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**Tracing the Centrality of Materials to
Religious Belief in Southeast Asia**

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The Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

Tracing the Centrality of Materials to Religious Belief in Southeast Asia

The central argument of this paper is that the material aspects of religion are crucial to the formation, enactment and maintenance of religious belief. This is particularly true in Southeast Asia in the age of religious diversity. It is in the way believers in the region engage with the tangible and material, and in the way they are in turn shaped by this engagement, that the quintessential character of faith is reiterated, even under the spectre of other competing belief systems in their midst.

This statement is not as intuitively given as it may seem. The materialist rationality – that things are secondary to ideas, values and attitudes – remains persistent even within faith traditions themselves. Christians are taught, for example, to see the things in one's worldly existence as temporary, and one's corporeal body both the impediment to, and the vehicle towards, the attainment of an immaterial life eternal. Buddhists and Hindus, similarly, are encouraged to seek detachment from the material world as the realm of desiring subjectivities, pointing to a Right Knowledge and Mindfulness that repudiates the self and the objects and materials with which it engages. The encouragement for one to 'leave behind the material' is pervasive, therefore, given the various doctrinal injunctions to think about the Truth that lies beyond it -- to think exclusively, that is, of the immaterial aspects of the faith towards which a pious mind ought to be inclined.

When seen in the context of diversity and multi-faith interaction, the issue materiality takes on an even more crucial significance. In today's multi-religious, multi-ethnic environment, the engagement with and through religious materials evokes wider debates about secularization, pluralism, religious competition and the management of inter-faith interaction. In the West, religious pluralism has resulted in increasing levels of tension and instability, and materiality is often at the centre of the most heated religious controversies. The paradox of the maintenance of religious pluralism is that it puts a strain on the very secular ideals on which it is founded, particularly in places such as France, Belgium and Switzerland where there are laws that are of concern to Muslim citizens. Such legislation refers specifically to Islamic forms of materiality, whether it stipulates the prohibition of the *burqa* or the banning minarets. We need to understand what these materials mean in the context of Islamic practice, not just belief, in order to appreciate why laws that regulate their use can cause contestation in a religiously plural society. The *burqa*, for example, does not merely operate on the level of Islamic attitudes about femininity and empowerment. It is also a way in which a female can cast her identity as one who expresses – or even champions -- the liberal democratic ideals of liberty and free expression. Similarly, the Islamic architectural structures is not just an aesthetic predilection of the faith, but that which literally facilitates the visceral experience of practicing Islam, and publicly manifests its distinctive character. The examples demonstrate how religious objects, architectures and images (just to name a few) serve to publicly reiterate the distinctiveness of religious belief in the face of pluralism and multiplicity.

This centrality of things to belief is nowhere more apparent than in Southeast Asia. Thinking about the intricate and intimate relationship between materiality, belief and religious diversity is not simply a matter of canvassing and categorizing the various physical characteristics of religious paraphernalia. It involves interrogating how things themselves are the arena and focal point in the construction and maintenance of religious ideas, either within faiths or between faith traditions in a pluralist society. In what follows I intend to show that an understanding of materiality is all the more crucial in Southeast Asia: a region that is, arguably, the most religiously diverse place in the world.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND MATERIALITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Religious diversity is a fact of life in Southeast Asia¹, and often with a more robust inflection than that of Europe or North America. Here we find fertile ground for talking about the nexus between materials and faith, since the region is regarded as “a living laboratory of types of diversity, varieties of religious mix with widely differing histories with many different approaches to managing religious diversity” (Bouma, Ling and Pratt 2010: xvii). The Southeast Asian states of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Singapore are predominantly Buddhist. In the island Southeast Asian nations of Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, Islam is a widely practiced religion of over 240 million inhabitants – the largest in the world. The Philippines is the largest Roman Catholic country in the entire Asian continent, followed by a significant proportion of adherents in Vietnam and East Timor. Meanwhile, Chinese religious traditions of Daoism and Confucianism is widely practiced in Vietnam and Singapore, while indigenous religious traditions are vibrant in Sarawak in East Malaysia and Borneo.

While a particular religion tends to be a majority in most cases, no country in Southeast Asia is religiously homogenous. For example, in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, Hinduism and Christianity dominate in the islands of Bali and Flores respectively. Meanwhile, sizable and increasingly influential Muslim populations live in the southern regions of Thailand and the Philippines. The region does indeed provide a wealth of case studies of diversity management – “most of them stories of success and inclusion” (*ibid*). In Singapore, for example, pagodas, mosques and churches stand often in very close proximity to each other.

The dynamism of religious plurality in Southeast Asia, however, is not simply a matter of the presence and coexistence of ‘mainstream’ faith traditions. The resilience of organic belief systems, as well as the emergence of new ones, are features of a diverse, and often tension-ridden religious landscape. Indigenous religious traditions are vibrant in many scattered parts of the region, particularly outside the metropolises in virtually all countries, often practiced in addition to or alongside ‘foreign’ faiths. Communities in northern Myanmar, northern Laos, Sarawak and Borneo, for example, continue to practice their faith traditions and rituals in spite of their minority status and pressures from various ethnic and religious groups.

¹ There have been those who have suggested that the very concept of “Southeast Asia” is arbitrary, given that the term itself may be traced to the geo-political interests of European and American forces during the second world war. One of the insights that we gain from a material based understanding of religion is that there are overlapping and intersecting socio-cultural dynamics between the inhabitants of the region that makes the notion of Southeast Asia meaningful. In the context of religious materiality, there is still scholarly value in seeing “Southeast Asia” as a region of shared histories and diffusive cultural influences, not to mention religious diversity and pluralism reflected in the material aspects of the faith.

Meanwhile New Religious Movements (NRMs) from within and outside of the ‘mainstream’ religions add greatly to the diversity of faiths in Southeast Asia. Reform and Prophet-based movements in Burma, Thailand and Vietnam have arisen in reaction to the influence and spread of Buddhism and Christianity. In Indonesia, messianic and apocalyptic movements have drawn from Javanese mysticism to offer alternatives to both indigenous and institutional religious networks. In the Philippines, millenarian and syncretistic Colorum sects present varying interpretations of the Christian message; often in terms that intersect with nationalist, anti-colonial or separatist agendas. While this internal religious diversity may be seen as a recipe for potential conflict and contestation, it is also the milieu in which the faithful seek to reiterate what is distinctive and unique about their faith traditions. As the papers in this volume will demonstrate, it is in the material realm that such efforts find expression.

To be sure, Southeast Asians have not traditionally devoted much of their time and resources to the material aspects of their day to day living. The ready availability of palms, bamboos and fast growing trees in mild tropical climates meant that Southeast Asians regarded materials with a sense of lightness and impermanence. Houses in particular, as Anthony Reid (1988) describes, were designed and built for ready transportability, owing to the perishability of raw materials, the frequent decimations of raids, the demands of shifting cultivation patterns, and the prevalent omens of death and illness. Implements and objects used in the course of life, such as furniture, cutlery and utensils, were similarly constructed with a view towards the non-permanence and transience of its utility.

Yet while Southeast Asians were less inclined to invest a robust materiality into the mundane aspects of their lives, their religious concerns were a different story. The magnificent ruins of Bagan, Borobodur and Angkor are testament to the sophistication of Southeast Asian artistry and craftsmanship. But more than this, such structures are tangible proof that the Southeast Asian regard for the divine was constituted in tangibly material form. Khmer kings, for example, built grand shrines evoking Mount Meru, and the objects within that structure -- either a phallic *linga* or a statue -- served to establish the ruler/god’s own belief in the divine legitimacy of his authority. As far back as the 8th century, the construction and veneration of timeless structures such as stupas, temples, monuments, as well as the associated objects that went *in* them, were central to the very fabric of religio-political beliefs in many parts of both mainland and island Southeast Asia.

Given that Southeast Asians have traditionally thought about religion in material terms, the notion that religious materials are but mere paraphernalia for belief, secondary to cerebral notions of the faith; or merely outward symbolic forms of one’s internalised subjectivities seems misplaced. Even the ‘everyday’ objects and structures associated with faith in the region -- the statues of deities, candles, incense sticks, painted scrolls, to name just a few -- are not merely conduits towards a divine world of ideas and belief. Rather, all sorts of materials -- such as objects of offering, amulets, relics and sacred buildings, to name even more -- are considered by Southeast Asians today as primary, significant aspects in the process of crafting and determining their own religious subjectivities. Religious subjectivities are formed in -- and sometimes only through -- the various ways in which materials, objects and spaces are produced, transported, decorated, preserved or interacted with.

Conflict in a religiously plural society can be induced by the encroachment of mutual space, and the movement of the faithful across borders and boundaries. The example of the burqua and the minaret I described earlier is only one among many expressions of this. Within the region itself, the border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear

temple and its surroundings suggest that materiality still features in the impassioned claims for national sovereignty. This highlights the need for us to re-situate the material in understandings of religious diversity and pluralism, and how central they are to the formation of attitudes and beliefs.

The anthropologist Liana Chua provides us with a good starting point. In her analysis of the ways in which the Bidayuh of Sarawak engage ritualistically with religious objects, Chua's work (2007) demonstrates how objects are not merely conduits or vehicles to the divine, but actually constitutors and facilitators of 'doing religion'. For the Bidayuh, the material stuff of both *adat gawai* indigenous belief and that of Christianity – which include specific items of clothing, blue and white Chinese porcelain bowls, or candles -- are not potent in and of themselves. Rather, it is in the combined effect of object and words, material and chant, or item and song, that the 'resultant bundle' of religious practice is seen as meaningful and efficacious. For example, the unique sound emitted by a metal knife tapped against porcelain bowls produces a momentarily distinct entity that is crucial in giving potency to certain words, actions and movements. "For in talking about that bowl," Chua observes, "they are not simply referring to objects per se, but acting and working *through* them as the material facts of a larger constitutive sequence" (2009). This implies an approach to material religion that recognises the 'doing' and the 'believing' aspects of faiths as dependent on the interplay between human agency and specific religious objects that, in their combinatory coalescence, enables and constitutes faith.

The variety of religious traditions in the region presents us with many other vivid examples of this, pointing us to the ways in which the regard for the divine is more than just a matter of theology, doctrine or scripture. As scholars, we must think about how the visceralness of religiosity is, in fact, an embodied, concrete experience that has always been constituted in and through a vast array of tangible things. 'Religious materials', in this context, is a term that collectively refers to objects and things as well as places and monuments. It is an expansive term that accommodates a diversity of form, size, age, number, construction and craftsmanship. To be sure, there are objects which one would intuitively think of as 'religious' -- statues, icons, monuments, relics and buildings – and such objects are certainly important to consider. It is also important, however, to consider the things may not immediately evoke religious ideas -- like money, cars, theatre props, soil and even female undergarments – in underscoring the diverse ways in Southeast Asia in which, as Daniel Miller (2003) has put it "objects make selves."

MATERIALITY AND MOTION

There is a specific thematic framework that brings this general concern for materiality together. Just as Southeast Asians have traditionally regarded objects in terms of transportability, religious materiality may productively be conceptualised through the themes of motion and movement. I refer specifically to three kinds of motion.

The first concerns the locomotion of objects themselves, either in the process of ritual or procession. What happens to people's faith in the process of the object's movement? How does the movement of religious objects provide the conditions for the enactment of religious piety? The change in the physical location of objects is a crucial part of the internal subjectivities of those around it, such that when objects move, people's emotions, sensibilities and are likewise placed in motion.

Secondly, critical scrutiny should be placed upon those objects that circulate in the process of commerce and exchange, legally or illegally, in market places and economies. How of objects does the traffic in and of objects impact upon their spiritual value and efficacy? Do they diminish when they are bought, sold or traded? We shall see that one's participation in commerce affects the religious obligations of respective agents. When objects circulate in the reciprocal transactions of buying and selling, notions of belief and piety can also be crafted or even enhanced.

