

Also, when she refers to “personal communication” it is a convention within academia that the date when such communication took place should be mentioned.

Birgit Brock-Utne

**Holt, John Clifford:** *Theravada Traditions. Buddhist Ritual Cultures in Contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 391 pp. ISBN 978-0-8248-6780-5. Price: \$ 68.00

Trying to provide an account of a major religious tradition that spans over time and geographical space is a difficult task. This is what “Theravada Traditions” tries to do. As the author tells us in the preface, it attempts to understand the way Buddhism is practiced within the context of indigenous Asian cultures rather than as an abstract system of religious ideas. Each of the five lengthy chapters of the book focuses on different Buddhist rituals, which are practiced annually, in five countries, Lao, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia.

In the short introduction Holt makes certain points about ritual in order to anchor the later chapters. His view of ritual is that they articulate a certain order as well as preserve collective identities (social political, national, or ethnic and familial) through the performance of a dramatized narrative. The narrative generates power that helps sustain the social order and engenders ethical awareness. Holt also stresses that rituals are not fossils from the past, but that they change and mirror the new social and political and economic circumstances surrounding their enactment. Each chapter in “Theravada Traditions” clearly shows how the rituals described have been changed by particular social circumstances.

In the first chapter on Phra Bang, Holt focuses on the role of power and image. Holt provides a brief history of the Phra Bang image bringing the descriptions up to the present in which it is used in the New Year festivals. He points out that in Lao (as well as in Thailand) Buddha images are associated with power, which invites popular petitions to the Buddha. He explores the relationship between power, spirit-cults, and Buddhism and develops an argument about traditional Southeast Asian states and *mandala/muang* (town-complex) systems in Tai-speaking regions. Further, in the pre-Buddhist spirit-cult complex there was an interrelationship between the “spirit of place,” the “headman,” and the people. Buddhism was grafted onto this system and brought in an ethical dimension to this power-complex. The Phra Bang image came to be invested with the “spiritual power of place.” Today, the Buddha image is the most symbolically potent vestige of Lao religious culture, which the state has been trying to monopolize in recent years. Further, there are similarities in the way the New Year procession of the Phra Bang image is carried out today with the manner it was carried out in the pre-modern past. What was important in the past was that the procession drew in everybody living within the *mandala* of the state and this is duplicated in present-day New Year festivals. Holt also suggests that the role of the Beauty Queen in the ritual represents the revival of the ancestral pre-Buddhist female spirit-force.

The next chapter focuses on another annual procession, that of the *asala perahara* and the veneration of the “Buddha Tooth Relic” in Sri Lanka. This procession entails a march with military symbolism around the town of Kandy during which time the exemplary centre defining the power of the state in relation to the rest of the kingdom is enacted. The chapter details earlier accounts of the ritual procession and brings the historical narrative of the ritual up to the late 20th century, when Sri Lanka was experiencing ethnic violence. If in the Lao case the present-day rituals draw the “world” into its orbit, Holt argues that the Sri Lanka ceremony is not designed to exclude the Tamils, but to incorporate them as ethnic inferiors within the Buddhist hierarchy. Holt’s argument is not novel and was already put forward by earlier authors working on the ethno-religious problems in Sri Lanka. He ends questioning whether the ritual can transcend its ethno-religious hierarchical representation to one representing an egalitarian multiculturalism.

The chapter on Thailand focuses on *upasampada* and *pabbajja* rituals of ordination. Although these ordination rituals exist in the other countries, they vary in their practice. Holt stresses that they even vary within Thailand between those practiced in villages and those practiced in larger cities, and he explores some of these differences. One main point he makes is that in Thailand there has been a shift in merit-making focusing on the transfer of merit from the individual who is ordained to his mother. Holt also takes the Dhammakaya movement’s ordination ceremony as one main example for his discussion. He concludes the chapter with discussions drawn from established publications on Thai Buddhist studies about the changing role of women in Thailand, which has opened up the question of women ordination, and he also discusses the ordination of trees as a practice influenced by the environmental movement.

The *kathina* (the formal act of giving robes at the end of the rainy season) and merit-making is the central ritual theme of the chapter focusing on Myanmar. The aim of gift-giving is to generate merit on order to overcome *dukkha* (suffering). For the present day, Holt tells us that the Burmese government has tried to monopolize gift-giving to obtain religious legitimacy in the manner that earlier kings have done. The most powerful tool that the *sangha* has against the monopolizing state is for the monks to turn their bowls upside down, a symbolic act suggesting that the *sangha* rejects its patronage. And this act the *sangha* has carried out on a number of occasions reflecting the tensions between the two parties. Finally the last chapter discusses the *pchum ben* in Cambodia during which time worshippers ritually care for the dead. A part of the interesting discussion of this chapter focuses on the period when the Khmer Rouge was in power and the chapter links the memorializing of the dead in present-day Cambodia to the tragedy of loss of human life during this period. The role of merit-making and transfer in these rituals is discussed. Holt also explores the possibility that the origin of *pchum ben* may have been influenced by the Chinese ghost festivals.

