



ORGANISED BY ASIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

URBAN RELIGION, GENDER, AND THE BODY

A conference that takes gender and
the body as lenses of analysis to study urban religion

ONLINE

VIA ZOOM

25-27

JANUARY 2021

CONVENOR

NATALIE LANG

For more information, please visit <https://ari.nus.edu.sg>

Vibrant religious activities in cities have received much recent scholarly attention. Yet, the gendered and bodily dimensions of the relation between religion and the city have been widely left out in existing research. This conference takes gender and the body as lenses of analysis to study urban religion.

Rather than the urban merely impacting the religious, the latter can also serve as a driving force behind urban developments. Such an intrinsic relationship between religion and the city becomes apparent, for example, in how people's religious and urban aspirations are often closely intertwined. Bodily religious practices can be powerful means for people to work toward their urban aspirations, both on special occasions, such as life cycle rituals or religious festivals, and in urban everyday life. These practices are often highly gendered, both in the public and private sphere. This conference aims at investigating how bodily religious practices create (gendered) urban spaces, how people use their bodies to pursue their religious and urban aspirations, and how their bodies become sites of gender negotiations. Recent scholarship on religion has undergone a shift in focus from the textual forms of religious knowledge to the material aspects of religion, including the bodily and affective dimensions. Furthermore, research on religion and gender demonstrates the importance of intersectionality in the analysis of religious practices. These important dimensions do not find much attention in existing research on the relation between religion and the city. At the same time, most research on the city in relation to gender or the body does not consider the important role that religion often plays in these relations. The mutually missing attention to these issues in the respective fields of religious, gender, and urban studies becomes especially apparent in research on Asia. The gap between the importance of the body in religious practices in Asia and its scant attention in scholarship on religion in Asian cities is striking.

This conference brings together scholars from different fields to think jointly about the role that religion plays in how people imagine, experience, live in, and appropriate the city, with a particular focus on gendered and class-inflected, bodily and sensory religious experiences. The main research questions to be addressed include but are not limited to the following:

- What are the theoretical and methodological possibilities and implications when taking gender and the body as lenses of analysis for the study of the relation between religion and the city?
- How do bodily religious practices co-constitute the city? How do bodily religious practices contribute to how the city is imagined and experienced?
- How do bodies become sites of urban religious negotiations? For example, how do bodies of religious practitioners reflect different dimensions of negotiations of religious diversity, such as spectacle and conflict? Or how do bodily religious practices reflect time constraints of busy urban lives?
- How do bodies become sites of gender negotiations in urban religious practices? How do gendered notions of the body in rituals relate to notions of gender roles outside the ritual context?
- What can a focus on gendered and bodily religious practices tell us about the relation between private and public religion in urban contexts?

CONFERENCE FORMAT

The conference format is synchronous-asynchronous. Several weeks before the final discussion panels, paper drafts and pre-recorded presentations have been circulated amongst discussants and presenters only. Conference participants are invited to ask questions, write comments, and engage in discussions before the final discussion panels on 25-27 January 2021, to be held virtually via Zoom. On the 3 days of the online conference, paper presentations will not be featured. Each discussion panel will start directly with a discussant's comments on the papers, followed by responses by paper authors, leaving the rest of the time for questions and answers.

CONFERENCE CONVENOR

Ms Natalie LANG

Postdoctoral Fellow at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

E | arinklgk@nus.edu.sg

25 JANUARY 2021 • MONDAY

16:00 – 16:15	WELCOME REMARKS
16:00	<p>Kong Chong Ho National University of Singapore</p> <p>Kenneth Dean National University of Singapore</p> <p>Natalie Lang National University of Singapore</p>
16:15 – 18:15	PANEL 1 • URBAN MUSLIM GENDERED BODIES
Chairperson	Erica M. Larson National University of Singapore
16:15	<p><i>Discussant</i> Yang Yang National University of Singapore</p> <p>Being a Good Muslim Man in Asia's World City: Performing Youthful Muslim Masculinities in Hong Kong</p> <p>Murat Es Chinese University of Hong Kong</p> <p>The Young Muslim Women's City at the Intersection of Gendered Religious Practices and Politics in Delhi, India</p> <p>Syeda Jenifa Zahan Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative</p> <p>'Urban, Modern and Islamic': Muslim Men Fashion in Malaysia (and Indonesia)</p> <p>Wai Weng Hew National University of Malaysia</p> <p>Navigating Islamic Enclosure and Cosmopolitan Space: Young Chinese Female Muslim Converts in Hong Kong</p> <p>Wai-chi Chee Hong Kong Baptist University</p>
16:55	Authors' Responses
17:35	Questions & Answers
18:15	END OF PANEL

26 JANUARY 2021 • TUESDAY

14:00 – 16:00	PANEL 2 • CROSS-DRESSING AND GENDER PERFORMANCE IN URBAN RITUALS
Chairperson	Emily Hertzman National University of Singapore
14:00	<p><i>Discussant</i> Michelle H. S. Ho National University of Singapore</p> <p>Queering Death Rites: Transgender Funeral Performance as a Context for Understanding the Politics of Cultural Governance in Southern Vietnam</p> <p>Thu Nguyen Huong Vietnam National University of Hanoi</p> <p>Queer Mediums and their Painful Journey to Gain Social Recognition</p> <p>Binh Tran Thi Thuy University of Auckland, New Zealand</p> <p>The Cult of the Lady of Linshui: Featuring a Castrated Monkey Spirit and Cross-Dressing Taoists</p> <p>Kenneth Dean National University of Singapore</p> <p>Subliminal Identities: Gender Shifting Religious Practices in South India</p> <p>Shubhi Sonal REVA University, India</p>
14:40	Authors' Responses
15:20	Questions & Answers
16:00	END OF PANEL

26 JANUARY 2021 • TUESDAY

17:00 – 19:00	PANEL 3 • THE BODY AS SITE OF NARRATION, NEGOTIATION, AND DIVINE PRESENCE IN URBAN RITUALS
<i>Chairperson</i>	Chand Somaiah National University of Singapore
17:00	<i>Discussant</i> Vineeta Sinha National University of Singapore The Hindu Body as a Site of Contested Narratives: Fire, Religion, and Embodied Practice in Urban London Ann R David University of Roehampton, UK Goddess and the City: Women, Worship and Inhabiting/Creating Religious Worlds Indira Arumugam National University of Singapore Kavadi Bearing in Singapore: Performing Citizenship through Bodily Rituals Lavanya Balachandran National University of Singapore Why do Hindu Women Not Fire Walk in Singapore? Urban Religion, Gender, and the Body Natalie Lang National University of Singapore
17:40	Authors' Responses
18:20	Questions & Answers
19:00	END OF PANEL

27 JANUARY 2021 • WEDNESDAY

16:00 – 18:00	PANEL 4 • GENDERED URBAN BODIES AND LIVES
<i>Chairperson</i>	Carola E. Lorea National University of Singapore
16:00	<i>Discussant</i> Neena Mahadev Yale-NUS College, Singapore Babies for 'Bawas': The Jiyo Parsi Scheme in India Leilah Vevaina Chinese University of Hong Kong Chinese Protestant Calisthenics: Women Producing Religious Space Michel Chambon Hanover College, USA Entangled Intimacies: Negotiating Kinship and Religious Embodiments amongst Tamil Hindu Women in Singapore Ranjana Raghunathan National University of Singapore Negotiating Urban Inclusion through the Moral-Religious Body Sajida Ally University of Sussex, UK
16:40	Authors' Responses
17:20	Questions & Answers
18:00 – 18:15	CLOSING REMARKS
18:00	Natalie Lang National University of Singapore
18:15	END OF CONFERENCE

Being a Good Muslim Man in Asia's World City: Performing Youthful Muslim Masculinities in Hong Kong

Murat ES

Chinese University of Hong Kong

murates@cuhk.edu.hk

Hong Kong has long been home to immigrants and citizens of South Asian background, popularly known as 'ethnic minorities'. During the recent anti-extradition bill movement, a Chinese protest organizer was attacked by a group of men, who were suspected to be of South Asian background. The rumors of retaliation against ethnic minorities spread soon after. When the tension that followed the incident was dispelled by a visit by protesters at the most iconic site of South Asian presence in the city, Chung Kong Mansions, one expert declared that the mainland Chinese had replaced ethnic minorities as the significant other of Hong Konger identity. Young Muslim men are both ethnically and religiously stigmatized in the contemporary conjuncture as the bearers of patriarchal masculinities and radical Islamism in South East Asia, as elsewhere. This paper looks at the ways in which young Muslim men of South Asian background perform their masculinities in Hong Kong. My analysis focuses on differentiated capacities for mobility, embodied practices of Muslim manhood and affective atmospheres of desire, fear and safety to understand the ways in which ethno-religious difference of minority populations are experienced and accommodated in South East Asian cities. Through my ethnographic fieldwork with young Muslim South Asian men in Hong Kong, I explain how these youth draw from different cultural traditions, engage various discourses of pious subjectivity and negotiate an unstable politics of belonging in Hong Kong. My findings point to the importance of transnational moral geographies operating at multiple scales in regulating embodied encounters with, as well as constant (mis)recognition and negotiation of, cultural difference in 'Asia's world city'.

Murat Es has studied History (BA) and Sociology (MA) at Bogazici University in his native Turkey, before continuing his doctoral studies at the Department of Geography, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Currently, he works as a lecturer at the Department of Geography and Resource Management at Chinese University of Hong Kong. His work highlights the co-construction of urban spaces and identities through cross-cultural encounters forged by national and transnational mobilities. He has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Netherlands, Hong Kong, and Turkey with ethno-religious minority groups. His current research explores practices of citizenship, youthful masculinities, and urban development in Turkey and Hong Kong.

The Young Muslim Women's City at the Intersection of Gendered Religious Practices and Politics in Delhi, India

Syeda Jenifa ZAHAN

Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative

e0008635@u.nus.edu

This paper focuses on the intimate relationship between gendered religious practices and the differential use and appropriation of the city. Drawing on interviews conducted with young Muslim women in Delhi, India I argue that lived experiences of religion often produces complex and paradoxical relationship between young women and the city. Previous research has demonstrated that religious practices such as veiling shape Muslim women's engagement with the city. For instance, Secor (2002) argues that embodied practices such as veiling are women's spatial practices to ensure their continued mobility in the city (see also Listerborn 2015). Najib and Hopkins (2019) establish that many women reinvent their mobility patterns to accommodate growing Islamophobic discrimination in everyday urban life. These analyses, although central to the understanding that gendered urban access is a deeply religious experience, focus only on overt embodied religious practices in public spaces. I, however, argue that Muslim women's religion-mediated interactions with the city move beyond these overt public embodied practices that signal "Muslimness" to ostensibly 'different' and 'stranger' urban dwellers. Instead, the gendered city is a product of both overt and covert gendered religious practices performed at the interstices of the public and private geographies of the self, families/faith community, and the city. As a result, I argue, the embodied intersections between gender, religion and the city are much more nuanced, ad-hoc, and paradoxical that shift and change within the historical socio-spatial context wherein gender and religion are invoked in the city.

Syeda Jenifa Zahan completed her doctoral research at the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore (NUS). Dr Zahan is currently working as Postdoctoral Researcher for a collaborative project undertaken by colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies, UK; Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative, Nepal; and Commonwealth Local Governance Forum, UK, titled "Governing the Ungovernable: Understanding the Space-Violence Relationship through an Interrogation of Municipal and Police Functioning". Dr Zahan's teaching and research interests lie in the broad areas of urban feminist geography, with a specific focus on geographies of violence, urban socio-spatial formations, and urban activism produced by intersectional power relations of gender, religion, race/ethnicity, and class. Her work has been published as peer-reviewed journal papers, reports and research blogs.

'Urban, Modern and Islamic': Muslim Men Fashion in Malaysia (and Indonesia)

Wai Weng HEW

National University of Malaysia

hewwaiweng@gmail.com

Most studies on Muslim fashion have been centred on female, this article focuses instead on contemporary Muslim men fashion among urban pious middle-classes in Malaysia. Most Malay Muslim men wear baju Melayu (traditional Malay clothing) during the Idulfitri celebration, however, there are new trends since the last few years, in which jubah (Arabic long robe) and kurta (long shirt, commonly dressed in South Asia) are becoming popular especially among young Muslim men. The popularity of jubah prompt some observers to worry about 'Arabization' or the perceived growth of Wahabi's influence. However, as I observe, the jubah in Malaysian fashion industries has been adapted to local taste and fashion trends, brightly-colored and form-fitting for example. While the jubah's Arabic origins give it 'Islamic authenticity', wearing it doesn't equate to religious piety. Hence, Malay Muslims may wear jubah today as a selective and creative adaption of 'Arabness', instead of a form of sweeping 'Arabisation'. In 2016, an advertisement for 'Jubah Pahlawan' (Hero Jubah, a local brand of Jubah) drawn criticism from conservative Muslims for its short-sleeved, V-necked, form-fitting and brightly-colored design, in which some associate the models with transgender or gays. By looking at the debates surrounding these Muslim men fashion trends and based on my ethnographic research in some of the Muslim men fashion boutiques, this article explores how such bodily religious practice reflect male Muslim middle-classes' aspirations to be 'urban, modern and Islamic', as well as various motivations and contradiction behind such practices.

Wai Weng Hew is a fellow at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, National University of Malaysia (IKMAS, UKM). He has published on Chinese Muslim identities, Hui migration, and urban middle-class Muslim aspirations in Malaysia and Indonesia. He is the author of *Chinese Ways of Being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity in Indonesia* (NIAS Press, 2018).

Navigating Islamic Enclosure and Cosmopolitan Space: Young Chinese Female Muslim Converts in Hong Kong

Wai-chi CHEE

Hong Kong Baptist University

wcchee@hkbu.edu.hk

Among Hong Kong's population of 7.3 million, about 270,000 are Muslims, predominantly Indonesian domestic workers, and South Asian and African migrants. Only about 10% are ethnic Chinese – most have a root that can be traced to the *Hui* minority in Mainland China. Thus, in Hong Kong, Islam largely evokes imaginaries of ethnic minorities and “otherness.” In this context, Chinese Muslim converts often find themselves shifting from the ethnic majority of Hong Kong to an ethnic minority within a religious minority in the city. To most Hong Kong people, it is unimaginable that local Chinese females born and raised in this modern city should convert to Islam because Muslim-majority societies are stereotypically perceived to be at odds with gender equality and modernities.

This ethnographic research explores the interplay between Islamic regulatory regime and cosmopolitan space through the experiences of a group of well-educated young Chinese female Muslim converts who find themselves challenged by everyday realities that constantly require creative adaptation. Focusing on issues related to gender and ethnicity, this paper argues that these women embody and represent regulatory enclosure and cosmopolitan identities simultaneously, entailing continuous negotiations and contestations.

These women identify themselves as members of the local and global Islamic communities, and also as modern independent females in a cosmopolitan city. By exploring how they create Islamic practices strategically in reaction to different situations, this paper sheds light on how Muslims negotiate regulatory enclosure and cosmopolitanism, and how Islam is dynamically constituted and re-constituted locally in response to constantly evolving challenges.

Wai-chi Chee (PhD in Anthropology, Chinese University of Hong Kong) is Assistant Professor in Education Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. Her research interests include migration, education, youth, globalization, religion, and culture and identity. She has published in various international journals including *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, *Mobilities*, *Social Indicators Research*, *Children's Geographies*, and *Asian Anthropology*. She has also contributed chapters to *Refugees, Immigrants, and Education in Global South* (2013 Routledge; Jackie Kirk Outstanding Book Award), *Religious Pluralism, State and Society in Asia* (2014 Routledge), *Detaining the Immigrant Other* (2016 Oxford University Press), *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium* (2017 Springer), *Hong Kong Keywords: Imaging New Future* (2019 The Chinese University Press), and *Realities and Aspirations for Asian Youth* (2019 Routledge).

Queering Death Rites: Transgender Funeral Performance as a Context for Understanding the Politics of Cultural Governance in Southern Vietnam

Thu Nguyen HUONG

Department of Anthropology, Vietnam National University of Hanoi

huongethno@gmail.com

The economic and political Reforms (Đổi Mới) since 1986 led to a significant resurgence of ritual practices in Vietnam including funeral performance and other forms of entertainment. The recently emerging transgender funeral show in Southern Vietnam adopts the historical and cultural legacy of male cross-dressing performance and incorporates erotic elements of present day traditional theatrical elements in order to carve out its own niche in the variegated modern entertaining repertoire. This paper aims to explore to what extent transgender funeral performance may produce an environment ripe for seemingly politicized struggles over space and the ownership of the “cultural hub” of the city. It also addresses how this practice figures in the articulation of social differences among different strata of urban people in a city like Ho Chi Minh City that has seen particularly stark and rapid political-economic transformations. Data for this study were collected through a series of ethnographic observations conducted in a variety of spatial contexts and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 45 transwomen entertainers in Ho Chi Minh City. Additional information on official policies and societal attitudes on transgender and transsexual entertainers was gathered from in-depth interviews with 26 persons including local government officials, social workers, development practitioners, and local residents in two selected research settings in Ho Chi Minh City. The research was rounded off with a list questionnaires handed out to 125 residents in the research areas. This quantitative survey helps illuminate factors that shape popular attitudes about transgender funeral performance.

Thu Nguyen Huong (PhD from University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) is a senior lecturer at the Department of Anthropology of Vietnam National University, Hanoi and was also affiliated with the Department of Gender Studies of Lund University as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow (2015-2017). Her research interests center on the intersection of sexual violence, gender diversity, ethnicity and climate disasters in the Philippines and Vietnam. Her latest work has appeared in *Culture, Health and Sexuality*; *Violence Against Women*; *American Anthropologist*; and *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, etc.

