

Beyond his publications, Gibson-Hill perhaps is best known for both his caustic and supportive personality. He would practically rewrite entire manuscripts so the original author could get a piece published, while he would receive little recognition for the work. At the same time Gibson-Hill was also highly critical of the work of others as well as his own. This resulted in his work, and that of others, grinding to a halt. By the time of his death, the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* was so backlogged that issues missed their publication dates by years. My favourite fact in the book that reflects this era is that the 1961 issue of the journal only appeared in 1969, some six years after Gibson-Hill's death.

The result is a biography of a late-colonial scholar in Singapore and Malaya that primarily utilises his various publications. In each chapter Luyt reiterates Gibson-Hill's life story from childhood up to the early 1960s through the lens of a new topic and his scholarly output. While of interest, these discussions often focus on particular details, becoming a bit repetitive, and do little to elicit a deeper understanding of the individual. They do, however, provide a wide survey of his many works. The ultimate result is a fairly conventional bibliography, deeply wedded to scholarly production, that repeats many of the points raised throughout, which will be of vital interest to anyone fascinated in an important figure in the development of Malayan and Singaporean studies.

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Southeast Asia

Spirit possession in Buddhist Southeast Asia: A world ever more enchanted

Edited by BÉNÉDICTE BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE and PETER A. JACKSON

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How are we to account for the ongoing, indeed flourishing, presence of spirit possession rituals across mainland Southeast Asia? In this collection, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Peter Jackson bring together a collection of ten empirical studies from Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam that both demonstrate the vitality of contemporary 'spirit beliefs' and attempt to provide new theoretical frameworks for understanding this vitality. The core intervention is to address 'the failure of Weberian sociology of religion to predict the global rise of diverse and thriving new forms of religious expression' (p. 1). While this critique is nothing new, the editors acknowledge, they argue that the literature on (dis)enchantment has so far focused on organised religion, less so on spirit cults which, far from disappearing under the conditions of modernity, have flourished across the Buddhist-dominated societies of Southeast Asia. Strikingly, this flourishing has taken place across very different sociopolitical contexts, from Myanmar's military authoritarianism to Thailand's monarchy to Cambodia and Vietnam's (post)socialism. These parallel

trends are not necessarily connected causally, though they share a 'distinctive regional genealogy of spirit possession' (p. 2).

While some twenty-five years ago Jackson posited the notion of 'withering centre, flourishing margins' (Peter A. Jackson, 'Withering Centre, Flourishing Margins: Buddhism's Changing Political Roles', in *Political change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, ed. Kevin Hewison, 1997) to describe the apparent decline of state-backed Buddhism and proliferation of non-orthodox religious forms in Thailand, the thrust of the gathered essays is to demonstrate not just a flourishing of margins but also the increasingly *mainstream* presence of spirit beliefs and other 'magical' practices across much of mainland Southeast Asia. This presence finds expression in various ways: states are cultivating rather than trying to repress spirit beliefs; spirit mediums are confidently claiming ritual superiority over Buddhist monks; seeking spiritual aid for the pursuit of worldly goals is an ever more mainstream pursuit; and spirit beliefs are being commodified and repackaged in ways that appeal to urban, middle-class sensibilities.

The role of states here proves to be complex: they sometimes feature as the primary sources of Weberian rationalisation against which proliferating enchantments are defined, and yet some chapters document the attempts by states not to repress 'superstition' but to appropriate spirit beliefs to their own ends. For example, Paul Sorrentino describes how the Vietnamese state is now raising an autochthonous spirit cult to the level of a nationally legitimated form of intangible cultural heritage, whereby the creation of a national 'pantheon' has served a purpose in terms of integrating the Mother Goddess Religion into state-backed Vietnamese cultural identity. Similarly, Kazuo Fukuura in her study of the modernisation of spirit mediumship in northern Thailand describes attempts by state officials to regulate the activities of mediums of guardian spirits.

