

living there during a period of relatively low economic growth in comparison with other major colonial ports (pp. 250–52). While overall an excellent contribution, the chapter might have benefited from illustrations given the visual nature of the subject and the availability of such materials.

The writers of this book demonstrate that a thorough examination of texts on Southeast Asia can uncover many different perspectives. The work exemplifies the notion of exchange over imposition as a vital aspect of cultural development and accomplishes this goal effectively. While promoting a history of peaceful intercultural exchange in Southeast Asia is commendable, these interactions occurred under a geopolitical environment that merchants, scientists and religious figures operated within. Regardless of how these figures felt about European colonialism, it enabled them to conduct their work relatively unhindered, a point that scholars must not ignore. The work pushes scholars in the right direction but could have provided better clarity in navigating the treacherous rocks and shoals of the field that has yet to emerge anywhere near its full potential.

**Scott C. Abel**

Otis T. Bland Memorial Library, United States Merchant Marine Academy, 300 Steamboat Road, King's Point, New York 11204, USA; ABELS@usmma.edu.

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*Spirit Possession in Buddhist Southeast Asia: Worlds Ever More Enchanted.* Edited by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Peter A. Jackson. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2022. viii+346 pp.

This timely collection of essays puts the spotlight on the prominence of benign spirit possession, or adoricism, in the predominantly Buddhist societies of mainland Southeast Asia as well as in “atheist” Vietnam. Countering normative portrayals of adoricism as bound to extinction

in the face of modernization, and simultaneously challenging the tendency to identify monks as the fulcrum of Buddhist practice, the volume aims “to place spirit possession rituals at the center of accounts of religious change” (p. 3).

The erudite introduction by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Peter Jackson develops the theoretical framework for the book by examining how modernity facilitates instead of hindering what Weber refers to as “enchantment”. Insightfully, the editors argue that the apparent proliferation of spirit possession and related practices in Southeast Asia arises in fact from factors ascribed to modernization. First, the decreased interest of states throughout the region in disciplining people’s religious conduct grants greater freedom and agency to individuals, including less “orthodox” practitioners. Second, the triumph of neoliberal capitalism doubles as a source of anxiety and as vehicle of a worldview in which the accumulation of wealth feels magical and mysterious, paving the way for beliefs and practices that promise worldly prosperity to thrive. Third, the advent of new technologies, including media, produces novel iterations of magical spectacle, sustaining the kind of enchantment (once) associated with the religious domain.

Focusing on Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, the ten chapters all contribute in distinct ways to this narrative as they offer glimpses into the lives and activities of ritual experts such as spirit mediums and diviners as well as their clients. Readers are treated to an impressive array of case studies that explore themes ranging from the religious politics of ethnic identity to the complicity of the Buddhist clergy in supposedly unorthodox practices. A major takeaway from the essays is that religious actors constantly innovate as they negotiate the relevance and outlook of spirit possession in the modern world.

Some among the chapters are more theoretically ambitious; others more descriptive. The latter remain highly stimulating in a volume one of whose main strengths lies in conveying the richness, diversity and dynamism of the local religious field. Inevitably,

such efflorescence forces readers to confront the inadequacy of the analytical categories at our disposal, which make it a struggle to even frame the myriad practitioners and practices, let alone understand their continuous transformations. Such inadequacy is reflected in the difficulty I find in describing a volume that, while focusing on “possession”, includes practices beyond what one may assume “possession” to entail; while focusing on “spirits”, involves entities that may not be immediately categorized as “spirits”; and while focusing on “Buddhism”, contemplates forms of religiosity that may resist such labelling. Unfortunately, if understandably, assessing the implications of category-making (and their politics) often transcends the scope of the volume.

At times, the authors’ insistence on emphasizing the ubiquity of agents such as mediums and their increased role or visibility in the twenty-first century risks obscuring the fact that their legitimacy remains contested. In Thailand, for example, one of the contexts depicted as being especially tolerant, mediums continue to be subjected to stigmatizing discourses of superstition if not primitivism, with some monasteries and shrines even displaying signs that read “possession forbidden” (*ham khao song*). While, as a site of culture production, modernity fuels religious change, as a discourse, it therefore tentatively puts a cap on practices considered to be “unmodern”. The teleological worldview that the authors dispel so powerfully does influence social life and religiosity therein.

Overall, *Spirit Possession in Buddhist Southeast Asia* offers a refreshing way to look at a changing religious arena. With its willingness to recognize the often-maligned practice of adoricism as a key feature of religious life in the region, this volume provides not only empirically rich and insightful studies but also takes a bold step in an exciting direction.

**Edoardo Siani**

Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Palazzo Vendramin dei Carmini, Dorsoduro 3462, Venice 30123, Italy; email: edoardo.siani@unive.it.