Greetings from the Centre!

Welcome to the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia, at the University of Groningen! Planned and initiated by Peter Berger and myself, the Centre coordinates research projects on important themes within the overall subject of ‘Religion and Culture in Asia’. The scholars who are members of these research teams adopt difference disciplinary approaches to address the issues under investigation, and thus contribute to the production of cutting-edged and interdisciplinary works.

The first inaugural issue of our CSRCA Newsletter is a report of what has happened in the Centre since its launch in November 2013. In these almost six months we have organized six research clusters, held four talks within the lecture series of the Centre (i.e., the Colloquium on Asian Religions) scheduled conference panels and workshops abroad, and planned joint publications that will be available in print in 2015 and 2016. Another part of the newsletter is dedicated to the research that some of our Associate Fellows have completed in 2013-2014.

The focus on religion and culture in Asia is also reflected in BA and MA courses that are taught in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies and the Faculty of Philosophy, and in the studies that research students are conducting here at the University of Groningen. This year we will also have a Summer School on religion and culture in contemporary India, and in September a 3-year full-funded PhD position in the field of religion in China.

Stefania Travagnin
RESEARCH CLUSTERS - HIGHLIGHTS

HISTORY AND THEORY OF THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF INDIA

CONVENOR: DR. PETER BERGER

The selection of themes for research is no “coincidence” as Peter indicated in his introduction of the Adivasi cluster, but is related to historical and academic circumstances. As such one’s own research is embedded in a larger context of the history of (social) science in a particular field. To investigate this complex field — here the history of the anthropology of India — is the focus of another research cluster. Again, Peter’s interest in the history and theory of the discipline grew over years and has various sources. One was ethnographic. Working on Adivasi cultures of Central India Peter was asked to join the Fürer-Haimendorf Digitization Project at SOAS where he researched some 4000 of Fürer-Haimendorf’s photographs (a “labour of love, stress on labour”, as one of his colleagues commented). In doing so he also became increasingly interested in the life and work of Fürer-Haimendorf himself and his generation of anthropologists. This interest also is related to the panel Peter is convening together with Edward Simpson (“What to do with ‘old’ anthropology?”) at the EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists) conference this year in Tallinn, with several Fellows of the Centre participating. Another source was the general interest in the development of the anthropology of India, which led to a fruitful long-term collaboration with Frank Heidemann and other colleagues who contributed to the book The modern anthropology of India.

We hope that the Fellows of the individual clusters make constructive use of the networks of scholars, extend them and, most significantly, keep them active and come up with ideas for research cooperation of all kinds.

CURRENT FELLOWS:

Christopher Gregory (Australian National University, AUSTRALIA)
Frank Heidemann (University of Munich, GERMANY)
Erik de Maaker (Leiden University, NETHERLANDS)
Robert Parkin (University of Oxford, UK)
Georg Pfeffer (Free University of Berlin, GERMANY)
Anastasia Piliavsky (University of Cambridge, UK)
Harald Tambs-Lyche (Université de Picardie, FRANCE)
Almost 20 years have passed since Peter’s first ethnographic research on the highland “tribal” cultures of Central India in Odisha in 1996. Peter was still a student of anthropology in Berlin at that time. As such, it was quite natural that this would be one of the research clusters when the new Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia was established. Why has the study of Indian “tribal” societies (or Adivasi) fascinated him so much? One important answer to this question concerns the tension between cultural unity and difference. When you move up into the hills of the Eastern Ghats you feel that you are entering a cultural setting different from the plains, in terms of gender, food, authority structures, rituals, among other things. Yet, at the same time everything is still recognizably “Indian.” To spell out the implications of this observation — historically, comparatively, etc. — remains an ongoing motivation and challenge. His comparison of Hindu and tribal death rituals (forthcoming with Berghahn) is connected to this basic question. This picture is further complicated when one takes the cultural similarities with mainland Southeast Asian highland societies into account.

