation of meaning to the act of communication. What I am trying to evoke here is something like the Wittgensteinian notion of "grammar," which is not based on precisely shared concepts or rules held in some master archive but instead emerges out of practice itself.

In these cases it is better to think of ritual as a sort of temporary assemblage that brings a heterogeneous range of actors into relationship with each other, if only briefly, rather than the expression of the "identity" of an already constituted community (c.f. Robbins, 2010; Seligman et al., 2008). This is to see ritual not only as an essentially conservative practice but to see its orientation to the *future* as an assertion which is only

complete when it receives recognition. At the same time, however, the fact that ritual organisers can make this particular "bet" with a reasonable expectation of success is testimony to the existence of wider sensibilities regarding the nature of sacred objects and one's embodied engagement with them.

It is worth evoking Christopher Pinney's distinction between "aesthetic" and "corpothetic" modes of interaction between persons and sacred objects (Pinney, 2001). Rather than the detachment of an observer, the corpothetic mode involves an embodied engagement with the object of devotion. The ritual object, so to speak, is not "complete" in itself but only becomes so by means of embodied ritual interaction with a devotee. It is through such corpothetic engagement with sacred objects that bystander becomes devotee, and spectacle becomes ritual exchange. Such engagement does not depend upon an abstract knowledge of the meaning of the symbols in question. Instead, it is the embodied interaction itself and the blurring of the distinction between self and other that occurs in the process that are significant. These notions, I argue, are crucial to understanding what Ajan Praphon and his group were trying to achieve through their inclusion of their statues in the Songkran procession.

The Luang Pho Thuat Tattoo Group

I now turn to the Luang Pho Thuat tattoo group itself; its origins and its attempts to find a niche in this peculiar environment. The openness to new possibilities has also been instrumental in allowing this group to achieve some level of success. However, I do not want to suggest that this openness to innovation necessarily implies a lack of religious authenticity. It is on purpose of this next section to demonstrate that the tattooing group has roots in an established ritual lineage and that its ritual performances during Songkran cannot be understood merely as a touristic spectacle.

In order to better understand this group it is necessary to say something about their central figure of worship. Luang Pho Thuat is a legendary Thai monk who is now something akin to a patron saint of southern Thailand. He was supposed to have lived during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and to have performed a range of miracles (*aphinihan*), most famously turning seawater fresh by dipping his foot into it. Despite his apparent antiquity, however, a figure known as "Luang Pho Thuat" has only existed since the 1950s, when the abbot of an obscure rural monastery in Pattani province called Wat Chang Hai, Phra Khru Wisaisophon

(better known as Ajan Thim), began producing amulets of a monk he claimed to have seen in visions while meditating and whom he identified as the Ayutthaya era monk (Jory, 2008; Maud, 2007).[13] Produced with the support of a member of an important local Sino-Thai family, Anan Khananurak, amulets made by Ajan Thim almost immediately achieved a reputation for providing invulnerability and quickly became highly sought out, especially among the armed forces. Nowadays Luang Pho Thuat is one of the most highly respected monks in Thai popular religion. He is widely regarded as a protective spirit and is now far and away the most imaged religious figure in southern Thailand. As the centre of the Luang Pho Thuat cult, Wat Chang Hai has been one of the most popular Buddhist pilgrimage sites in southern Thailand and attracted a large number of visitors from within Thailand, and from Malaysia and Singapore.[14]

The popularity of Luang Pho Thuat as a religious figure must be understood in light of broader strategies of state endorsement of localised Buddhist saints and associated myths to the project of state building (Horstmann, 2008). Through their association with the Thai armed forces and the production of a prominent source of Buddhist sanctity in a Muslim-dominated region, Wat Chang Hai and Luang Pho Thuat have been significant in symbolic attempts to incorporate the lower South into the Thai nation state and the creation of a landscape that can be "read" as both Buddhist and Thai (Jory, 2008; Maud, 2007, 2012; Gesick, 2002).[15] Both Wat Chang Hai and Luang Pho Thuat have also received conspicuous support from the royal family, particularly the Queen, with what is currently the world's largest statue of the saint constructed in her honour in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province further to the north.

In addition to his importance for southern Thailand, Luang Pho Thuat is also developing an increasingly transnational presence. His amulets are among the most popular ones traded in Malaysia and Singapore. Furthermore, the hagiography produced by Wat Chang Hai also mentions several

---

[13] The story of Luang Pho Thuat's origins is very complex and difficult to summarise. For the most concise account of this genesis, see Jory (2008).

[14] In recent years, however, insurgency-related violence that has broken out in the Muslim-dominated borderland provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat has considerably reduced the number of people willing to travel there.

[15] More recently, Wat Chang Hai's association with the armed forces and the political struggle for the lower South has become more literal. It has been prominent in the militarization of Buddhism in the region, having been used as an army camp in which the torture of suspected insurgents has taken place (Amnesty International, 2009; see also Jerryson, 2010).

sites in the present-day Malaysian state of Kedah where Luang Pho Thuat was supposed to have wandered. In recent years, monasteries and stupas that are claimed to mark the sites where he stayed have become pilgrimage sites and have been developed mainly with the support of ethnic Chinese financial support.

As well as a thriving trade in amulets, Ajan Thim's "discovery" of Luang Pho Thuat has also spawned various other kinds of ritual activity centred on Wat Chang Hai which are linked to, but not encompassed by, Theravada Buddhism. These include a lineage of tattooists of sacred symbols who draw on the charisma of both Luang Pho Thuat and Ajan Thim and who make use of mantras and designs developed by the latter. Although drawing on traditions and practices of tattooing that are widespread in Southeast Asia, the tattooists see Luang Pho Thuat as the originary font of the sacred power in which they are invested, with Ajan Thim as the chief "avatar" of this ancestral power. Ajan Praphon belongs to the second generation of tattooists after those who learnt aspects of their esoteric knowledge directly from Ajan Thim. Although not based at Wat Chang Hai himself, he clearly seeks to maintain and emphasise this connection.

Tattooists are hierarchically organised in lineages, with those receiving tattoos expected to enter into a master-disciple relationship with their tattooist. To signify this relationship disciples are first tattooed with the design of their master (*yan khru*) and are supposed to pay ritual respect to him.[16] Each year lineages perform ceremonies of homage to their masters (*wai khru*) when disciples gather to pay respects to the senior members of the lineage and partake of the efficacious power of the teacher.[17] Disciples from around Thailand as well as a significant number from Malaysia and Singapore make the journey to participate in these rites. For the Wat Chang Hai tattooists, these ceremonies coincide with Songkran and also with lustration (*song nam*) rites held at the monastery to honour of Luang Pho Thuat and Ajan Thim. This then is a time of great ritual activity, which brings together the geographically dispersed networks of disciples. Ajan Praphon, along with his disciples, travels to Wat Chang Hai to pay respect to his own master, as well as to make offerings to Luang Pho

---

[16] Things are not always as clear cut at this and those receiving tattoos often shop around. One Singaporean tattooing enthusiast told me that certain people like to "collect" as many *yan khru* as they can find.

[17] On similar ceremonies in northern Thailand see Swearer (2004:83–86). Such teacher-disciple relationships are widespread and important in Thailand and occur in a range of contexts. Even supposedly secular relationships, as between school teachers and their students, are given a sacred character through *wai khru* ceremonies (Wong, 2001).

Thuat and Ajan Thim and to take part in the *song nam* ceremonies more generally.

Ajan Praphon clearly intends for the ceremonies he organises in Hat Yai to be an extension of the rituals centred on Wat Chang Hai. He has named the ceremonies *song nam*, dedicated to Luang Pho Thuat and Ajan Thim.[18] However these rites go beyond typical Buddhist lustration practices in that they also include a fire-walking ceremony and the red palanquin chairs upon which the statues of the monks are carried. With this hybrid creation, drawing on Buddhist purification through water and Taoist purification through fire, Ajan Praphon seems intent on bridging the Theravada Buddhist context of Wat Chang Hai with the folk Taoism that dominates popular religious expressions in the heavily Chinese city of Hat Yai. This combination, however, puts Ajan Praphon in a somewhat strange position in relationship to both Theravada Buddhist institutions and established Chinese shrine groups. This is evident in the way Ajan Praphon described his early attempts to establish fire-walking rites in Hat Yai. When I asked him about his reasons for his establishing the rites, his response was "if the Chinese could do it, then the Thai could do it too." When I asked him what he meant by this he explained that he had begun the fire-walking in part to prove a point: that Luang Pho Thuat was every bit as *saksit*—imbued with efficacious power—as the Chinese deities who dominated rites in the city.[19] At first Praphon tried to include his statues of Luang Pho Thuat in an event called the Procession of the Deities (*khabuan he phra*) organised by one of Hat Yai's biggest Chinese charitable foundations during Chinese New Year. According to Praphon this had initially been met with reluctance from the event's organisers. He told me that when he had asked to participate:

> People [from the Foundation] commented that Luang Pho Thuat is Thai and that this place is for Chinese *phra* [*deities*] only.[20] I asked them if Chinese *phra* can [participate], why not the Thai? He said, they are different traditions (*khon la naeo kan*). And I said why? It's all *saksit.* Luang Pho Thuat is

---

[18] Other statues are involved though. In 2000 these included two Buddha statues, and statues of Somdet Phutthajan To, central Thailand's most imaged monk, and Luang Pho Thuat Krai. The latter is another monk "discovered" in visions by Ajan Thim and was reputed to be able to transform himself into a tiger.

[19] For a fuller discussion of the concept of *saksit* see Vandergeest (1993), Tambiah (1984) and Taylor (1993).

[20] These statements also point to the ambiguities of the Thai word "*phra*." This word can be used equally to refer to a variety of sacred figures, including monks and heavenly beings.

saksit isn't he? Why are you forbidding? Are you the abbot here? They were just being bullies (*nak leng*) . . . I said I'll do it myself, and two years later I did it, I did a fire-walking (*lui fai*) ceremony. I don't boast much about that day. I did it because of the power of Luang Pho Thuat.

Initially, the ability to hold his own fire-walking depended on the support of Hat Yai Municipality and particularly that of the former mayor, Khreng Suwannawong. This support had allowed him to participate in the Songkran parade and he was able to host his first fire-walking in 1993. At the same time, the Municipality provided Praphon and his group with a space in the Municipal Park for his ritual performances. As he lacked the space to perform his own fire-walking or the resources to organise his own street parade, the fact that the Municipality allowed him to attach his own practices to broader celebrations of Songkran was crucial for his ability to expand his public presence and reach a wider audience. Also, having performed his rites several times during Songkran he was subsequently allowed to take part in more general folk Taoist rites in Hat Yai. By 2000, he was regularly involved in the parade of the deities and fire-walking ceremonies from which he had originally been excluded.

Praphon, like many religious practitioners in the southern Thai borderland, relies on developing transnational networks of patronage. A long-time resident of Hat Yai, he has also spent extended periods of time in other parts of the country and regularly travels to Malaysia to perform tattooing and sell amulets. He has a cluster of local supporters, mainly poor young men working within the local informal economy as motorcycle taxi drivers or similar. Most, but not all, of these men have received tattoos from Praphon and can therefore be considered his disciples (*luksit*). They provide most of the ritual labour during the ritual event but cannot provide much in the way of financial support. Instead, his main source of income is from ethnic Chinese devotees and customers who come predominantly from Malaysia and to a lesser extent from Singapore. During my first visit to his shrine he pointed out a number of photographs on the walls of people being tattooed by him: "This one from Malaysia, this one from Singapore, this one from Penang," and so on. Therefore, in order to further expand his group the support of the relatively wealthy Malaysians and Singaporeans was crucial. Ajan Praphon emphasised that he wanted to build up the tattooing group so that he could afford a larger residence somewhere on the outskirts of town. He admitted though that money was hard to come by, especially because the majority of his local devotees were quite poor. In 2000 a number of Malaysian followers actively participated in the events, though they left most of the carrying of palanquins,

fire-walking and so on, to the Thai supporters. In general they had either received tattoos, or received Luang Pho Thuat amulets, from Praphon. The Malaysians I met were all ethnic Chinese but they were by no means elites, tending also to be working class or small business owners. Some were urban professionals, including an optician, a hair-stylist and tailor from KL. Praphon was also on the lookout for more substantial support. In the same year a group of potential patrons attended the fire-walking rites with an eye to possibly buying a piece of land for Praphon to build a larger shrine hall dedicated to Luang Pho Thuat. Clearly it was important for Ajan Praphon to find a ritual register that both satisfied his own desires to pay respects to venerate Luang Pho Thuat and Ajan Thim and those of his foreign Chinese patrons.

It is impossible to say to what extent Praphon settled upon his particular rites out of a desire to appeal to foreign devotees, to fit into the city's Chinese ritual culture, or to express something of his own Sino-Thai identity. What is clear though is that whenever I raised the question of his Chineseness, or those of his religious practices, he fiercely denied this line of questioning. Instead of claiming any sort of Chinese identity, Praphon was instead emphatic about the Thai-ness of what he was doing. For example, he stressed on a number of occasions Luang Pho Thuat's status as a *Thai* saint and that his practices were of/for Thai people, not Chinese (*an ni khong khon thai, mai chai khon jin*). He also took pains to point out how his own ritual palanquin differed from Chinese ones. Although they superficially resembled the Chinese palanquin, there were a number of important differences (Figure 13.1). Ajan Praphon pointed these out to me, explaining what made them "Thai": the palanquins were covered in flowers, bore peacock feathers, and the ends of the "armrests" and "backrest" bore elephant heads instead of the dragon heads normally found on Chinese ones.[21] Multiple flower garlands placed around the necks of the monks also convey a distinctively Thai mode of honouring respected figures. Furthermore, the flags standing vertically along the back of the palanquin, normally representing the flags that Chinese warriors wore on their backs, were decorated not with Chinese figures but with the same formulae (*yan*) that Thai tattooists make use of in their designs. Thus while this ritual equipment would appear at first sight to be markedly

---

[21] It should be noted that elephants are not only a commonly-used Thai symbol of power and royal authority, they are directly implicated in the Luang Pho Thuat narrative, especially in the legend of the founding of Wat Chang Hai.

Figure 13.1   Statue of Luang Pho Thuat seated upon a red palanquin (*kiao*) and surrounded by ritual paraphernalia. Flowers, flags, peacock feathers, and carved elephant heads at the rear corners are visible. Photograph by the author.

Chinese in character, from Praphon's point of view, his practices were making a strong assertion of Thai-ness. Indeed, in many of his statements he characterises his attempts to have Thai monks included in public rituals in Hat Yai as a virtual defence of Thai national pride. This also demonstrates that far from creating some sort of cultural melange where "Thai" and "Chinese" intermingle, the categories of Thai and Chinese remain extremely important.

These objects are, however, more than abstract symbols. It is also important that their efficacy is demonstrated, and this efficacy is expressed in the correct and successful completion of ritual. Thus the statues are not included in the procession merely to be seen. For Ajan Praphon, the fact of religious interaction is extremely important for the validation of the images as sacred and efficacious and for the successful completion of the *song nam* rites. In a sense, the public of Hat Yai, including foreign tourists, is the mirror in which the aura of his statues was validated and incorporated. In other words, the ritual objects he listed were representative of an identity at one level. They allowed Ajan Praphon to make distinctions between "Thai" and "Chinese" and to characterise his practices as belonging to the former. At the same time, the actual validation of these symbols, their recognition as genuinely *saksit* and therefore authentic and efficacious, could only take place through acts of corpothetic engagement in a ritual context.

The seriousness with which Ajan Praphon and his group take the *song nam* event is demonstrated in the number of ritual activities and preparations they engage in during the Songkran festival. They demonstrate that the Songkran parade was not an isolated, decontextualised event created purely for the consumption of tourists but fitted within an elaborate set of ritual practices. At the same time the involvement of tourists was crucial for the success of the event—though not as spectators but as participants.

In 2000 the Songkran parade and fire-walking took place in the morning and evening of the same day respectively. Beforehand, however, a large number of other rituals took place designed to prepare both participants and location. In many of the rituals Ajan Praphon was assisted by one of his own masters from Wat Chang Hai.[22] First, the statues of

---

[22] This man's own speciality was *manora*, a form of ritual dance and mediumship distinctive to southern Thailand, rather than tattooing. This illustrates that there are a number of ritual traditions centred on Wat Chang Hai and which draw on the charisma

monks on their palanquins were transported out to the Municipal Park on pickups in the early morning of the day prior to the parade. This involved each of the statues being ritually invited (*anchoen*) to make the journey, along with the letting off of Chinese crackers in ways typical of moving Chinese deities. The ground at the Municipal Park also needed to be prepared. This involved propitiating the local spirit (*jao thi*) through the offering of a tray of various foodstuffs. He also buried a bag filled with secret ritual items under the location on which the fire-walking was to take place. Five monks from Wat Tha Khura, a monastery located close to the Songkhla Lake famous for its association with *manora* lineages, were also invited to chant in order to bless the proceedings. According to followers, these monks were particularly strict (*khreng*) and therefore both powerful (*saksit*) and worthy of respect. Later a Chinese lion dance was performed inside the fire-walking area. As part of this a large number of Chinese crackers were strung up above the fire-walking area and let off as the lion entered the area.

Participants themselves were also prepared through a series of rituals. These included a *wai khru* (honouring teachers) ceremony and the ritual "recharging" the tattoos of followers. Followers also said that they were supposed to abstain from sex and alcohol on the day of the proceedings, though at least in the case of alcohol this didn't seem to be strictly adhered to. One day before the parade and fire-walking Praphon distributed shirts bearing a picture of Luang Pho Thuat on a palanquin and the name of the religious event in Thai and English to all participants. He drew a sacred design (*yantra*) on the shirts and chanted over each recipient as we took the shirts from his hands.

Afterwards followers set about preparing the palanquins for the next day's events. This involved an elaborate and time-consuming process of wetting strips of cloth and winding them tight with bamboo poles in order to secure the palanquins' handles, the statues, and the flags, flowers and other paraphernalia. Naturally, given the rough treatment they would receive the next day it was vitally important that the statues were secured properly and this process went on until late at night. Replete with paraphernalia, the statues and devotees were transported to the town hall early in the morning and took part in the Songkran parade. That evening the fire-walking was performed in the Municipal Park, drawing a small

---

of Luang Pho Thuat and that these traditions are by no means separate from one another. On *manora* see for example Guelden (2005) and Horstmann (2004, 2009).

crowd. In this event only members of the tattooing group took part, while everyone else was consigned to being spectators. It was therefore during the street parade that the most significant ritual interactions with a wider public took place.

As this brief description shows the involvement of the tattooing group in the Songkran parade was just one part of a much wider and more elaborate set of ritual events. These rites drew on a range of traditions—folk Brahmanism, *manora*, Buddhism and folk Taoist practices—incorporating them into a ritual whole. These were done seriously and with a trajectory that cannot be reduced to the logic of a tourist event designed to raise revenue for the city's businesses. Nor was the even merely a simulacrum of a "real" religious practice purely designed for tourist consumption. While tourist interactions were vital for the success of the event, it was for the purpose of validating the sacredness and power of Luang Pho Thuat and the other monks rather than to generate tourist spending. Tellingly, Praphon actively resisted the temptation to capitalise on the parade to raise funds. Although it is common in these sorts of processions for participants to carry boxes for collecting donations, Ajan Praphon did not attempt to monetise the event in this way. Indeed, I saw a number of tourists reach for their wallets to make donations before they realised that no one was collecting.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with a prevailing cultural critique in Thailand, which understands contemporary developments of Songkran as the transformation of a traditional event and symbol of national identity into a debased, morally questionable and commodified spectacle. Instead, this paper points to tourist-oriented events as potential sites of ritual creativity rather than merely consumption. In this particular case Ajan Praphon and his group have made use of the Songkran festival to further their religious goals. The success of such a project though relies on a certain lability in the social field; a certain openness to novelty and an ability to react spontaneously and improvise. The ritual involvement of the tourists in the procession—the fact that they recognized the objects as sacred and behaved in an appropriate way—both demonstrated and confirmed their sacred nature. The tourist "bystanders" were as much a part of the process of sacralization as those carrying the statues. The involvement of the tourists is a necessary part of the event, not merely a supplement. It is their recognition of the sacredness of the objects that validates the ritual as authentic. The "spontaneity" of this encounter, however, is based

in a wider history of interethnic interactions in the region where similar ritual sensibilities, rather than shared understandings of the meanings of symbols, have formed the basis of exchange and allowed the negotiation of difference. I have used "fire" and "water" as tropes in this discussion. Rather than understanding them as symbols with set meanings—and thus implying the existence of coherent cultural systems—I have instead focused on their ambiguities, and their performative qualities, which facilitate the crossing of boundaries.

Ritual, then, can be as much about the assertion of identity as the negotiation of the ambiguities of difference. As Seligman et al. (2008) have argued, ritual is arguably not a discrete area of human behaviour set apart from everyday life. Instead it is particular mode of engagement with the world, a practice of living in the context of ambiguity, and of mediating difference rather than trying to overcome it by the imposition of discrete categories. The particular use of improvised ritual tools, where water easily takes the place of fire, points to a "ritual" attitude towards difference, in which solutions are provisional and "satisficing" (Simon, 1956) rather than definitive.

For small-time religious specialists in the southern Thai borderland this is necessarily a process of engaging with actual and potential devotees from Malaysia and Singapore. This involves finding methods of appealing to the ritual sensibilities and aesthetics of tourists and cross-border devotees. What was produced then was a genuine act of devotion but one which used the commercialised context of Songkran to address and interact with a transnational audience. In this sense acts of devotion cannot be separated from acts of promotion. Finally, however, I argue that this engagement with a diverse public and the production of what on the outside appears to be a profoundly hybrid event did not necessarily produce an erosion of "culture" from an emic perspective. Indeed from Praphon's point of view, his practices were designed to assert the power of one of southern Thailand's most prominent religious figures and symbols of the nation state. These points suggest that identity and difference are not necessarily opposed, and that the crossing of boundaries does not necessarily imply their erosion.

References

Amnesty International (2009) Thailand: Torture in the Southern Counter-insurgency. London: Amnesty International Publications.

Appadurai, Arjun (1996) The Production of Locality, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 178–199.

Askew, Marc (2002) Tourism and the Production of Lower Southern Thailand's Border Space: From Danger to Pleasure and Pilgrimage. *The First Inter-Dialogue Conference on Southern Thailand.* Pattani, Thailand.

—— (2006) Sex and the Sacred: Sojourners and Visitors in the Making of the Southern Thai Borderland, in Alexander Horstmann and Reed L. Wadley e.d. *Centering the Margin: Agency and Narrative in Southeast Asian Borderlands.* Oxford: Berghahn.

—— (2008) Materializing Merit: The Symbolic Economy of Religious Monuments and Tourist-Pilgrimage in Contemporary Thailand, in Pattana Kitiarsa e.d. *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods.* Routledge, pp. 89–119.

Askew, Marc and Erik Cohen (2004) Pilgrimage and Prostitution: Contrasting Modes of Border Tourism in Lower South Thailand. *Tourism Recreation Research* 29: 89–104.

Cohen, Erik (2001a) *The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Phuket: Religion, Ethnicity and Tourism on a Southern Thai Island,* Bangkok: White Lotus Press.

—— (2001b) Thailand in 'Touristic Transition,' in Peggy Teo, T. C. Chang and K. C. Ho e.d. *Interconnected worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia.* Oxford and New York: Pergamon, pp. 155–175.

—— (2008) Kuan To: The Vegetarian Festival in a Peripheral Southern Thai Shrine, in Pattana Kitiarsa e.d. *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods.* Routledge, pp. 68–88.

Comaroff, John L. and Jean Comaroff (2009) *Ethnicity, Inc,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

deBernardi, Jean (2004) *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Gesick, Lorraine (1985) Reading the Landscape: Reflections on a Sacred Site in South Thailand. *Journal of the Siam Society*: 157–161.

—— (2002) Places, Stories, Dreams: Luang Pho Thuat, Wat Chang Hai, and Southern Thai Historical Sensibilities. *The First Inter-Dialogue Conference On Southern Thailand.* Pattani, Thailand.

Golomb, Louis (1978) *The Brokers of Morality: Thai Ethnic Adaption in a Rural Malaysian Setting,* Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii.

Guelden, Marlane P. (2005) Ancestral spirit mediumship in southern Thailand: The nora performance as a symbol of the south on the periphery of a Buddhist nation-state. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i.

Hamilton, Annette (2008) Performing Identities: Two Chinese Rites in Southern Thailand. *The International Journal of Asian Studies* 5: 161–185.

Hill, Anne Maxwell (1996) Gods, Ghosts, Ancestors and Buddhism? Chinese Popular Religion in Thailand. *International Thai Studies Conference.*

—— (2001) Tradition, Identity and Religious Eclecticism among Chinese in Thailand, in Tong Chee Kiong and Chan Kwok Bun e.d. *Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand.* Singapore: Brill Academic Publishers; Times Academic Press, pp. 299–317.

Horstmann, Alexander (2004) Ethnohistorical Perspectives on Buddhist-Muslim Relations and Coexistence in Southern Thailand: From Shared Cosmos to the Emergence of Hatred? *Sojourn* 19: 76–99.

—— (2008) Pilgrimage and the Making of Ethnic Identities on a Plural Peninsula, in Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory e.d. *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on the Plural Peninsula.* Singapore: NUS Press, pp. 275–291.

—— (2009) The Revitalisation and Reflexive Transformation of the Manooraa Rongkruu Performance and Ritual in Southern Thailand: Articulations with Modernity. *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37: 918–934.

Jackson, Peter A. (1997) Withering Centre, Flourishing Margins: Buddhism's Changing Political Roles, in Kevin Hewison e.d. *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation.* London and New York: Routledge.

—— (1999a) The Enchanting Spirit of Thai Capitalism: The Cult of Luang Phor Khoon and the Post-modernization of Thai Buddhism. *Southeast Asia Research* 7: 5–60.

—— (1999b) Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods and Magic Monks: Thailand's Boom Time National Religion of Prosperity. *South East Asia Research* 7: 245–320.

Jerryson, Michael (2010) Militarizing Buddhism: Violence in Southern Thailand, in Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer e.d. *Buddhist Warfare.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 179–209.

Johnson, Irving Chan (2008) The Mobility of Stories and the Expansive Spaces of Kelantanese Thai Religiosity, in Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory e.d. *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on the Plural Peninsula.* Singapore: NUS Press, pp. 304–326.

Jory, Patrick (2008) Luang Pho Thuat and the Integration of Patani, in Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory e.d. *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on the Plural Peninsula.* Singapore: NUS Press, pp. 292–303.

Kasian Tejapira (2002) The Postmodernisation of Thainess, *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos.* London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 202–227.

