

Book Review

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Spirits and Ships:
Cultural Transfers in Early Monsoon Asia

Edited by Andrea Acri, Roger Blench, and Alexandra Landmann
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) Yusof Ishak Institute,
2017, ix + 577 pp.



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This volume follows the earlier *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*, edited by Andrea Acri and published in 2016 by ISEAS. It is a breathtaking work. The range of areas, time periods, and subjects covered is overwhelming. The work, which came with an introduction, offered two key theoretical, historical, and ethnographic contributions by Robert Dentan and Andrea Acri. It ended with an equally important ethnographic chapter by Robert Wessing. That Dentan and Wessing are both anthropologists is hardly a coincidence here. The great originality of the volume lies exactly in bringing the richness of highly localized ethnographic detail in contact with a very broad and detailed historical perspective based on universal religions (in fact, varieties of Buddhism and Hinduism) encompassing diverse epochs and different oceanic regions. The result is a veritable blurring of traditional boundaries of area studies, in particular, those related to South, Southeast, and East Asia, the heart of Monsoon Asia as treated in this volume.

In a work of this magnitude, there are inevitably difficult moments. A non-specialist reader may have a hard time going through Alexandra Landmann's detail-heavy chapter on law. However, despite the difficulty, Landmann's broad theoretical and

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historical exercise related to law ended well. Her chapter, however, might have gained a good deal from a deeper engagement with Wessing's, which closed the book. He provided an ethnographic flesh, so to speak, to the imposing historical, structural bones that Landmann discussed in great detail. On the other hand, Waruno Mahdi, a scientist and scholar based in Germany, made a very intriguing and original case for the populations labelled "Negritos" in the history of cultural transfers across the Bay of Bengal and other territories. His perspective is quite important, as it helped debunk widespread civilizing myths of cultural transfers and influence, all of which traditionally situated the "tribal" as either culturally insulated or only at the receiving end of any influence.

Dentan's avowedly conjectural chapter is on angry deities of South and Southeast Asia. He made a suitably ethnographic case, being a senior anthropologist, with vast field experience in the region, particularly among a couple of "tribal" peoples in Peninsular Malaysia. Acri's contribution meanwhile focused on more historical rather than religious concerns. Both chapters jointly formed the backbone of the book—a volume where spirits are in command of the ships they board. In his chapter, Acri synthesizes the the entire volume's revolutionary point in this manner:

My main thesis is that phenomena that are perceived by current scholarship as being either "Indic" or "local"/"indigenous" in nature were in fact already shaped by multi-directional and supra-local circulatory dynamics; therefore, a perspective transcending the current paradigm is required to make sense of their genesis and transfer over a long period of time (Acri, Blench, and Landmann 2017: 72-3).

Rather than building on the idea of a "common religious matrix" proposed by Jean Przyluski, Sylvain Lévi, and Paul Mus, Acri looked to Dentan's work, as he mentioned various deities such as Rudhra/Rudra (an ancient Vedic god) as well as Nkuu', a deity of the Semai people in Peninsular Malaysia. Both deities were related to thunder. Acri also contrasted Sheldon Pollock's famous "Sanskrit cosmopolis" in South and Southeast Asia with David White's "demonological cosmopolis," while firmly rooting his own to

Southeast Asia, without closing the doors to the possibility of a Central Asian and Iranian element or extension. In the way of Paul Mus, Acri posited that religion is the very basis of unity in the region. The centrality and importance of feminine power in both Semai and Indic religions are likewise brought to the fore. Acri managed to make a convincing case for the existence of a common religious matrix, in itself a key insight which stood out in the volume. The other key insight is that whatever the common matrix, it is certainly not Indian. Acri argued that there are far too many supposedly “peripheral” regions involved in tantrism, for instance, for it to have such a narrow geographical cradle.

