

## PERSPECTIVES OF THE PAST: RITUAL IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Michael Leadbetter, Cheng Nien Yuan, Natali Pearson and Wayan Jarrah Sastrawan

**A**s emerging researchers of the Southeast Asian past, we critique commonly-accepted assumptions to discover new theoretical and methodological insights. Earlier this year, when TAASA invited us to speak about ritual in Asia, we were keen to investigate this concept further. A strength of our research group is the diversity of our scholarly backgrounds. 'Ritual' offered a common starting point for us to break new academic ground and extend our understanding of the topic beyond the usual stereotypes about Asian rituals.

Inspired by TAASA's theme, we convened a double panel – *Perspectives on the Past: Ritual in Southeast Asia* – at the 9th European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EuroSEAS) conference at the University of Oxford (16-18 August 2017). This major international conference attracts hundreds of experts on Southeast Asia from across the world.

Several considerations informed our selection of panel participants. We sought to bring together a diversity of perspectives and to consider ritual broadly, as heritage, practice, performance, tradition, religion and spiritual practice. We also wanted to handle the idea of ritual in innovative ways: ritual as a subject of historical enquiry, as a set of economic relationships, ritual landscapes and spaces, ritual connecting past and present and as heritage production. We were interested in critically analysing the socio-cultural, political and historical significance of certain ritual practices, rather than simply describing them.

It is important to talk about ritual now, because the concept of ritual was used by Western scholars throughout the 20th century to explain power differences between 'the West' and 'the Orient'. This was particularly the case in Southeast Asia, where the frequency and cultural depth of ritual activity was wrongly used to argue that Southeast Asian communities were incompatible with modernity, modern statehood, economic systems, political identities and technologies. This is an extremely limiting and clichéd way of thinking about ritual, but it dominated mainstream views until relatively recently. Our panel rejected this problematic paradigm, dealing with new and relevant issues in a more nuanced way than artificial dichotomies between East and West, traditional and modern.

**DOUBLE PANEL PARTICIPANTS.** BACK ROW (L TO R): GERTRUD HÜWELMEIER, CHENG NIEN YUAN, WAYAN JARRAH SASTRAWAN, KELLY SILVA, LENE PEDERSEN, MARK TALLARA, PETER WORSLEY (DISCUSSANT). FRONT ROW: NATALI PEARSON AND MICHAEL LEADBETTER. PHOTO SOURCE: N. PEARSON



The first panel focussed on new understandings about ritual and its connections to society, power, landscape, political process and environment. Professor Lene Pedersen began by revealing that the Balinese 'theatre state' emerges from a nexus of ritual activities between people at all levels of society and their landscape. Wayan Jarrah Sastrawan demonstrated the role that landscape and rituals played in the rise of political dynasties in ancient Java. Michael Leadbetter considered power relations and ritual from the ground up, examining the social and ecological footprint of ritual in ancient and modern Cambodia. Dr Kelly Silva considered how governance agencies are attempting to manage people, resources and ritual in Timor-Leste.

Equally insightful connections were made by the second panel, particularly on the relationship between ritual and embodiment. It started with a bang: Mark Tallara presented thrilling, dramatic footage of the annual *Traslación* procession of the Black Nazarene, where millions of devotees spill onto the streets of Quiapo, Manila for more than 20 hours in embodied, religious fervour. The phenomenological significance of ritual's affective qualities carried through to Cheng Nien Yuan's presentation on *Brother Cane*, a 1994 performance art piece/quasi-ritual which took Singapore by storm. Each re-performance has tested and reinforced the state's stance on freedom of expression.

Dr Gertrud Hüwelmeier explored the relationship between socio-cultural practice and the state in the context of the spectacularisation of Vietnamese spirit mediumship onto the theatrical stage, a transition which affects the body's senses in markedly different ways. Natali Pearson examined the embodied implications of naval shipwrecks in Southeast

Asia, arguing that visits to these underwater graves by a variety of stakeholders – including military officials, government representatives, survivors and descendants, recreational divers and local communities – can be characterised as ritual-like.

The strong level of interest in our double panel indicates that there is a demand for innovative and multi-disciplinary approaches to previously-exoticised issues such as ritual. We hope that this is an exciting beginning for diverse perspectives that reach across the past and into the present.

The authors are postgraduate students at the University of Sydney and founding members of the research group *Perspectives on the Past* ([www.SEAsiaPasts.com](http://www.SEAsiaPasts.com)). Michael LEADBETTER is an archaeologist who works on the Greater Angkor Project; CHENG NIEN YUAN is researching oral history and performance in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies; NATALI PEARSON, in the Museum and Heritage Studies Program, is looking at underwater cultural heritage in Indonesia; and WAYAN JARRAH SASTRAWAN, in the Asian Studies Program, is investigating the traditional historiographical practices of island Southeast Asia.

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*A full outline of papers presented in the double panel 'Perspectives on the Past: Ritual in Southeast Asia' at the 9th EuroSEAS Conference, University of Oxford, August 2017, can be accessed at: <https://seasiapasts.com/2017/08/12/euroseasoxford-here-we-come/>*