Although each chapter of the book is self-contained

and can be read on its own without reference to the other chapters, there are some cross-referencing between them. The arguments in each chapter developed for the ritual it describes provides comparative insights for understanding the practice of Theravada Buddhist rituals and their relationship to society in the other countries. Unfortunately, there is no conclusion to the book in which comparisons between certain themes that appear in the chapters could have been made. For example, more detailed conclusive comparisons could have been drawn between the Lao and Sri Lanka processions and the *mandalas* they generate or about the manner in which the different governments try to monopolize the major rituals. Or again a comparative discussion about the influences of consumer practices and political events on the different rituals could have brought the present-day changes influencing the rituals into more comparative focus. Notwithstanding these and other certain limitations, the chapters provide interestingly informative reads that bring together some established writings on these rituals with the author's own personal observation and insights. They show us the present-day diversity of the major ritual practices performed by the lay followers of Theravada Buddhism in the respective nations. In this the book, which is also nicely illustrated, has accomplished its task.

Nathan Porath

**Hüsken, Ute, and Udo Simon (eds.):** The Ambivalence of Denial. Danger and Appeal of Rituals. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016. 315 pp. ISBN 978-3-447-10570-5. Price: € 38.00

“The Ambivalence of Denial. Danger and Appeal of Rituals” engages the subject of authorization and de-authorization in systems of belief and practice as they play out a number of locations, the majority of which are to be found in Asia. Twelve chapters including a thoughtful and informative introduction and a reflective afterward provide a detailed and lively discussion of how rites and ritual performance act as primary mechanisms and signifiers to speak the “truth”, however and for whatever reason that truth is deployed.

Central to the organization of the edited text are the concepts of ritual denial and criticism, and how these concepts function to “exercise … judgement that makes value-commitments and value-conflicts overt” (Grimes qtd. on page 7). According to the editors these concepts were examined in a preliminary fashion during an earlier conference, the proceedings of were published in 2013 in the *Journal of Ritual Studies* (7). The current text builds on this previous work but extends the understanding of the concepts of ritual denial and critique to include ambivalence allowing denial and critique to be more than a negative side of acceptance and compliment, even as they take rejection into their meaning frame. In ritual, as in life, nothing is clear-cut and the detailed case studies demonstrate this point nicely.

The first chapter by Ute Hüsken presents a comprehensive study of the rise of the Brahminic ritual efficacy of humans marked as female/feminine in the context

of Maharashtra. In this rise there was and is contestation from male/masculine ritual experts, but at the same time some of whom had trained women to perform “properly” the rites. Contradiction and paradox abound as the ritual systems of Brahmanism shift under multiple pressures not the least of which are feminisms in this context.

Continuing with Hindu traditions, Christof Zoller develops a case study that also takes up the subject of authenticity and the denial applied to those not belonging to one's group. Like the ritual experts of Maharashtra, the ritual experts of differing groups, “denominations of the Aghorī” (56) that engage the cremation ground and the transgressive power attributed to it. Seeking to establish authority over the other, each group challenges the rites of the other calling into question the authenticity of the rites and, therefore, their efficacy. The rites already inverted and, therefore, dangerous, should not be engaged by the foolish or the “false” (69) as each group might designate the other.

Udo Simon's contribution shifts to discuss contestation around the ritual observance of Muhammad's birthday. As a given in the previous chapters, ritual denial is not a stable concept and includes multiple meanings depending on how the denial is deployed. In this chapter Simon charts the play of denial of the festival of Muhammad's birthday from the Wahhabis through to modern critiques all of whom, in greater or lesser degrees, locate the festival as innovation and, therefore, un-Islamic and ritually inauthentic at best and a perversion of Islam. As with many dominant systems of belief and practice, adoption of practices, views, rites, representation, and narratives is systemically monitored and guarded against, to greater or lesser degrees depending on the context, but in the end life is messy and change is a normative aspect of ritual systems regardless how much change is denied (R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford 1977).

Denial of and innovation around rites linked to bloodletting is the subject of Ingvild Flaskerud's contribution to the volume. As with any blood sacrifice, contestation follows it as seen in Twelver Shiism wherein young men inflict on themselves bloodletting wounds overseen by older men to commemorate the death of Abū 'Abd Allāh Husayn Ibn 'Alī, the third Imam (109). Denying, embracing, or ignoring the rite demonstrates, Flaskerud argues, a chain of denials wherein no fixed position or story's end is ever acquired. Rather rites shift, change, are renewed or denied all of which, she suggests, “releases creativity” (132). Non-human animal bloodletting is the subject of the case study written by Jürgen Schaflechner when looking at the rite of *bali* (135). Denial of the blood sacrifice in the context of Hindu communities in Pakistan, in particular those connected to a female deity where ritual obligations include animal sacrifice, creates, argues the author, a situation of contestation, antagonism, and change, all of which mirrors the shifting social and political contexts that provide logic for the rite. A complex and interesting chapter, presenting the intersection of ritual and social identity that is played out every year at the shrine shared by both Hindus and Muslims alike.

Cezary Galewicz's contribution on the Vedic ritual