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Introduction: The Politics of Spirituality and Religion in Southeast Asian Cinemas

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This special issue of *Situations*, guest-edited by Patrick Campos, focuses on the cinemas and cultures of Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Each of the selected papers was first presented at the 10th Biennial of the Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas, whose website may be accessed for further information.

The idea of cultural difference has become a central topic in the academic humanities since the 1990s with the advent of the global economy and the wide array of transnational contacts as well as conflicts it has engendered. But the study of world cultures under globalization has all-too often been constrained by methods and approaches that project a frame of analysis that is overwhelmingly rationalistic and progressive in its orientation. People in developing countries are seen either as Westerners-in-waiting, who are certain to adopt Western values as well as Western lifestyles once their economies have become integrated into the global market, or they are extolled as revolutionary subjects whose poverty and hardships make them into the ideal agents for bringing about the political change that the working-classes of the West have failed to execute. Between the cracks of these two opposing visions of historical progress, between the neoliberalism of the Washington Consensus and the radicalism of post-colonial theory, it has often been difficult in the West to catch sight of what peoples in regions of the world like Southeast Asia actually hold to be important for themselves and for their societies. Wide-ranging changes, some of them transformational, are under way in this area of the globe, yet theoretical models that define human beings in materialistic terms are ill-suited to confront and make sense of these developments. Our conceptions of progress, whether as a necessary and inevitable movement toward liberalization or toward

revolution, serve to prevent us from seeing the full complexity of cultural change in the world outside the West.

The limitations of Western theory in discussing cultures outside the West have become a more prominent topic in recent years. For example, Kuan-Hsing Chen in *Asia as Method* points out that even the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism and imperialism has remained within a conceptual horizon that is itself Western. Postcolonial critique, he argues, has been constrained by its “parasitic” nature, decrying Western imperialism and Western cultural hegemony by taking as its scholarly models the works of thinkers rooted in the Western tradition.[1] Similarly, Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety* opens her book with the admission that she, as a feminist and a secular liberal in Pakistan, was obliged to rethink her beliefs and assumptions with the sharp rise in support for “Islamic mores” among the affluent middle class in the Muslim world.[2] She notes that she had never expected Muslim political movements to take an active role in pushing for democracy in authoritarian regimes and in supplying vital services to the poor that governments under the pressure of neoliberalism were no longer able to provide. The study of religion, in other words, offers the chance not only to discover new perspectives but also yields insights into the consequential events and movements that are reshaping cultures in the present age, which a reliance on Western concepts of progress might deprive one of the capacity to recognize. An approach to religion that does not reduce it to a symptom or to superstition can enable us to see the world from the standpoint of those whose outlooks may be different from our own and whose values are in tension with those of liberal modernity.

This issue contains five articles dealing with questions surrounding belief and spirituality in the Southeast Asian countries of the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, East Timor (Timor-Leste), and Laos. It opens with “Being Chanthaly, Becoming Lao Cinema” by guest-editor Patrick Campos. This article examines the history of Lao cinema and the cultural and artistic breakthrough of the film, *Chanthaly* (Mattie Do, 2012), a work of horror whose narrative was shaped in compelling ways by state censorship. Laos is a socialist republic that was established after a civil war in which the communists defeated a monarchy supported by the

United States. Campos gives a fascinating account of the obstacles that stood in the way of creating a film industry in Laos, where filmmakers not only had to contend with state censorship but also with a lack of movie theaters in which to screen their work. After the country was reunified by the communists, the new government released newsreels aimed at promoting its legitimacy among the population and imported films from the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and other countries in the region. The Lao government did release two feature films, a war movie titled *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars* (Ky Nam Pham and Somchith Pholsena, 1983), and a love story titled *Red Lotus* (Som-Ok Southiphone, 1988). Both films paint a heroic picture of the struggle to establish a socialist regime in Laos, but failed to attract a strong domestic audience, even as *Red Lotus* won acclaim and admiration among viewers and critics in the Soviet Union, Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. After a period of several decades in which few films were made, the Cinema Department of the Lao government decided to give another try at building a national film industry with the feature, *Chanthaly*. Campos documents the ingenious ways in which the filmmakers had to deal with state censorship even on a project approved by the government. The instructions that the filmmakers received from the state, far from stifling the project, led them to imaginative solutions that drew on Lao folk tradition while serving to stage the dialogue between reason and belief in a compelling form. Such responses to government directives, which served to make the film both more suspenseful and more reflective of Lao society, enable the film to emerge as an allegory for Lao film history itself.