There are many other reasons why the study of Adivasi cultures in India is a crucial academic endeavour. They make up nearly ten percent of the Indian population, and Indian politics (the ongoing elections will prove the case once more) had — and still has — to deal with the complex and delicate questions of “development”, “uplift” and “protective discrimination” with regard to these communities. At the same time Adivasi groups have been agents in the political arenas of the country for a long time as claims to ethnicity, land, indigeneity and the creation of “tribal states” within India show. Again, the picture is complex as different communities participate in these political processes to very different degrees. This, in turn, is related to their diverse historical experiences. For example, the five million Santal (see the research project of Lea Schulte-Droesch and the work of Marine Carrin, both Fellows) have had intensive experiences with colonial and postcolonial power formations, while this may not be said for about all the fifteen thousand Guto Gadaba that Peter’s ethnographic research is mostly focussing on. Finally, studying the ethnography of Adivasi cultures tells you a lot about the history of the anthropology of India. While studying “tribes” was canonical before Independence, it grew completely out of fashion in mainstream, non-Indian anthropology after 1947. Only during the last ten years or so there seems to be a renewed interest discernible. A number of the themes mentioned here we are going to deal with in the summer school “Transformations of Religion and Culture in Contemporary India” in Groningen, in which several Fellows of the Centre participate as teachers.
TEXTUAL VS. EXTRA-TEXTUAL: DYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN EAST ASIAN BUDDHISM

CONVENOR: DR. STEFANIA TRAVAGNIN

This research project originated from a discussion between Stefania Travagnin and Mark Dennis on the function of texts and the concept of textuality within the context of religion at the workshop Texts and Otherness: Politics, Empire, and Post-Secularism in Religious Studies (May 2009, Baylor University).

The first step in the realization of a research on textuality within the specific area of East Asian Buddhism was the panel ‘TEXTUAL “FUNCTION” IN EAST ASIAN BUDDHISM: DISLOCATION AND RELOCATION OF SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITIES’, which was presented at the AAS (Association of Asian Studies) annual meeting in Honolulu, late March 2011. The panel saw the participation of four of the current members of this research cluster (Mark Dennis, Benedetta Lomi, Neil Schmid and Stefania Travagnin), and covered pre-modern and modern Japan, pre-modern and modern China, and modern Korea. The objective of the panel was to look at ‘texts’ beyond their written form and their doctrinal contents, reconsider the authority of the written text while in interaction with visual culture and performative practices, and challenge current theories and methods in the study of textuality in Buddhism.

That panel forms the core of this cluster. The starting point of our research was the realization that the field of Buddhist studies in the West began as a textual study, and the translation and exegesis of texts has remained a predominant approach in the field. This emphasis on written works has provoked debates over whether the textual bias has devalued the role that the ‘extra-textual’, i.e. forms of visual culture and performative practices, play in the scholarly interpretation of Buddhist traditions. The cluster addresses different forms of extra-textual, different engagement between textual and extra-textual, different balance of efficacy between textual and extra-textual, different scenario of opposition between textual and extra-textual.

Some of the members of this cluster is finalizing an edited volume on the topic, which will be the first output of the team and the beginning of other studies that will include Tibetan Buddhism and the process of inter-religious borrowing.

CURRENT FELLOWS:

Wendi Adamek (University of Calgary, CANADA)
Mark Dennis (Texas Christian University, USA)
Charlotte Eubanks (Pennsylvania State University, USA)
Tullio Lobetti (SOAS University of London, and Institute of Ismaili Studies, UK)
Benedetta Lomi (SOAS University of London, UK)
Fabio Rambelli (University of California Santa Barbara, USA)
Neil Schmid (Royal Asiatic Society China, CHINA)
John Shultz (Kansai Gaidai University, JAPAN)
RELIGION AND THE MEDIA IN EAST ASIA

CONVENORS:
DR. ERICA BAFFELLI
DR. STEFANIA TRAVAGNIN

Taking East Asia as a case study, this project explores forms and levels of interaction between religions, believers, expressions of religiosity on one hand and social media on the other. This interdisciplinary study addresses issues such as the historical and ideological roots of the media translation and projection of religions in East Asia, the impact that this has had on the image and role of religion in the life of individuals and in the transformation of society, the state intervention (through both censorship and propaganda), the reflection of mediated religions on a new form of mediated religious ethics, the new ways for religious institutions and communities to promote themselves through the media, the relations between online and offline communities, the role of the media in the relations between local and diaspora communities.