Wessing’s contribution—and exceedingly useful chapter in understanding some themes of the previous chapters, like the role of spirits in local cultures in Southeast Asia—echoed Dentan’s and Acri’s works. Quite like Acri, Dentan also brought the issue to an altogether different arena, and in considering Wessing’s perspective effortlessly offered a novelty of historical and ethnographic evidence and perspectives. He convincingly proposed that it is largely pointless to drive a wedge between Indic religions and deities, on the one hand, and indigenous (read ‘tribal’) ones, on the other. One idea that ran throughout the book is that there was an ancient, often overlooked, common substrate between South and Southeast Asia, as well as parts of East Asia—one that is certainly pre-Indic, let alone pre-Islamic, and very likely also pre-Austronesian. Moreover, the idea of unidirectionality (that is, from the more “civilised,” “universal,” towards the more “primitive,” “parochial”) is hammered down by Dentan’s truly “apotropaic” writing (which fellow anthropologist Michael Taussig described as writing that is not run-of-the-mill or “disenchanted”). In this excerpt, Dentan pulled the carpet from a good deal of historical perspectives on the movement of influences between South and Southeast Asia:

I want to suggest, however, that, rather than thinking of the spectre huntsman or *Batara Guru* as inferior peasant versions of Śiva, it would make more sense to think of them as Indianized versions of the thunder god of the Austroasiatics and early Austronesians whom they so closely resemble (Acri et al. 2017: 55).

This is nothing short of a masterly reversal of the late colonial “Greater India” hypothesis, which include talk of “Indianized states” in Southeast Asia and even Indian colonization.

Acri duly historicized and explained in great detail the whole issue. The perspectives offered in the book were hardly novel as such; only, they were abandoned in post-Second World War nationalist-inflected histories developed from using an area studies perspective. Those histories had difficulty looking at both South and Southeast Asia together. The whole book therefore may be seen as a vast—and, to my mind, largely successful—exercise in various types of deep historical anamnesis. Nonetheless, this variegated exercise is carried out now with the benefit of the great advances in the archaeology, linguistics, history, and so forth, of Monsoon Asia at the disposal of today’s scholars. This is seen in prominent linguist and scholar Alexander Adelaar’s contribution, which elaborated on Srivijaya’s influential reach in Africa. He also posited that the Malagasy immigration first touched East Africa proper, rather than Madagascar, though there seemed to be no trace of it in the continent. Adelaar’s highly specialized linguistic exposition of Malagasy is important for its deep understanding of Austronesian and Malagasy histories in the Indian Ocean.

Blench’s chapter offered the most wide-ranging exploration of the theme of the common substratum. One can learn a good deal about heterophonic music (typical of all of Southeast Asia), and musical instruments such as the mouth-organ and the gong, as well as the distribution of the crossbow. Besides, he provided discussions on the famous raised houses or *sumatraliths* (stones probably used for processing fibers), textiles, as well as languages. Blench’s contribution is quite felicitous in setting all these elements side by side, while showing the intriguing contours and configuration of a common cultural area. Meanwhile, Bérénice Bellina’s archaeological overview argued that maritime networks and related exchanges were in fact developed earlier than previously thought, and were therefore not the result of any unidirectional Indian influence in Southeast Asia. By going as far back as the Neolithic era, and by furthermore looking into the particular crafts and items of trade such as pottery and stone ornaments, she presented a more complex view of the

early urban maritime centers of the region. She pointed to various localized heterogeneous patterns rather than an overall common scheme, offering a nuanced pre- and proto-history of what later became the famous trade emporia of the region.

Christopher Buckley's chapter on looms, textiles, and the famous Austronesian expansion is yet another tour-de-force. His combination of archaeology with present-day ethnography turned out to be quite attractive. It also yielded important insights on the yet to be understood connections between Neolithic Mainland China and the adjacent Southeast Asian region. It came with good photographic color reproductions of some textiles, along with intricate descriptions of looms that include the famous *pua kumbu* cloth of the Iban in Sarawak, a highly valued item in the international luxury textile market today. His positing of an "ikat" line (i.e. a divide between *ikat*—a common kind of cloth in Maritime Southeast Asia—and non-*ikat* regions), is benchmark and intriguing in establishing "Indianization." This contributed to the book's novel ways of looking at different items as means of historical appraisal.

Following the footsteps of Jan Gonda's monumental work of the early 1950s, another Dutch scholar, Tom Hoogervorst, inventoried the Austronesian words derived from various Prakrits, or Middle-Indian Aryan languages (i.e., languages other than Sanskrit, Pali, and Tamil, or modern Indian languages). Hoogervorst proved himself worthy of Gonda's legacy. The 101 etymologies offered (mostly related to both Malay and Javanese terms) illustrated the complex and multifaceted linguistic borrowing and adaptation in Maritime Southeast Asia almost two thousand years ago.