Low, Setha M. (2000) *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture,* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Maud, Jovan (2005) The Nine Emperor Gods on the Border: Transnational Culture, Alternate Modes of Practice, and the Expansion of the "Vegetarian Festival" in Hat Yai, in Wattana Sugannaasil e.d. *Dynamic Diversity in Southern Thailand.* Chiang Mai: Prince of Songkhla University & Silkworm Books, pp. 153–178.

—— (2007) The Sacred Borderland: A Buddhist Saint, the State, and Transnational Religion in Southern Thailand. *Department of Anthropology.* Macquarie University.

—— (2012) Sacred Tourism and the State: Some Paradoxes of Cross-border Religious Patronage in Southern Thailand in Nelia Hyndman-Rizik e.d. *Pilgrimage in an Age of Globalisation.* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press.

Oakes, Tim and Donald S. Sutton (2010) Introduction, in Tim Oakes and Donald S. Sutton e.d. *Faiths on Display: Religion, Tourism and the Chinese State.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, pp. 1–25.

Olson, Grant A. (1991) Cries over Spilled Holy Water: "Complex" Responses to a Traditional Thai Religious Practice. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22: 75–85.

Parthasarathy, D. (2009) Rethinking Urban Informality: Global Flows and the Time-Spaces of Religion and Politics. *Global Cities Conference.* Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.

Pattana Kitiarsa (2005a) Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36: 461–487.

—— (2005b) Magic Monks and Spirit Mediums in the Politics of Thai Popular Religion. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6: 209–218.

—— (2008) Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods. London and New York: Routledge.

Picard, Michel and Robert E. Wood (1997) Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Pinney, Christopher (2001) Piercing the Skin of the Idol, in Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Thomas e.d. *Beyond Aesthetics: Art and the Technologies of Enchantment.* Oxford & New York: Berg, pp. 157–179.

Poranond, Ploysri and Mike Robinson (2008) Modernity and the Evolution of a Festive Tourism Tradition: The Songkran Festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in Janet Cochrane e.d. *Asian Tourism: Growth and Change.* Amsterdam, Boston and London: Elsevier, pp. 311–321.

Pravit Rojanaphruk (2004) Thainess is a Limited Definition. *The Nation.* online ed.

Reynolds, Craig J. (2011) Rural Male Leadership, Religion and the Environment in Thailand's Mid-south, 1920s–1960s. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42: 39–57.

Robbins, Joel (2010) If there is no such thing as society, is ritual still special? On using *The Elementary Forms* after Tarde, in Matei Candea e.d. *The Social after Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments.* London and New York: Routledge, pp. 93–101.

Salazar, Noel B. (2010) *Envisioning Eden: Mobilizing Imaginaries in Tourism and Beyond*: Berghahn Books.

Scott, James C. (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Seligman, Adam B., Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, et al. (2008) *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Simon, Herbert A. (1956) Rational choice and the structure of the environment. *Psychological Review* 63: 129–138.

Swearer, Donald K. (2004) *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja (1984) *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tanabe, Shigeharu and Charles F. Keyes (2002) Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos. *Anthropology of Asia Series.* London: Routledge Curzon.

Tannenbaum, Nicola (1987) Tattoos: Invulnerability and Power in Shan Cosmology. *American Anthropologist* 14: 693–711.

Taylor, James L. (1993) *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

—— (2008) *Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand: The Religiosity of Urban Space,* Surrey, England: Ashgate.

Terwiel, Barend J. (1994) *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*, Bangkok: White Lotus.

Urry, John (1990) *The Tourist Gaze*, London and Newbury Park: SAGE Publications.

Vandergeest, Peter (1993) Hierarchy and Power in Pre-National Buddhist States. *Modern Asian Studies* 27: 843–870.

Weller, Robert P. (2006) *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wong, Deborah Anne (2001) *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wood, Robert E. (1997) Tourism and the State: Ethnic Options and Constructions of Otherness, in Michel Picard and Robert E. Wood e.d. *Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 1–34.

FROM PARTY BUREAUCRAT TO RITUAL EXPERT: THE ROLE
OF THE OFFICIATOR IN CHINESE FUNERAL CEREMONIES

Shaoming Zhou

Previous studies have shown that local communal religion in villages has
revived with great force in contemporary China. In some areas, the prac-
tice of rituals has the entire community participating, and it becomes a
political, economic, and symbolic resource as well as a resource-generator
(Dean, 2003).[1] Though some scholars express different views (Vermander,
2009),[2] they all observe and agree that local religious rituals are signifi-
cant arenas for the negotiation of modernity in contemporary China. The
attitude of local cadres towards popular religion and their participation
in it thus play a significant role in the revival of Chinese local religion. It
is important to re-evaluate and recognise the significant involvement of
local cadres in the ritual process of contemporary funerals. This consti-
tutes a reintegration of the state into the ways of Chinese tradition, as well
as a new articulation of those traditions.

In this paper I will refer to the village of Shagou in Eastern China as a
case study to investigate the administrative structure of funeral ceremo-
nies, focusing on the role of the funeral officiator (Naquin and Watson,
1988).[3] I will look into the question of whom or what the officiator repre-
sents in funeral rituals and how this satisfies the expectations of tradition,

---

[1] Dean, Kenneth (2003) "Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-east China,"
The China Quarterly, 174:338–358.
   Chau, Adam (2006) *Miraculous response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*,
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
[2] Benoit Vermander argues that 'revival' and 'exit' taken as a twofold phenomenon
facilitate an understanding of the evolving and often disputed nature of China's religious
sphere throughout history as well as the socio-political stage that the country is entering.
   Vermander, Benoit (2009), "Religious Revival and Exit from Religion in Contemporary
China," *China Perspectives*, 4:4–16.
[3] Previous studies have shown that regional variations of practice in Chinese funerary
ceremonies have much to do with the specialists of funerary rites. Their knowledge of
funeral rites and their personal understanding and illustration of them has, to a great
extent, shaped the rites as what they have been throughout, at least, the recent history
of China.

the political demands of the state regarding the conduct of funerals, as well as villagers' personal interests in their funerary affairs. I will argue that the funeral process is not at any stage a passive reflection of the life of the community. Every ritual or task performed during the funeral process serves to redefine people's lives, temporarily or permanently within both the family and community.

Background

Traditionally, an adult male, called *Li xiansheng* (礼先生) (Ebrey, 1991),[4] is invited to officiate at the funeral on the family's behalf when a death occurs in Shangou.[5] Throughout Shagou's history, different members of the community have taken up this role at different times, and the person enjoyed absolute power regarding the funeral process. The family entrusted the funeral to the appointee and gave him total control of events. Guided by tradition, the officiator could decide on whatever was necessary for the funeral proceedings, and the family had to comply with his decision. Under no circumstances could members of the family contravene the officiator's arrangements for the funeral process.

In local people's eyes, serving as funeral officiator was a mark of high social status. In Shagou, therefore, not everyone could become or act as a funeral officiator and the people who actually did so were highly regarded. Traditionally, only two kinds of person could be appointed in this role: ritual professionals,[6] and lay people who were considered to be well-educated, sensible and capable. People described the latter as non-professional (*feizhuanye*, 非专业).

Naquin, Susan (1988) "Funerals in North China: Uniformity and Variation," in James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, e.d., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, University of California Press, pp. 37–70.

Watson, James (1988) "Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society: Pollution, Performance, and Social Hierarchy", in James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, e.d., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, University of California Press, pp. 109–134.

[4] Ebrey uses the term 'funeral director' for this role.

Ebrey, Patricia (1991) *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals*, Princeton University Press, p. 65.

[5] The person invited to do this is the 'officiator for the funeral ceremony,' referred to in the discussion below as the 'funeral officiator.'

[6] My informants could not recall when the professionals started disappearing from funerals in the region. As far as their memories go, they could recall that they have witnessed any such performance in their lives.

The ritual professionals were people who had trained to become ritual specialists, usually graduates from Confucian academies (*shuyuan* 书院) (Hucker, 1985).[7] They established themselves in the locality by demonstrating their mastery in the field. They worked as masters of ceremony for various ritual ceremonies, including funerals. The 'non-professional' had not received any formal training to become ritual specialists; they had gained the knowledge they had simply through their own interest and participation. According to the villagers, every family would like to have a ritual professional to officiate their family funeral as these people could ensure them a proper funeral service. However, not every family could actually afford them. People's expectations of a non-professional funeral officiator was not as high as what they have for the professionals but, on the other hand, the former could be more flexible since the understanding or definition of their role could vary for different people under different circumstances.

In the past only rich families could afford to appoint a *Li Xiansheng*. This was indeed a chance for them to demonstrate their standing in the community by means of appropriate formal arrangements for their family funerals. Poor families could only afford to ask a very well-educated, sensible and capable person.

Nowadays the term used for a funeral officiator in Shagou has changed from *li xiansheng* to *zhusang* (主丧). None of my informants could say when this change took place. Currently, government administrative officials are most popular choice for the post.