Thirdly, it is important to consider the motion that static, immovable objects inspire and encourage or, conversely, impede and inhibit. That is, it is not necessarily the object that has to be in motion in order to facilitate an animation of religious sensibility. Certain motionless objects, for example, might infuse the energies of the deities and spirits around them. Others may affect how the human body itself moves, as in ritual performance and bodily practice. Static religious materials may also encourage, dictate and inhibit the movement of collective bodies, whether in religious pilgrimage or across borders, or within the hegemonic influence of secular authority. What must be highlighted is not simply the nature, direction and frequency of an objects actual movement, but how kinetic energies are generated in and around objects that stay put – energies that animate bodies and spirits alike.

These three kinds of motion – locomotive, circulatory and animative -- help us examine the myriad of ways in which religiosity can be premised upon tangible things, rather than simply the other way around. For it is not the mere fact of materiality that is significant, but the ways in which those objects move, are moved, or encourage movement. Given that the motion and movement of and through religious materials is crucial to the practice of many faith traditions in the region, using this as a theme of analysis will be conducive towards understanding how social cohesion and religious diversity is facilitated. How does the movement of materials and people define religious belief in Southeast Asia?

Before I begin with a more detailed elucidation of how motion, materiality and religion finds concrete expression among various Southeast Asians, it is important to situate the analysis within the broader discourse of thinking on the matter, particularly towards efforts to re-situate the material as a central concern in the humanities and social sciences.

THE MATERIAL ON THE AGENDA

In 1986, Arjun Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* described how things lead ‘social lives’ and have ‘cultural biographies’ as they circulate across different regimes of value. Seminal as that work is, a lot has changed since the mid 1980s. The end of the Cold War, globalisation, the rise and fall of the market, and the global war on terror has changed the intellectual and social terrain considerably. Many may well claim that religion has taken over from ideology as the master ‘problem’ of the 21st century, with environmentalism competing for this dubious distinction. What remains constant is the notion that the way in which we engage with things – whether as commodities, or sacred stuff, or sources of environmental degradation – is central to our understanding of the world.

Given that that commodities lead social lives’, it is important to ask how materials lead ‘religious lives’ as they move through different regimes of value and piety. Over the past decade, two academic gatherings are particularly notable in this tackling this issue. Firstly, in June 2007, a conference entitled *Things: Material Religion and the Topography of Divine Spaces* was organized by Dick Houtman and Brigit Meyer at the University of Amsterdam. The goal of this gathering was to go beyond an account of the provenance, style, construction and constitution of religious objects, and situate materials within “topographies” -- a whole ensemble of religious acts and disciplines that involve human or other agents. What was significant about this was it shifted the focus of discussion from mere description religious objects to an analysis of practices in which they were embedded.

The other gathering was conference entitled *Thinking Through Things: Theorising artefacts in ethnographic perspective* held at the University of Cambridge in October 2004 with the aim of initiating “a renewed interdisciplinary debate about knowledge, social life and materiality with fields placing artefacts at the centre of inquiry”. The volume that has resulted from the Thinking Through Things gathering proposed a methodological blueprint for an “artefact based anthropology.” 'Things', in short, are not simply objects to be subjected to our ready made scholarly frameworks, but can in themselves be premises of a multiplicity of theories. This inclination towards an anthropology of things was premised upon a refusal to accept that 'meanings' are separate from the tangible objects that ostensibly represent them. It was a methodological movement that sought to reverse our own ‘commonsense’ expectations about ‘thingness’ by questioning, if not abandoning altogether, the conventional dichotomies of concept/object, idea/thing and representation/stuff.

These two gatherings were significant for advancing the methodological aspects of the study of religious materiality. The participants at these gatherings have pointed out that the way scholars have traditionally spoken about material religion deploys a well-entrenched dualism of immanent and transcendent. As a response to this, the conferences called for an identification of new modes of analysis of material religious objects, ones that go beyond thinking of them as merely symbols from which the observer can interpret its ‘meaning’. Studies of materiality, rather, ought to be premised upon new heuristics, that seek to interrogate the role of religious objects in the formation and maintenance of religious subjectivities, identities and communities.

A review of prominent scholarship across different disciplinary inclinations suggest how such calls might be taken up. Among the foremost thinkers in the field are Webb Keane, Daniel Miller and David Morgan, whose works show complementarities in advocating the methodological and analytical agendas in which the material can be understood as

constitutive of people's beliefs. In *Materiality* (2005) Miller calls for a 'republic of mutual respect' which is a mentality that acknowledges that the faithful and the materials with which they engage are embedded in processes of mutual self-construction. Miller calls for ethnography, in particular to

...focus upon how precisely our sense of ourselves as subjects are created... It is not just that objects can be agents, it is that practices and their relationships create the appearance of both subjects and objects through the dialectics of objectification and we need to be able to document how people internalize and then externalize the normative. In short, we need to show how the things that people make, make people. (pp. 27-28)

Miller's sense of attentiveness the ways in which "things make people" is the central focus of David Morgan's call to "materialize belief". In his volume entitled *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (2010), Morgan focuses on the "use of things, the sensation of things, the cultivation of feeling that objects, spaces, and performances induce and are in turn coloured by" (xiii). Materializing belief means more than just considering non-textual sources for the understanding of religion. Works such as that of Morgan and Miller are a reaction against the assumption that religious experience is solely motivated and expressed through words, ideas and discourses. Inherent in such assumptions is the notion that every thing, particularly religious objects, 'has to mean something' and it is the task of the scholar to 'decode' or decipher its (hidden) significations. A focus on materiality requires us to expand the very definition of belief itself as not simply a matter of doctrinal, theological or scriptural transmission. It emerges, rather, from a host of practices and feelings (or "topographies" as Meyer and Houtman might call it) which are conditioned by tangible things and spaces.