CURRENT FELLOWS:
Scott Dalby (University of Amsterdam, NETHERLANDS)
Benjamin Dormann (Nanzan Institute, JAPAN)
Paul Farrelly (Australian National University, AUSTRALIA)
Wai-Yip Ho (Hong Kong Institute of Education, CHINA)
Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (Grinnell College, USA)
Weishan Huang (University of Göttingen, GERMANY)
André Laliberté (University of Ottawa, CANADA)
Samuel Lengen (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, GERMANY)
Manya Koetsé (Leiden University, NETHERLANDS)
Scott Pacey (University of Manchester, UK)
Giovanna Puppin (Middlesex University, UK)
Ian Reader (Lancaster University, UK)
John Shultz (Kansai Gaidai University, JAPAN)
Yam Chi-keung (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, CHINA)

FELLOWS’ SELECTED PUBLICATIONS AND CONFERENCES ON THE TOPIC


Panel at the ISMRC (International Society for Media, Religion and Culture) Conference in Canterbury, 4-6 August 2014: “RELIGION AND THE MEDIA IN CHINA”

The last decade has seen a rapid increase in the number of publications addressing various aspects of religion in modern China. This flood of new research reflects the fact that the subject of ‘religion in modern China’ has become a new and challenging field of study. To date, monographs and edited volumes have focused on specific historical events, prominent individuals and local religiosities, as well as the rituals and material cultures of modern Chinese religious traditions. Within this emerging field of study, however, there is an ongoing and largely unresolved, debate regarding what methods and theories are appropriate to be employed in this new field.

This research cluster will address these conceptual and methodological issues in a systematic and comprehensive manner. The project is divided into two parts. The first includes (1) a discussion of the benefits and limitations of applying conventional theories and disciplinary methods to the study of modern Chinese religion, and (2) the delineation of new, and potentially more effective, research methodologies for working in this field. The second part is dedicated to the definition of critical concepts in the study of religions – such as ‘ritual’, ‘modernity’, ‘authority’ and ‘scripture’, as they apply to the study of religion in modern China. In this context, these topics take on new lives, and thus definitions drawn from Western contexts often lack accuracy when applied to the field.

This research cluster aims to create the basis for constructive dialogue and cooperation among Western and non-Western scholars, directed towards the theorization of effective conceptual frameworks and methods for the study of religion in modern China.

**Current Fellows:**

Paul Farrelly (Australian National University, AUSTRALIA)

Erik Hammerstrom (Pacific Lutheran University, USA)

Wai-Yip Ho (Hong Kong Institute of Education, CHINA)

Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (Grinnell College, USA)

Weishan Huang (University of Göttingen, GERMANY)

Andrè Lalibertè (University of Ottawa, CANADA)

Brian J. Nichols (Mount Royal University, CANADA)

Justin Ritzinger (University of Miami, USA)

Gregory Adam Scott (Edinburgh University, UK)

Yang Der-Ruey (Nanjing University, CHINA)
CONTINUITY AND CONTESTATION IN DEFINING TIBETAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS, HISTORIES AND COMMUNITIES

CONVENOR: DR. AMY HOLMES-TAGCHUNGDARPA

This Cluster will explore the diversity of religious community in areas of the world that practice forms of Buddhism that are conceived of as having Tibetan origins, thereby disrupting these definitions and acknowledging local, regional, and transnational histories and practices beyond contemporary nation state boundaries of China, Mongolia, Russia, India, Bhutan, and Nepal, and beyond even conceptions of a singular Buddhism.

In doing so, research in the Cluster will suggest new methodological considerations for the exploration and acknowledgement of the myriad forms of identity and belonging among cultural traditions of the Tibetan plateau, the steppes of Mongolia, and the mountains of the Himalayas, challenging binary ideas of national identity, local/global, centre/periphery, colonizer/colonized, and nangpa (insider, or Buddhist)/chipa (outsider, or non-Buddhist).

