

Editorial Foreword

Anthropology is the common disciplinary terrain of the five research articles included in this latest issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, with four articles based on ethnographic research conducted in Cambodia and Thailand's eastern and western border regions, and a fifth one dissecting the politics of anthropological knowledge in Brunei.

The opening article by Courtney Work moves from the ethnography of a 'charged moment' in the daily life of a Cambodian community — the activation of ritual offerings to make possible, and morally acceptable, the bribing of the local police — to examine an instance of 'the local processes by which social worlds and local power emerge amid disparate conceptions of order and truth'. At the core of this process in Cambodia is the deep historical connection between political leadership and Buddhist virtue, which remains socially meaningful despite the importation of 'global' notions of democracy and development by international organisations and the diffusion of the consumerist ethos. The outbreak of youth violence in public spaces such as temple celebrations bespeaks these tensions, which heighten social perceptions of 'successful masculinity' and conversely the inability of disenfranchised young males to achieve it. Ritual mediates these tensions, curbing 'fear and contained violence in a way unavailable to the police' through the 'transformation of gangsta youths into meritorious children', who thus act in accordance to Buddhist social norms, but also as 'complicit actors willing to descend into, and perhaps resignify, the state's corruption'.

Matthew O'Lemmon's following article considers the growth of spirit cults vis-à-vis the reconstruction of Buddhism in post-1979 Cambodia by focusing on the cult of tutelary spirits (*neak ta*). Countering the attempted eradication of Buddhism by the Khmer Rouge, *neak ta* have remained popular especially in the countryside, where spirits are perceived to inhabit the land and preside over agriculture. Also, the canonical division of roles between Buddhism as urban religion and spirit cults as rural religion has not impeded the syncretic inclusion of spirit shrines within monasteries, for 'the *neak ta* acts as an ally and defender as well as a potential bearer of misfortune'. The local cults of specific *neak ta* are redoubled by legends that propagate their influence even among the transnational community of Khmer émigrés. Such legends 'provide a context through which Khmers make sense of events which have been largely outside of their control'. O'Lemmon accounts for the pre-eminence of spirit cults in present-day Cambodia because of their ability to 'change with the cultural currents, adapt to loss, and even provide an explanation for that loss . . . for a people for whom dislocation has been all too common'.

Variability and responsiveness to power are also the characteristics Ian G. Baird associates with the unmarked sociocultural boundaries that set ethnic Lao apart from

ethnic Thai in Thailand's northeast. In his article Baird looks specifically at the ways spirit mediums based in a village founded by a prominent figure of the ill-fated 1827 Lao rebellion against Bangkok are implicated by means of spirit possession in reproducing ethnic divisions that take cultural and spatial forms. Following the Lao saying, 'what is not spoken of becomes forgotten', spirit mediums can be considered important transmitters of oral history, and therefore 'integrally linked to boundary-making'. In addition to reiterating the opposing 'Lao' and 'Thai' historical narratives that underpin boundary-marking in the northeast, spirit mediums may become 'markers of the boundaries themselves, indicators of whether a community was or is historically sympathetic to one side of the conflict or the other'. This realisation highlights, for the author, 'the complex nature of the dynamic meanings of socio-cultural boundaries, with individuals acting across multiple boundaries in multiple ways'.

The next article by Prasert Rangkla investigates the ceremony of wrist-tying as a recently invented tradition, based on older Karen cultural practices, which acts as a signifier of Karen ethno-nationalism. While the wrist-tying rite marks various social occasions, it is the one that is celebrated annually in the eighth month of the Buddhist lunar calendar that has achieved over the past two decades a huge following among the displaced Karen living in the area along the Myanmar–Thailand border. Prasert's ethnography focuses on the organisation of the annual ceremony in a village where 'prominence [is] given to distinctive markers of Karen ethnicity, both in terms of the decorations and cultural and ritual performances'. The appropriation by the Karen nationalists of a rite whose original function is to call back the 'soul' (the body's custodial spirit) to restore a person's physical or mental health, suggests that 'Karen nationalism has been popular and efficacious as a political utterance by borrowing structure and content from the soul-calling incantation'. Conversely, the ritual objects utilised in the annual wrist-tying ceremony 'allow for different interpretations that make sense to particular individuals or groups' by way of a physical, sensory experience that 'indicates the coexistence of nationalism, animism, and magic'.

Finally, Frank Fanselow probes the relationship between the state and the discipline of anthropology in post-independence Negara Brunei Darussalam, and in so doing reflects on anthropology's allegiance to nation-building projects. Since the country's emergence in the mid-1980s after a century of being a British protectorate, Brunei's ruling elite has employed ethnographic research to document political traditions that may suggest, in the absence of historical documentation, that Sultanate and subjects were bound in a sort of social contract prior to the enactment in 1959 of a constitution, which declared Islam, Malay, and the Sultanate as the state's religious, cultural, and political foundations. Over the next two-and-a-half decades, various agencies were entrusted with 'the (re)discovery, (re)invention, and (re)production of the three components of the national identity'. But because of the lack of Bruneian social scientists in the 1960s and early 1970s, the gap was filled by American students, whose historically problematic reconstruction of Brunei's pre-colonial politics was later appropriated by national/nationalist scholars: 'In the official anthropological discourse,' says Fanselow, 'this ahistorical and ethnocentric model ... has become the dominant narrative that provides the ideological foundation of the postcolonial nation–state.'

These research articles are followed by a book review article by noted Thai art historian Piriya Krairiksh, who discusses new directions in the study of Buddhist art from Thailand by way of reviewing two volumes published in conjunction with a major exhibition held last year in Singapore. A rich Book Review section, discussing recent publications on Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia generally, complements as usual this issue.

As this is the first issue of *JSEAS* for 2014, the Editorial Board and I take this opportunity to wish a serene and professionally satisfying new year to our readers, and in particular to those colleagues who, as book reviewers and anonymous article referees, make this journal possible.

Maurizio Peleggi