

its role in the post-authoritarian polity. Once it had settled into that role, its capacity to manage conflict increased dramatically. As a result, much of the large-scale communal violence subsided after 2001.

Overall, the book gives an excellent overview of the multitude of methodological and theoretical approaches to the sudden proliferation of ethno-religious violence during Indonesia's democratic transition. While the conflicts in Papua and Aceh are mostly excluded, readers will find a wide range of interpretations on the religious carnage in Maluku and Poso, the ethnic tensions in Kalimantan and the vigilante killings across the archipelago. As indicated above, some readers may have preferred a more uniform conceptualisation of the chapters, but a collection of highly contradictory viewpoints is indeed more reflective of the dynamism of the scholarly debate than a methodologically standardised volume would have been. Consequently, Ashutosh Varshney is to be commended for enriching the discussion with a volume that no scholar of Indonesian affairs or theorist of communal conflict can afford to ignore.

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Laos

Spirits of the place: Buddhism and Lao religious culture

By JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT

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Although often treated in academic literature as adjunctive to the history of the Thai or Burmese kingdoms, or, in contemporary accounts, as a peripheral setting for dramatic 'secret' war narratives involving the US Central Intelligence Agency during long periods of conflict in Indochina, the arc of Lao history has begun to receive its share of refreshed scholarly attention. With the nascent Lao studies conference series that has been held over the past five years in the United States and elsewhere, and the gradual opening of the country to foreign investment and accompanying economic analyses, this new attention to the nuances of the history of Lao People's Democratic Republic clearly has been strengthened.

The objective that John Clifford Holt sets before himself and the reader in *Spirits of the place: Buddhism and Lao religious culture* is one which has been complicated by a number of factors related to the complex filigree that is the story of Laos. Holt is clear in his preface that there are certain limitations in the study, as a nuanced understanding of Sri Lankan Buddhism is difficult to project onto a Southeast Asian cultural landscape. Holt is an acclaimed scholar of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism and has spent decades in this intellectual setting, and his linguistic background is steeped in the canonical traditions of Pali and Sanskrit. He

writes in his preface that one of the primary motivations for this study was that, in looking for a logical halfway point in his travels between the United States and Sri Lanka, he and his wife selected Southeast Asia as a place of leisure, a way to abbreviate a long flight: this naturally sparked the academic inquiry that the book reflects so well.

By prefacing the reader's anticipated experience and thus altering overall expectations, he does some (but not complete) disservice to some of the text that follows. Long citations amplify his analyses, primarily authored by recognised authorities on Lao history. Grant Evans and Martin Stuart-Fox are so heavily and often quoted that it is easy to become distracted by the referenced texts themselves and to be persuaded to continue following their own lines of argument further. This can make it ambiguous, at times, whether the quoted text strongly supports his observations directly. In short, there is an identity crisis of sorts that is played out in the text with two concepts competing for the reader's attention: Lao history (synchronic and diachronic) on the one hand, and the relationship between Theravāda Buddhism and Lao spirit cults on the other.

A few minor quibbles on the historical front: Holt often refers to *mandalas* in a way that shows fidelity to Wolters, Stuart-Fox and others who have used this term to describe Southeast Asian concepts of waxing and waning royal power, but the stress here detracts from what may have been better referred to as 'kingdoms' for the sake of narrative elegance, and it creates unnecessary confusion relative to the *meuang* and *baan* descriptors. These debatable issues aside, Holt really hits his stride regarding communism's impact on religious orthopraxy, as well as in tracing the thread of nationalism that runs through religious historical processes that show that the tradition of Buddhism in Laos and the 'spirit of the place' have endured despite shifting political structures and the intrusion of 'nonspiritual powers'.

The common leitmotifs that recur in the narrative of Laos are brought into sharper focus with this addition to Lao studies. The incessant bombardment of the Ho Chi Minh trail during the Vietnam War has left the small country defiled with unexploded ordinance, while its vast natural resources have begun to tantalise Chinese, European and Thai commercial appetites. Having lost its monarchical traditions under French colonial rule, Laos remains one of the few communist holdouts at a time when its neighbours have adopted capitalist market mechanisms, and are becoming integrated into the complex networks that modern technology facilitates. The historical upland/lowland dichotomy has been brought into sharper relief with the recent passing of General Vang Pao in the United States, whose funeral, replete with a horse-drawn carriage, was afforded a semi-official grandeur remarkable for an ethnic community displaced from its native highlands of Laos by the vagaries of twentieth-century conflict.

Spirits of the place illustrates well that there are clear opportunities for further academic exploration of Laos as scholars have a rare opportunity to observe and attempt to measure first-hand the possibility of change that is concomitant with globalising influences on the small nation's religious traditions. Holt's contribution to the field of Lao studies produces fresh and inviting incentive to continue the work of previous scholars who have made careers out of the historical and cultural narratives of the country as it is situated in broader conversation with the Southeast Asian cultural

matrix generally, or the unique Theravāda Buddhist landscape as it continues to flourish on the mainland.

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The Malays

By ANTHONY MILNER

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The Malays — a volume in Wiley-Blackwell's series 'The peoples of South-East Asia and the Pacific' — is an absorbing read, clearly written not only for those already interested in the cultural dynamics of the island world of Southeast Asia, but also for everyone who is interested in knowing how to successfully fail in defining a particular race, people or ethnicity. 'In particular I ponder the issue of who are "the Malays" and ask how they became "Malay" and what it means to be a "Malay";' Anthony Milner writes in the Preface. 'One thing that has intrigued me in particular is the often stated "Malay" anxiety about a lack of permanence — a fear sometimes expressed in terms of an emphatic denial that "the Malays will disappear from this world"' (p. xi). *The Malays* tells its readers everything we always wanted to know about the Malays in terms of beginnings, transformations and present-day situations, Malay (*Melayu*) being a many-faceted, multilayered term which, if anything, refers to many phenomena at once — and why would *Melayu* ever disappear from this world?

Wherever we look, it has proved impossible to find a notion of being 'Malay' that has achieved stability — that has become secure. It is an idea in motion — something which can present danger as well as opportunities. 'Malayness' is often a matter of anxiety; it is always open to contest — and the most pressing contest today is the Islamist insistence on the dominance of 'Islamic' over 'Malay' identity and community. (p. 17)

Are the Malays perhaps in danger of disappearing from this world, after all?

It is telling that the author consistently uses inverted commas to refer to everything and everyone Malay from beginning to end: Malay and Malays refer to virtual if not imaginary entities, so it seems, as terms that have been floating through discursive formations and languages without a solid foundation, caught in contradictions, embedded in ambiguities and transformations, and hence constantly on the brink of disappearance. *The Malays* offers a wonderfully effective survey to these entities, which in one way or another have manifested themselves in peninsular and island Southeast Asia in many shapes and forms since times immemorial — before the Melayu River on Sumatra — to the present day, beyond the political discussions about the role of 'the Malays' in contemporary Southeast Asian nation-states.