How does one put into practice a mode of analysis that is sensitive to the constitutive power of religious materials and objects? What analytical strategies can scholars utilise in order to account for the diversity of ways people interact with objects in a pluralistic topography? Anthropologist Webb Keane is one who called for a sense of comparativity as a way in which to deploy the methodological and analytical prescriptions called for by the scholars above. In *Christian Moderns* (2007), Keane suggests that our efforts must be aligned against a "particularism so scrupulous it can sometimes obscure our view of large contexts and deny us the insights we might gain from comparing cases. This effort is particularly important when the very people with whom we are most immediately concerned insist that an important part of their lives involves something both global and transcendental." (Keane 2007: 25) In other words, it is not enough to merely state the fact of an object's influence on religious ideas. We must demonstrate it in practice across a *comparable* cultural and social milieu.

While the works and gatherings above have contributed greatly to the broad, general meta-theorizing on the subject, they have been less focused on tracing regional commonalities, trends and family resemblances in the field of material religion. In examining issues such as embodiment, sensation, space and performance, what has tended to result are collections of case studies from a very wide geographical scope, juxtaposing examples from vastly different historical, cultural contexts in the same volume. In Morgan's case, examples are drawn from Korea and Brazil, to North America, Europe and Africa. Aside from the methodological prescriptions of shifting focus on the material, and towards the analysis of how 'the things that people make, make people', significant progress can be made by tracing points of comparison within a region such as Southeast Asia in which one can observe a host of cultural, linguistic, historical and religious family resemblances.

This focus on motion that is advocated here was conceptualized in response to a need for meaningful comparison. It is based on the observation that random examples drawn from a vast geographical scope is an analytical strategy with only limited value. The study of materiality, rather, needs to be conducted with reference to a clearly defined geographical boundary to engage in the kind of meaningful comparativity that Kean calls for. In this regard, the theme of ‘motion’ is an effective heuristic through which we can bring into fairly coherent order the varied ways in which religious materials are crucial to the constitutions of religious subjectivities. The main rationale for this paper is to trace the ways objects encourage Southeast Asians to move in similar ways, though they might be inspired by different theological and doctrinal motivations. In the sections that follow, I shall elaborate upon the focus on ‘motion’ and materiality in greater detail.

THE LOCOMOTIVE SOCIALITY OF RELIGIOUS OBJECTS

In Southeast Asia, the various ways in which tangible objects change location determine the conditions under which religious ideas are understood, internalised and disseminated. The movement of religious materials such as scrolls, statues or images is a common practice in both rural and urban communities throughout the region. As objects traverse space, they often compel, encourage, or even ‘activate’ certain kinds of religious sensibilities that would not have otherwise been possible if not for the objects involvement in the ritual process of motion. Examples from Buddhist Laos and the Catholic Philippines stand out in demonstrating that piety is enacted by what I describe as an object’s locomotive sociality, or the actual movement of an object of veneration in a social and public capacity.

The ritual procession of the Vassantara Jataka scrolls in Northeast Thailand and Laos exemplifies how motion is crucial towards the fulfillment of religious obligation. The faithful carry the long *Bun Phra Wet* cloth scrolls from the forest, into the village in an embodied enactment of Prince Vassantara’s movement from exile to return. In the village, the scrolls are ceremoniously blessed by monks before they are unfurled and carried in procession back to the *wat*. This motion is not merely a theatrical rendition of the Prince’s story. As Cate and Lefferts (2009) show, the procession points to and facilitates a process of the faithful’s ‘active becoming’: a social and spiritual opportunity towards the accumulation of merit, not merely for the carriers, but for all those involved in its production and upkeep. In this respect, it is primarily through motion that a moral community of “merit-making consociates” can be fostered. The production and monetary exchange of Buddhist scrolls does not diminish its religious value, provided that the participants remain cognizant of the wider ritual and processional uses to which they could and should be put. Scrolls, like the *adat gawai* objects among the Bidayuh that Chua described, are not mere commodities but are, rather, crucial elements entwined in a larger moral universe of merit-making.

We also find this convergence between sociality, mobility and piety in Luzon in the Philippines. In Lucban, the image of the dead Christ, the *Mahal na Señor*, is moved around the town by male devotees in a street procession during Good Friday. Originally, the statue had been born on two large wooden beams and hoisted via the shoulders of the carriers. Eventually, the custodians of the image had wheels and a handbrake installed onto the statue’s carriage – a response to the violent reaction of the townsfolk who forcibly took the image to procession when its custodians had once refused to permit its use. This impassioned regard for the *Mahal Na Senyor* is manifested in the procession itself which is, as Delapaz (2009) describes, a raucous experience characterized by drinking alcohol and making a lot of

noise. Such worldly vices hardly diminish the spiritual significance of the procession, however. Participating in the procession, either in the physical moving of the statue or in the witnessing of it, is a way of fulfilling one's *panata* to God – a personal vow that, while kept secret and interiorized, is facilitated through the very public and communal ritual of the image's procession. In this respect, being individually pious could only be achieved by being collectively involved with the object's movement. Like the movement of *Bun Phra Wet* cloth scrolls, *panata* is fulfilled under the social, public contexts of the statue's movement.

In these examples, spiritual responsibilities are facilitated by the locomotion of religious materials. Significantly, the movement of the *Bun Phra Wet* scrolls succeeds in making merit 'real', not merely for those who are physically involved in their moving, but also for those who produce them. Similarly, the movement of the *Mahal na Señor* enacts very private personal vows, whose *panata* is fulfilled vicariously through a very public demonstration of motion. Merit-making and *panata* are realized in and through a process of the religious object's locomotive sociality, and are far from merely peripheral or subordinate appendages to religious praxis.

Religious belief and practice in Southeast Asia, as we can see, is crafted through the object's movement in and through the ritual processes, either as part of calendrical, commemorative or obligatory religious observance. This movement, however, is not confined to these contexts alone. Aside from religious ritual and procession, materiality in motion may also include that which occurs in the frenetic exchange of amulets, talismans or religious replicas in secular spaces, where objects may literally change hands and be transported to places unknown to those who part with them. This may be a transactionary movement involving the exchange of currency or services in the market place in ways that I discuss in the next section.