Queer Mediums and their Painful Journey to Gain Social Recognition

Binh Tran Thi THUY

University of Auckland, New Zealand

tbin787@aucklanduni.ac.nz

In Dao Mau – an indigenous Vietnamese religion and identified by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, mediums identifying themselves with any gender are expected to have their mediumship roots with certain male and/or female deities. In len dong - a core ritual practice of Dao Mau, mediums experience a cross-gender journey while their bodies are continuously possessed by the souls of male and female deities. Some mediums still perform their gender fluidity outside the ritual context. In big cities, len dong attracts LGBT individuals when mediums challenge anyone questioning their homosexual orientation. My research focuses on biologically male mediums living and/or working in Hanoi and adopting traditional female characteristics and behaviours during len dong, and some retain these traditionally feminine gender expressions in wider daily life. How do mediums and their followers understand the mediums' queerness and gender fluidity through the incarnation? How does their knowledge relate to notions of gender roles outside the ritual context? Answers will be analyzed based on (1) my personal observation of forty len dong, (2) unrecorded talks among practitioners and their followers, (3) in-depth interviews with a medium and three master mediums and (4) and their publicly Facebook pages. I argue that the cross-gender journey helps Dao Mau's practitioners shape their queer identity and recognition of non-binary practices. With the growth of Dao Mau's impact, the cross-gender journey as well as non-binary practices become visible in urban discourses and then receive the sympathy of city dwellers. It helps dong co mediums shape their gender fluidity as a norm.

Binh Tran Thi Thuy, PhD candidate, University of Auckland (New Zealand), has done her research about gender, religion and sexuality. Part of her research has been presented in four conferences, including 14th Singapore Graduate Forum on Southeast Asian Studies 22-26 July 2019; Gender, Bodies and Technology conference April 25-27, 2019; ASAA/NZ Conference 6-7 December, 2018; and NZASR/AASR Conference 29-30 November 2018. She co-authored with Dr Gloria Filax to publish an article about gender and religion titled "Social effects of Dao Mau". She also published two articles (including "*Sexual harassment – a hurdle of female promotion*", "*Masculinity and its impacts on female leadership in media companies in Vietnam*") and one report ("*Gender Equity on television based evaluating social and cultural programs of VTV1 and VTV3 of Vietnam Television (VTV)*") about gender and media in Vietnam. More information can be found here: <https://unidirectory.auckland.ac.nz/profile/tbin787>.

The Cult of the Lady of Linshui: Featuring a Castrated Monkey Spirit and Cross-Dressing Taoists

Kenneth DEAN

Asia Research Institute, and Department of Chinese Studies,
National University of Singapore

chshead@nus.edu.sg

This paper first discusses recent literature on gender and religion in China, then explores a case study of the role of gender and cross-dressing in rituals and myths of the Lushan tradition of Daoist ritual. Next the paper examines the changing role of women in local communal religion in China and in Singapore, exploring new leadership functions for women in temples and vegetarian halls, as well as the increase in female spirit medium activity. Case studies will be provided of female spirit mediums who have had temples built for them by their devotees, transforming the local built environment and shifting power relations in the religious sphere.

Kenneth Dean is Raffles Professor of Humanities and Head, Chinese Studies Department, National University of Singapore (NUS). He is also the research cluster leader for Religion and Globalisation at the Asia Research Institute, NUS. He has published extensively on Taoism and popular religion in Southeast Asia and Southeast China. His current project is the construction of an interactive, multi-media Singapore Historical GIS (SHGIS) and Singapore Biographical Database (SBDB) database. These projects can be viewed online at shgis.nus.edu.sg and sbdb.nus.edu.sg.

Subliminal Identities: Gender Shifting Religious Practices in South India

Shubhi SONAL

School of Architecture, REVA University, India

shubhisonal@reva.edu.in

The study documents religious practices in the southern region of India where gender is treated as a sublime interchangeable concept. Colorful stories of fire walking festival, water bearing processions etc frequently capture our cultural imagination of folk religious practices in the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala in South India. The study picks up on three distinct festivals from these states in which gender reversal (signified by cross dressing) is a primary ritual and inherent part of the religious practice.

The study documents the folklore, community linkages and ritual practices seen in the Karaga festival from Karnataka, Thimithi fire walking festival from Tamil Nadu and the Chamayavilakku festival from Kerala. While all three festivals bear the superficial similarity of cross dressing to imbibe the feminine energy, each has its own cultural ethos and singularities. The thread that ties them all together despite regional variations is possibly the respect for feminine energy and the need to imbibe it as a path towards salvation. On an urban level, the scale of festivities transforms the public commons to a colorful dystopic realm for the duration of the festival. The study follows an ethnographic approach and relies on qualitative methods to document and comprehend the symbolism behind these unique religious practices. On a fundamental level, gender shift is seen as a path towards invoking the female deity and channelizing feminine energy. A closer look reveals that this momentary shift in gender identity is an ironical manifestation of the underlying feminism in a hitherto patriarchal society.

Shubhi Sonal is an urban planner-architect with diverse research interests including urban sustainability planning, gender studies and architectural pedagogy. Shubhi holds a master's degree in City Planning at Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur. She is pursuing her doctoral research in urban planning from JNAFAU, Hyderabad. Shubhi has over 12 years of experience in practice and academic research and currently teaches at School of Architecture, REVA University, Bangalore.

The Hindu Body as a Site of Contested Narratives: Fire, Religion, and Embodied Practice in Urban London

Ann R DAVID

University of Roehampton, UK

a.david@roehampton.ac.uk

This paper examines what part bodies play as sites of urban religious negotiations, taking the example of *Thimithe*, or religious fire-walking practices carried out in London by groups of Mauritian Tamils as part of annual Hindu ritual festivals. How do these extreme bodily practices sit in their translocated new homes? What part do they play in confirming and re-inscribing in the diaspora, people's faith as Hindus? How do the bodies of these religious practitioners reflect different dimensions of negotiations of religious diversity, such as spectacle and conflict? These questions are at the forefront of an analysis of a new growth of extreme and spectacular public rituals that involve mortifications to the body, not usually witnessed in the UK.

