

The first few chapters in the volume have overlapping historical narratives of the Sikhs in the region, and the editors should have tackled the repetition. A thematic organisation of the chapters could have also made the publication more connected and interesting. However, in spite of its limitations, this volume makes an important contribution to the discourse of sub-ethnic transnational identities in Southeast Asia.

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*The spirit of things: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia*

Edited by JULIUS BAUTISTA

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Once upon a time the modern academic study of Asian religions meant primarily the collection and close textual examination of the major scriptures in order to uncover the underlying tenets of the religion. Religion was held to be principally about the next world, rather than the material world. This view gained influence during the colonial period when scholars of religion under the influence of Weber saw Asian religions, unlike their Protestant counterparts in Christian Europe, as incompatible with modernity as exemplified by the 'secular' colonial powers. Following decolonisation and independence, attention shifted to religious practice — in particular, how religion was an obstacle to economic modernisation and rational governance. The expectation was that religion would steadily become confined to the private realm, if it did not die out altogether. More recently, however, scholars are discovering the importance of religion to economic prosperity. Why has this happened? Put simply, the capitalist transformation of Asia over the last three to four decades, and the improved material well-being of many Asian citizens, has led to the stubborn persistence, if not flourishing, of religion in this region. As a result the material aspects of modern religious life in Asia are increasingly drawing the attention of scholars. It is this phenomenon that is the subject of this timely publication, *The spirit of things: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia*.

*The spirit of things* is an ambitious attempt to study the religiosity of a range of material objects associated with the various religious traditions throughout contemporary Southeast Asia. The volume tries to do justice

to the region's geographic and religious diversity by being representative. Twelve chapters cover topics as diverse as religious shrines and other sacred objects in contemporary Vietnam (Kendall, Vu and Nguyen); Islam, middle-class consumerism, Malay nationalism and the auto industry in Malaysia (Fischer); 'visual theology', or the expression of religious doctrine through material objects, among Vietnamese Caodaists (Hoskins); Buddhist visual culture and ethnicity in Myanmar's Shan state (Karlsson); holy water at a Roman Catholic pilgrimage site in northern peninsular Malaysia (Yeoh); the making of Buddha images in Myanmar's Arakan state (de Mersan); the presence or absence of material objects of worship among different groups of Bidayuh Christians in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo (Chua); Buddhist amulets worn by Thai soldiers during the Vietnam War (Ruth); house altars among the ethnic Bentian people of Indonesian Borneo (Sillander); scrolls depicting scenes from the famous Buddhist narrative the *Vessantara Jataka* in northeastern Thailand and Laos (Cate and Lefferts); religious sculpture in Catholic Philippines (de la Paz); and image worship in Chinese popular religion in Singapore (Chan).

Together these essays present a strong argument for the importance of understanding the place of material objects in religious worship in contemporary Southeast Asia. Many of the essays contain a richness of detail and present interesting conclusions that will be of benefit for scholars in each particular field. For the general reader, however, it is somewhat overwhelming to be plunged into twelve separate field sites, encountering a wide range of material 'objects' that have various roles in at least half a dozen different religious traditions practised by diverse ethnic groups. Is there a coherent theme to tie the volume together, to make sense of it all?

Bautista's Preface and the Introduction, co-written with Anthony Reid, attempt to provide that coherence. There is a brief and rather abstract discussion of the importance of the broad themes of 'motion', 'devotion' and 'materiality'. An argument is presented that material objects assume a heightened role in Southeast Asian religiosity due to the region's great religious heterogeneity. And the claim is made that popular interest in, and attachment to, religious objects are partly a response to the 'homogenizing tendencies' (p. 5) of governments and religious institutions: 'new and recalcitrant engagements with religious materiality have arisen in reaction to modern day, state-driven managerialism. While religious institutions offer formal compliance with government norms, this is often accompanied by a variety of calculated subaltern agencies that material things make possible in a religiously plural landscape' (p. viii). The Introduction refers to four sections into which the book has been divided, presumably to give the volume greater coherence: 'Commodification, consumption and

exchange', 'Ethnicity and nationalism', 'Power, potency and agency', and 'The spirit in and of things'; but confusingly, nowhere in the book do these sections actually appear. For this reviewer at least it is hard to see that these themes and arguments have been carried through by the contributors to the volume in any obvious, systematic manner. As a result it is difficult to characterise *The spirit of things* as presenting a powerful coherent argument, beyond recognising the importance of the material dimension of religious worship.

In conclusion, there is much valuable research in this volume that will be of interest to scholars in particular fields, but as a whole the volume is perhaps less successful than the sum of its parts.

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*Early Southeast Asia viewed from India: An anthology of articles from the Journal of the Greater India Society*

Edited by KWA CHONG-GUAN

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This eclectic collection of essays from the eighteen volumes of the *Journal of the Greater India Society* invites us to revisit the historical pursuits of the Greater India Society and see how its history-writing projects shaped the nature of 'Indian thinking towards Southeast Asia' (p. xii). It is a delight to note that in this book, Kwa Chong-Guan, who has been engaged in the understanding of the long cycles of Southeast Asian history and the editor of the volume under review here, has selected and put together 31 articles by leading historians and philologists of the society showing critically how the society painted the image of Greater India through its journal. Though these scholars used the image of Greater India with details of Indic influence across the Indian Ocean to show a brighter phase of the subcontinent's past against the backdrop of its colonial domination by the British, Kwa goes beyond the frame of their mentality and shows how this image became 'a way of thinking' and 'part of a social memory of India' that influenced its outlook towards the East. The publication is timely given the profound transformation of the object of study, and consequent changes in the field.