

***Spirited Politics: Religion and Public Life in Contemporary Southeast Asia.* Edited by Andrew C. Wilford and Kenneth M. George. Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2005. Softcover: 210pp.**

Contrary to common predictions, religious expression in public life over recent decades has not declined in response to the dual processes of nation-building and modernization in Southeast Asia but instead has grown in importance. The shortcomings of the “secularization” thesis have become increasingly remarkable in recent years as seen in numerous examples of religious resurgence across the region, such as the rise in Singapore of evangelical Christianity, or the unbridled popularity of spirit-mediums and spiritual pilgrimage in Vietnam — two countries where the state has long dominated public discourse on modernization and economic development. While the field is crowded with studies on politicized religion — notably political analyses of fundamentalist-militant Islam — the arrival of this volume of eight essays by anthropologists and historians on popular spirituality and its varied interactions with the nation-state is very welcome.

Guiding several of the volume’s essays is the question: “In what ways do religious practices and debates provide people with room for maneuver amid the shadows and light of the nation-state?” (p. 11). Another question might well be “To what extent has popular religiosity impacted on grassroots political change?” Smita Lahiri’s essay on the Philippines’ popular folk-Catholic pilgrimage destination, Mt. Banahaw, highlights the site’s growing significance for politicians and presidential hopefuls in the race to attract support among the rural and urban poor who support a cult surrounding a priestess, Suprema Isabel Suarez, based near the mountain. Only for local politicians, visits such as by Congressman Jose De Venecia prior to the 1998 elections, are taken as an act of homage deference to Suarez herself. In a somewhat similar fashion, Thamora Fishel follows the tireless attendance of local politicians to a succession of funerals in Southern Thailand. “Funerals provide politicians”, as Fishel explains, “with far more than an opportunity to be visible to a large gathering of people”. They are opportunities to “make merit and build or maintain patronage relationships” (p. 145). Again, the relationship between politicians and their constituents and supporters is blurred: in the process of campaigning and making merit with bereaved families, politicians are obliged to contribute to funeral costs, and attendance is all but compulsory at the cremation ceremonies of high-status community members. These two papers also quite skilfully touch on

the growing class divide between the religious tastes and sensibilities of metropolitan middle-class and those living in rural areas and regional towns.

One recurring theme in the volume is the pressure of religious change on reform within the state itself, on its ideologies and social policies. Suzanne Brenner's study of gender politics explores the controversies which animated debate between proponents of conservative and official values and liberal Muslim activists in 1980s and 1990s Indonesia. She traces the roots of certain gender ideologies to the development and pro-capitalist initiatives underlying Suharto-era policies. While these policies prescribed "traditional" roles for women in the home, they also promoted greater female participation in the workforce. Opportunities in education and work exposed women to global feminism, fuelled middle-class lifestyles and in the process led many to challenge the socially conservative basis of official gender values and norms. Similarly, Andrew Abalahin recounts the long-running battle of an ethnic Chinese couple in Indonesia to have their Confucian wedding rites recognized by the state. Their efforts to have their Confucian identity recognized as legitimate under the Pancasila code exposes the messy contradictions in the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and national identity. Such perspectives illustrate the ways in which government planning on social and cultural cohesion is often frustrated and sometimes reversed with the very instruments developed to create idealized hierarchies and social order.

This volume offers a wide variety of social and historical case studies which will greatly appeal to anthropologists and scholars of popular religion in Southeast Asia. Undoubtedly the work's greatest strength is the breadth of scope and the ethnographic detail in several essays. The editors have succeeded in drawing together a group of diverse case studies and for this reason the volume will make an invaluable teaching resource for courses on religiosity and political change in the region. However, as a volume dedicated to the relationship between religion and politics it disappoints on several key points. While individually the essays reveal new insights into the subject, very little holds them together as a group. In its attempt to define the title's claim, the introduction does not quite succeed in conceptualizing the public sphere nor the relationship between religion and politics. The editors concentrate on the nation-state and nationalism, but one might question to what extent popular experience of these concepts dominate all levels and domains of political experience within society. In defining the relationship between religious identity and the experiences of nationalism in Southeast Asia one asks

whether the editors have defeated their aims to illuminate grassroots experiences by taking such a top-down perspective. Moreover, while the introduction is careful to acknowledge the absence of a “uniting theoretical perspective” to guide the essays, at the same time little attention is paid to the burgeoning body of literature on religion and politics in Asia.

Two further minor points deserve mention. The title’s claim to address religion and politics in “contemporary Southeast Asia” is somewhat misleading. Most of the eight essays draw on fieldwork undertaken during the mid-1990s, stretching the notion of “contemporary”. This would not be so notable but for the insertion in a couple of the essays commentary updating recent developments on the author’s specific topic. Andrew C. Willford’s essay goes into excellent ethnographic detail on one spirit-medium’s enchantment session in order to explain ethnic-Tamil marginalization in mid-1990s Malaysia. A footnote appended to the essay’s final paragraph startlingly brings to attention a violent inter-ethnic clash at a squatter’s camp in 2002 which left six Indians dead. Why does this episode not make a more prominent appearance in the essay? Similarly, Brenner’s discussion on gender politics in “Late New Order Indonesia” makes only a cursory and somewhat dismissive mention of Megawati Sukarnoputri — the country’s first female president — first in the essay’s penultimate paragraph. Also, it may be a cliché to note how greatly the region’s religio-political contours have changed since 11 September 2001, but the absence of essays on post-9/11 case studies is a little unfortunate. Secondly, perhaps a less significant issue is the limited geographic exploration of the region. Of the eight essays, the case studies cover only four countries: Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. Given the growing attention in the field to religion and politics, it is hard to understand why the editors were unable to solicit essays from other areas.

Notwithstanding these caveats, this volume’s exceptional scholarship makes it a valuable source. *Spirited Politics* is successful in its endeavour to outline new questions on “the way religion has entered into the operation of state power and the nation-state’s anxious articulation with identity, culture and ideas about community” (p. 21). And as a window for students to the field, it will undoubtedly add impetus for further attempts to understand the dynamics of Southeast Asian religious politics.

JACOB RAMSAY
Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore