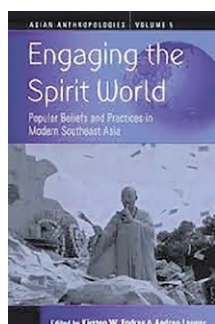


Engaging the spirit world

As the contributions to this collection rekindled my early experiences 'in the field', reading through the ten chapters of *Engaging the Spirit World* was great fun. As the greenhorn I was, I laughed at my initial encounter with 'spirits' (*phii*) in Thailand, which so upset my girlfriend that she slapped me in the face. It spelled the end to my fun. I not only learned to take beliefs seriously – whether western, eastern, religious, or political – but also to realise that for the believers concerned these represented their living experience. In that sense, beliefs are as tangible as a bowl of rice and have to be explored concretely before we, 'servants of science', put any 'theoretical' *à priori* on top of them.

Niels Mulder



Reviewed publication:

Endres, K.W. & A. Lauser (eds.) 2011. *Engaging the Spirit World; Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, ISBN 9780857453587 (hb)

IN SEVERAL EARLY CHAPTERS of the collection, researchers apparently struggled with the above caveat. Rather belatedly, they discovered that 'modernisation theory' about disenchantment, rationalisation, and its supposed correspondence with capitalism consisted of heaps of untenable hypotheses. This I experienced on Java while doing research among sophisticated members of the urban upper and middle classes in the late 1960s. To them, the practice of mysticism or the development of the secretive 'inner man' (*kebatinan*) was at least as real as their Dutch-taught 'rationality'. It spelled my escape from the intellectual straight-jacket of high-flown ivory tower assumptions.

I realised that the world is an enchanted place, with or without religion. Imagine the desert that life would be without fantasy and art, without dreaming and making love. We simply need these to sustain ourselves. Besides, don't most people in this world take the existence of an esoteric double – 'their soul' – for granted?

The intention of *Engaging* is to illuminate the wider context of the contemporary dynamics of religion in Southeast Asia. The flourishing of religion, urban medium-ship, the worship of ancestors, heroes and deities, and the need to appease hosts of unfulfilled lives/souls evoked by unrestrained American barbarism in Vietnam – with which the editors are most familiar – led to inviting the contributors to the collection to relate and reflect on their research in Laos, on the Indonesian islands of Lombok and Java, in Vietnam,

Korea, Malaysia, Burma, Southern Thailand, and on Thai ghost films-cum-horror movies.

In the process of examining contemporary engagements with the world of spirits, ghosts and ancestors, most contributors bend over backwards to offer insights and fresh interpretations that seek to contribute to the theoretical discussion of the relationship between religion and modernity. To their credit, all of them take the phenomena they encounter 'in the field' seriously and engage with these as the point of departure for building 'grounded theory'.

Writing the last sentence made me conscious of the datedness of my vocabulary, as the ideas of phenomenology and grounded theory simply do not occur in the collection. The various researchers make an 'ontological approach' to their subject matter – which is fine by me – while proposing that modernity does not equate with the western ideal type of it. As a result, authors recommend 'alternative modernities' that assume their own characteristics depending on the (cultural) milieu in which they originate. Next to this, they recognise that the idea of the autonomous individual is an inapplicable construct to elucidate Southeast Asian personality. Life and self-definition thereabouts are strongly relational' and may make us aware that modern westerners are not such lonely monads, either.



A delightful observation proffered is the idea that spirits and all the beliefs that surround them are pleasantly flexible; whereas they do not escape from the wide realm of religion, they are impervious to dogma and doctrine. As a result, they can accommodate to any circumstance and practice of modern life. So, as we study them, we should be aware that they are in step with contemporary existence, which seems to me a rather basic field-anthropological assumption.

The book is composed with the expectation to contribute to the

re-enchantment debate. In order to do so, the authors assume that local traditions of engaging supernatural entities are important arenas in which the dynamics of political, economic and social change are confronted and negotiated. Accordingly, market relations, economic opportunity, social change, power struggles, etc., are brought into relation with the reconfiguration of local spirit worlds. In doing so, it bared the necessity of reshaping discourses on cultural identity, morality, power relations, and interpretative control, while challenging the concept of modernity itself. Altogether, these ambitions resulted in a loose plethora of stimulating ideas that make the collection well-worth reading.

