

Editorial Foreword

The relationship of cultural practices and institutions to politics and religion is the overarching theme of the present issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. More specifically, the six research articles gathered here form three discrete thematic units: the first deals with politics as performance and with performance as politics; the second with education and youth literature as instruments of national imagining; and the last one with the relationship of legal texts to religious heterodoxy.

In the opening article, Astrid Norén-Nilsson examines the dissemination in contemporary Cambodia of the narrative of the sixteenth-century king, Sdech Kân, in support of the incumbent prime minister's political and personal power. Tellingly, Sdech Kân not only embodies the 'man of merit' whose virtues are intimately connected to traditional notions of authority and moral order in Buddhist Southeast Asia, but is also believed to have achieved power by toppling an unjust king — an obvious parallel to Prime Minister Hun Sen's defenestration of Prince Norodom Ranariddh from the governing coalition in 1997. The narrative of Sdech Kân is performed by Hun Sen primarily in the form of elaborate public speeches that deploy tropes and imagery rooted in collective memory. 'The reinvention of Sdech Kân,' writes Norén-Nilsson, 'advances an idea of the curbing of royal power as integral to national reconciliation and prosperity'; at the same time, the figure of Sdech Kân 'provides Hun Sen with a new vision to guide the present era ... [for] the leader who dares to challenge the hereditary leader achieves the democratic revolution and embodies the nation's aspirations'.

Moving from political theatre to theatre as a political tool, Michael Bodden's article considers the development of Indonesian theatre since the 1950s from the peripheral perspective of South Sulawesi in relation to the construction of both a distinctive regional identity and a national culture. Bodden identifies three reasons for the contribution of theatre practitioners in Makassar to Indonesian national culture: the allure of Western modernity and modernist aesthetics; the use of Bahasa Indonesia as national medium; and theatre workers' subscription to 'universal humanism'. These factors had, by the 1960s, 'led to the creation of a national artistic community bound together mainly by its commitment to technique, which in turn linked it to international artistic currents'. Developments in the 1970s saw the emergence of a more conceptual dramaturgical style combined with the incorporation of elements from indigenous performances. But only in the 1990s, following the dissolution of the New Order's political and cultural centralisation, did the Makassar theatre practitioners claim a more assertive role within the national theatre scene. By then, 'Makassar theatre had ... become at once more local ... but also more national ... [with] ties to both Java-based and international avant-garde as well as populist, locally inflected national styles.'

The next two articles debate the role of education and literature in moulding a putative nation's youth in two critical situations: Singapore from the 1930s to the early 1950s, before the attainment of self-government; and South Vietnam in the early 1970s, before the country's unification by the victorious North. Siew-Min Sai's article sketches an alternative genealogy of nationalism in Singapore by tracing the origins of the island-nation's current official policy of multiculturalism. Postwar 'colonial nationalism' derived from the idea of 'imperial citizenship' that had enticed Malaya's Anglophone Asians in the interwar years, but lost its currency with the collapse of empire. Postwar multiculturalism was devised as a tool to foster an embryonic nationhood that would not challenge Britain's regained control over Malaya. As demonstrated by the foundation of the University of Malaya in 1949, colonial policymakers identified the promotion of English as a common language through education as the key to attain this objective. But the replacement of the Malayan Union by the Federation of Malaya and the declaration of the Emergency in 1948, along with the question of Chinese education, fatally compromised multiculturalism and the peculiar nationalist project it subtended. Ironically, this colonial template was recast by Singapore's long-ruling party after 1965 in opposition to Malay ethnonationalism, furnishing 'the *raison d'être* of Singapore's independent nationhood'. This reinscription has resulted, as Sai poignantly concludes, in 'multiple amnesias' that impede public awareness of the fact that the postcolonial ideology of multiculturalism was, in fact, 'scripted in the language of the erstwhile coloniser'.