In the past few decades there has been a proliferation of studies of Tibetan Buddhism as a lived tradition, as opposed to a textual object. However, the representation and definition of religious communities and practices throughout areas that are considered to be part of the Tibetan cultural world, including parts of East, Inner and South Asia, as being representative of a uniform 'Tibetan' Buddhism is problematic.
Colloquium on Asian Religions

The Colloquium on Asian Religions represents the regular seminar of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia, and aims to present new findings in the study of religion and culture in areas like South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. It is a forum for discussing the conceptualization of religion in Asia as well as aspects of Asian religions from the perspectives of anthropology, history, sociology, political science and other disciplines. We plan to have six talks per academic year, and to address various aspects of the religious traditions in Asia from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Here below are the abstracts of the four talks that the Colloquium is hosting from its inauguration in November 2013 until the summer 2014.

Ms. Berit Fuhrman (Münster University, GERMANY)
18 Nov 2013, 16-30-18.00, Oude Boteringestraat 38, room 253

Cosmological continuities, ritual changes and the process of Christian conversion in a tribal society of Meghalaya, Northeast India

Most of the tribal minorities in the mountainous parts of Northeast India are Christians today. The Karow in Meghalaya got confronted with Christianity sixty years ago. Many people converted in the last decades but to this day the Karow do not form a complete Christian society.

The people rather express that they live with ‘two religions’ - their ‘old’ Karow religion and the ‘new’ Christian religion. In my talk I will take up this local expression and discuss the interplay of two socio-religious systems. Looking at the process of conversion, I will first describe in which way Christianity is attractive for the people. I will then point to some of the social and ritual transformations that are caused by the ongoing conversions. In the situation where a local system of socio-religious ideas and practices meets with the Christian system the question is not only which changes the latter causes but also which continuities we can observe. Although many Karow rituals do change or cease due to Christian interventions we also find a number of continuities at the level of socio-cosmological ideas. I will explain some of these continuities and show that Christianity among the Karow cannot be viewed as an outside force that simply alters the given conditions. As in many other regional contexts, the ‘new’ religion is instead actively indigenised which not only leads to the occurrence of a specific local Christianity but also to the constant remodelling of the so-called ‘old’ Karow religion.
Dr. Stefania Travagnin (University of Groningen, the Netherlands)
24 March 2014, 16.00-17.30, Oude Boteringestraat 38, room 253

Buddhist cyber-activities and state-led nationalism:
Interpreting contexts and modalities of online Buddhist ritual practice

Since the Chinese Communist Party altered its religion policies in the 1980s, bottom-up initiatives have renovated old Buddhist temples, reinstated traditional community rituals, and reaffirmed the social role of Buddhist communities. At the same time, the regime aims to channel Buddhism’s resuscitation through ideology of state-led nationalism, characterized by the patriotic slogan ‘love one’s country and love one’s religion’ (aiguo aijiao 爱国爱教). But shaping popular activism has become increasingly challenging in the twenty-first century, as Buddhist authorities and organizations have expanded their media presence. One example is the Online Buddha Hall (zaixian fotang 在线佛堂) of Nanputuo Monastery. In this Buddhist cyberspace, believers perform ritual practices such as coping sutras, reciting liturgies, lighting candles and making offerings. To what extent do online Buddhist practices overturn the traditional features of Chinese Buddhist rituals? And how did it serve the aims of the CCP?

Dr. Scott Pacey (University of Manchester, UK)
28 April 2014, 16.00-17.30, Oude Boteringestraat 38, room 253

Pointing at the Moon Yinshun, Shengyan and Buddhist-Christian Rivalry in 1960s Taiwan

This paper will consider the responses of two Buddhist monks Yinshun 印顺 (1906-2005) and Shengyan 聖嚴 (1930-2009), to the Christian criticism that Buddhism was superstitious and unmodern. In particular, it will show that in debates with Christians on key concepts such as God and nirvana, Yinshun and Shengyan used Western academic scholarship on the history of religions in an effort to counter this claim. By focusing on essays and books published during the period, the paper will show that their responses embodied modernist trends within Chinese Buddhism that had been on-going since the republican era in mainland China (1911-1949). Finally, the paper will consider the lasting effects of Buddhist-Christian engagement during the 1960s in light of subsequent religious developments in Taiwan.