THE CIRCULATION OF MATERIALS IN A PIOUS ECONOMY

Many Southeast Asian cultures deal with the motion of objects in secular, mundane space, particularly as commodities. In these examples, the movement of objects is not enacted through overtly religious activities, but by the circulatory traffic of market transaction that may not intuitively encourage or facilitate specifically religious or pious sensibilities. Nevertheless, this kind of movement not only impacts upon an object's spiritual potency in ways that condition the crafting of religious subjectivity itself.

In Karl Marx's historical materialism, human interaction with things as commodities was crucial to the constitution of one's humanity. The process in which one loses a connection to things in its relegation to mere commodity is also the process in which one is alienated from his fundamental species being. Can the same be true when we are talking about religious objects in the market? What happens to the holiness or sacredness of religious materials in the context of their movement in and through vibrant market exchange? How does the selling and buying of religious materials impact upon the constitution of religious subjectivities? In answering this question, it is important to think not only of the movement of religious objects, but also the significance of those instances in which the market encourages an inhibition of the traffic in objects according to prescribed norms of piety.

One of the most immediately striking aspects of religious objects in the market is the effect of mass production and multiplication on the spiritual meanings of religious objects. In Singapore, many painted and sculpted stone, clay or bronze statues, pictures, paintings and photographs of Sanskrit and folk Hindu deities are bought and sold in a frenetic marketplace. In Cebu, as Bautista (2010) notes, replicas of the Christ Child Santo Niño are often bought by devotees who bypass the official Church store in favour of mercantile chaos generated by the replica stalls beyond the environs of the Basilica. The same can be said of the opulent and highly revered Emerald Buddha in the grand palace of Bangkok. Like the Santo Niño, the Emerald Buddha evokes the long history of Thai Buddhism, and its value to the Thai people is premised upon the ancientness of its materiality. And like the Santo Niño, the Buddha is surrounded by amulet sellers even in the immediate vicinity of the palace in which it is held.

The multitude of cheaply produced Santo Niño replicas or Buddhist amulets can hardly approximate the opulence of the original on which they are modeled. Yet their movement is determined by a market in which the consumer envisions a personal relationship with his or her purchase. Unlike the original model, replicas and amulets are not generally expected to have an exalted place in a grandiose altar. Rather, they are held close to one's body, placed in one's bag, displayed in car dashboards, personal bookshelves, bedside tables, kitchen cupboards and computer desks – wherever one associates with the pursuit of life's toils.

From the vendor's perspective, the movement of religious objects as merchandise is not completely separate, nor antithetical to their religious obligations. Though there is a profit to be made in the selling of replicas or amulets, replication, multiplicity and its movement in a market of mass dissemination does not by default diminish the spiritual meaningfulness of the transaction. In fact, because it enables personal relationships to be forged between customer and replica/icon, a seller's facilitation of an object's movement in and through commercial exchange is a fulfilment of their spiritual obligations. It is in this context that religious materials move in what can be called a pious economy – a milieu in which a transactionary relationship is forged between buyer, seller and object, and through which religious piety is enacted in contexts outside formalized realm of ritual, performance or ceremoniality.

The operation of this pious economy is particularly evident in Vietnam, although with a slightly different inflection to what we see in Thailand and the Philippines, as anthropologist Laurel Kendall describes (2008). *Doi Moi* reforms of the 1980s fostered an environment which tolerated an effervescent and frenetic pluralism, including towards religious materials which became 'abducted' into collectible objects and subjected to the rules and transactions of monetary exchange. This has stimulated the sale of temple images of Buddhas, Mother Goddesses, and village tutelary gods in global and regional art markets. Temple images became the concern of dealers and private collectors, who placed a monetary value on the object's aesthetic appeal. The new sense of 'value' however, has also fostered an illegal trade in stolen antiquities which has, in turn, conditioned the sensibilities of buyers, sellers and collectors. While many are willing to deal with temple-certified images, they are not oblivious to a statue's capacity for punitive agency should they show disrespect by purchasing images of dubious origin. Cheaply-produced Buddha or Mother Goddess images are thought by Vietnamese to bring bad luck. In this sense, Vietnamese, as devotees and as traders, are required to inhibit the movement of cheaply-made or stolen religious images as a matter of spiritual and ethical responsibility. In this case, therefore, it is not by encouraging the movement of religious objects, but in regulating or stopping the flow of its traffic that one's religious piety is conducted.

In Northeastern Thailand, Buddha statuettes are displayed in the Kingdom's museums and art spaces and are subjected to the same discerning standards of connoisseurship. They do not only circulate in a mere money-for-object, exchange-based economy, however. Rather, their movement is driven by an 'industry' of aficionados and experts, who regularly publish assessments of specific image's religious profiles, histories as well and an account of their rarity. While an implicit sense of monetary value is crafted by this kind of collector-inclined network, there is also a sense that the mere act of buying and selling religious materials is a crass or even blasphemous one. In light of this, statuettes move in an industry in which religious materials are 'loaned' and rented in exchange for offerings and donations, effectively reinscribing its circulation according to a specific vocabulary or piety and deference. By altering the terms of circulation, therefore, participants are able to participate in a network of exchange without compromising their religious and spiritual values. Again, it is by impeding movement, not facilitating it, that one is conducting oneself as pious actor in this specific space of commodity exchange.

In urban Malaysia, as Fischer (2008) describes, the use of religious paraphernalia such as Islamic labels or tags on private cars likewise points to a pious economy in which discourses of religiosity, ethnicity and class can influence the contours of exchange and consumption. The choice of the national car, Proton, may not afford its owner with the positional legitimacy that a more upmarket Mercedes Benz or BMW would. Malay Muslims need not feel a sense of shame or inferiority, however, in driving a smaller and inexpensive Proton. In fact, only a Proton can be meaningfully 'Islamicised' with religious materials – on dashboards, or painted into chassis, or hanging from mirrors -- to the extent that driving a Proton is an extension of one's personal religious values. In this case, the traffic of religious materials – literally moving ones in this case of Islamicised Proton cars – is meaningful within a pious economy in which the national car is coterminous with a state-sponsored Malay Muslim identity. Conversely, Mercedes Benz and BMWs, while effective arbiters of class and positional status, are understood as excessive, gratuitous and hence, un-Islamic.

Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, therefore, are examples of places in Southeast Asia in which religious materials move in a specific space and logic of exchange and consumption. This traffic is quite different to that which I described as the locomotive sociality of *Bun Phra Wet* cloth scrolls in Northeast Thailand and the *Mahal Na Senyor* in Luzon. In the movement of the former, value and agency are determined by the demands and expectations of a pious economy in which their circulation is driven by the assumption that monetary exchange and economic consumption does not necessarily undermine religious piety. Indeed, these can act as catalysts towards piety, or at least offer the potential for its meaningful enactment. Conversely, the inhibition of their traffic is likewise determined by the same conflation of piety, exchange and consumption, as we saw with the refusal to trade in stolen antiquities, or with the inappropriateness of non-Proton cars to be legitimately Islamicised. Buying, selling, assigning value or regulating commercial flows are economic acts that are, simultaneously, meaningful enactments of religious piety. The forces and assumptions that either encourage or inhibit the movement of religious materials correspond to the religious expectations and sensibilities of those who participate in their circulation or procurement.

KINETIC ENERGIES: THE ANIMATION OF AND THROUGH STATIC OBJECTS

The objects examined so far – either moving in locomotive sociality or circulated in a pious economy -- have characteristics that are amenable to a relatively easy transportability. But not all religious objects can traverse physical space so freely and readily. Sheer size or weight, for example, can preclude the objects movement from one location to the next. This does not mean, however, that relatively immobile religious materials do not significantly impact upon the lives of the faithful. Many other objects are highly regarded because of their embeddedness to one location. The monumental, record-setting Buddha statues that tower over the Kelantanese countryside in Southern Malaysia, for example, dominate its immediate surroundings with its heft and size as anthropologist Irving Johnson describes (2008). Such objects are typically funded by wealthy Chinese residents, who are able to craft express their solidarity to the local community through their support of gargantuan statues. The competition over the sponsorship of such statues evokes the ways in which issues of class and ethnicity can intersect with religious materiality.

Its immediate impact lies in its groundedness in that location in such way that it itself becomes a metonymy for the locality in which it resides. In contrast, the highly revered Christchild Santo Niño of Cebu, Philippines is barely a foot tall. Thought to be four hundred years old, it is kept in a bullet-proof, air tight shrine to protect it from further exposure the elements (Bautista 2010). Moving it around, even in ritualized procession, would likely cause damage to its diminutive frame. In this case, it is not heft or bulk that prevents its movement, but its lack of it.

The spiritual potency that is ascribed to these religious materials is not a function of their capacity to change location. Rather, it is the way in which such ‘immovable’ objects inspire a kinetic energy in those around them that is significant. Equally characteristic of religious materials is their capacity to have an impact upon one’s personal subjectivities demonstrated, for example, by being in ‘awe’ of enshrined statues or sacred architectures. In this respect, faith is defined by one’s being ‘moved’ or inspired by religious materials. It is to this kind of motion that we shall turn.

THE SPIRIT IN AND OF THINGS

The *longan* house altar of the Benitan of Indonesian Borneo— upright, vertical structures atop of which are held several potent objects such as tigers teeth, small figurines, or unusually shaped stones -- do not move like the *Mahal Na Senyor* or the Islamicised Prottons. They are in fact permanent structures found in an extended family’s house and village longhouses, as Sillander describes (2004). So strong is the association between *longan* and those dwelling spaces that the former is not altered or demolished, and are moved only when houses are rebuilt or relocated. The *longans* staticity is such that it becomes the focal point for village group solidarity among those who congregate there to recite origin myths (*tempun*). *Longan*, in its staticity, is the repository of shared social and familial histories. It provides a symbol and instrument of collective integration, thus forming, in Sillander’s words, a ‘node of spatio-temporal unification’ (Sillander 2008). It is precisely in its embeddedness to permanent structures that the *longan* is crucial in the performance of Benitan religious ritual.

This does not mean that no motion occurs in the context of *longan*. Its most crucial function lies in its capacity to facilitate a negotiation between humans and spirits. *Longan* enables *ngulas*, or 'blood lustration', during which spirits are attracted to religious objects and, upon their interaction with human beings, they can subsequently be 'fed'. This feeding provides the conditions under which spirits can reciprocate by ensuring the continued health, prosperity and protection of their 'feeders'. *Longan* are not merely objects that are filled with meaning in the course of ritual. Rather, they themselves invoke the sacred by attracting spiritual presences, who would not otherwise inhabit that living realm if not for the presence of such ritual objects. While the *longan* do not move, therefore, their staticity influences the movement of spirits for the benefit of their human interlocutors.

The movement of spirits is also evident in the worship of anthropomorphic images among Singaporean ethnic Chinese. As is the case with Benitan spirit worship, a characteristic feature of Chinese religion is the extent to which the power of Gods are dependent on people. While gods and deities do have the capacity to grant favor, they are also reliant upon humans making a continued commitment and intervention through into their realm. Chan (2006) describes a system in which worship and offertory is a form of 'bargain' between humans and ancestor spirits, in which the latter are 'put to work' in exchange for continued veneration. The anthropomorphic statues of Gods, as such, have 'personalized' human characteristics that corresponds to the 'work' to which the gods are to be put. More specifically, static images of Chinese religion are thought of as corporeal bodies through which souls of the dead can enter into the human world. The personalisation of images imbue gods with a humanity that popularize their cults, and allow otherwise formless spirits to be objectified.

The image for both Benitan and Singaporean Chinese is not the abode of god in the sense that their power is indelibly restricted to the statue's materiality. Rather, they are portals that facilitate the motion of spirits between mortal and human realms. Like the *longan*, images of Chinese religion facilitate the movement of spirits in the context of a reciprocal negotiation between at least two actors, who both have their own stake in the transaction. Humans are able to benefit from the spirits protection and advocacy, while the spirits are able to inhabit the mortal realm by animating the statues that humans adorn, venerate and maintain.

