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*The Camphor Tree and the Elephant: Religion and Ecological Change in Maritime Southeast Asia*

FAIZAH ZAKARIA

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023.

The accolades for Faizah Zakaria's *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant* (on the publisher's website)—"Absolutely fantastic" and "Insightful work on such a vital subject"—by the notable scholars Johan Elverskog, author of *The Buddha's Footprint*, and Bradley Camp Davis, co-editor of *The Cultivated Forest*, is high and deserving praise. The "vital subject" alludes to the less-focused research on the intersection of religion and the environment, particularly in an Asian context, which is famed for its diverse cultures and religions. In this regard, Zakaria's volume is a valuable scholarly contribution to the interdisciplinary fields of Asian studies, Southeast Asian studies, environmental studies, history, environmental history, and postcolonial studies.

The postcolonial lens brings the book's thesis into sharp relief: "What is the role of religion in shaping and structuring interactions between the human and nonhuman in nature? How do they change? And why are Muslim and Christian organizations generally not a potent force in the region's environmental movements?" (p. 2). A central motif in the book is conversions; this is first embodied in religious conversions of Batak people in upland Sumatra and Malays on the Malay Peninsula from animism to (traditionalist, then modernist) Islam and Christianity during the long nineteenth century, heralding a shift from a human-nature interdependency to a relationship of alienation, from enchantment to disenchantment of spirits of the seen and unseen worlds. A corollary conversion is manifest also in the environment, which was greatly impacted by the exploitation of natural resources and rationalization of the landscape (e.g., deforestation and cultivation of cash crops) by Dutch and British colonialists in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, respectively, and their local allies and elites. This led to the devastation and loss of prestige of camphor trees and the megafauna elephants—emblematic of indigenous pride, tradition, and heritage—which gave rise to the book's arresting title, *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant*.

Local folks accord agency to these nonhuman forms as spirit-filled rather than insensate beings that coexist with spirits of the departed. We recognize this as an extension of the decolonizing and

desecularizing (p. 3) impulse. This, in turn, challenges tired dichotomies that ordinarily frame conservation discourses, chiefly civilized (environmentally conscious) colonialists/uncivilized natives; human/nonhuman; sacred and otherworldly/mundane and worldly; rationalized religions and theology (God talk)/everyday religions, e.g., local customs (*adat*), folklore, and superstitions. Zakaria astutely opines, “The everyday indexes the entanglement of two modalities of conversion—embracing both a new religion and internal reform—as being religious responses to the same ruptures and dislocations in politics and environments” (p. 8). In this regard, conversion entails not only an ideological shift from one religion to another but also the material changes of lived religion—religion that is lived—within a faith tradition, e.g., traditionalist to modernist Islam.

The Anthropocene—humanity’s indelible and irreversible impact on the environment—in the everyday, in turn, indexes yet reframes the mutually constitutive environmental and conversion narratives in terms of timeline and agency. Each of these narratives is more commonly positioned as inversely proportional to the other, with conversion narratives “highlighting ascent” and environmental narratives highlighting “decline” (p. 6). But from the uncommon and fuzzy lens of the Anthropocene in the everyday, “environmental narratives grow more sensitive to how beliefs through which humans make meaning about nonhuman worlds can impact the material realm” (p. 6). And conversion narratives go beyond the all-defining “moment of enlightenment” (p. 6) in valuing the long-term processes of individual (e.g., male local elites, anticolonial heroes, shamans) and collective (e.g., the Batak of North Sumatra and Malays in the Malay Peninsula) meaning-making. Negotiating change and reform in this regard is both externalized in the ecosystem of flora, fauna, and spirits, and internalized. Zakaria privileges a “spiritual Anthropocene” that more faithfully encapsulates “the world of spirits” (pp. 3, 188) as this spiritual Anthropocene is grounded in the materiality and messiness of the everyday, as an inseparable part of the environmental and conversion narratives.

The Anthropocene in everyday, lived religion finds expression through a tapestry of personal and historical artifacts such as family histories, shamanic charm books, and folktales, along with colonial and ethnographic archival materials, e.g., diaries. These artifacts ground the narrativization in *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant*’s three parts—“Structures,” “Representations,” and “Materialities”—with poetically named chapters, two in each part. The first part’s two chapters are titled “A Time Before Religion” and “Rupture and Resilience in Conversion.” Chapter 1 sets the stage by taking readers through a “cycle of birth, life, and death” in Batak society. In doing so, it enables us to better appreciate the coexistence of the human and nonhuman and the ways in which the heterogeneous minority of the Batak people (taking into consideration their subgroups) within the Indonesian political landscape acquired “agency over the local environment” (p. 13). It also enables us to appreciate the change that awaits them in the period under study, the long nineteenth century. Chapter 2 puts the spotlight on the Padri War, the civil war between 1793 and 1838 that facilitated the Dutch intervention which sided with West Sumatran

Minangkabau *adat* leaders who were losing the fight against Islamists (p. 14). The colonization of West Sumatra is memorialized through the confessional manuscripts of the Padri War leaders that delineate how the uplands were transformed for the colonizer's accessibility and profit through coffee cash cropping.

