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Book Reviews

Asia

Belonging across the Bay of Bengal: Religious rites, colonial migrations, national rights

Edited by MICHAEL LAFFAN

London: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. xii + 252. Figures, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

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Michael Laffan opens this compelling collection of essays on the history of the Bay of Bengal by stating that ‘the modern history of the region ... is inexorably one of belonging’ (p. 1). *Belonging across the Bay of Bengal* emerged out of a pair of conferences held at Princeton between 2011 and 2014, the object of which was to bring together papers in an ‘initiative to rethink Area Studies’ (p. 7) to better understand the interconnections, both historical and contemporary, that bind South and Southeast Asia. The result is a collection that offers ‘informed studies of region, interconnection, and diaspora, unmoored from the myths of nations but mindful of their creation’ (p. 8). Indeed, the array of themes across the essays is eclectic, the standard of scholarship is high, and the geographic distribution is extensive.

The book’s geographic framework brings into question the boundaries that have divided South and Southeast Asia by proposing the Bay of Bengal as an alternative, and more analytically coherent, spatial unit. In this endeavour, the authors follow both the conceptual defiance that Southeast Asian Studies poses to normative Area Studies frameworks, and the broader trend of writing histories that emphasise connections across spaces that have been treated as discrete, both politically and historiographically.

The book’s three sections are arranged chronologically. The first, entitled ‘Sacred itineraries, Indian bodies’, addresses, through an examination of ‘deep historical remains and archival traces’ (p. 7), the origins, deployment, and disputation of the region’s common Indic past. The second set of essays, under the heading ‘Merchants, migrations, and rights’, is situated firmly in the colonial period. Its essays focus on itinerant South Indian labourers, merchants, and families whose place in Southeast Asia, Burma (Myanmar), and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) became increasingly precarious at the hands of exclusionary debates about citizenship, immigration, and miscegenation. The third section, ‘Cosmopolitan hybridities’, hosts essays that consider the reiteration and recalibration of belonging and community that occurred as the Bay’s political landscape was transformed by decolonisation and the emergence of postcolonial nation-states.

While the Bay of Bengal, especially its South Indian, Sri Lankan, and Malay Peninsular regions, is undeniably the focal point of this collection, many of the essays chafe against and spill over the region’s formal geographic boundaries to include

histories and analyses of belonging elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. For example, Michael Laffan's chapter explores forms of Islamic belonging and community that were transplanted from the Bay to South Africa. This shift of scope, which is both deliberate and productive, reveals the ways in which forms of belonging and identity that were forged in the Bay of Bengal endured, and were transformed, in distant lands. Moreover, it reveals that colonial administrators and census-makers considered the Bay hermetically, if also simplistically and derogatorily; for example, through the use of catch-all categories such as 'Malays' as a descriptor for a diversity of Muslim Southeast Asian settlers in the Cape. Teren Sevea's essay, which describes the emergence of nineteenth-century *keramatic* [*sic.*] traditions and hagiographies in colonial Singapore, also transcends the Bay. His chapter reveals a circulation of Islamic knowledge and miracle-working that allowed *keramats* such as Nuh al-Habshi (venerated by Tamil, Malay, and Arab Muslims), to teleport from Singaporean prison cells to the Ka'aba in Mecca while simultaneously accompanying and protecting sailors crossing the 'ghost-infested junctures of the Bay of Bengal' (p. 63).

While this book does well to delineate the various forms of belonging that pervaded and connected the Bay of Bengal, a common theme that binds many of the essays is, in fact, belonging's foil: that is, exclusion. It is true that so much of the Bay's history is a story of its shared institutions—political, cultural, religious, linguistic, architectural, commercial, etc.—yet, many of the essays make equally clear that kingdoms, empires, and, later, postcolonial nation states sought to monopolise the prerogative of defining community, often through practices of difference-making and forms of systemic exclusion. Ultimately, this collection reveals that belonging was, and remains, an unstable category. Moreover, its essays demonstrate that it was often through competing, contested, and uneven forms of belonging that the connections which bound the Bay of Bengal (and its surrounding Indian Ocean world) were both made and unmade.

Nira Wickramasinghe's excellent chapter, 'Citizens, Aryans, and Indians in colonial Lanka', takes as its focus the exclusionary debates around citizenship and race which emerged in 1930s Ceylon at the confluence of economic crisis, South Indian labour migration, and the reconfiguration of national identities. Exclusion is equally prominent in David Henley's chapter which considers forms of state-sanctioned discrimination against non-'Malays' in colonial and postcolonial Malay(si)a. Such practices of exclusion remain painfully visible today, whether in the crisis of statelessness facing the Rohingya of Myanmar, or in the stark hierarchies of community and labour fostered and perpetuated in ethnically segregated Singapore. Although the opening chapter acknowledges that processes of colonisation thrust systems of belonging into 'flux' (p. 3), and that the 'postcolonial milieu has often become hostile to the "outsider"' (p. 1), the introduction could have benefited from a more detailed discussion of the parameters, definitions, and methodologies used to assess belonging (and exclusion).

Nevertheless, *Belonging across the Bay of Bengal*, as a whole, is a welcome response to the call for historians to move beyond the confines of Area Studies. The essays themselves exhibit the direction that southern Asian historiography can take when spatially transcendent concepts, such as belonging, are emphasised, as opposed to studies bounded by 'determined spaces' (p. 6). As such, this collection

will prove useful to historians of the Bay who are in search of creative responses to the call for new methodologies that challenge the politically and academically 'entrenched' (p. 7) boundaries that divide South and Southeast Asia.

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Asia

Ruling before the law: The politics of legal regimes in China and Indonesia

By WILLIAM HURST

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Ruling before the law employs the concept of 'legal regimes' to compare the dramatically different nations of China and Indonesia. Hurst, in defining legal regimes, is particularly interested in how Chinese and Indonesian politics shape a general legal order, and in turn, how this legal order affects state–society relations and political change. Exploring legal regimes in China and Indonesia highlights what he describes as the 'outer limits of comparability between countries'. This 'outer limit' allows for a side-by-side comparison of common features to understand how legal regimes operate. Simultaneously, the immense difference affords a level of generalisability and insight into the different conditions that lead to the emergence of particular forms of legal orders. Specifically, in his book Hurst examines how the law functions and is ordered in the legal regimes of revolution, authoritarianism, and neotraditionalism.

After spending chapter 1 outlining the concept of legal regimes, Hurst, in chapter 2, provides a rich and comprehensive review of the historical conditions that undergird the legal regimes he discusses in subsequent chapters. Starting off with law and revolution in chapter 3, Hurst discusses the types of cases that emerged in Indonesia from 1955 to 1974 and China from 1949 to 1979. In Indonesia, first under Sukarno's Guided Democracy and then under Suharto's New Order, there was a paucity of criminal cases, and evidence of civil law being used by political individuals to entrench their wealth and power. In China, criminal law was deployed more frequently as an instrument of political and social mobilisation, especially as the socialist government aimed to root out supporters of the Kuomintang. Chapter 4 details the path to authoritarianism and legal efficiency in China from 1979 to the 1990s during a period characterised by the nation's push for economic growth, and post-*Reformasi* Indonesia from 1998 onwards, in which democratisation led to the further development of the criminal justice and civil law systems. During this period, in both countries, the legal system becomes more sophisticated—in China with civil law becoming more transparent and predictable; and in Indonesia with criminal law becoming less of a tool of political control and more a tool of establishing order and predictability. Finally, in chapter 5, Hurst