Hindu fire-walking rituals appeared for the first time in the UK as recently as 2008. Celebrating tradition and identity, they also inextricably link past and future, home and diaspora. These ritual and bodily mortifications are demonstrably a religious, devout and auspicious occasion for all those present and sit alongside an atmosphere of high tension, excitement, participation and drama. Using data collected during fieldwork from attendance at *Thimithe* events in London, I argue for the importance of the body in playing host to belief and religious sentiments, particularly when emplaced in diasporic situations.

Ann R David is Professor of Dance and Cultural Engagement at the University of Roehampton, London. She specialises in dance anthropology and South Asian classical and popular dance and her dance training includes ballet, contemporary, folk dance, as well as bharatanatyam and kathak. Ann's research work focuses on dance and ritual practices in UK Indian communities investigating issues of migration, identity and embodiment, and the gestural, narrative and ritual practices of bharatanatyam. She has published widely on this work, as well as on dance in Bollywood, and on the ritual dances of Tibetan Buddhism and is currently working on a monograph of Indian dancer Ram Gopal.

Goddess and the City: Women, Worship and Inhabiting/Creating Religious Worlds

Indira ARUMUGAM

Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore

socio@nus.edu.sg

This paper revolves around a hitherto local rural goddess cult from Tamil Nadu which has become even more resonant in global urban Singapore. As a mother and mid-wife goddess, Periyacchi is particularly meaningful for women. There are two dimensions to the Periyachi cult in Singapore: (1) the spectacular, communal and temple-based rituals choreographed by male priests and (2) the intimate domestic worship governed by women and forbidden to men. In temples, women are the laity and largely spectators. At home, they are the priests, mediums and the deity herself. Customarily women are symbolically undermined and corporeally marginalized during public worship. At Periyachi's domestic rituals, men, by virtue of their gender, are excluded. Juxtaposing Periyachi's public and private cults, I probe the significance of gendered roles, specifically with reference to fertility, to framing ritual processes, constituting Periyachi and evoking her potency. Mediating between the sublime and the material are female bodies both of women worshippers and of the goddess herself as she is materialized in human worlds. Tracing women's traversals between temples and households, I engage with how bodies become temples, persons become goddesses and everyday living becomes religious experience. Through the ways in which women commune with, conduct rituals to and constitute the goddess, I explore how an autochthonous village goddess inhabits and becomes habituated – or not as the case may be – to the city.

Indira Arumugam is Assistant Professor in the National University of Singapore. She is an anthropologist working primarily in Tamil Nadu and amidst the Tamil diaspora in Southeast Asia. Her primary research interests are rituals, lived kinship, popular politics, everyday ethics and grassroots Hinduism. Her articles on pleasurable kinship, resurgent animal sacrifice, coercive gift and electoral politics and festival ethics have been published in *Social Anthropology*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* and *Material Religion*. Her monograph entitled, *Visceral Politics: Intimate Imaginaries of Power in South India* is in press. She is currently working on two projects: the contemporary resonance of animal sacrifice and the ritual cult of an autochthonous village goddess in urban Singapore.

Kavadi Bearing in Singapore: Performing Citizenship through Bodily Rituals

Lavanya BALACHANDRAN

College of Alice & Peter Tan, National University of Singapore

lavanyab@nus.edu.sg

Participation in ritualistic processions in urban spaces have provided the means by which ethnic communities inherit, reproduce and safeguard cultural practices while remaining entrenched in the social, political and economic milieus of a modern nation-state. My ethnographic research amongst Singaporean Tamil Hindus, the largest ethnolinguistic community within the formally recognized 'Indian' ethnic minority group, reveals that the ritualistic practice of *kavadi* bearing in annually held public processions like *Taipucam* and *Panguni Uthiram* is a performative act. More specifically, it is a dynamic one that is constructed at the interstices of history, intergenerational ties and kinship networks while being equally contingent upon state policy and the vagaries of everyday life in a cosmopolitan city. Narratives amongst procession participants, spectators and organizers reveal that the continued interest in ritual practices of *kavadi* bearing encapsulates the tensions of race, class, caste, gender and citizenship in a non-liberal, postcolonial multicultural state that explicitly preserves the frontiers of ethnic differences through the formal recognition of race categories. This paper conceptually offers to extend Diana Eck's concept of *darsan* by arguing that the efficacy in an individual experience of Hindu religiosity – in this case *kavadi* bearing - rests on the recognition of its potency in the broader social rather than being embedded in an intimate relationship between the devotee and deity. Thus, the interest amongst Tamil Hindus in Singapore to 'preserve' their cultural heritage through public rituals is strengthened by the impetus to lay claims to the wider ethnic community, urban landscape and ultimately, the nation-state.

Lavanya Balachandran is currently Lecturer with the College of Alice & Peter Tan at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Her research interests include inequality and stratification in Singapore with a specific focus on family, education, race and ethnicity and social networks. After completing her PhD in Sociology at NUS, she joined Asia Research Institute (ARI) and Centre for Family and Population Research (CFPR), NUS as joint postdoctoral fellow (2017-2019) where she worked on the topic of remarriage and stepfamilies in Singapore. More recently, Lavanya was guest editor and has also contributed to a special issue collection with *Journal of Family Issues* based on a conference she organized at ARI on repartnerships and stepfamilies in Asia.