One of the most absorbing chapters is Imran bin Tajudeen's on "Indic architectural and cultural translation" in Malayo-Polynesian societies ("Malayo-Polynesian" is a term which the book fully resuscitated, incidentally, from various perspectives). This is, to my mind, one of the most important and trailblazing chapters in the volume, which carried out a detailed, theoretically fundamental analysis of comparative architecture of a vast region, stretching well into the Pacific, as his title indicates (in fact, as far as Fiji and Tahiti).

The notion of creolization comes to mind when reading Tajudeen. Nonetheless, the term is not mentioned anywhere in this book (unsurprisingly, since it is usually employed when discussing island and coastal societies of colonial origin). Incidentally, the chapter also served as a great epitaph to the persistent, long-standing notion of “Indianization.” Hermann Kulke’s notion of “cultural convergence,” as used by Tajudeen in his explanation of the convergence of cultural processes between South and Southeast Asia (also mentioned by Acri and Bellina), can perhaps be considered a version of the concept of creolization. At any rate, it shows that canonical written sources (not always favored in India, though ultimately of Indian origin), on the one hand, and architecture, on the other, “converse” with each other. In this way, Java’s “Indic” architecture is to be seen as actually quite original, as it has no real Indian antecedents, though it “converses” with its South Asian scriptural and stone equivalents. It is therefore at best Indic rather than Indian (giving the lie yet again to the old ‘Greater India’ unidirectional hypothesis). Tajudeen also found the “indigenous” category inadequate because of the abundant evidence of creolization with Indic forms, such as the architectural “readings” of the relevant *śāstric* literature by the Central and East Javanese over the centuries. Quoting Robert Brown, Tajudeen also emphasized that the *dharmacakra*, a Mon Dvāravatī art motif of Indic origin, is neither “Indian” nor “indigenous,” but “products of a specific culture and period that transforms constantly” (Acri et al. 2017: 473).

Tajudeen’s chapter linked with Acri’s, as it mentioned that esoteric/tantric Buddhist data from Java and Sumatra are not congruent with extant theorizations in India itself, and may therefore reflect a previous state of affairs. Tajudeen posited that the “production of Indic religious sanctuaries were [sic] enmeshed with Javanese structures of authority, socio-spatial organization, and mechanisms of economic redistribution...” (Acri et al. 2017: 481). This is to be observed in the terraced mound and walled compounds of the Austronesian tradition, now re-utilized in different, unique structures, such as the *perwara*, or supposedly “subsidiary” temples. There were also powerful nods to both Yayoi

Japan and Neolithic Yunnan in this chapter. Creolization also meant that Sanskrit terms were to be applied to local structures, and this was not lost on Tajudeen when he said that there was a “conscious, deliberate linguistic-cultural adoption of Sanskrit” (Acri et al. 2017: 503). In this way, one of the great hypotheses debunked in this volume, among others, is Pollock’s celebrated “Sanskrit cosmopolis.” Tajudeen concluded with a quote from Keith Taylor, and in effect underlined that it was the (Western) Malayo-Polynesians who went to India to obtain what they needed, being a maritime people, and quite different from the more land-bound peoples of South Asia. It is likely that no Indian “Sanskritisers” existed, but only Malayo-Polynesian ones.

This point may seem arcane and minor, but is in fact fundamental: Malayo-Polynesians were the agents of the processes of creolization here, rather than immigrant South Asians (as assumed in much specialized literature, including some recent works mentioned by Acri, Bellina, and Tajudeen, among others). Tajudeen came out strongly in favor of a Southeast Asian creolized “civilisation” rather than an “Indianized” one, an enduring theme of the volume.

In his conclusion, Blench claimed that all the material and intangible items he analyzed, such as music and language, are difficult to integrate into a “psychogeographic map,” even though he managed to show how these strongly conveyed the sense of a *Kulturkreis*. This is precisely what most of the contributors achieved in their own ways.

Received: Oct 2, 2017; Reviewed: Nov. 3, 2017; Accepted: Dec. 10, 2017