Static, immovable objects then, just like those that actually move and traverse space, are crucial in enactment of religious sensibilities among Southeast Asians. In the case of both the Benitan *longan* and Singaporean Chinese anthropomorphic images, spirits need something tangible beyond the act of ritual and performance in order for their powers and influence to become animated. Whereas the *longan* influences the motion of spirits by attracting them to 'feed' in a Benitan's home, ancestor spirits in Singapore can only move by inhabiting the statues and figurines which are 'personalized' according to their roles in the human realm.

MOVING BODIES AND RELIGIOUS PIETY

While religious objects enable the movement – indeed the very being -- of the immaterial, they also encourage human bodies to move in particular ways. Thai Buddhist amulets brought from villages to warzones, Islamicised cars driven around the Kuala Lumpur metropolis, or Hindu trinkets brought home as souvenirs – the potency of such objects have much do with the ease with which they can be made part of the body itself, and affect the course of its motion and movement. Religious objects facilitate processes in which the

movement of the body is itself an act of piety and the fulfillment of religious obligation. How do objects inspire, encourage or compel the movement of bodies?

In Cebu, the worship of the Santo Nino Christchild figure is associated very closely with the *tinder* dance performed by candle vendors who work in the outside environs of the figure's Basilica (Bautista 2007). A purchase of a candle initiates the process in which the vendors perform a dance to the Santo Niño on behalf of the buyers who effectively petition them for a kind of piety by proxy. Holding the newly purchased candles, the vendor engages in a set of stylized movements in place. The dance itself is mundane: requiring no special costume, no musical accompaniment, no particular type of preparation, and revealing no apparent choreographic influences. Yet while the stylized movements were uniform, the *sinulog* is a personal, intimate and focused ritual that reflected the emotional state of her customer. A petitioner asking for the health of a sick relative, for example, would evoke a slower dance movement. After the dance, the candles are taken back by the vendors and placed in a receptacle in which the wax would be collected and recycled into new candles. It is a process which by its very nature lends itself to repetition. It is in the transactional process of purchasing religious materials – in this case the candles -- that the petitionary relationship can be facilitated. More specifically, it is through the facility of the candles, itself not valuable in a monetary sense, that a relationship with the icon is engaged.

The movement of the body in this ritualized context is manifested in many other instances across religions and contexts in Southeast Asia. But one can observe bodily movement even outside the formal aspects of worship in which the object is venerated, traded, circulated or revered. The act of production – in building, assembling, adorning, designing, decorating and crafting religious objects --- is likewise a series of movements that, like *tindera* dancing, is a simultaneous enactment of work and piety. The production process, for many of the faithful in Southeast Asia, are inspired by the same conflation of movement and religious observance. The anthropologist Alexandra Demersan (2009) analyses this in great detail in thinking about body techniques of the craftsmen of Buddha images in the Arakan State of Burma. In observing the ceremonies and rituals that occur in the various stages of making the image, Demersan shifts the focus back from the images consecration towards the forms of habitus involved in the production process.

Some ways of movement are less intuitive, and need to be emboldened by religious objects. Among Thai volunteers to the US Army forces during the Vietnam war, religious materials – ranging from Buddhist amulets and charms to objects drawn directly from kinfolk's bodies and clothing, and even female undergarments – are reported to be efficacious in offering magical protection in combat. As Ruth (2010) describes, Thai volunteers affixed the amulets to their bodily armory. These amulets, more so than other forms of bodily training, emboldened them in battle with a significant measure of success. It was common for a Thai volunteer to possess more than ten amulets, some of which were exchanged or given to *farang* (foreigner) infantryman who eventually became convinced of their protective properties.

Would the Thai soldiers have moved in the ways they did, placing their bodies in harm's way, if not for the amulets? It is significant that the bearers of the amulets were not necessarily religiously devout, or even Buddhist. In spite of this, amulets as potent and transportable religious materials encouraged a particular boldness of movement by investing the bearers – Thai and American -- with an arcane power of protection that transcended any knowledge of its doctrinal or theological underpinnings. In short, it is not always ideas but materials that

drive religious ideas, and facilitate effective interaction at times when faiths are challenged by competing belief systems.

COLLECTIVE BODIES AND MARKING BOUNDARIES AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

The significance of religious materials in Southeast Asia is not restricted to how materials encourage individual bodies to move, as we saw through ritual or performance of religious piety. Equally compelling is the capacity of religious materials to encourage the collective, coordinated movement of those who are devoted to them, in some cases inspiring them to traverse vast physical spaces. It is important to observe, for example, how devotees and pilgrims are drawn across borders towards temples or monuments, which is something that we find quite commonly in religious sites around the world.

Yet collective movement in this context is made for reasons beyond the religious. The collective bodies also respond to the specter of the secular authority of the nation state. In such cases, religious materials can profoundly influence people's movement, exerting an authoritative jurisdiction in the drawing and reulation of politico-ethnic boundaries. As we shall see, diasporic and ethnic communities across Southeast Asia engage with religious materials in ways that are mediated by the wider vicissitudes of displacement, marginality or the challenges of state and nation-building. It is in this context that we are able to appreciate the extent to which the social cohesiveness amidst religious pluralism is often premised upon how the faithful engage with religion's tangible forms.

The incident that Kendall, Vu and Nguyen (2008) describe shows how crucial materiality is to the maintenance of faith, particularly when that faith is under siege by state authority. During the period of high socialism in the 1940s to mid 1980s, the Greater Hanoi Bureau of Culture and Information of Vietnam had ordered the dismantling of shrines in an iconoclastic campaign against superstition. Yet those devoted to the Saint Trần Hưng Đạo had persisted in their devotion, refusing to dismantle the altar and insisting that it was an extension of their filial piety. When faced the prospect of dishonouring a patriotic ancestor, the Bureau delegates – reluctant iconoclasts, as Kendall, Vu and Nguyen describe them – relented in carrying out their tasks, enabling the shrine to survive for many years in spite of state crackdowns.