Why do Hindu Women Not Fire Walk in Singapore? Urban Religion, Gender, and the Body

Natalie LANG

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

arinklgk@nus.edu.sg

Fire walking is performed in different contexts in different parts of the world, including religious rituals, spiritual gatherings, or counselling workshops. The Hindu fire walking ritual in Singapore relates to the South Indian Draupadi cult and is grounded in the mythological stories of the Mahabharata epic. Hindu fire walking is performed by both women and men in some temples in India, Malaysia, and other parts of the Tamil diaspora, while in other temples, including the Sri Mariamman temple in Singapore, only men are allowed to walk over the field of burning coals, while women can circumambulate it instead. This paper contributes to debates on the relation between religion and the city by examining how the role of the gendered body in this urban ritual intersects with the situation of (Hindu) women, the creation of religious tradition, and the creation of urban memory in Singapore.

Natalie Lang is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Religion and Globalisation Cluster and the Asian Urbanisms Cluster at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore (NUS). She is also affiliated to the Centre d'études et de recherches sur l'Inde, l'Asie du Sud et sa diaspora Université du Québec à Montréal (CERIAS-UQAM). Her doctoral thesis in anthropology received the Frobenius Research Award, and her book *Religion and Pride: Hindus in Search of Recognition in La Réunion* is forthcoming with Berghahn Books. After her doctoral studies at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS), University of Göttingen, Natalie Lang was a junior fellow at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt. She holds an MA in Migration and Diaspora Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and a BA in South Asian Studies from the University of Heidelberg. Natalie Lang is the co-editor of the research blog *CoronAsur: Religion and Covid-19*, and member of the editorial board at the peer-reviewed journal *Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Südasienforschung* (Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on South Asia).

Babies for ‘Bawas’: The Jiyo Parsi Scheme in India

Leilah VEVAINA

Chinese University of Hong Kong

leilah.vevaina@cuhk.edu.hk

The Parsis of Mumbai, while rich in communal real estate in the city, see their community as one in demographic crisis. At every census result, community leaders decry the greater loss of numbers and the community’s dwindling presence in this megacity. Funded by UNESCO and the Indian Government, and managed by a governing trust, the Jiyo Parsi (Live Parsi) scheme aims to ameliorate this crisis through IVF treatments for infertile Parsi married couples. But the promotion of the scheme, along with selection criteria, have garnered critique from many corners. Some see the advertising campaign as putting undue and unwanted stress on the women in the community to reproduce and bear many children. Others critique the advertising campaign for a kind of Parsi chauvinism, with its negative depictions of other religious groups in Parsi spaces. A further aspect of the Jiyo Parsi scheme with important consequences is the requirement that both the prospective father and mother be Parsi, which goes beyond the current norm of accepting children as Parsi if at least their father is Parsi. The paper will analyse the campaign and highlight the ways in which this IVF program exhibits new notions of who is a Parsi and what kinds of entitlements to space and communal rights that designation now affords. This paper will argue that this additional criterion for IVF, with its racial overtones, has some eerie echoes of early twentieth century Parsi involvement with the eugenics movement in India, and how Parsis deem themselves a minority.

Leilah Vevaina is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She received her PhD in Social Anthropology from the New School for Social Research in 2015. She has an MA in Anthropology from The New School (2007) as well as an MA in Social Thought from New York University (2005). Her research lies in the intersection of urban property and religious life within the legal regimes of contemporary India. She has conducted fieldwork in Mumbai, India and Hong Kong, with specific focus on the Indian Zoroastrian, or Parsi, community, with generous support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation as well as the American Institute of Indian Studies. Her book manuscript entitled, *Trust Matters: Religious Endowments, Parsis and Property in Mumbai* focuses on religious endowments and the trust as a mechanism of property management in the city, and is forthcoming with Duke University Press.

Chinese Protestant Calisthenics: Women Producing Religious Space

Michel CHAMBON

Independent Scholar, Malta

chambonmc@yahoo.fr

Over the past few decades, Chinese society has demonstrated a renewed interest in calisthenics practiced in public squares, parks, and sidewalks. From the largest cities to smaller townships, millions of daily practitioners gather early mornings or evenings to stretch, dance, and practice exercises. While the size, style, and method of these fluid groups are incredibly diverse, they all rely on loudspeakers and distinct music to guide their movements and compete for public space. This activity draws practitioners from many age groups but is particularly popular among middle-aged women. Participating in this “calisthenics fever,” Protestant Christians are developing their religious version of these public square dances. With bright T-shirts and loud religious songs, they perform together on sidewalks to praise their Lord and cultivate their health. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews in Nanping and Fuzhou (Fujian Province), this paper explores the ways Christian women have locally developed Christian calisthenics. I argue that these religious actors use their bodies to negotiate the spatialization and significance of their religion. While religious and public authorities tend to limit Christianity to formal worship places at distinct churches, calisthenics practitioners open new avenues to practice and display what their religion is. Their discourses and practices focus on what Christianity brings for health and well-being, whereas clergy members tend to emphasize doctrines and biblical faith. Thus, Christian calisthenics becomes a tool through which Chinese Christian women proselytize and advocate for an alternative Christian subjectivity less marked by institutionalization and denominational theologies.

Michel Chambon is a French Catholic theologian and a cultural anthropologist interested in the intersections of Christianity and Chinese culture. He has completed his Master’s Degree in theology at the Catholic University of Paris exploring through an ethnographic approach the ways Taiwanese Catholics and Presbyterians respond to widespread beliefs in ghosts. Furthermore, he was awarded a PhD in Anthropology from Boston University. His dissertation examined the five Christian denominations of Nanping (Fujian) to question the ways social science theorizes the unity and diversity of Christianity. Since then, he has held a position as Visiting Assistant Professor in Anthropology at Hanover College (USA). In addition to various publications on the agency of Christian buildings, Chinese Pentecostalism, and Chinese Catholic nuns, he has two forthcoming books: *Making Christ Present in China, Actor-Network Theory and the Anthropology of Christianity* (Palgrave Macmillan), and *Les chrétiens dans la Chine de Xi Jinping* (Les Indes Savantes).

