

Alberts is well informed on the role of Southeast Asians themselves in interpreting the faith and developing devotions. Something that I missed here is a discussion of priestly practices that would have seemed strange, or even repulsive, to many local people. The best example is flagellation and “discipline”, which Francis Xavier, to cite a prominent practitioner, undertook with much enthusiasm.

The book closes with a chapter on the role of women in European Catholicism and its modification in Southeast Asia and one on slavery, quite acceptable in the region but posing particular challenges for missionaries. A strong conclusion reiterates the main themes of the book.

This is an excellent example of a successful transition from a doctoral dissertation to a book that should have wide appeal amongst those working on conversions in general, not just in Asia, but also to scholars of the three areas treated. What would be an excellent complement would be a parallel study of Islamic missionary work in insular Southeast Asia, if only because the process of Islamization was much more successful than Christianization. So many of the themes that Alberts mentions can be found in the Muslim effort, such as the matter of accommodation and amusing denunciations from the heartland of Islam concerning the lax practice of Southeast Asians who claimed to be Muslims. Alberts cites various studies on conversion to Islam, but maybe someday we will get a focussed comparative study, one which — from the Christian side — would necessarily draw heavily on Dr Alberts’ excellent book.

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Gambling with the Land: The Contemporary Evolution of Southeast Asian Agriculture. Rodolphe De Koninck and Jean-François Rousseau. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. xvi+189 pp.

A learned, stimulating and yet puzzling book, *Gambling with the Land* comprises nine chapters. All but its introductory and concluding

chapters consist of odd pages featuring graphs and tables facing even pages discussing those graphs and tables. These graphs and tables present country-level data from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, complemented in some cases with data from other UN agencies, from the World Bank and from additional sources. In Chapter Six, on the “Expansion and Intensification of Food Crops and Increase in Livestock Production”, for example, page 87 holds graphs showing trends in “Rice exports in selected countries (with prices), 1961–2007”, “Rice export ratio in selected countries, 1961–2007” and “Rice imports in selected countries, 1961–2007” above tables providing quantitative measures of these same indicators for 1961–63, 1971–73, 1981–83, 1991–93, 2001–3 and 2007. Page 86 offers a discussion of these data. Sixty-six similar pairs of facing pages — addressing topics ranging from “Estimated global population growth and cropland expansion, 1700–2007” and “Estimated cropland expansion in selected regions and countries, 1700–2007” (Plate 1, pp. 12–13) to “CO₂ emissions in total and per capita by country, 1960–2007” (Plate 67, pp. 156–57) — make up Chapters Two through Eight of this book.

The discussion appearing on the even pages facing the charts and graphs in these chapters is often fascinating and informative. One expects nothing less from Professor De Koninck, who has over the past four and a half decades carved out a unique place in the study of Southeast Asian agriculture. Few will be the readers who do not find in this discussion fresh and thoughtful observations on topics ranging from Thailand’s emergence as a diversified food exporter to the state of the region’s oft-forgotten coconut sector or the broad ramifications of the rapid increase during the past half-century in the cultivation in Southeast Asia of “cash crops” such as oil palm, rubber, sugar cane and, again, coconut.

On a more general level, this book embodies De Koninck’s and Rousseau’s effort to analyse “some of the essential macro-level trends ongoing in Southeast Asian agriculture since the 1960s in every one of the eight major agricultural countries in the region” (p. 6). It treats, that is, each of the ASEAN countries save Singapore and Brunei. These trends, or “fundamental processes” include what

the authors term the “commodization” and “externalization” of the region’s agriculture and the “agriculturization ... basically at the expense of its forests” of its landscape (p. 162). At a time when Southeast Asia is more generally understood as an urbanizing region defined by its industrial and service sectors, the volume emphasizes with great effectiveness the “remarkable resilience” (p. 160) of its agricultural sector. Indeed, De Koninck and Rousseau point out that the region’s share in global agricultural output increased from 4.2 to 7.3 per cent between the early 1960s and 2008, while its agricultural exports increased fortyfold, to US\$95 billion, in roughly the same period.

The impact of such data, the book’s effective focus on the simultaneous intensification and physical expansion of Southeast Asian agriculture and its many other virtues notwithstanding, *Gambling with the Land* remains a puzzling publication. The disconnect between its title and its structure make what is so puzzling clear. That title suggests an argument. And the volume’s introductory chapter does, after noting that agricultural land remains “a locus of activity, investment and competition” (p. 6) in Southeast Asia, refer to something that the authors “call gambling with the land or even gambling or betting on the land” (ibid.). Yet the chapter offers no explanation of what the authors mean by these terms, of why the development of Southeast Asian agriculture in the decades since 1960 may represent a “gamble” or a “bet”. Neither does it explain the authors’ choice of this metaphor by hinting at what the risks involved in taking such a gamble or making such a bet might be. And this passage is the last allusion to the apparent argument of the book before the graphs and tables begin.

At two points in the seven chapters consisting entirely of tables, one gains a somewhat better idea of what De Koninck and Rousseau may be arguing. The first comes when they write, “throughout much of the region, farming remains an activity [that] many people turn to when fearing for their subsistence security. Southeast Asians still bet on the land” (p. 46). At the second, more than ninety pages and many graphs and tables later, the discussion links the region’s having “launched itself into a process of increasingly betting on the

resources of its lands, to the point of at times gambling with them” (p. 138) to the phenomenon of agriculturization of the Southeast Asian landscape, noted above. Finally, the volume’s brief concluding chapter notes,

the agricultures and agriculturalists of Southeast Asia ... are not only gambling with and betting on its land and soil, but also, increasingly, with and on its seas and inland waters [which are] thus sharing the increasing pressure. (p. 162)

What is curious about all this is twofold. First, one never does learn in any explicit way what the risks for Southeast Asians or their societies, environments or economies inherent in these bets or gambles might be. One suspects, second, that De Koninck and Rousseau have a thoughtful and important argument to make about those risks. But by structuring their book around tens and tens of graphs and tables, they have denied themselves the chance to develop that argument in a sustained way, let alone to make its implications clear.

Gambling with the Land appears as a part of the major Canadian research project on “Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia”, under the leadership of Professor De Koninck. The puzzling manner in which it would make its case notwithstanding, its macro-level treatment of agrarian change in the region certainly provides valuable context for the other volumes already published under the auspices of the project (De Koninck et al. 2011; Hall et al. 2011; Sikor et al. 2011; Rigg and Vandergeest 2012; High 2014). And one may be sure that it will prove a similarly effective complement to the volumes yet to be published.

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Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay-Indonesian World: Critical Perspectives. By Azhar Ibrahim. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2014. 315 pp.

This book critically investigates how dominant Muslim groups in Southeast Asia think and appropriate Islam in response to contemporary challenges of social and political change. Its approach and perspective, based on the sociology of knowledge, provide a refreshing departure from the pervasive culturalist frameworks that have marked publications on Islam and Muslims in the region in recent years. The author does a fine job in giving conceptual coherence to the vast amount of materials that he harnesses in making sense of Muslims' thought and its ramifications for the wider plural societies in which they live.

Comprising six chapters, the author identifies and meticulously analyses dominant modes of group thought, namely religious traditionalism and *dakwah* revivalism, and their impact. He critically evaluates these against the marginal yet highly significant progressive ideas and orientations of selected Muslim groups and individuals. The salient traits of the spectrum of these modes of thought and their interplay are carefully delineated, as are their differences and commonalities. The socio-historical factors conditioning each and how they in turn condition their adherents' sense of relevant issues