

## Editorial Foreword

Ritual, power, and ‘production’ are some of the themes that connect the six research articles featured in this issue.

Alexandra Kaloyanides explores ritual and power through a study of the highly ornamented Burmese manuscript known as the *Kammavacā*, an authoritative text that is conventionally used in important monastic ceremonies. The article examines the process through which the late eighteenth and nineteenth-century *Kammavacā* emerges as a standardised ritual object and for what it reveals about the local political-economic conditions of Myanmar’s last kingdom, the Konbaung dynasty. Focusing on the visual and material features of over four dozen Burmese *Kammavāca* manuscripts, the article suggests that the production, decoration, and circulation of these texts constitutes an attempt by the royal court to mobilise protective ‘militarised’ spirits in the wake of an advancing British occupational force that threatened to overwhelm the kingdom.

Where Kaloyanides’ article examines the harnessing and distribution of spiritual power by the royal centre, our next article by Edoardo Siani expands this perspective to consider the appropriation of cosmological ideas and ritual practices as they relate to expressions of everyday resistance in contemporary Thailand. Based on ethno-historical fieldwork conducted between the coup of 2014 and the death of King Bhumibol in 2016, Siani’s study examines how divination is utilised by different stakeholders in contemporary Thai society as expressions of contestation and dissent. While acknowledging that cosmological references and divination practices are often reflective of conservative stakeholders, Siani suggests that Thai diviners continue to provide political actors across the social landscape with the spiritual vocabulary and ritual means to contest and produce sovereign claims to power.

Shifting to the sixteenth-century world of the Spanish Philippines, Stephanie Joy Mawson examines a similar contestation between legal, religious, and ritual worlds via 98 Inquisition cases concerning ‘folk magic’ or *hechicería*, a juridical category denoting a minor religious infraction. Her examination of the interaction of Spanish and Filipino folk practices complicates our understanding of what constitutes the boundary between the local and the foreign by pointing out that the Spanish came to the Philippines with their own ‘folk magic’ practices that intermixed with pre-existing customs. Similar to Siani’s findings in contemporary Thailand, Mawson’s research suggests that these rituals were adopted by elites and commoners alike, drawing the attention and ire of the ruling authorities. While the article illustrates the way Spanish-Mexican folk knowledge was appropriated and produced by local practitioners, this research also considers how Asian botanical, medicinal, and spiritual knowledge was incorporated into Spanish understandings of folk magic. Colonial authorities struggled to repress *hechicería* practices within the Spanish community

that was itself drawing upon local Filipino folk rituals and remedies that were similarly targeted by the Catholic Church.

If the persistence of folk magic in the Philippines highlights the limits of religious authorities to influence behaviour, Bibiana Wong Yee-ying's study of the Catholic Church's connection to the migration of overseas Chinese communities from China to Southeast Asia reminds us of its broader reach. The article draws attention to the Singapore-based Catholic Central Bureau and its founder, Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke, whose missionary work contributed to the expansion of the Chinese Catholic community in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. Wong's research prompts scholars to recognise the multiple factors and contexts in which mobilities across East and Southeast Asia took place and the role that religious institutions and actors played in the production of these identities.

Where Wong's research highlights the role of the Church in diasporic identity formation, Rosemary Gianno's article focuses on how colonial and postcolonial ethnographers contributed to the ethnohistorical production of the Orang Asli, the communities long considered to be the original or indigenous peoples of peninsular Malaysia. The article examines the ethnonyms related to the identification of groups within the Orang Asli, with particular attention directed towards two groups: the Temoq and Semelai. By tracing the histories of four ethnonyms currently used to denote different linguistic groups today, the study traces the way ethnonymic landscapes changed during the colonial and post-colonial period. This article explores the role of colonial ethnographers, state personnel, and scholars in the historical construction of the Temoq, its application to the Semelai, and conventional understandings of the Orang Asli.

Our final research article reconsiders conventional understandings of the colonial encounter and how it was understood by various stakeholders via the transregional history of the Yunnan–Burma railway. Cao Yin asks how an initiative to build a railway across state borders created a transnational issue that galvanised anti-colonial nationalists in British Burma and China against the colonial state. Through a close examination of the railway, Cao Yin argues that the project was more a commercial enterprise than an instrument of state policy, despite nationalist criticisms on both sides of the border that presented it as such. The article raises important questions about the varied nature of the colonial state, the changing practices of transnational anti-colonial nationalists, and the potential of infrastructure as a theme in Southeast Asian Studies.

Along with a selection of book reviews, this issue features a special Review Article by Thomas Borchert who compares two recent works on transnational Buddhism: Jack Meng-Tat Chia's *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity across the South China Sea* and Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox and Brian Bocking's *The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk Who Faced Down the British Empire*. As always, we are indebted to the authors, scholars, reviewers, and referees who made this issue possible.

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