The next article is "*Surrexit*… She Has Arisen: *The Rites of May* and the Folk Catholic Imaginary" by Antonio D. Sison. Focusing on the debut feature of Filipino director Mike de Leon, Sison situates the film *The Rites of May*, or *Itim* (1977), against the backdrop of Filipino Catholicism, especially its syncretic aspects, as well as in the context of world cinema. The film, a work of horror, relies on religious iconography to embody the guilt of the culprit as well as to evoke fear and dread in the viewer. For Sison, what gives the traditional Catholic images of the Virgin and the Apostles an unusual potency in *The Rites of May* is the syncretic nature of

Filipino Catholicism, in which the boundaries between the supernatural and the natural and between the sacred and the profane are porous, reflecting the continuing influence of precolonial animistic beliefs. Sison draws on the idea of "worldfeel" from theologian Jose De Mesa, which refers to a sensuous mode of cognition in which touch and intuition play a leading role. Distinct from a "worldview," which emphasizes sight and privileges written communication, the idea of a "worldfeel" instead looks to experience and sensation as sources of religious illumination. The expanded role accorded to a physical and sensuous experience of the sacred finds a particularly appropriate expression in the film's climactic scene, in which the spirit of a young woman inhabits the body of her sister to accuse her former lover of having murdered her. Sison's article not only provides a close reading of the film that also draws vital points of comparison to notable films that are both recent, such as *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010), and contemporary with *The Rites of May*, such as the classic of Cuban cinema, *The Last Supper* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1976), but it also offers a productive concept which drives home the distinctiveness of film-making in the Philippines.

"Islam and Stardom in Malay Cinema: From *Ibu Mertuaku* to *Salam Cinta*" by Jonathan Driskell takes on a topic that many readers are likely to find paradoxical—depictions of celebrities in popular Malaysian films. Of course, if we find the link between stardom and Islam to be unexpected, it is because of the increasing influence of conservative and traditionalist forms of Islam in countries like Malaysia. But as Driskell shows, the concern for an ethical life, in which Malay traditions play a central role, recurs throughout the three films that are objects of his analysis. *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), directed by the multi-talented P. Ramlee, who achieved fame as an actor, writer, and singer, is about a singer from a working-class background who becomes involved with a young woman from a wealthy family. In a striking reversal of the standard Hollywood formula, the star is the one who suffers for his status as social inferior, while his antagonist is the mother of his lover, who is portrayed as Westernized and corrupted by wealth. In the second film under consideration, *Layar Lara* (Shuhaimi Baba, 1997), the female movie

star Ena behaves in a vain and selfish manner befitting the familiar stereotype of the star as a prima donna. After she is humbled by a professional reversal, Ena undergoes a personal transformation after she learns about the solidarity, humility, and professionalism of the actors who made their names in the 1950s, during the golden age of Malay cinema. This plot development reflects the growing Islamization and the narrowing of freedom of expression in Malaysia. In response to such forces, the heroine Ena is shown resetting the "equilibrium between tradition and modernity." The third film, *Salam Cinta* (Azhari Mohd Zain, 2012), moves even further in the direction of Muslim traditionalism, as its hero, who is a brash and arrogant film star, moves to a village, falls in love with the daughter of the local imam, and gives up his profession altogether. The triumph of Islamic piety over the most conspicuous rewards of secular life marks a possibly decisive moment in the history of Malaysian culture, in which a characteristically modern medium is made to repudiate modernity itself. One wonders what the future might hold for the cinema in a culture that increasingly rejects modern values.