Olga Dror's article reassesses the societal orientation and preoccupations of the South Vietnamese state in the final years of the civil war against North Vietnam by examining an overlooked cultural material: literary magazines for children and teens. Given South Vietnam's high degree of child literacy, written texts arguably played a significant role in fostering social cohesion, especially important in wartime. And according to the author, South Vietnam, unlike the communist North, allowed to some degree the expression of dissenting views, including criticism of the diffusion of American culture. Of the two magazines discussed in the article, which were published in the early 1970s, Dror writes: 'Both publications provided exemplary models for youth with stories about praiseworthy figures from Vietnamese history, information about hygiene and health ... [and] tried to save young people from the influences and consequences of the war'. Both magazines also stigmatised negative American influences, one blasting hippies, the other highlighting the more real threat posed by drugs. In so doing, these magazines suggest that 'what most concerned Southerners about the future of their youth was that they continue to be Vietnamese' and (perhaps less openly) that 'because American influence was a result of the war, Southerners who worried about youth tended to be sympathetic toward an anti-war stance'.

The last two articles interrogate the authority of legal texts in enforcing heterodoxy in two historically and religiously distinct situations: contemporary Islamic Indonesia and premodern Buddhist Burma. Mun'im Sirry considers two 'controversial fatwas' (legally binding opinions that are expressed by an Islamic religious leader to settle a controversy) issued by the state-appointed Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) in 1981 and 2005, respectively, as — counterintuitively, perhaps — the catalysts for a public conversation within Indonesia's Muslim community. The 1981

fatwa, which discouraged local Muslims from attending Christmas celebrations, was issued when the Suharto government was promoting interreligious cooperation and was thus criticised by state authorities, leading eventually to the resignation of the MUI chairman. The 2005 MUI fatwa on religious pluralism, liberalism and secularism, which was issued in the post-Suharto context of increasingly plural and often contrasting expressions of Islam, stigmatised the three phenomena, but also attracted public criticism. While acknowledging the tensions they created both among Indonesian Muslims and between them and the religious minorities, Mun'im Sirry argues that 'these fatwas also engendered unprecedented intellectual discussion and debates' which may be hopefully taken to show 'that the "virus" of religious pluralism, liberalism and secularism has massively infected the Indonesian *umma*'.

Finally, the article by D. Christian Lammerts examines the genealogy and status of premodern Burma's predominant type of legislation (*dhammasattha*) in an analysis that carries relevance also for Southeast Asia's other Buddhist polities. 'Debates about the proper boundaries of Buddhist scripture,' notes Lammerts, 'characterise a significant proportion of seventeenth through nineteenth-century Burmese monastic writings.' Such debates were fuelled by the perception of *dhammasattha* not as an authoritative record of Buddhist legal culture, but as extra-canonical literature that differed from religious ideology. Thus, the relationship between religion, law, and the state in premodern Burma and the rest of mainland Southeast Asia 'was defined by tension rather than commensurability; and jurisprudential, as well as textual, innovation and change was often driven by attempts to resolve ideological conflict'. The detailed examination of the mythical genealogy of laws typical of *dhammasattha*, along with their authors and contents, leads the author to distinguish between the jurisprudence presupposed by monastic law, royal law, and *dhammasattha* law, for the latter 'was not enacted by a Buddha or by kings, ministers, or jurists, and claims a genealogy independent of the "state" or other legislative institutions'.

In addition to the research articles, this issue also features an extended review article by Barbara Watson Andaya, who looks at recent books in an area of historical research — women's history in Southeast Asia — that she herself has pioneered. Indeed, Watson Andaya's frame of references is so extensive that her review article actually reflects the state of the art of gender history within Southeast Asian studies. Also, a dozen new publications on Asia, the Southeast Asian region in general and Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam in particular are appraised in the Book Review section.

Looking forward to another year of intellectually stimulating contributions and conversations, the *JSEAS* editorial team wishes our readers a joyful 2013!

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