In various contexts, spirit-oriented ritual practices seem to be taking a more confident, public position. Brac de la Perrière discusses the birthday celebrations of Botataung Lady, Mya Nan Nwe, a *naga*-like Burmese spirit associated with protecting Buddhist pagodas, which has experienced 'dramatic growth' since the 1990s, broadly associated with the rise of an urban middle class. Such rituals take a 'forum-like' character, in which different ritual traditions interact but do not collapse into each other. In a similar vein, Niklas Foxeus focuses on a 'lottery mania' in Burma-Myanmar. These 'novel cults' of spirit possession offer prosperity, often through providing winning lottery numbers, but in a way that intrinsically supports Buddhist institutions, morality, and identities. In Cambodia, Paul Christensen argues that the set of ritual traditions, including spirit mediumship, that constitutes 'Brahmanism' has emerged as a prosperity religion in contradistinction to institutional Buddhism, which while morally superior is seen as lacking the spiritual potency to deal with needs in the here and now. With this grown public presence and confidence, traditions that might once have been stigmatised as 'black magic' or 'superstition' are being rebranded to be more amenable to middle-class tastes. One example is the 'angel child' (*luk thep*) dolls in Thailand (Megan Sinnott). Here, more gruesome child-spirit practices involving preserved foetuses are being replaced by sanitised, family-friendly and positively evaluated practices among middle-class, educated Thai. Thus, while

some forms of spirit cults might be in decline, others are emerging that resonate with urban sensibilities within the current economic order.

In one way or another, virtually all of the chapters deal with the complexities of the relationship between spirit beliefs and institutional Buddhism. Here, in various ways, the chapters problematise the boundaries between traditions, and the assumed moral superiority of Buddhism. For example, Visisya Pinthongvijakul provides a fascinating study of Ajan Tho, a charismatic Thai Buddhist monk who blurs the boundaries between the roles of monk and spirit medium by providing healing and other ritual services to his devotees via mediumistic practices. Indeed, Pinthongvijakul turns the usual hierarchical relationship between Buddhism and spirit beliefs on its head: in what he calls ‘medium-sponsored Buddhism’, ‘spirit mediumship is like the womb in which local monasteries originate and flourish’ (p. 104). Furthermore, this does not seem to be an isolated case, other authors mention the blurring of lines between mediums and monks (Fukuura, Stengs) or mediums situationally claiming ritual superiority over monks (Christensen).

In a valuable attempt to reconceptualise this relationship between monks and mediums, Irene Stengs presents the notion of a spectrum of ‘oneiric encounters’ that links rather than separates ‘spirit mediums’, ‘magic monks’ and others who engage with invisible forces through possession, trance, dreams and other modes. In Stengs’ words, possession is ‘a continuum of possibilities, practices and modalities, all entailing some form of contact with the invisible’ (p. 233). Finally, in probably the most theoretically ambitious and challenging chapter of the volume, Benjamin Baumann engages with the literature on new animism and the ontological turn to describe the religious landscape as characterised by ‘contrasting ontological registers’ of different Wittgensteinian language games which coexist and intermingle. He posits the animist ontology as *nonmodern*—a relatively stable language game that interacts with but remains distinct from both naturalist and Buddhist language games. Interestingly, this analysis moves in virtually the opposite direction from the general thrust of the volume as outlined in the introduction. For Baumann, new enchantments do not emerge from the conditions of modernity, through the influences of the market and media and even the rationalising force of state apparatuses, but rather through the persistence of a distinct animist ontology.

In this way the volume raises interesting questions about the relationship of modernity and mediumship without necessarily drawing any clear conclusions. Indeed, the chapters sometimes pull in quite different theoretical directions. It might have benefited the volume to bring some of these divergent approaches into conversation with each other and to explore their tensions. But perhaps the main value of the volume is in the complex, composite picture that it portrays, which like its subject matter doesn’t try too hard to unify a bubbling heterodoxy of approaches and claims.

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