Administrative Officials

Today, the funeral officiator remains a key figure in the complex ritual process of a funeral, but in recent years his power has taken on a quite different form. The former representative of the deceased and of tradition has become the representative of a new social and communal reality. Currently, the role of funeral officiator in Shagou is fulfilled most often by a member of the village administrative committee. However, according to the head of the Shagou village administrative committee, this is not the result of government intervention into villager's private affairs. Rather, the

---

7 For this translation see Hucker, Charles (1985) *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, California: Stanford University Press, p. 437.

practice of committee members serving as funeral officiators had become inevitable since, for a range of other reasons, the beginning of the 1980s.

Firstly, the availability of funeral officiators has become an issue in Shagou in recent years. In 1980s, numerous systems of contracting farm production work between individuals and collective economic organizations were introduced to villagers in Shagou by the local government (Gazetteer of Longkou, 1995).[8] This practice restored family farming, and encouraged villagers to invest time and effort into family enterprises. Since then, villagers have been very busy taking advantage of any new opportunities to improve their economic well-being (Kelliher, 1992).[9] The performance of funeral ritual functions now had to compete with other family activities, in particular 'getting rich.' Obtaining an appropriate funeral officiator from within the village became more difficult than before, and at times was impossible.

The head of the village administrative committee pointed out that it is still easy enough for powerful families who are wealthy and well positioned in the village's social network to find a funeral officiator whom they like. That is because people still regard a funeral as an opportunity to make political connections with other people, and it is an honour to be asked to officiate by a wealthy family. Potential officiators are thus prepared to incur a business loss for their political gain in such cases. It is the weak families in the village who often find it difficult to find an officiator for their funeral proceedings, or who cannot get someone they want. They too would like someone of status to act as their funeral officiator but they are just not socially or financially powerful enough to secure the services of such a person.

Finally, it has also become necessary for the committee to monitor the conduct of the funeral proceedings. In the mid-1980s the revitalization of local traditions started taking place in the Longkou region[10] and people there started reviving the traditional form of funeral rituals. With regards to this 'revival,' what had come to the village administrative committee's attention is not the 'superstitious' elements involved, as the committee is capable of keeping such elements within reasonable bounds. What concerned them the most at the time was the amount of money spent

---

[8] Shandong sheng Longkou shi shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, 山东省龙口市史志编撰委员会 (1995) e.d., *Longkou shizhi* 龙口市志 [Gazetteer of Longkou], Jinan: Qilu shushe, Jinan.

[9] A point also made by Kelliher, Daniel (1992) *Peasant Power in China: the Era of Rural Reform 1979–1989*, Yale University Press, p. 91.

[10] Longkou—the prefecture in which Shagou is situated.

on funerals as it has increased significantly and the competition between families for an 'appropriate' funeral within the village had became intensified day by day. Also, as the poor families in the village did not have the means to join the competition they gradually became rather depressed whenever family funerals occurred. The committee members were often required to solve some domestic disputes between family members caused by the family's funerary spending or to comfort those families that felt themselves to be failures. In their view the village would have suffered more social instability if this issue had not been dealt with.

In the 1990s the village administrative committee decided to take an active part in the directing of funeral proceedings in the village. They determined that 2,500 RMB should be the maximum expenditure for a funeral in Shagou. At the time, a realistic figure for villagers' average annual income would be around 3,500 RMB and 2,500 RMB should be an amount that would be affordable to most of the families in the village. In doing this they not only put a ceiling on the cost of funerals but also restricted their scale, effectively 'killing two birds with one stone.'

According to the head of the village administration this regulation only serves as official policy in theory. In reality it works just as a guide. There are some wealthy or powerful families in Shagou who have spent far more than 2,500 RMB on their own family funerals. But as long as the villagers raise no complaint, which is the case most of the time, the committee regards such occasions as a private matter. What the committee does do is to ask the family to keep the funeral process to an acceptable scale. They can spend their money on enforcing their social network within the village or beyond by serving a big banquet or giving some big 'thank you' gifts to the mourners without making the funeral a public spectacular. If they believe that the funeral has become too 'extravagant,' the family receives a 'warning' from the committee. Most of the time such 'warnings' are not backed by sanctions of any kind.

It seems to me that there are two things to consider arising from the views of the head of the village administrative committee. On the one hand, as the state's representative in the village, he is supposed to say 'no' to the rich and powerful families in accordance with the state policy on funerals and not allow such expenditure. This is his responsibility. On the other hand, as a member of the village community, the committee head has to take all possible consequences into consideration before saying 'no' to wealthy families. This is not just a question of establishing and maintaining social networks: there can also be an element of personal financial interest. Someone who wants to maintain their position as a committee member has to do whatever they can to please the villagers, and as long as

no one complains about the rich villagers' behaviour then the committee members do not have to say or do anything about it.

The administrative committee elected by the villagers began to institute policies on villagers' affairs in the mid 1980s. A new committee is elected every three years and two committee members are appointed to look after the village's weddings and funerals, (*hong bai xishi* 红白喜事). Although there has been no regulation specifying which surname groups these two members should come from, the common practice in force since the first village election was conducted in the mid 1980s is that the two members should come, one each, from the Wang and the Sun surname groups, which are the two dominant surname groups in the village.

According to the head of the administrative committee, this arrangement has arisen in accordance with village tradition. In Shagou, people prefer to ask someone within their own surname group to be the funeral officiator since, to them, a death is first and foremost a family affair. It would be regarded as shameful for the family and also for their lineage if they failed to find a funeral officiator within their own surname group; the other surname group would have reason to ridicule them.

Nowadays, having the committee members appointed from the two surname groups has not only ensured the administrative committee's involvement in the villagers' funerals, but also gives the committee the opportunity to monitor each funeral in case it steps outside the guidelines drawn by the committee. Political or social fairness might be another consideration. The head of the committee noted that he prefers to understand such an arrangement as a matter of convenience, as no obvious power struggles between surname groups have taken place in village history.

Nevertheless, things may not be that simple. It should be noted that the make-up of the village administrative committee suggests that the village leader likes to recruit the accountant from his own surname group. This suggests that there are in fact political divisions between these two surname groups in the village. Offering the representatives of both surname groups opportunities for participating in the management of civil affairs indicates the committee's effort to reflect the actual social constitution of the village and their commitment to maintaining a balance in the power distribution between the surname groups.

My investigation in Shagou led me to conclude that the arrangements made by the village administrative committee are overwhelmingly popular amongst the villagers and directly reflect their preferences. People like to have someone from the village administrative committee as their funeral officiator and the committee head is always their first choice. Even if the

head is from a different surname group, his attendance at the funeral is very important to the family. Villagers still believe that committee members are the people best equipped to draw together all the resources required for a funeral, such as helping hands from amongst the villagers. When I asked my informants at the village activity centre about why they would like the head or one of the committee members to be their family funeral officiator, the villagers were unanimous saying, '*Tamen dou shi shoule jiaoyu de nengren*' (他们都是受了教育的能人—They are the most well-educated and capable persons in the village). My informants confirmed to me that the head and the committee members enjoy their high regard.

What is interesting here is that, since the mid 1980s, when the power of the village administrative committee over the villagers' affairs was reduced under the new administrative structure adopted by the Chinese government for local administration, members of the committee in Shagou have still been able to maintain their informal powers. This includes their continuing to be considered the people best able to bring villagers together, for funerals or anything else. When I asked more about this, my informants said that it is not a question of how much power the village administrative committee still exercises over the villagers' affairs; rather it is a question of how much the committee's views on village funerals represent those of the villagers. This seems to confirm the finding of Jean Oi, who has noted that 'political participation and popular control will increase only when people perceive it to matter to their interests.' (Oi and Rozelle, 2000)[11]

Villagers repeatedly claimed, for example, that the 2,500 RMB limit on funeral expenditure has taken a big burden off their shoulders financially. If the village administrative committee allowed villagers to follow the trend elsewhere and revitalise the traditional form of funeral rituals, the cost of funerals would climb higher and higher. For example, in the neighbouring village, Dongzhuanqu 东转渠, the average cost for a funeral in 2001 was already around 6,500 RMB—a cost far beyond affordability for most Shagou villagers. However, without the committee's formal intervention, Shagou would become the laughing stock of neighbouring villages, as funeral expenditure remains one of the main criteria for judging people's filial piety towards their ancestors. The committee's regulation gives villagers an acceptable excuse for spending less on funerals and ensures that they will not be subject to any blame or pressure or censure for doing so.

---

[11] Oi, Jean and Rozelle, Scott (2000) "Decision-Making in a Chinese Village," *The China Quarterly*, 6:539.

Furthermore, to my surprise, quite a few people mentioned that having a committee member as the family's funeral officiator ensures that no details of a funeral will violate the committee's policy regarding such matters. This does not mean all that takes place in a funeral is totally in accordance with committee policy. But if the committee member, the unofficial representative of the committee at the funeral, does not raise any question about the way that the funeral is conducted, then people assume that everything is all right. Should the funeral step too far outside the line then the family can make the committee member bear any blame because he did not say anything about it. Such comments clearly indicate that people are still sensitive about a funeral's potential political consequences.