**Entangled Intimacies:
Negotiating Kinship and Religious Embodiments amongst
Tamil Hindu Women in Singapore**

Ranjana RAGHUNATHAN
National University of Singapore

ranjana@u.nus.edu

The scholarship on formation of diasporic religious identities has departed from the emphasis on the proverbial 'homeland', to highlight processes of transnational flows. This has brought attention to local contexts and resulted in a rendition of urban life that is associated with 'diasporic public spheres' (Appadurai 1996). Diverse Hindu practices in Singapore have surfaced contestations and negotiations of plural identities in the multicultural city-state, amidst ongoing shifts in urban landscapes and policy directives. However, the scholarship has rarely considered the gendered dimensions of everyday religious practices. In this paper, I draw on the narratives of Tamil women that I collected through in-depth life story interviews, to underscore the ways that religion is entangled with intimate domains of kinship and relatedness. The worship of village or guardian deities in Singapore has shown how religious practices of Tamil Hindus are also related to ancestral histories and lineages (Sinha 2005), but how do they impact women (who often 'marry-out') in the patrilineal milieu of diaspora Tamils? Additionally, how are religious practices mobilized to negotiate belonging within domains of marriage and kinship? This paper unravels these entanglements by attending to women's embodied experiences of devotion, black magic, and prophetic utterances. The paper thus unties the conflation of the urban with 'public', and illuminates the relations between intimate life and urban religiosity. It also explores the ways that Singaporean Tamil lives are historically inflected by religious place-making efforts in Malaysia, through ongoing connections between the two post-colonial nations, away from the 'homeland' in India.

Ranjana Raghunathan has recently completed her PhD from the National University of Singapore, based on an anthropological research about kinship and belonging among Singaporean Tamil women. In her doctoral thesis, by foregrounding undocumented aspects of their lived experiences and inter-generational histories, she offers a gendered interrogation of belonging. She is currently working on publication from her research, and exploring the religious dimensions of Tamil kinship. Her recent publications include a book-chapter on the history of Tamil marriages and women in Singapore, and a book-chapter based on her master's research on gender and homelessness in Mumbai. Prior to her academic avatar, Ranjana was engaged with NGOs for more than a decade, and has worked on issues of gender inequality, migrant workers' rights in Singapore, and homelessness in Mumbai. She has served as Vice-President at AWARE, a leading feminist organization of Singapore, and has managed research projects at NGOs and think-tanks.

Negotiating Urban Inclusion through the Moral-Religious Body

Sajida ALLY

Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, UK

s.ally@sussex.ac.uk

While gender and religion underlie social hierarchies in Kuwait, Sri Lankan migrants exist near the bottom of these, in part, because they lack the *wasta* or Arab normative social ties required to negotiate the city. This is especially so for women living outside of normative kin arrangements and the unauthorized, although all Sri Lankans seek to assert inclusion in cities in which illicit economies thrive. Consciously or unconsciously, migrant women end up regulating physical appearances and bodily behaviour to blend with prevalent moral values and Gulf Islamic norms and create the *wasta* required to find lucrative work. While Asian women have been found to come closer to the religion of their hosts or adjust pre-existing practices to fit dominant forms in diasporic spaces, less is known about how religion overlaps varied ethical practices and contests other forms of identification. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Kuwait and Sri Lanka, this paper examines transmigrants' deployment of the body through everyday moral and religious performativity as part of efforts to secure better lives as racialized and non-citizen women. I argue that Sri Lankan abilities to develop ties of trust and pursue aspirations are influenced by vernacular ways of comporting the body and engendering morality – including the concept of *nathaimurai*, 'the manner of walking' – acquired in Sri Lankan rural areas. These are adjusted to Islamic orthodoxies to manoeuvre new urban inequalities in Kuwait, and they underline how religion helps implicitly to sustain, re-shape or transgress gendered normative ideals.

Sajida Ally is a social and medical anthropologist who researches the moral and political anthropology of migration, health and wellness, particularly in the context of South Asian transnational migration to the Arabian Peninsula. She is a Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sussex, where she is the PI of a project on Sri Lankan migrants' health and healthcare entitlement in Kuwait – funded by Columbia University and NYU-Abu Dhabi. Formerly, from 2017 to 2019, Sajida was a Lecturer in Global Public Health at Queen Mary University of London, where she led the development and implementation of an MSc in Migration, Culture and Global Health. Her academic training has been in Social Anthropology (PhD, Sussex), Social Policy and Development (MSc, LSE), and History and Arab Studies (BA, Georgetown). Sajida has also worked extensively in the NGO sector in migration policy advocacy in Hong Kong, Geneva and across Asia.

ABOUT THE ORGANISER, CHAIRPERSONS & DISCUSSANTS

Carola E. Lorea is Research Fellow in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster of the Asia Research Institute in National University of Singapore. She is interested in oral traditions and popular religions in South Asia, particularly eastern India, Bangladesh and the Andaman Islands. Her research lies at the intersection between oral literature and the anthropology of religion, with a particular focus on sound cultures, folklore and heritage in relation to esoteric religious movements and the ethnography of Tantric traditions. Her monograph *Folklore, Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman: A Journey between Performance and the Politics of Cultural Representation* (Brill, 2016) is the result of a four-year travel-along ethnography with Baul performers in West Bengal. She received research fellowships from IIAS, Gonda Foundation (Leiden) and SAI (Heidelberg) to study travelling archives of songs in the borderlands of India and Bangladesh. She authored several articles on folklore and sacred songs, published the translated works of Bengali poets and novelists, such as Jibanananda Das and Nabarun Bhattacharya, and has been socially engaged as an interpreter for Bangladeshi refugees for several years. Her current book project is a study on soundscapes of religion and displacement focusing on a numerous, yet understudied community of low-caste religious practitioners called Matua, and their flows of preachers, performers, religious items and ideas across the Bay of Bengal.