The fourth essay in the collection, "The Muslim 'New Man' and Gender Politics in Indonesian Cinema" by Evi Eliyanah, examines a feature film that mounts a strong critique of the traditional conception of masculinity that dominates Indonesian society. *Woman with a Turban* [*Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*] (Hanung Bramantyo, 2009) deals with the struggles of Annisa, a young woman from a rural village, to make a career for herself against the wishes of her stern father, who is an imam and the principal of a religious school. She is married against her will to a man who mistreats her, but after she is turned out of the family home, she meets Khudori, a scholarly young man who has studied abroad in Egypt. Khudori pointedly does not fit the image of the traditional Indonesian Muslim man. He supports Annisa in her aspirations to gain a modern education and to work outside the home as a counselor helping women trapped in abusive situations. Eliyanah stresses that the figure of Khudori is meant to show that becoming a sensitive modern man can be reconciled with faithfulness to the Muslim religion, as he embraces a more open form of Islam that respects the desires of women for autonomy and independence. For Indonesians, male figures who

did not exemplify traditional masculine norms are familiar as figures of ridicule in sitcoms, so *Woman with a Turban* broke new ground in its depiction of a male character who was both sensitive and pious. But as Eliyanah cautions, this representation comes at the price of stereotyping rural men, laying the blame at their doorstep for the values and customs that continue to oppress women in Indonesia. Citing statistics regarding domestic violence, she points out that it is erroneous to ascribe patriarchal violence to working-class and rural men. This fact helps to draw a complex and nuanced portrait of Indonesian society, in which the sudden rise of women to positions of prominence in politics and education since the late 1990s has not been matched by changes in the everyday attitudes of men regarding gender equality and the rights of women.

The final contribution to the issue is "Revisiting Passabe: *Lisan* and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste" by Chris Lundry, who explores the process of forgiveness and reconciliation in East Timor after the country gained its independence from Indonesia in 2002. In the months leading up to the referendum of August 30, 1999, militias supported by Indonesia committed massacres and rapes across the region in an effort to intimidate the population into voting against secession from Indonesia. The membership of these militias was composed predominantly of East Timorese, who, after East Timor became an independent country, fled to Indonesia. But many sought to return to their villages. The UN proposed to set up courts and put former militia members on trial for the atrocities they committed, but it gave up on the effort to institute legal mechanisms to punish the perpetrators because of the preference of the East Timorese for using traditional ceremonies and rituals to reintegrate the returning militia members. The film *Passabe* (James Leong and Lynn Lee, 2006), which is the name of a remote village located on the border of Indonesia, documents the process of reconciliation for a returning villager who had taken part in the massacres that took the lives of nearly three hundred villagers. For the East Timorese, reconciliation takes place through a series of rituals called *lisan*. These rituals are drawn from folk tradition but also include the participation of the Catholic Church. Former militia members, after admitting their wrongdoing to their victims,

make reparations and then take part in ceremonies that involve animal sacrifice as well as a Catholic mass. Lundry shows that the practice of *lisan* has been strikingly successful in bringing about reconciliation between perpetrators and victims. While the key to its success may have to do with the fact that *lisan* takes place on an intimate scale, at the level of the village, nevertheless Lundry points out that it has also served to strengthen the rule of law in the fledgling nation.

The articles in this special issue highlight the potential for cultural studies in Asia to open up new frontiers in the discipline at a time when the humanities in the Western academy finds itself trapped in a conceptual impasse as well as caught in a crisis of legitimacy. It is perhaps not surprising that the most prominent thinkers who have laid down the most direct challenges to the dominance of narrowly materialistic and politically dogmatic schools of thought—Jonathan Haidt, Camille Paglia, Jordan Peterson, and John Gray—all take religion, including non-Western beliefs, seriously as a source of meaning and value and underscore the importance of studying religions to achieve a genuine understanding of art and culture. Indeed, Haidt has written that it is the West which is historically divergent from the moral cultures which have characterized almost every civilization, drawing on anthropological research on moral foundations that was carried out in India.[3] In the endeavor of providing a more balanced and nuanced view of the developing world, it is clear that attention to religion is vital in enabling us to understand cultural and ethical paradigms that are often at odds with those that dominate the West, which, as Haidt and others point out, tend to project a simplistic and distorted view onto complex realities.

Notes

[1] Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

[2] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), x.

[3] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).