

The Appropriation of Religion in Southeast
Asia and Beyond

Michel Picard
Editor

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This collection of essays originates in a collaborative research project titled ‘Local Traditions and World Religions: The Appropriation of “Religion” in Southeast Asia and Beyond’, jointly funded by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) and the German Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), that ran from January 2011 to June 2014.

Combining anthropological and historical approaches with philology and political science, the participants to this research—placed under the leadership of Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Annette Hornbacher—aimed to investigate contemporary religious politics in Southeast Asia and Melanesia by framing it in long-term perspectives. In the course of regular meetings in Paris and Heidelberg, they confronted their analyses of the localization of world religions occurring dialogically with the universalization of local traditions in their respective fields of investigation. While these issues are commonly framed in terms of relations between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, globalization should not be viewed as impacting the local from the outside as it is always localized. Besides, it is inevitably mediatized by the state and its religious politics. On the whole, in the name of modernity and progress, Southeast Asian states tend to press their populations to have a ‘religion’. On that account, the authors in this volume address religion as a process of ‘religionization’, implying that adherents of indigenous ritual practices are ‘not yet religious’ and therefore are due to be ‘religionized’.

In this respect, we deem it necessary to problematize the category ‘religion’, as it is neither a descriptive nor an analytical term but a

prescriptive and normative concept, which is too imbued with Christian theology as well as with Western modernity to have a transcultural relevance. However, while religion is not a vernacular category but one projected externally on some aspects of native culture, the fact is that non-Western peoples have appropriated the category religion to define certain practices as differentiated from others. Hence, the issue is to investigate the process whereby such a category has become self-evident even to those for whom it was previously a novelty. That is to say, our aim is to understand what happens when local peoples themselves claim to ‘have a religion’, whether they want to have a religion or are constrained to demonstrate that they profess one.

In methodological terms, thus, ‘religion’ is that which is regarded as such by these local actors, which might not correspond to what counts as religion for the observer. Furthermore, local actors do not necessarily concur regarding what their religion is about, as religion is a contentious issue. Indeed, in the course of our research we noticed a tension between proponents of local traditions, who consider them as both self-sufficient and deserving the label ‘religion’ in their own right, and advocates of a world religion, who deny those local traditions the qualification of ‘religion’. What’s more, in many cases this tension may coexist within the same actors, who are faced with the predicament of having to integrate both their own indigenous traditions and the locally prevailing world religion(s) into the same socio-cosmic order. In consequence, in each of our case studies, we purpose to elucidate what gets identified and legitimized as ‘religion’, by whom, for what purpose, and under what political conditions.

For diverse reasons, several of the participants to the initial research project could not be included in this volume, namely Andrée Feillard, Alexandra de Mersan, François Raillon, Susanne Rodemeier, and Gwenaël Njoto-Feillard. On the other hand, the editor would like to express his heartfelt gratitude to Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Cécile Barraud for their invaluable assistance in the achievement of this collective enterprise, as well as to Chelsie Yount-André and Richard Fox for having smoothed over the style of some of these chapters. Last but not least, this research project could not have been brought to fruition without the invaluable financial and administrative support of the Centre Asie du Sud-Est.

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