Dr. Uwe Skoda (Aarhus University, Denmark)
26 May 2014, 16.00-17.30, Oude Boteringestraat 38, room 253

Palace and Market: Transformations of Dashehra and Durga Puja in a former princely state in Odisha (India)

This presentation looks at two by and large simultaneously performed rituals in the former princely state of Bonai - nowadays a sub-district in northwestern Odisha. It compares rituals around goddess Durga on two levels: a) historically (i.e. late 1930s versus present day practices), and b) spatially (i.e. fort-based rituals versus market-based rituals). An album of photographs commissioned by the last ruling chief and subsequent interviews form the basis of an analysis of pre-merger rituals, while observations in the palace as well as of the relatively newly introduced Durga Puja rituals performed in the market reveal a substantial ritual dynamic. In contrast to the 1930s fort-based rituals have either been abolished or considerably reduced, yet the present Raja continues to sponsor a number of rituals for various deities and maintains links to certain Adivasi communities. However, in the wake of a recent industrialisation in Odisha the initially small Durga Puja, introduced in Bonai in 1948 by an “outsider”, increasingly overshadows fort rituals and - being generously funded by industrialists - attracts larger crowds. Thus, I argue that rituals around goddess Durga in all her manifestations encountered in Bonai may be considered a social prism to understand a local socio-cultural configuration and its transformations.
Staff Research and Publications

Together with his colleague from Munich, Frank Heidemann, Peter Berger has been editing a volume that should originally have been titled The Many Indias but which was ultimately published as The Modern Anthropology of India: Ethnography, Themes and Theory (Routledge 2013). They have worked on this project for some years, their initial idea being to provide a critical assessment of the ethnographic work done in India from the perspective of the individual states of the Indian Union. Peter and Frank considered this to be a useful and hitherto neglected perspective for several reasons. Firstly, research practice is usually strongly located in a particular region and newcomers to a region would also have a critical and quick access to the ethnographic work in that particular corner of India; secondly, academic discussions and thematic preferences are quite different in the different regions of India and they wanted to stress this diversity, not subordinating it to a pan-Indian perspective; finally, they wanted to investigate the relationships between part and whole. For example, how concepts originating from a particular ethnographic background gain a pan-Indian currency but are then put to work in different ways in different regions.

Together with Edward Simpson (SOAS, University of London), Peter Berger is organizing the panel What to do with ‘old’ anthropology? Knowledge, Zeitgeist and time at the conference of the European Association of Social Anthropology (EASA), which will be held in Tallinn (Estonia), on 31 July -3 August 2014. Even though this panel is not dealing with India exclusively, for many of you interested in the history of the anthropology of India this could be a relevant panel.

Nine papers deal with anthropological ancestors that worked in India (Bailey, Dumont, Führer-Haimendorf, Mayer, Pocock) and investigate how we engage with them in our work today.

Stefania Travagnin has participated in the exploratory session of the Seminar titled Holmes Welch and the Study of Buddhism in Twentieth-Century China at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), 22-27 November 2013. The Seminar has been allocated one slot in the next five years (2014-2018) of the AAR annual meeting, and will end in the publication of an edited volume on the subject. Our Associate Fellows Erik Hammerstrom and Gregory Adam Scott are the chairs of this Seminar.
At the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies (AAS), held in Philadelphia on 27-30 March 2014, Stefania Travagnin presented her paper Buddhist cyber-activities and state-led nationalism: Interpreting contexts and modalities of online Buddhist ritual practice within the panel Chinese Religions Online: The Politics of Buddhism, Protestant Christianity and Islam in Cyberspace. Professor Yang Guobin served as discussant.

