



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*The Appropriation of Religion in Southeast Asia and Beyond*  
ed. by Michel Picard (review)

Kirsten W. Endres

Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Volume 34, Number  
1, March 2019, pp. 207-209 (Review)

Published by ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/722725>

## Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj34-1g

*The Appropriation of Religion in Southeast Asia and Beyond*. Edited by Michel Picard. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xi+285 pp.

This edited book presents results of a Franco-German research project that investigates how local processes of appropriating the Western concept of religion as a classificatory device have shaped or transformed indigenous cosmologies and local traditions in Southeast Asia and Melanesia. The volume provides a range of rich ethnographic case studies that — together with Michel Picard's insightful introduction — contribute new perspectives to the study of religion in the Southeast Asia-Pacific region, and, more generally, to the anthropology of religion.

Critics like Talal Asad (1993) have problematized the concept of religion as a European historical construction that reflects Christian theological interests. What most of them did not consider was that the Christians had themselves appropriated the term from the Romans and changed its original meaning quite substantially. Missionary and colonial encounters subsequently triggered similar processes of appropriation in other parts of the world, including the Southeast Asia-Pacific region. This is why the category of religion, as Picard suggests, needs to be historicized and treated as an object of study and analysis in its own right.

Southeast Asia offers a particularly fertile terrain for exploring how 'religion' became a vernacular category used to differentiate certain practices from others. The book's eight contributors are well-established sociocultural anthropologists who draw on long-term fieldwork and historical research to present a multifaceted picture of a complex subject. While the authors do not attempt to establish

a common framework for theorizing about the different ways by which ‘religion’ migrated, took root and sprouted new meanings or imposed new meanings on vernacular concepts in various parts of Southeast Asia, they provide crucial insights into local processes of ‘religionization’, that is, processes by which local actors negotiate, establish and maintain the boundaries between what gets categorized as ‘religion’ and what is classified as, for example, ‘mere’ belief or tradition.

Three contributions are concerned with mainland Southeast Asia and the localization of the Pali concept of *sāsana*, that is, the Buddha’s teachings. Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière traces the evolution of the Burmese semantic field of ‘religion’ and argues that the Pali-derived *thathana* gradually came to encompass what she calls a Burmese Buddhicized ‘social space’, distinct from the domains of other religious doctrines (*batha*) or spiritual practices. In contrast, the Khmer word *sāsanā* and the Lao term *sadsana* extends to other ‘world religions’ such as Christianity and Islam. In local discourse, they may also denote indigenous animist or so-called Brahmanic traditions. Anne Yvonne Guillou shows how the meaning of the term has shifted in Cambodia since the colonial period, and how contemporary Buddhist monks try to delineate the religious sphere in different ways. Similar to the situation in Cambodia, the Buddhist and animist spheres in Laos — differentiated as *sadsana phud* (Buddhism) and *sadsana phi* (spirit religion) — frequently overlap with each other. Guido Sprenger uses the notion of connectivity to address the relationship between these diverging yet overlapping spheres and argues that the Lao(cized) concept of ‘religion’ contributes to a dichotomous — and ultimately hierarchical — differentiation between the two *sadsana*.

The next four contributions take the reader to the archipelagic islands of Indonesia, where ‘religion’ translates into the term *agama* in the national language. But this translation has not been a straightforward one, as Michel Picard shows in his essay. In Bali, it ultimately led to the (re)invention of Balinese ritual and cosmological tradition as ‘Hinduism’ (*agama Hindu*). Annette

Hornbacher accompanied a group of Balinese on their pilgrimage to the source and holy places of their 'Hindu religion' in India, which turned out to be an enriching yet puzzling experience that — paradoxically — confirmed the pilgrims' Balinese animist ontology rather than their identification with modern 'universal' Hinduism. Cécile Barraud analyses the case of Tanebar-Evav in the Southeast Moluccas, where *agama Hindu* has only recently been integrated into the local spectrum of religious denominations. But while islanders feel that Protestantism and other adopted religions threaten their ancestral traditions, the new *agama Hindu* is perceived as protecting and reinforcing their *adat*. Jos D.M. Platenkamp addresses indigenous encounters with Christianity in the North Moluccas from an ethno-historical perspective and shows how in the course of history, 'religion' became closely associated with political power and authority.

The "beyond" in the book's title is exemplified by André Iteanu's contribution. Drawing from the 1920s works of F.E. Williams and his own research in Papua New Guinea, he examines how Melanesian societies localized Christianity by emphasizing its perceived continuity with their ancestral traditions, referred to as *kastom* (custom). Taken together, the essays in this volume make a compelling case that 'religion' must not be taken for granted. The volume is thus a strong reminder, not just for anthropologists of Southeast Asia but also for scholars and students of other disciplines and regions, that it is necessary to deconstruct and historicize the categories in which we have come to think.

#### Kirsten W. Endres

Department "Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia", Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Advokatenweg 36, 06114 Halle (Saale), Germany; email: endres@eth.mpg.de.

#### REFERENCE

- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993.