At least one important conclusion can be drawn from all this: the village administrative committee has not become merely an administrative body. It still exercises some political influence on people's lives, brought about by its remaining economic power over the villagers in areas such as contracting out the land and organizing production, although this hardly compares with the power it held before (Benewick and Wingrove, 1995; Blecher and Shue, 1996).[12] This might lead villagers to regard the role of funeral officiator as to some extent political, although the head of the village administrative committee strongly denied such a possibility. Shagou villagers have a considerable trust and confidence in the head and the committee members. Despite all the turbulent political experiences in China, political and administrative leaders in the village still remain the most popular persons for the role of funeral officiator and for other civil affairs. The villagers believe that the committee's stand on the village's funeral affairs essentially reflects their own interests, as well as the ambiguities inherent within those interests.

We might have to bear in mind that all the committee members are from within the village. To the villagers, they are not just some cadres or officials and, most importantly, they are members of 'family' as well. While exercising their political or administrative power in village funerals, to a certain extent, it is rather easy for them to do this with 'family' interests in mind. Villagers do not feel pressured by what they are asked to do by the committee members.

---

[12] Benewick, Robert and Wingrove, Paul (1995) e.d., *China in the 1990s*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., London, pp. 127–129.

Blecher, Marc and Shue, Vivienne (1996) *Tethered Deer; government and economy in a Chinese county*, Stanford University Press, pp. 194–200.

Ritually Knowledgeable Bureaucrats

The post of administrative officers does not necessarily guarantee a person the position of funeral officiator. They have to be suitable for the job, which means that they have to command considerable knowledge of local funeral rituals and be a 'sensible person.' In the view of the villagers, a funeral officiator must be an intelligent person and possess at least the following capabilities:

Familiarity with Local Funeral Practice

Apart from ritual specialists, in former times local gentry would have been available to provide advice about what was written in the ritual classics and ritual handbooks such as the *Jiali*. No ritual professionals are recorded as having served as funeral officiators in recent village history, and currently, a funeral officiator's understanding of related rituals is drawn mainly from word of mouth, collective memory and his own experiences as a participant. This indicates that the level of professionalization is very low: a funeral is a community ritual rather than the product of a larger or more formally codified system of knowledge.

When asked how they define a 'sensible person,' all my informants agreed that they should have some education (*you xuewen* 有学问). Though, at the time of my survey, the highest educational qualification all the committee members have is a middle school graduate certificate, they are the best-educated people available amongst the villagers. People believe that education gives a person a better understanding of funeral rituals and a much-needed ability to present the rituals to the villagers in a clearly understandable way. Unless they are regarded as well educated with high literacy, a person would not be recruited.

Knowledge of the Local Social Structure

Funeral rituals are not just about dealing with the 'soul' and the body of the deceased. As Naquin points out, the rituals are also about dealing with the mourners themselves, the bereaved family and friends of the deceased (Naquin, 1988).[13] Or as Bloch and Parry claim, funeral rituals are related to the organizational aspects of the society in which the funeral occurs

---

[13] Naquin, Susan (1988) 'Funerals in North China: Uniformity and Variation,' in Watson and Rawski, e.d., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, pp. 53–54.

(Bloch and Parry, 1983).[14] To date in Shagou, the social network is still the first connection that villagers turn to once a big occurrence takes place in their life, and funeral rituals are no exception. The key issue here is the local social structure. This requires the officiator at a funeral ceremony to be equipped with far more knowledge and skill than that simply pertaining to the funeral itself.

According to the villagers, knowledge of local funeral rituals is not usually the first criterion for selecting a funeral officiator as all the villagers have a similar memory and experience of funeral rituals. In the local people's point of view, such knowledge is only a precondition; it provides no guarantee of a successful funeral. In fact what people look for in a funeral officiator is a 'person capable of managing things'—a *neng banshi de ren* (能办事的人), not a *shu daizi* (书呆子), 'bookworm.' Apart from having the knowledge required by a funeral officiator, he should be sensitive to the family's situation, including its financial situation, kin and affinal ties, and its social standing in the village. He must have the capacity to deal appropriately with the implications of these various situations.

Administrative Structure Behind a Funeral

A funeral officiator is responsible for the smooth running of the entire funeral proceedings, but he would never be able to carry out his duties all by himself. Traditionally, in Shagou once a funeral officiator was appointed an administrative body for the funeral was formed. The diagram below is an illustration of its administrative structure:

Zhusang 主丧 *Funeral Officiator*

Da tingyong 大听用   *Zhangwu* 帐务
Executive Officer   Accountant

Xiaotingyong 小听用   *Xiaotingyong* 小听用
Assistant   Assistant

---

[14] Bloch, Maurice and Parry, Jonathan (1983) *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge University Press, p. 6.

The Economics of Funerals

In the old days, it was the funeral officiator who determined how to carry out a particular family funeral. Once the tasks and procedures were determined, the accountant would calculate the total amount of money needed for the funeral. As soon as he got the figure from the accountant of the money required, the officiator's first task was to assess the assets of the family and lineage members concerned, then tell the family to get the money he needed for the funeral. Once the figure had been determined, the family had to pay for it and families sometimes had to sell property or lands if they did not have enough cash in hand. The administrative body wanted to see the family pay for a funeral in accordance with its financial situation and had the power to force a family if they were not willing to do so. However the funeral officiator would not make an over-stated assessment of the family's assets. It had been a common practice in Shagou that people did what they could financially for their family funerals. They did not have to stretch their financial resource to its limits as long as the tradition was respected. Yet people would be highly regarded if they chose to spend all they had on their family funerals. 'Being filial' was the first priority.

Nowadays, it is not the funeral officiator but the family members who determine how much they intend to spend on a family funeral. However, the weakening of village administrative committee's political power and the rise of villagers' strength in village affairs has not reached a point at which one side could dominate the other. Therefore, negotiations over village affairs between the two parties have to take place, and funeral ritual proceedings in the village are no exception to this. Good cooperation between the committee and the families are the key for smooth funeral proceedings. The common practice is for the funeral officiator to gather the deceased's descendants together to discuss how much they intend to pay for the funeral. He then determines how to proceed. Only when there is a dispute will the officiator have to use his social and administrative skills to direct the funeral proceeding toward a satisfactory outcome.

According to the villagers, these days there are more disputes between the siblings over the expenditure on funeral than in olden times. Most such disputes are not caused by questions of whether a family should pay for the funeral but how much each individual should contribute. Disputes might arise, for example, when a sibling in a better financial position than the others insists that everyone should share the costs equally, or that the eldest should take more responsibility for the funeral financially.

Sometimes children are unwilling to pay for the funeral because they will not receive a fair share of the parents' assets, and so on and so forth.

Villagers believe that the decline of parents' dominant economic position in the family has caused more disputes over payment for funerals. In the old days the extended family was the dominant living arrangement for Longkou people (Gazetteer of Longkou, 1995).[15] Within the traditional extended family unit, each individual's income was part of the household's finances and all the family's property was in the parents' names regardless of what it was or who used it. When the parents became old it was quite natural for them to live on the family property. And would they consider that they have every right to expect that when they die what they have, or had, will be spent for their funeral. Any objection to this from their children would be regarded as being in the highest category of improper filial behaviour—the worst offence.

With the popularisation of the nuclear family in modern and contemporary China since the 1960s (Chan, Madsen and Unger, 1984; Gao, 1999),[16] the former highly collective property ownership relationship between parents and their children has changed greatly in Longkou. The members of the younger generation have become the breadwinners in their own family, and their financial gains are no longer joint assets of the extended family. When the parents become old they generally do not have much left for their own use after having spent most of their life savings in establishing their offspring, offspring who now live in a nuclear family setting. Most parents have no income after they stop working, and so are unable to live on their own unless they have accumulated a lot of money during their working life. Thus they have to rely on the support of their descendants. When they die, their children spend what is now their own money to hold a funeral for their parents. For these reasons the children now have more say on the amount of money to be spent on their parents' funeral. Of course the parents might express their wishes regarding the conduct of their funerals before they die—as, for example, in the question of what kind of 'grave clothes' (*shouyi* 寿衣) and burial they want.

---

[15] Shandong sheng Longkou shi shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, 山东省龙口市史志编纂委员会 (1995), *Longkou shizhi* 龙口市志 [Gazetteer of Longkou], Jinan:Qilu shushe, p. 766.

[16] Ibid., pp. 105, 766. The same process took place at a similar time in other parts of China as well.

Chan, Anita, Madsen, Richard and Unger, Jonathan (1984) *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*, University of California Press, p. 194.

Gao, Mobo (1999) *Gao Village*, University of Hawai'i Press, p. 48.

The shift of economic power from parents to children is having a fundamental impact not only on families, but also on the administrative and economic power structure of the village. The interests of the bereaved have more weight in making funeral arrangements today, and this is one of the key reasons for some changes that have occurred in funeral rites in Shagou.

Nowadays once a death takes place the administrative committee consults the eldest son of the family rather than the lineage leader. Whether the lineage leader should also be consulted is up to the family to decide, although most times the family will do so. Neither the lineage leader nor the village administrative committee have the right to decide anything on the family's behalf; they can only serve in an advisory capacity if so required.

