

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

<Book Review>

Victor T. King

Volker Gottowik, ed. *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia: Magic and Modernity*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014, 338p.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 5, No. 1, April 2016, pp. 155-157.

How to Cite: King, Victor T. Review of *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia: Magic and Modernity* edited by Volker Gottowik. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, April 2016, pp. 155-157.

View the table of contents for this issue:

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/2016/04/vol-5-no-1-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

Subscriptions: <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

For permissions, please send an e-mail to: english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University



Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia: Magic and Modernity

VOLKER GOTTOWIK, ed.

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014, 338p.

This edited volume is an integrated and carefully edited collection of informed and ethnographically rich chapters on the relationships between religion and modernity. For me the strength of the volume rests in its detailed ethnographies of spirituality and ritual action. The several chapters emerged from a “scientific network” of early career researchers focusing on the theme of “Religious Dynamics in Southeast Asia.” It was supported initially by the German Research Foundation over a period of four years, and then from 2011 the project was continued, expanded, and translated into a “competence network” financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The book gives expression to the scholarly work undertaken by primarily German-based researchers from the universities of Frankfurt am Main (Birgit Bräuchler, Volker Gottowik), Freiburg (Melanie V. Nertz, Judith Schlehe), Göttingen (Peter J. Bräunlein, Paul Christensen, Michael Dickhardt), Heidelberg (Susanne Rodemeier, Guido Sprenger), and the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg (Annette Hornbacher), along with the coordinator of the BMBF-funded network, Karin Klenke, Thomas A. Reuter at the University of Melbourne, and Martin Slama at the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

The research, in part at least, refers back to the pioneering Weberian-inspired studies of Clifford Geertz on Java and Bali and his conceptualization of religion as a “cultural system,” and appropriately in a German context, to Max Weber’s masterpieces in the sociology of religion. In this connection Volker Gottowik’s book grapples with a major issue which engaged Geertz and Weber and that is the relationship and interaction between religion and modernity. These issues were taken up in various conceptually differentiated ways by Talal Asad in his *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), and in an Indonesian context by among others Andrew Beatty (1999), John R. Bowen (2003), Robert W. Hefner (1985), Webb Keane (1997), and Mark R. Woodward (1989; 2011). The volume investigates “the specific forms that modernity is assuming in Southeast Asia through creative adaptations, which pertain not least to religion” (p. 13), but it confirms that the West is a “symbol” but not a “model” of modernity (p. 172).

All the chapters, in various intriguing ways, examine the religious or spiritual responses to the processes which are generating “multiple,” “plural,” “regional,” “parallel,” or “other” modernities and in particular the reactions to generalized processes of commodification, secularization, rationalization, homogenization, and standardization. There is also a clear concern with the exercise of agency and the forms and patterns of interaction between the human and the non-human or supernatural world.

The volume demonstrates in ample ethnographic detail that there has been a range of spiritual responses in Southeast Asia which engage with, resist, negotiate, and transform the Weberian modernization-religion prospectus; these counterpoints embrace what the volume collectively refers to as “magic” covering such beliefs and practices as witchcraft, sorcery, possession, trance, “faith-healing,” and ancestor and spirit worship. These “magical” responses give expression to ambiguity, but also serve to subvert and resist the processes of modernization (p. 22); they also act to defend, reinterpret, rejuvenate, and revitalize what is referred to, perhaps somewhat misleadingly, as “tradition.” In addition to magic the other set of responses to modernization are embodied in variants of Islamic reformism which perceives modernity as “multilayered, contradictory and contested” (p. 26). Several of the chapters also examine the ways in which the state intervenes in and attempts to control and direct religious life.

The book is organized into three sections entitled “Modern Spirits,” “Modern Muslims,” and “Modern Traditions”; “modern traditions” is an oxymoron of significant proportions and the subject matter is probably better captured in Eric Hobsbawm’s and Terence Ranger’s concept of “invented tradition” (1983). With regard to “modern Muslims” we have to address the phenomenon of radical or fundamentalist Islam and its engagement with modernity; is it “modern”? Even the concept of “modern spirits” is problematical and connects both with modernity and a reinvented tradition in a spectrum of rituals and beliefs which include Philippine passion rituals, self-crucifixion and self-flagellation, Indonesian horse rituals and Rmeet (Lamet) rituals addressing ancestor spirits, and house, village, sky, and forest spirits.

Much of the detailed case material is taken from Muslim Indonesia and especially Java, with some examination of Balinese Hinduism, as well as Christianity in Sumatra and Maluku, and religious transformations in Vietnam and Laos. It is unfortunate that there is very little attention to Theravada Buddhism. Moreover in a volume on the current ideational and active dimensions of religion there are no chapters provided by researchers from Southeast Asia. Had locally-based and -derived field research been included might there have been different conceptualizations of the interaction between religion and modernity and the ways in which tradition is reconstructed and invented? Interestingly in the preface to the volume which outlines the research project and its inputs only one Southeast Asian researcher is mentioned, Goh Beng Lan, a Malaysian anthropologist now based in Singapore. One wonders why there was not a greater level of scholarly exchange between European and Southeast Asian researchers.

Finally, it seems not altogether surprising that in periods of rapid social, cultural, economic, and political change, the human search for meaning and reassurance turns to the spiritual, to domains that are not within the reach of the market and the production of commodities. Nor is it a great surprise that “familiarity with rational-scientific explanations does not necessarily imply the refutation of religious and spiritual interpretations and experiences” (p. 65). Yet the juxtaposition of the twin concepts of magic and modernity does provide a framework which generates some interesting ideas and findings in the examination of the dynamics of religions in Southeast Asia.

Victor T. King

Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University

References

- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Beatty, Andrew. 1999. *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowen, John R. 2003. *Islam, Law and Equality in Indonesia: An Anthropology of Public Reasoning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hefner, Robert W. 1985. *Hindu Javanese: Tengger Tradition and Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hobsbawm, Eric; and Ranger, Terence. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Keane, Webb. 1997. *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Woodward, Mark R. 2011. *Java, Indonesia and Islam*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- . 1989. *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

The Historical Construction of Southeast Asian Studies: Korea and Beyond

PARK SEUNG WOO and VICTOR T. KING, eds.

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013, xviii+468p.

Before this important edited volume by Park and King was published, I had the pleasure to be invited to endorse it. I wrote the following message, “At a time when Southeast Asian Studies is declining in North America and Europe, this book serves to remind us of the fresh, constructive, and encouraging view of the field from Asia. On behalf of Taiwan’s Southeast Asian research community, I sincerely congratulate Professors Park and King for making such a great and timely contribution to the making of Southeast Asian Studies in Asia.”

After having reviewed the whole text once again, I am further convinced that this collective