

1. Title: Religious Encounters in Southeast Asia: Understanding Spiritual Communities and Social Boundaries through Field Research

2. Conveners: Chris Chaplin (KITLV), Michael Edwards (LSE)

Participants: Alicia Izharuddin (University of Malaya) Giulio Ongaro (London School of Economics), Michael Edwards (London School of Economics), Chris Chaplin, (KITLV)

Discussant: **Joanna Cook**, *Department of Anthropology, University College of London*

3. Description of Panel

This panel brings together papers discussing the methodological and conceptual dynamics of studying contemporary religious movements in Southeast Asia. The study of religion – whether Islam, Christianity or Buddhism – remains key to how we understand societies across Southeast Asia. Not only do religious categories provide us with tools for navigating its broader geographical and political boundaries – between archipelagic Southeast Asia and the Buddhist ‘mainland’, for example – but religion has also long been shown to be a ground from which different modes of identity and solidarity emerge within the region’s national and local communities. Yet while existing descriptions and analyses have provided insights for understanding religious belief and practice, and their implication within social and political processes and institutions across the region, an equally important set of questions concerns how, as a researcher, one gains access to religious groups, establishes different kinds of trust with their members, and, accordingly, comes to approach the contextual and private details of Southeast Asian religious life. This panel foregrounds these methodological questions and demonstrates how attempting to answer them might generate broader insights. It takes an expansive definition of religion to reflect upon the processes of ethnographic research with a range of communities across the region – Salafi groups in Indonesia, Muslim women in Malaysia, Akha highlanders in northern Laos, Christian evangelicals in Myanmar. Indeed, these papers look at how the inter-subjective encounters that are the stuff of fieldwork – the chance meetings, social blunders, and emergent friendships – might offer insights into the everyday ways that religious categories and boundaries are defined, negotiated and challenged by adherents and their various interlocutors in contemporary Southeast Asian societies.

4. Single Session Abstracts

Paper 1: *Interviews as therapy: Moral communities and conversations with Muslim women about moral failure,*

Alicia Izharuddin, Lecturer in Gender Studies, University of Malaya

Matters related to representation, research as a ‘native’, and social engagement have been at the centre of feminist debates in ethnography for decades. In my paper, I reflect on my experience as a researcher on the practice un-veiling and non-veiling among Malay-Muslim women within the context of intense Islamisation and political corruption in Malaysia. The issue of un-veiling and non-veiling among Muslim women is an under-studied socio-religious phenomena because it is regarded as antithetical to the rise of Islam in the public sphere in predominantly Muslim societies. Muslim women who reject the hijab represent critical subjectivities whose resistant bodies

are re-inscribed with messages about radical moral failure and resistance against institutional failure. This paper draws on the experience of interviewing respondents who have sought out the researcher to divulge their social realities of moral failure and deviations from normative Islamic practices and Malay-Muslim femininity. It calls into question the meaning of the 'native' researcher who is also seen by respondents as belonging to the same 'moral community' while re-activating the political potential of the in-depth interview as therapy.

Paper 2: *The ethnic identity of spiritual beings: cultural relativism and the "taking on" of customs, spirits and ancestors among the Akha of northern Laos.*

Giulio Ongaro, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics

The Akha – an ethnic group of swidden farmers inhabiting the hills of northern Laos and neighboring borderlands - live in villages interspersed with those of several other ethnic groups, which differ in both language and customs. "Customs" represent for the Akha a wide-ranging category that encompasses, among other things, magico-religious phenomena such as rituals, spells and taboos. All this makes it common for an ethnographer living in an Akha village to hear strong cultural relativist statements about the effects of magico-religious actions; to hear, for instance, that eating a certain type of meat on a certain occasion will definitely kill an Akha, but not a Lahu. How, as both ethnographers and theorists, are we to approach and make sense of such relativist statements? Drawing from a range of episodes and conversations with fellow Akha villagers, this essay examines the ways in which relativism emerges in different spheres of thought and practice of customs. It pays special attention to how informants negotiate relativistic attitudes against the self-evident degree of universality that unites human beings of different groups, and statements, made by Akha themselves, that we are all originally descendant from a common apical ancestor. Throughout the essay, I will also attempt to illustrate how such analysis has gained insight through my own experience of being gradually included in an Akha village as Akha, and becoming, consequently, gradually subjected to Akha-specific cosmic forces (or considered to be so). Engaging with a strand of the classic "rationality debate", the essay uses novel methodological tools and relatively unusual ethnographic material to shed new light on the relation between ethnic identity and the epistemology of religious belief.

Paper 3: *'We are praying for your thesis': Fieldwork, faith, and encountering 'non believers' in Myanmar*

Michael Edwards, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics

For some members of Myanmar's small evangelical Christian community, the country's current political transition is seen as strong evidence of the power of their prayer and the work of God. New freedoms and the opposition's landslide victory in recent elections are read as heralding a more general 'revival' whereby Myanmar – still approximately 90% Buddhist – will come to 'know Jesus'. But how, in the face of such demographic realities and against the historical backdrop of over two centuries of missionary work, do these believers maintain this faith in the imminent salvation of their Buddhist compatriots? Drawing on recent fieldwork in Yangon with local

evangelists sharing the gospel with Buddhists, this paper approaches this question by reflecting on the ways in which my interlocutors and I negotiated and attempted to understand each other's beliefs and doubts throughout the course of my research. Whether accompanying them on 'gospel trips', or joining them at prayer meetings at which my own research project at times became a focus, this negotiation produced moments of insight into how these evangelists understand the different kinds of 'non believers' they encounter. Foregrounding these moments, this paper engages both with longstanding debates regarding the relationship between intersubjectivity and ethnography, as well as with more recent conversations concerning the particular epistemological challenges attendant to the anthropology of Christianity.

Paper 4: *Salafi Islamic Activism and the Renunciation of Unbelievers: Examining Religious Boundaries Through Ethnographic Encounters within Yogyakarta*

Chris Chaplin, Researcher, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV)

Islamic movements, many of which tap into global religious networks, have increasingly become a part of the socio-political landscape of contemporary Indonesia. One such movement is the translocal Salafi Islamic movement that propagates a 'literalist' interpretation of Islam in order to emulate the first three generations of Muslims. As part of their method, strong emphasis is placed on *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (allegiance to Islam and renunciation of unbelievers) - which points to a need to separate society into those who follow 'true' Islam and those who do not. This is not without controversy, as they believe Indonesian society is riddled with *bid'a* (unIslamic Innovation). Yet, the daily implementation of such a rigid definition of society is rarely clear-cut. By reflecting upon my ethnography within the al-Hasanah mosque during the month of Ramadan in Yogyakarta, I describe the ways my informants and I negotiated each other's presence and how this challenges religious categorizations linked to *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*. Indeed, activists did not shy away from me. They argued that, despite my position as a non-Muslim researcher, my presence was guided by *Hidayah* (guidance from Allah) and so how I ate, dressed and conducted myself became topics of rigorous debate as they tried to align my practices with their own. Yet, my apparent blunders also led activists to describe their own personal tribulations, aspirations and relationships with non-Salafis. This underlined a degree of flexibility when it came to applying seemingly rigid socio-religious boundaries, which remained open to constant contextual consideration and negotiation.

5. Discussant: Joanna Cook, Department of Anthropology, University College of London