During a possession session on Java, I did an interview with the Nyai Loro Kidul, the mystical queen of the southern ocean; in Thailand, my broad smile excited the tenth century Marshal of the Queen of Dvaravati so much that he threatened me with an accident on my way home – and I must avow that I drove more precautionary than usual; in the Philippines, reputed medium Mang Tinoy urged me to team up when he hopped around his audience as the playful Santo Niño (Holy Child Jesus). After many such experiences 'in the field', I was well-prepared to take my anaesthetist brother seriously when he volunteered that he regularly conferred with my Dutch-Reformed minister-grandfather who died when he (my brother) was three years old. Wherever we are, we live with fairies – and we need them dearly.

Niels Mulder retired to the southern slope of the mystically potent Mt. Banáhaw, Philippines, where he concluded his swan song, *Situating Filipino Civilisation in Southeast Asia; Reflections and observations*, Saarbruecken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2012 (print-to-order ed., ISBN 978-3-659-13083-0). (niels_mulder201935@yahoo.com.ph)

Reference

1 Mulder, N. 2011. 'The Crux is the Skin: Reflections on Southeast Asian Personhood', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1/2011: 95-116.

industry, as well as its clout, in China and the US. The largest producer of panels in the EU, Germany, the sector lost influence relative to automotive and machine tool exporters to the PRC. Vermeer takes into account the implication of the slowdown in hydropower for China's 2010 Copenhagen commitment to procure 15% of electricity from non-fossil sources.

The work concludes with an essay on the somewhat torturous notion of global energy governance and its evolution since early 20th century, a thing which in the words of the author "is highly diffuse and almost non-existent". Borrowing from Beriman's Earth System Governance, the author sees global energy governance at work where others tend to see the pursuit of national interest by the strongest powers.

Potential areas of cooperation

What to make of this vast and multi-authored study?

The editors of the work under review hint to potential areas of cooperation between these two large energy importers. However, this theme does not figure explicitly in the work. I find that unfortunate. Relations between domestic growth and international conflict about raw materials got, and still gets, most of the scholarly attention. Take for example the still influential study of Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North, *Nations in conflict. National growth and international violence*. San Francisco: Freeman (1975). They developed a model, and tested its observable implications empirically, for the era of Europe's second industrial revolution annex competitive colonization drive. They found strong linkages between and among the expansion of industry in western European countries, domestic pressure to go beyond borders to get access to resources, conflicting claims on territory and maritime trade routes,

alliance activity, military build-ups and militarized inter-state disputes. National level rival mobilizations around these conflicts were not mediated by parliament, leading to rallies and clashes between large, organized sectors of the domestic economy. These domestic contests played role in conflict escalation. The editors of the work under review take exception to the inevitability of a repetition of such a development. They hint to potential areas of cooperation between these two large energy importers. For many, turning around the causal linkage between growing resource use from conflict towards cooperation instead, may come as a surprise. Why? Ascending, middle-income, China is urbanizing its vast peasant population at an unprecedented rate. These low per capita energy consumers in the most populous country of the world used to depend on biomass for cooking and heating. Bringing these people to an urban environment will increase their per capita fossil consumption, which interacts with food and water supplies as well as emissions. Accordingly, it should not come as a surprise that China is destined to pass the US as the largest oil-importer in the next couple of years, increasing its still relatively low per capita rate of consumption. High-income, highly urbanized, Europe on the other hand, already operates on a high level of per capita fossil energy use. Indeed, World Energy Outlook 2010 estimates primary energy demand to increase by 36% between 2008-2035. As may be expected, most of that increase will come from Asian demand. In my opinion, these very characteristics of the Chinese – European dyad do not only imply a potential for conflict. They also create a bargaining field for cooperation on the basis of shared interests. Chinese and European economies are connected through a dense network of trade, investment and transport linkages. It is in the EU's interest

to assist China further improving its energy efficiency in the fossil sector. It would slow down the rate of resource depletion when current oil exporters with high population growth are increasing their domestic consumption. Today, Saudi Arabia is the only exporter with an oil-surplus production capacity.

Another area of cooperation between China and the EU is the emerging clean energy sector. China and the European Union try to escape from the fossil-carbon emission trap by developing domestic sources of clean energy. If successful, developing domestic sources of clean energy should further reduce the level of lateral pressure in each of them to compete for access to sources beyond borders. The joint development of clean energy points to the shared long-term interest in viability of both societies in the face of climate change. In the European Union, international energy cooperation also serves the latent objective to contribute to the creation of energy policy competence at the EU-level, with the potential spin-off of for strengthening the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Supported by, among others, the Chinese Academy and the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, Amineh and Yang Guang have currently underway a shared research project on the trans-nationalization of Chinese oil companies and their involvement with local governments and institutions. We are looking forward to seeing what is happening on the ground in several large energy exporting countries of Africa and Latin America.

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