The ability of Vietnamese devotees to circumvent authority was premised upon their persistent engagement with the material aspects of their faith. As a mere idea or memory, the devotion to Trần Hưng Đạo might not have survived state repression. It was in the materiality his memory was able to be manifested in ways that made devotion possible. Webb Keane described religious materials as bearers of their own temporality, that “their very materiality gives them a historical character” (Keane 2008: 124). For in the shrine itself --- as well as the objects on it, the altar, incense sticks, chair and tablet -- was the converging intersection of filial and spiritual responsibility. The response of the reluctant iconoclasts represented gaps in state repression in which forms of religious diversity can take root and even flourish.

Religious objects can provide tangibility to the narratives that are invoked when devotees are ‘moved’ and relocated forcibly by the state authorities who delineate borders and dictate the normatives of belonging. Buddhist statues, for example, are directly implicated in the subjugation, surveillance, or intimidation of ethnic minorities by governmental authorities in

Burma. In describing Buddhist visual culture in the Burmese Shan state, Karlsson (2000) examines the process in which Buddhists are enclosed and excluded based on ethnic-religious categories. The histories, myths and rituals connected to images and buildings sponsored by the Burmese military government was coterminous with the regime's attempts at 'Burmazisation' of ethnic minorities. Karlsson's discussion focuses on the capacity of Buddhist paintings, murals and statues to manifest sentiments of protest and recalcitrant subjectivities, if not the reaffirmation of identities, or forms of complicity. In this case, religious categories are expressed visually, but often had a surplus of meaning which hinted at the tenuous and contested issues of national belonging and nation-building.

In analyzing the eclectic architecture of the Caodai Great Temple in Tay Ninh, Vietnam, Hoskins (2006) provides us with another example of these surplus of recalcitrant meanings. On one level, the temple's hybrid modernism are themselves a clear expression of religious concerns. By the visual display of the lateral syncretistic reach of Caodai – its architectural features include depictions of Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Kuan Yin and Jesus – the Great temple encourages and moves people to congregate within its walls in the spirit of religious harmony. Yet the architectural features of the temple alluded to other more controversial themes as well, albeit more subtly. On the inside walls of the temples one can find a large mural showing three Cao Dai saints – Victor Hugo, Sun Yat Sen, and Nguyen Bihn Kiem -- in the act of signing a contract between God and Humanity. Each of these figures represented not merely the spiritual establishment of Cao Dai as a faith, but were material depictions of Chinese, French and Vietnamese traditions of a unified crafting of nationhood under the architectural confines of Cao Dai. In this respect, Cao Dai materiality anticipated the ideal forms of an independent nation of Vietnam, neither French nor Viet Minh, in promoting what Hoskins calls emblems, narratives and technologies of modern nation states.

Like the Grand Cao Dai temple, the Roman Catholic shrine at Bukit Mertajam in Malaysia that anthropologist Yeoh Seng Guan describes is a pilgrimage site attracting many devotees. But it is also more than this. What is interesting about the Shrine is its multi-ethnic, multi-religious character, where people of different faiths share an implicit recognition of the sacred power of the place, and the objects that are found therein. The shrine is seen as auspicious, for example, in terms of Daoist geomancy (*feng shui*) while Hindus apprehend it as a 'crossing point' for divinities. Beyond the architecture is the Saint Anne's water that is collected and kept by people of various faiths visiting the shrine. The water itself points to porous religious boundaries, as opposed to the strict and static boundaries which Shan Buddhist statues are used to demarcate.

The formless aspect of this particular religious material – water – offers the “potential of sidestepping doctrinal differences between religions whilst also threading through and connecting these differences” (Yeoh 2009) . As a commonly shared religious material, water has the properties that facilitate ethnic and religious harmony even in closely confined space of the temple. Given that race and religious identity is one of the most challenging and pressing issues of today, the religiously pluralistic significations of Bukit Mertajam shrine and Saint Anne “confounds contemporary societal configurations of cultural politics in multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia”.

Religious objects influence and condition the nature and direction of people's movement, often evoking the larger political and cultural milieu in which the faithful find themselves entwined. Hoskins, Yeoh and Karlsson's concerns, therefore, are quite similar in that they trace the ways in which religious sites, and the objects within them, provide the venue in

which people are able negotiate the challenges of citizenship or nationhood. But more importantly, these three examples of motion – each of them facilitated through religious materials and architecture – are the context in which the challenge of religious diversity is met in three different states in Southeast Asia.

In this paper I have argued that faith is embedded in objects and materials just as much, if not more so, than they are in doctrine, scripture or belief. It is clear that the impact of a religious material upon those who behold, possess or use them is not simply a function of their aesthetic appeal, or by the intricacy of their craftsmanship, or by their rarity. In all the examples that we have considered in this paper, religious materials – from the *Mahal Na Senyor* to *Longan* to the Bukit Matarajam shrine – are the arenas in which the faithful have been able to participate and express their identities in public life, be it in an economic, cultural or political contexts.

Religions will “always involve material forms,” argues Webb Keane, and it is “...in that materiality that they are part of experience and provoke responses that they have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences.” (Keane 2008: 124) We have seen this to be particularly true in Southeast Asia where it is through materiality, not through verbal pronouncements or discourse, that religious belief is fulfilled in societies where other religions and belief systems compete for attention and preeminence. By “materializing belief”, as David Morgan puts it – that is, in burning incense at an altar, in carrying a statue in procession, in affixing an amulet to one’s armor, in driving a proton car, and in many other ways – the faithful declare their beliefs, placing emphasis on their distinctiveness, reaffirming their devotion and carrying out their religious responsibilities.

Given the centrality of materiality to faith and public life, the way religious materials are used and regarded in a religiously plural region such as Southeast Asia has very important consequences for social cohesion. While religious conflict and competition remains an important issue in the region, the examples discussed here show that in casting their beliefs in tangible form, the faithful are able to maintain the solidarity of their respective communities in ways that interiorized belief alone cannot achieve.

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