

Book review: Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, Peter A. Jackson (eds): Spirit Possession in Buddhist Southeast Asia - Worlds Ever More Enchanted

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BÉNÉDICTE BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE / PETER A. JACKSON (EDS), *Spirit Possession in Buddhist Southeast Asia: Worlds Ever More Enchanted*. (NIAS Studies of Asian Topics 74). Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2022. 348 pp., £20.00. ISBN 978-87-7694-310-3

Among the central issues of studying religion in mainland Southeast Asia is the question of how the internal diversity of so-called world religions can be accounted for. Does the practice of addressing spirits belong to Buddhism or is it a survival of earlier cosmologies? Is it a separate system or an aspect of the world religion? This landmark volume throws fresh light on these questions by focusing on some of the most prominent forms of spirit address, possession and mediumship. It convincingly argues that these practices are far from being remnants of rural beliefs that will wither away with the spread of disenchanted modernity. On the contrary, as the rich anthropological research presented here shows, they are contemporary, urban, modern and continuously growing. The numbers of mediums as well as their devotees are increasing, and so are the pantheons of spirits they embody. This trend runs through such different places as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam – Laos being omitted here only due to lack of research.

In the introduction, the editors identify four main factors that support the growth of spirit cults: a loosening of state control over religion, growing markets and consumerism, new media, and a globalised idea of cultural heritage. Each contribution in the book then highlights how one or more of these factors operate in specific circumstances, resulting in a larger, surprisingly coherent, picture. While the volume builds on insights of the last twenty to thirty years, it represents the first overview that demonstrates the factors and processes enabling the practice, idea and experience of spirit possession to thrive in the region.

Paul Sorrentino's analysis of the Four Palaces cult in Vietnam argues that the uneven elaboration of the cult's pantheon results from the tension between its overarching structure of cosmic bureaucracy and the historical filling of its various offices with local figures and legends, which makes constant renewal possible. Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière shows how the veneration of female guardian spirits of pagodas in Yangon became increasingly elaborate and independent of the pagodas themselves – yet remains firmly integrated into a Buddhist cosmos.

Kazuo Fukuura documents similar intersections of Buddhism and mediumship in Chiang Mai. This recurrent theme is also prominent in Visisya Pinthongvijayakul's study of Northeast Thailand. While earlier studies emphasised that the selves of Buddhist monks are fortified against spirit intrusion by their ascetic practice, Visisya documents monks who operate as mediums. Still, they outsource some of the more carnal aspects of mediumship, such as dancing, to

their devotees – an example of a relational and participatory concept of personhood that runs through many of the chapters. Benjamin Baumann in particular, in his account of mediums in Buriram province, Thailand, proposes an innovative and reflexive theoretical vocabulary for the analysis of the animist collectives that form the background of these concepts of unstable personhood.

The growth of urban spirit cults along with the wealth of the middle and upper classes leads to changes, as Megan Sinnott analyses for child spirits in Thailand. The objects animated by these beings have turned from the “Golden Children”, made from fetuses or body parts, to their sanitised middle-class equivalent, the Luk Thep, commercially produced dolls. The relation between class and spiritual techniques is also addressed by Nikolas Foxeus’s study of illegal lotteries in Myanmar, where members of the lower and lower-middle class engage with mediums and monks in order to determine the winning numbers. But when spirit cults are seen as cultural heritage, class intersects with nation or region, as in Vietnam or Northern Thailand. For Chiang Mai, Irene Stengs documents the increasing appearance of King Chulalongkorn and his Northern Thai wife in an expanding pantheon.

In distinction to Thailand and Myanmar, where spirit possession quite effortlessly exists within Buddhism, Paul Christensen finds certain tensions in Cambodia. Here, the term “Brahmanism”, which designates non-doctrinal practices within Buddhism in Thailand, is increasingly used to establish a separate tradition in which possession finds new legitimacy. This is striking, especially in light of the findings of Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya, who studied fortune tellers in Phnom Penh. As with Cambodian Buddhism, the revival of these traditions after the rupture of the Khmer Rouge regime owes much to borrowing from Thailand. Erick White’s thought-provoking afterword draws together some loose threads and gives inspiration for future research.

The volume represents an excellent example of thinking through Southeast Asian practices and categories, thereby questioning numerous assumptions on religion, modernity, personhood and class. Still, occasionally authors cannot refrain from the traditional uncertainty argument, which says that people turn to magic in order to gain orientation in an uncertain, ever-changing world. There is always a whiff of enlightened presumptuousness in this rationalisation of practices that provoke the modernist mind. Instead, as Erick White suggests, one may rethink Buddhism from its edges. Perhaps, magic and spirits produce as much complexity and uncertainty as they seemingly ameliorate, and we need an altogether different approach to religion, magic and cosmology to properly grasp their role in people’s lives.

Together with its companion, *Divas and Deities* (edited by Peter A. Jackson and Benjamin Baumann, NIAS Press 2021), which examines the queer practitioners of cults, the present volume provides fundamental – and thoroughly

enjoyable – reading on one of the region’s most striking developments in the field of religion and cosmology.

Guido Sprenger

GREGG HUFF, *World War II and Southeast Asia. Economy and Society under Japanese Occupation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Xxx, 523 pages, £90.00. ISBN 978-1-107-09933-3

Even though Southeast Asia was the site of the most intense battles between Japanese and Allied Forces during the Second World War, no comprehensive overview of events or developments during that crucial period has been written. Instead, general chapters in histories of Southeast Asia or books like Nicholas Tarling’s *A Sudden Rampage: The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia* (London: Hurst, 2001) had to fill the gap, and often did so in a rather general manner. Gregg Huff’s substantial and well-researched volume is the first attempt to produce an extensive and analytical study of the period.

Huff’s book looks mainly at the economic performance of Japan and Southeast Asia during the war. After an introductory chapter, the first chapter deals with the control of people in the occupied territories by the Japanese administration, which was dominated especially by the needs of the military. The next chapter then investigates the financial arrangements that were put into place between Japan and the states it occupied. Monetary extractions were substantial, which was in part possible because inflation remained moderate and only turned into hyperinflation towards the end of the war. This, however, was only half the story, as Southeast Asian GDP values fell by half (or even more, as in the case of Malaya and the Philippines) during the war years. Chapter 4 starts the investigation of this phenomenon with a look at agriculture and mining. All over Southeast Asia, production dropped considerably, again to about half of the amount recorded for 1938, and although Japan acquired virtual monopolies in the case of rice and rubber, for example, their transport to Japan was much hampered by the Allied superiority in the air and on the sea, which made shipment almost impossible.

Industrial production and transportation present a similar picture (chapter 5). Transport, whether public or private, came to a standstill due to war-time requisitions on the one hand and the lack of fuel or spare parts on the other, and industrial production, which had been limited in any case, ceased almost completely. Instead, shortages and rationing dominated daily life in the occupied areas, as chapter 6 details. The people of Southeast Asia had to make do with whatever was available, usually substituting home-made articles when