Tasks to be Performed by a Funeral Officiator

A contemporary funeral officiator in Shagou has four essential tasks to perform. Although he will not find a task list waiting for him upon his arrival at the home of the bereaved family, an invited 'officiator' will know what to do and people know what they can expect from him. If not, he would not have been invited in the first place.

His first task is to make sure the family's expenditure for the funeral is under control. There is common agreement amongst the villagers regarding what is proper expenditure for a funeral: there is no need to waste money on unnecessary tasks as long as the family's true financial position is not concealed simply in order to avoid outlays on funeral expenses.

This is clearly still a vague definition of 'proper expenditure,' and the reality most certainly varies from family to family. In most cases it is the family that decides what amount can and should be spent, and afterwards the family itself, and not the funeral officiator, that has to bear any blame or can take credit if the community is unhappy or happy about the financial management of the funeral. Nevertheless the family might voice complaints behind his back suggesting that any shortcomings were his doing and this might damage that person's reputation as a funeral officiator.

Nowadays, the task of an officiator is rather easy. In Shagou, families would have everything prepared within their financial capacity beforehand for a natural death and the expenditure for the funeral would have been discussed and arranged among the family members. At the funeral, all the officiator need do is to direct its course. It is sudden death that still

requires the officiator's involvement for the financial aspect of a funeral. If the family does not have the necessary financial means, the officiator might have to help the family to organize it. In some cases, they might provide assistance by lending the family money from the village accounts.

The funeral officiator's second main task is to organize a sufficient number of villagers to perform each task required for a funeral. In Shagou it is not usually a difficult task to gather villagers to help with a funeral unless the family has a difficult relationship with others. In keeping with local tradition, unlike the case in James Watson's description of Cantonese people's participation in a funeral (Watson and Rawski, 1988),[17] people come to a funeral uninvited. In their words, *Xishi qing, sangshi dao* (喜事请，丧事到), 'For joyous occasions you are invited, for funerals you just come.'

People come forward even before a death takes place. When they know that a death is inevitable they come to the family to ask if they can help in any way. Failure to do this would result in the reputation of a person and their family being damaged: they would be considered heartless. According to the villagers, funerals in Shagou have always been occasions of cross-surname group co-operation rather than an opportunity for competitive display where surname groups try to out-do each other. Coming forward for a funeral, or not doing so, is a way to demonstrate one's participation in the village community.

However, there are some families in the village that find it hard to find sufficient people to help at their family funerals, although people in Shagou believe that only those who do not maintain a good relationship with other villagers might get into such a situation of difficulty. This is a time when the officiator needs to offer a helping hand by getting enough people to come forward.

The third main task for the funeral officiator is to make sure that all mourners are well received and that proper appreciation is expressed to them. In Shagou each mourner's relationship with the family decides their role in a funeral. Close relatives, for example, undertake no task at a funeral apart from mourning, but distant relatives may serve as assistants to the funeral officiator for various tasks required. The people from the same surname group as the deceased are assigned significant roles,

---

[17] According to Watson, in the Hong Kong New Territories people keep doors and windows shut when a death occurs in the village. This is to avoid pollution or bad luck brought by the death. James Watson, 'Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society: Pollution, Performance, and Social Hierarchy,' in Watson, James and Rawski, Evelyn, e.d., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, p. 109.

while the people from other surname groups are allocated tasks that are less significant. Consequently the funeral officiator must have the ability to ensure different people play a role appropriate to their relationship to the family.

A funeral officiator must be aware of each person's relationship to the family: social, financial, political and genealogical. He should not ask a daughter to perform any duties apart from mourning. However, the daughter's temporary change of status does not extend to a son-in-law's place in the family. He still remains an outsider and accordingly should be treated as a guest. The funeral officiator can ask him to carry out extra duties for the funeral: for example carrying the mourning banner (*fan* 幡)—a task that he would never ask a family member to perform.

People nowadays may be somewhat less particular about the roles they play. A person may insist on performing some particular task that the funeral officiator should never ask them to perform, as traditionally it should not be assigned to them.

There may be mourners who are unfamiliar to the funeral officiator. Should such a situation arise, he must consult family members or people who are aware of the situation, and then assign the person appropriate roles to perform. The funeral officiator should treat people who are politically influential or socially important to the family as honoured guests. No task should be allocated to them; appropriate persons should be assigned to accompany them, making sure they are well received for their social and political status, and advice regarding the funeral should be sought from them from time to time throughout the proceedings. This is definitely in the interest of the family and most likely in the interest of the funeral officiator as well.

This is possibly the most challenging and significant task for the officiator. Local people say that it is easy to get the funeral proceedings underway but difficult to manage its social and political aspects. Building up a good relationship with others has never been an easy task. As Andrew Kipnis states, human relationship 'is dependent upon the continuing work of human actors. . . . In practice, actors skilfully adopt strategies and draw on cultural resources in the pursuit of contemporary ends. . . . Practices are not merely 'remnants' of tradition, but rather are activated or vitalized in present village life. (Kipnis, 1997)'[18] The funeral officiator should always pay more attention to relationships than to specific tasks. In the

---

[18] Kipnis, Andrew (1997) *Producing Guanxi*, London: Duke University Press, Druham and London, p. 7.

villagers' words, *ban shi rongyi, chuli guanxi nan* (办事容易，处理关系难)
'Managing the task is easy, handling the social context is hard.' A com-
mon saying from the past, *sanfen liqi chuli sangshi, qifen liqi chuli guanxi*
(三分力气处理丧事，七分力气处理关系), advises 'People should only
invest 30% of their energy on the funeral itself and devote the remaining
70% to personal relationships.'

The fourth main task is to ensure the smooth running of the funeral
process. The duty of a funeral officiator commences as soon as a death
occurs and is not complete until the end of the burial day. Once he has
taken on the role, no matter how particular details might differ, his ulti-
mate goal is to create a smoothly run funeral for the family.

In Shagou people believe that 'a smooth and proper funeral,' *shunshun
dangdang de sangshi* (顺顺当当的丧事), is always characterized by two
key factors: that no dispute erupts, no matter what, and that the wishes
of the deceased person and their family are respected. Nowadays, more
disputes appear in family rituals than before, as more and more members
of the families have to share the cost of the funeral rather than use the
family's collective savings. The disputes might not take place on the days
of the funeral proceedings, but before or after. The capacity to prevent the
disputes from happening and to create a truce between conflicting parties
is part of the social value of the funeral. In the local people's words *si wei
da* (死为大), 'death is the most important'—meaning that, with regard
to the funeral, the interests of the deceased are the most important. The
day of a funeral is dedicated to the deceased and no issue is so important
that it should be allowed to disrupt the smooth running of a funeral. Any
family dispute or violent argument would be regarded as an extremely
unfortunate event at a funeral, showing an appalling lack of respect for
the dead. That is why people constantly say *Kanzai siren de mianzi shang,
bie chao le!* (看在死人的面上，别吵了！)—'For the sake of the dead
don't argue!'

This issue is actually far more complicated than one might imagine.
For example, what would happen if there is a conflict between the stated
wishes of the deceased person and the wishes of his or her family, or if
someone who is socially important to the family is in disagreement with
the funeral officiator over some aspect of the arrangements, such as the
expenditure for, or the scale of, the funeral? A funeral is a public ritual
display observed by the community, and the question of whose orders
to follow is not just a matter of correctness; it concerns people's dignity
and social standing in the village. That is why it is always highly appre-
ciated by the family that someone who enjoys a good reputation or is

socially and politically powerful attends the funeral, so that in a situation of dispute they have someone to rely on. Of course, before the people take action, consultation with the funeral officiator is extremely necessary, though sometimes it is just for the sake of the officiator's social face. Or the officiator might come to the person himself, seeking help. The smooth running of a funeral requires a balance between tradition and the social power that participants enjoy. A funeral officiator should not only be able to foresee potential problems but also deal with any unexpected incident. This is probably the most difficult task that a funeral officiator has because of the many factors that could have an effect on a funeral, and a funeral officiator needs to have a comprehensive range of complex social and interpersonal skills. When those skills fail, he needs the intervention of powerful persons.

Conclusion

Based on the outline above, the current administrative structure for the organization of a funeral in Shagou can be illustrated as follows:

Funeral Officiator ⇄ **Family**

Chief organizer

Assistant   Assistant   Assistant . . .
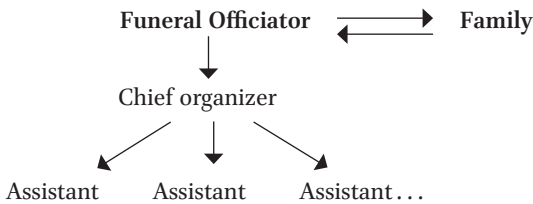
Compared to the traditional structure illustrated previously, there has been a diminution of a funeral officiator's power and authority in funeral proceedings. Although still doing what he did in former times or even more from a funeral's outward appearance, he is no longer able to enjoy all of the power or authority that a funeral officiator used to have. Rather than the result of a power redistribution or power struggle between surname groups or political factors in the village, the contemporary situation is in fact the result of social change. In the face of changing social and economic conditions, the head of the village administrative committee had no choice but to take on the role of funeral officiator. This role change has not enhanced the power of funeral officiators in any way.