E | aricar@nus.edu.sg

Chand Somaiah is Research Fellow in the Asian Migration cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She received her PhD in Sociology from Macquarie University. Her research interests include gendered experiences of migration and carework. Since 2017 she has been involved in the Child Health and Migrant Parents in Southeast Asia (CHAMPSEA) Wave 2 project which studies the impacts of parental absence on children from sending communities of international labour. She is currently editing a book manuscript based on her doctoral dissertation on social reconstructions of im/migrant mothering among Kodavathee transnationals living in the Asia-Pacific. Her published works on religion have appeared in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, in a chapter contribution to an edited Routledge book *Singapore: Negotiating State and Society, 1965-2015*, as a reference entry in *Encyclopaedia of Indian Religions; Hinduism and Tribal Religions*, and more recently in a photo-essay titled "Sites of Worship during the Pandemic – A Pedestrian Photo-essay from the Heartlands" available on the *CoranAsur* website (<https://ari.nus.edu.sg/20331-34/>).

E | aribcs@nus.edu.sg

Emily Hertzman is a sociocultural anthropologist whose research focuses on mobilities, identities, religious practices, and politics. She received her PhD in Anthropology from the University of Toronto (2016) and her MA (2006) and BA (2001) from the University of British Columbia. Her theoretical and empirical research is centered around understanding how peoples' concepts of home and belonging are transformed under broader shifting social conditions, including mobility, democratization, transnationalism, economic restructuring, and liberalization, as well as religious encounters and personal identity construction processes. As a research fellow in the Religion and Globalization Cluster in Asia Research Institute, she will commence a new research project about Chinese Folk Religion practices and temple networks in West Kalimantan. This project will focus on the intersection of inter-ethnic relations and politics as they play out in the space of Chinese spirit-medium practice.

E | emily.hertzman@gmail.com

Erica M. Larson is an incoming Postdoctoral Fellow in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster at the Asia Research Institute. She holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Boston University (USA). Her research interests include education, religion, ethics, and politics in Indonesia and Southeast Asia more broadly. She has examined how education becomes an arena of deliberation about the ethics and politics of plural coexistence through ethnographic research in North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Her current research engages Indonesian youth active in religious organizations and their attitudes and beliefs about corruption as a lens on normative state-society relations and notions of ethics, piety, and responsibility.

E | ariv4351@nus.edu.sg

Michelle H. S. Ho is Assistant Professor of Feminist and Queer Cultural Studies in the Department of Communications and New Media (CNM) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Her research broadly focuses on issues of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, affect and emotion, and media and popular cultures in contemporary East Asia. She has held visiting positions at NUS, MIT, and the University of Tokyo and holds a PhD in cultural studies and Advanced Graduate Certificate in women's and gender studies from Stony Brook University (SUNY). She is currently at work on a monograph on trans/gender, markets, and economy through an ethnographic study of *josō* (male-to-female crossdressing) and *dansō* (female-to-male crossdressing) cafe-and-bars in contemporary Tokyo, Japan. Recent and forthcoming publications from this project are in *Asian Anthropology* and *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. More information can be found at: michellehsho.com.

E | michelle.ho@nus.edu.sg

Natalie Lang is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Religion and Globalisation Cluster and the Asian Urbanisms Cluster at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore (NUS). She is also affiliated to the Centre d'études et de recherches sur l'Inde, l'Asie du Sud et sa diaspora Université du Québec à Montréal (CERIAS-UQAM). Her doctoral thesis in anthropology received the Frobenius Research Award, and her book *Religion and Pride: Hindus in Search of Recognition in La Réunion* is forthcoming with Berghahn Books. After her doctoral studies at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS), University of Göttingen, Natalie Lang was a junior fellow at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt. She holds an MA in Migration and Diaspora Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and a BA in South Asian Studies from the University of Heidelberg. Natalie Lang is the co-editor of the research blog *CoronAsur: Religion and Covid-19*, and member of the editorial board at the peer-reviewed journal *Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Südasienforschung* (Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on South Asia).

E | arinklgk@nus.edu.sg

Neena Mahadev is Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the Social Sciences Division of Yale-NUS College, and Research Associate in the Religion and Globalization Cluster of Asia Research Institute. Her specialization is in the anthropology of religion (Theravāda Buddhism, and Pentecostalism and Catholicism), with focus on religious and media, pluralism, nationalism, and inter-religious conflict in Sri Lanka. She has carried out ethnographic research among religious communities within Singapore. She received her PhD in Anthropology from Johns Hopkins University, and has held fellowships at the Max Planck Institute and the University of Göttingen. Dr Mahadev has published her research in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Current Anthropology*, *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *Religion and Society*. She received research grants from the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the William J. Fulbright Foundation. She is finalizing her book manuscript, *Of Karma and Grace: Mediating Religious Difference in Millennial Sri Lanka*. She serves on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Global Buddhism*.

E | neena.mahadev@yale-nus.edu.sg

Vineeta Sinha is Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology at National University of Singapore. Her research interests include Hindu religiosity in the diaspora, intersections of religion, commodification and consumption processes, interface of religion and materiality, religion-state encounters in colonial and post-colonial moments, formation of concepts and categories in the social sciences, Eurocentric and Androcentric critique of classical sociological theory, pedagogy and innovating alternative teaching practices. Besides numerous publications, she is also Associate Editor of *The Sociological Quarterly*, Editorial Board Member of *American Ethnologist* and Co-Editor of the Routledge *International Library of Sociology*.

E | sothead@nus.edu.sg

Yang Yang is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She received her PhD in Human Geography from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research focuses on transnational religious networks and the politics of ethno-religious identity in northwestern China. Her dissertation thus adopts an ethnographic approach to analyzing the impacts of Hui Muslims' grass-roots connections to non-Chinese Muslim communities in Southeast Asia and the Middle East in the Hui's everyday lives in Xi'an, China. Her current research examines how the Hui diaspora in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia contributes to grass-roots connections between China and Malaysia, and how Malaysia becomes Hui's new Muslim role model through serving as their preferred destination for halal tourism and their style references for Muslim fashion. Notably, this project analyses how ethno-religious identities and mobility intersect in the contexts of migration and the recentering of Islamic teachings in both cultural and political contexts on a global scale.

E | ariyang@nus.edu.sg

Secretariat

Ms Minghua TAY

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

E | minghua.tay@nus.edu.sg