The "displacement of local spirits" (p. 14) as a consequence of the dislocation of the human from the nonhuman is highlighted in the first part of the book. The phenomenon is elaborated on in the second part, "Representations." Chapter 3, "Secularizing 'Literate Cannibals' through Scripture," and Chapter 4, "Mountains, Waters, Derangement," showcase new genres of writing, such as biographical writing, school textbooks by indigenous teachers, and family history. It becomes apparent that the then emerging "environmental optic" among the locals sadly became "less attuned to the nonhuman agentive power" (p. 14), which was further fractured by the locals' complicit exploitation of resources, namely, tin mining and camphor harvesting. The advent of capitalist colonialism heralded not only a shift from animism to monotheism (i.e., Christianity) but also the ascendancy of the human over the nonhuman, as Christianity's worldview is anthropocentric: it centers the human in creation.

Despite the author's claim that the "book's ambitions are modest" (p. 15) where Batak historiography is concerned, the third part, "Materialities"—consisting of Chapter 5, "Camphor and Charismatic Retreat," and Chapter 6, "Disenchanted Elephants"—is a standout. This is the heart of book and discusses the fate of the nonhuman world in the hands of its human stewards. The decline of this world is exemplified by the decimation of camphor trees, with the colonial economy in Sumatra favoring benzoin cash cropping. The author carefully avoids romanticizing indigenous spiritualities, which can be a pitfall of faith-based environmentalisms, given the documented evidence of local complicity in changing the environmental landscape. She asserts, "linking indigenous claims to pristine forests and timeless ecological wisdom is flawed" (p. 154). In the Malay Peninsula, the megafauna elephants that were once depended upon for transportation and a marker of status among Malay leaders became redundant and at risk of extinction with the rise of riverine transportation during the British colonization of the Straits Settlements. The Islamization and Christianization of upland Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula—both equally anthropocentric—gradually supplanted shamanic influences along with human and nonhuman coexistence, embodied in a forgotten respect for the "elephant's personhood" (p. 16). Disenchantment indexes the "loss of wonder, a reduction in intrinsic value, and a dis-recognition of agency in the material body of a living being" (p. 156) with the eventuality of dehumanizing the human, however unintended.

The book's conclusion, aptly titled "Faith-Based Environmentalism in the Anthropocene," cements the book's thesis: that "the Muslim and Christian environmentalisms variously taking shape in the region today lack a radical edge" (p. 16), unless a concerted (rather than diffused and ineffectual) sense and practice of accountability in tracing the unprecedented and early ecological

damage in these regions under study is effected. Therein lies the hope that the book offers to us. The conclusion starts by referencing *Laudato Si'* (p. 187), which is globally touted as the green encyclical of the current Pope Francis. It shows the potential of long-standing anthropocentric faith traditions to not only renounce but also repent for their misguided teachings of human stewardship as having abusive dominion over nonhumans. In that vein, the book is disappointingly gender-blind. Zakaria's *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant* leaves us with a prophetic voice, in the spirit of old traditions: it is an invitation to "[rethink] what it means to be human, humanity's responsibilities, and ecological imagination" (p. 194).

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### ***Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia***

HOLLY HIGH, ed.

Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.

While *Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia* initially introduces itself rather humbly as an examination of "stone veneration in mainland Southeast Asia" (p. 5), it quickly expands into a much more ambitious comparative analysis of regional similarities and differences in materiality, cosmology, myth, ritual, and social organization across the region. As an exercise in comparative ethnology, the volume seeks to integrate fine-grained ethnography, local social history, regional historiography, and anthropological theory. Ranging broadly across mainland Southeast Asia, the volume contains three case studies from Laos, two from Myanmar, two from Thailand, and one each from Cambodia and Vietnam.

The two chapters by Holly High and John Holt in Section 1, "Stone Theory," analytically frame the volume's nine subsequent case studies in terms of key concepts and prior scholarship. Stones of various sorts (such as megaliths, statues, city pillars, termite mounds, mountains, stupas) are treated as physical manifestations of locality-centered occult presences and potency which require, even demand, negotiation for successful social life. "Masters" in the book's title refers to authoritative nonhuman presences mediated by these stones, agentive figures that are owners of territory, fertility, and bodies and display both the generative power to create life and the destructive power to take life. Simultaneously caring and capricious, these masters are appeased more than worshipped, pacified more than adored; and human collectivities are compelled to craft mutually beneficial relations with them. The localized cults emerging out of these relations give rise to multiple types and sources of power that nonetheless display thematic, discursive, ritual,