There are a number of ways to interpret the changes in the administrative structure of funerals, the reduction in the funeral officiator's power

and authority, and the implications this might have for villagers' lives, at least within the village of Shagou. First, it may reflect a trend or transition from an old-people-centred situation in Chinese villages, towards a society and lifestyle that is more young-people-centred, and this clearly applies not only in Shagou. Currently, villagers are in a position in which they can negotiate with the village administration over matters that concern them. When the members of a village administration serve as funeral officiators, villagers can negotiate with them over funeral arrangements, and in the process of negotiation, members of the village administration do not serve as all-powerful representatives of the deceased or of tradition. What they negotiate is the balance between the administration's regulations, general social expectations and the family's interests. What I have found is that there is broad support for a set of arrangements in which the expenses for funerals are kept under more or less strict control, and the responsibility for maintaining these restrictions is vested in the hands of the village administration through the funeral officiator. Serving the interest of the deceased in funeral matters is dependent on the family's willingness and on the state of public opinion. Public opinion is currently found to be a major influence on what happens in funerals, and a major constraint on the selfishness of younger family members. However, life in Shagou has changed dramatically in the last 60 years. To what extent family members remain willing to respect the wishes of the deceased and how effective public opinion continues to be, remains to be seen. Under the current arrangement the main focus of a funeral is no longer the interest or wishes of the dead person nor the transition of his or her *hun* (soul) to the next world. The interests of the deceased have become secondary to those of their children.

What is important about a funeral now is not to please the dead or maintain tradition but to serve the needs of the living family. The funeral officiator can no longer act solely as a representative of the dead or tradition—a role that in the past gave him substantial power over the bereaved family in a funeral and in life in general. Instead he now has to work more closely with the family. He still has to take into account the wishes of the dead person and tradition but to what extent he can achieve this has become more and more dependent on how well he can work with the family and how strongly he feels for the tradition. From the family's perspective he has been invited not just to look after the deceased but also to fulfil the family's wishes for the funeral.

Changes in the role of a funeral officiator have taken place at the expense of the interests of the deceased person. In the past, no matter what hap-

pened, the dead person's wishes and interests had to be respected by the family to their utmost capacity. Tradition required the family to settle the unsettled *hun* of the dead by any possible means, including selling its houses or lands if necessary. This is no longer the case. The funeral officiator has no authority to ask the family to do so. To a certain extent he now has little choice but to follow the family's wishes. The fading of the funeral officiator's power indicates that the essence of a funeral has changed fundamentally in Longkou's recent history. The transformation of a *hun* is not the funeral officiator's priority and his main task is not the smooth running of relevant ritual performances but the family's satisfaction in different regards. There are more funeral practices indicating that bereaved families want to spend less and less time and money on the funeral and prefer to use the money and energy they have to knit social networks. If the ritual performance is the necessary means of transforming the *hun* of the dead, the simplification of the funeral procedure can hardly help to materialize this aim. It may be, however, that accounts of past funeral practices are somewhat idealised, and that in practice, the shift is not quite as significant as it may seem.

Secondly, who or what the funeral officiator represents has also changed. In the old days the funeral officiator was very much the representative of the deceased and of tradition or *Li*—rituals, that is, in line with the ideology promoted by dynasties and states. Today the head of the village administrative committee is still the most popular person for the role of funeral officiator in Shagou. But with the above-mentioned shift in whose interests are served in funeral rituals, the officiator has to put the family and official interests in front of those of the deceased. The funeral rituals conducted by the officiator now represent a mutual accommodation arrived at between the bereaved family and the constraints of official policies which reflect the new social consensus. The state's policies on funeral rituals still exert a heavy influence on the villagers as far as funeral rituals are concerned, but certain concessions to villager's personal interests have to be made. As an administrator of the funeral the funeral officiator works within the guidelines of the family's wishes and does what they ask him to do. At the same time as a member of the village administrative committee the funeral officiator has to ensure that the funeral will not step over any line drawn by the local government.

How the officiator feels about tradition still plays a big part in family funerals. He could still enhance his power in the name of tradition if he wishes, because the funerary process has to be played out traditionally no matter what. He is able to make the family bear all the blame should they

dispute his directives for a 'traditional' funeral and he is protected under the umbrella of tradition. So the question is not about whether he can maintain the tradition, but how determined he would like to be. There are all kinds of factors to be considered, such as his social network and political future in the village.

In the process of a changing tradition what has been sacrificed are not the interest of the state or the bereaved family but that of the deceased. In the old days the deceased's interest was underwritten by tradition and *Li*; now it is heavily dependent on the inclinations of the bereaved family. If the family wants to continue the tradition then the deceased might be given a traditional funeral ritual. Otherwise they have to accept whatever is arranged. The current government and its representatives in Shagou—the village administrative committee—have no intention of reviving funeral rituals in full. People are more than happy to stay in line with the village administrative committee in the matter of funerals. As the villagers pointed out, this allows them to be better off in the current economic climate, which is marked by a struggle for upward socio-economic mobility.

Thirdly, the villagers' trust in their local administration has resulted in the members of the village administrative committee having become the most preferred persons to take on the role of funeral officiator. The trust seems to be built on two grounds: first, villagers believe that the committee's policies on village funerals represent their interests by lifting part of the associated financial burden from their shoulders. Under the current funerary administrative structure the popular presence of the members of the village administrative committee would simply not be possible unless the villagers welcomed these policies. Secondly, members of the committee have the qualities traditionally required of a funeral officiator—that is, to be well educated and capable.[19] If not, the villagers would not choose them in the first place. It should be noted that the funeral officiator has to consult the family on how to conduct the funeral. How much the funeral officiator can represent tradition thus depends, first and foremost, on

---

[19] The high school graduates are the most well-educated persons in the village as none of the villagers who received a tertiary education have been willing to come back: they all chose to work in a big city. When the township committee came to the village's general election in 1997, the villagers were told that the criterion for the head of the village administrative committee was to have completed senior secondary school study. Although the then-head still remained a strong candidate for the job and popular among the villagers, he had to withdraw his nomination, as he was only a middle school student when he left the village for military service.

the family's views. In these circumstances the trust that villagers put on the committee members is mostly built on the policies they represent. It remains an open question how much account the villagers would take of the committee members' representation of tradition if these policies did not please them.

The popular selection of committee members for the role of funeral officiator reflects on a process of revitalisation vis-à-vis the state. State officials are engaged in traditional ritual activities and thereby enlisted in the perpetuation of age-old customs that the state had once opposed. What is really changing the realities of funeral ritual in this case are changing economic realities within families and local communities, rather than the modernising influence of the state. While the present government encourages people to 'get rich,' such encouragement is hardly required, now that villagers are free to pursue their economic aspirations in a rapidly urbanising society. If people succeed in their quest to become wealthy and have significantly more disposable income, it may well be that social expectations about the funerals change toward more elaborate displays.

References

Benewick, Robert and Wingrove, Paul (1995) e.d., *China in the 1990s*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., London, pp. 127–129.

Blecher, Marc and Shue, Vivienne (1996) *Tethered Deer; government and economy in a Chinese county*, Stanford University Press, pp. 194–200.

Bloch, Maurice and Parry, Jonathan (1983) *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge University Press, p. 6.

Chan, Anita, Madsen, Richard and Unger, Jonathan (1984) *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*, University of California Press, p. 194.

Chau, Adam (2006) *Miraculous response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Dean, Kenneth (2003) "Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-east China," *The China Quarterly*, 174:338–358.

Ebrey, Patricia (1991) *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals*, Princeton University Press, p. 65.

Gao, Mobo (1999) *Gao Village*, University of Hawai'i Press, p. 48.

Hucker, Charles (1985) *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, California: Stanford University Press, p. 437.

Kelliher, Daniel (1992) *Peasant Power in China: the Era of Rural Reform 1979–1989*, Yale University Press, p. 91.

Kipnis, Andrew (1997) *Producing Guanxi*, London: Duke University Press, Druham and London, p. 7.

Naquin, Susan (1988) "Funerals in North China: Uniformity and Variation," in James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, e.d., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, University of California Press, pp. 37–70.

Oi, Jean and Rozelle, Scott (2000) "Decision-Making in a Chinese Village," *The China Quarterly*, 6:539.

Shandong sheng Longkou shi shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, 山东省龙口市史志编撰委员
    会 (1995) e.d., *Longkou shizhi* 龙口市志 [Gazetteer of Longkou], Jinan: Qilu shushe.
Vermander, Benoit (2009) "Religious Revival and Exit from Religion in Contemporary
    China," *China Perspectives*, 4:4–16.
Watson, James (1988) "Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society: Pollution, Performance,
    and Social Hierarchy, in James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, e.d., *Death Ritual in Late
    Imperial and Modern China*, University of California Press, pp. 109–134.

INDEX