

Thus, the edited volume presents a sophisticated image of contemporary Laos, which is astutely interpreted by the editors in the introduction via three main themes that run through the chapters: i) the ‘paradoxical state’, ii) mobility as a tool of governance, mobility as a means of livelihood, and iii) old ties, new ties. The introduction, however, could have further elaborated upon these themes to present a clearer overarching picture of contemporary Laos. The key terms in the title — changing lives, society, politics and culture, and the post-socialist state — for the most part remain undefined and un-theorised. For example, while the editors do stake out their conceptual approach to the state, they do not address the intriguing yet controversial notion that Laos is a ‘post-socialist’ state. It is commonly assumed that Laos is post-socialist because, like China and Vietnam, it has enacted economic reforms that have facilitated the expansion of capitalist social relations and regimes of accumulation. Unlike former socialist republics of Eastern Europe, however, the political structure in Laos has largely remained intact, and it is the state that in fact remains the most socialist element of the country today. The legacies of socialism even endure in the economic realm, such as the state’s dominant role in managing land and the joint ownership it often takes in major infrastructure projects.

Developing a more robust and conceptually rich introduction would serve as a guide to the next generation of scholars of Laos. Toward that end, the introduction could have considered the topics that did not make it into the book, but which demand further scholarship and should be featured in the next edited volume on Laos (ideally published in less than two decades’ time!). These would include the increasing presence of Chinese and Vietnamese investors, traders, and migrant labourers, the ramifications of relentless hydropower development, the unique experiences of urban life in Laos, the uncertain future of a nascent Lao civil society, and the meanings and practices of political activism, particularly in relation to social media. These are the themes that could stand up to and build upon the immense contribution that *Changing Lives in Laos* has made to the increasingly vigorous field of Lao Studies.

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Myanmar

Myanmar’s Buddhist–Muslim crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese narratives of siege and fear

By JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT

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Recent violence in Buddhist majority societies against Muslim minorities has generated policy as well as academic interest in the histories of Muslim communities in Buddhist Asia, as well as Buddhist–Muslim relations across time and space. (See for

example: Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam along the Silk Road*, 2010; John Holt, ed. *Buddhist extremists and Muslim minorities: Religious conflict in contemporary Sri Lanka*, 2016; Iselin Frydenlund and Michael Jerryson, eds., *Buddhist–Muslim relations in a Theravada world*, 2020). John Clifford Holt's new book constitutes an important contribution to this growing field — born out of the current 'Buddhist–Muslim crisis' in the region — but deviates from other academic works (including his own on Sri Lanka) in important and unusual ways.

The book contains a Preface, an Introduction, 15 in-depth interviews and an Afterword. The Introduction effectively presents to the reader recent events of Buddhist–Muslim violence across the region, with particular attention to violence in Rakhine State in western Myanmar since 2012. It also provides the reader with crucial analytical perspectives on politics and culture in post-colonial Myanmar such as the politics of 'Burmanisation', the anti-Indian policies of General Ne Win and Buddhist narratives of siege and decline.

The interviews are organised according to interview location (Yangon, Arakan and Mandalay), given the particular localised concerns of the interviewees, according to the author. Taken together, the interviews provide deep insights into the almost overwhelmingly complex set of identity formations, perspectives and positionalities in contemporary Myanmar. Here are the life stories of prominent Rohingya leaders, Yangon cosmopolitan intellectuals, Arakan politicians and famous Burmese Buddhist monks. The interview material is the result of multiple visits and prolonged stays between 2014 and 2018, which grant its solidity and trustworthiness. Particularly moving are the interviews with Rohingya leaders and activists who only see their tragedy and suffering deepen at each interview; just as they believe the situation can't be more dramatic, new and disastrous turns of event take place.

Also, a great achievement of the book is the diversity of voices presented. I would like to highlight two interviews that deserve particular attention as they are with people mostly overlooked when discussing Buddhist–Muslim relations in Myanmar, namely the Kaman Muslims in Rakhine ('The Teacher') and Bengali Hindus/Buddhists in Yangon ('The Real Bengalis'). Both of these interviews elegantly bring the reader close to how political events form individual lives, and furthermore, how shifting political realities impact minority ethnic and religious identity formations. Both interviews end with the interlocutors distancing themselves from the book project, most probably due to their precarious position as minorities within the minority and the shrinking civil space as the atrocities in Rakhine unfolded in 2016 and 2017. Importantly, Holt never lets the reader forget the volatile and dangerous situations that people in Myanmar are faced with, be it before or after Aung San Suu Kyi came into government.

Holt rightly points out in the Introduction the importance of giving 'attention to the little-known Arakanese perspective' (p. 14), but although he deserves credit for bringing in perspectives from historians on Arakan like Jacques Leider (who argues that 'Rohingya' is an ethnic formation born out of the 1950s identity politics), the interviews with Arakan leaders and community members are less detailed, providing the reader with fewer tools to understand hardline Arakanese nationalism, directed both against the Bamar-dominated state and the Rohingyas (or 'Bengalis' as they are classified by the state and the majority population in Myanmar). Similarly,

contemporary Burmese Buddhist nationalism is introduced through the interviews with the Burmese nationalist monk U Wirathu.

However, the interview material at hand does not allow for deeper scrutiny of why and how learned Buddhist monks like U Wirathu have ended up in a hardline Buddhist nationalist project with strong anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiments. Holt seeks to understand U Wirathu through his scattered family background, but this individual psychological perspective — together with Holt's Buddhist normative concluding remark to his meetings with U Wirathu that 'Wirathu's disposition was affected by a ranging hatred born of ignorance' (p. 225) — does not in this reader's view provide sufficient analysis of U Wirathu's position. The fact is that U Wirathu belongs to a broader circle of Buddhist nationalist ideologues who hold that the Buddha himself was a nationalist and that protecting 'race and religion' is good Buddhist practice, not a deviation. As such, U Wirathu's gender conservative position or anti-Muslim racism go far beyond his personal life story.

The interviews with Arakanese and Burmese nationalists point directly to a central question of the book: how does one as a scholar interact with interlocutors who represent illiberal, nationalist and even racist ideologies? How do we as scholars keep our methodological empathy, or is that ideal just a modernist illusion, or even unethical?

Holt refers to his teacher Stanley J. Tambiah and his notion of 'engaged tracts'. In Holt's own words, he felt that 'at times, my part of the conversation became something of an intervention' and moreover, 'given the circumstances, I had been forced into that role, one that I only reluctantly embraced' (p. xiii). Holt states several times how difficult he considered this project to be — and while the challenges of such a personalised style of writing clearly come to the fore in the interviews with people he disagrees with — his personal presence in the text, his sorrow, frustration and even anger all together makes this a refreshingly honest and self-reflexive academic achievement.

At times, Holt's text reads like the field notes of an anthropologist, before personal preferences and animosities are edited out to make a 'clean' and presumably 'neutral' text. Perhaps his choice of presenting lengthy life-story interviews, in addition to his reflexive narrative style, is more effective in communicating the precariousness and vulnerability of lived lives in extreme political situations than most 'distanced' academic texts. Be that as it may, the result is an intriguing book that offers a truly unique glimpse into a dramatic period in Myanmar's recent history.

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