Stefania Travagnin and Fabio Rambelli are the convenors of the panel The Matrix of Buddhist Capitalism in East Asia: Religious Agency, Social Dynamics and Intellectual Practice, which will be presented at the conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), in Groningen on 11-15 May 2015. The panel includes papers by Stefania Travagnin (titled Chinese (Buddhist) interpretations of Capitalism: patterns of resistance and modalities of conversion), Fabio Rambelli, Kiri Paramore and Gregory Adam Scott. At the EASR Conference Stefania will also present her research Theorizing Religious Diversity in China within the inter-Faculty and interdisciplinary panel Sustanability in Interdisciplinary Perspective: Diversity, Inclusion and Pluralism.

Stefania Travagnin has been invited to present her research on pagodas in the making of identity and history in modern Buddhism at the East Asian Buddhist Symposium Communities of Memory: Reimagining and Reinventing the Past in East Asian Buddhism, which is organized by the University of Hamburg and will be held on 22-24 May 2014. Stefania’s paper is titled Imaging History: Discursive Identity, Cross-Strait Lineage Construction and a Taiwanese Pagoda.

On 4-7 June 2014, Stefania Travagnin will participate in the meeting Critical Analysis of Religious Diversity: Theory and Method Network, organized by the University of Southern Denmark, where she will present a research titled A harmonious plurality of religious expressions: Theorising official normative paradigms in Chinese education practices.

Stefania Travagnin has been invited to the workshop on Taiwan studies titled Taiwanizing the World? Positioning Taiwan: Participation - Integration - Impacts. Stefania will contribute to the theme with her research on Taiwanese Buddhism and the paper Experiences of Inclusiveness for Taiwanese Buddhism – Blurring Identities or Bridging Agencies? The workshop will be held in Erlangen (Germany) on 11-13 July 2014.

On 4-6 August 2014, Stefania Travagnin will present Dharma in Motion Pictures: Hermeneutics of Animation in Contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism within the panel Religion and the Media in China at the Conference of the International Society for Media, Religion and Culture (ISMRC). The other presenters include the Associate Fellows Giovanna Puppin, Samuel Lengen and Yam Chi-keung. Stefania is also the organizer of the panel and the editor of a volume on the subject that is currently in preparation.

Finally, Stefania Travagnin’s article ‘Yinshun’s Recovery of Shizhu Piposha Lun 十住毗婆沙論: a Madhyamaka-based Pure Land Practice in Twentieth-century Taiwan’ has been published in Contemporary Buddhism, 14.2, pp.320-343, in November 2013.
REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE:
“MANIFESTATIONS OF HISTORY IN THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS, SOUTHEAST INDIA”
[21-23 JUNE 2013, MUNICH]

The conference “Manifestations of History in the Andaman Islands” was held in Munich from June 21 to 23, 2013. The point of departure were concepts of history and the discourse about the past in an interdisciplinary context. History is conceptualized as a process in the making, and a contested field of interpretation. The Andaman Islands are suited to demonstrate such manifestations of material and discursive legacies from the centre into the margins. Its cosmopolitan island society, called Mini-India, depicts the social complexity and ethnic diversity of the subcontinent with concise clarity. At the same time, the variety of castes, classes, communities, religions, and languages indicates the many entanglements between the British Empire, the Indian nation-state, and destinations of Indian overseas migration. The agenda of this conference arose from the significant, but yet underestimated, place of the Andaman Islands within the historiography of the Indian Ocean.

The Consul General of India in Munich, Mr. Sevana Naik, and participants from seven countries representing the disciplines of Geography, History, Sociology, Human Ecology, Literature, Political Science, Archaeology, Comparative Religion and Social and Cultural Anthropology attended the conference.

The keynote speaker, Vishvajit Pandya, called this event the first occasion on which almost all researchers from the social and cultural faculties specialized on this region gathered in one place. Totally 23 papers were presented on colonisation, migration, religious and social concepts and ideas about time and space. Several speakers questioned the time-dominated and linear concept of history, which was established in the Euro-American context, and its capacity to explain the concepts of the past in the Andamans. The organizers, Frank Heidemann and Philipp Zehmisch, are grateful to the German Research Foundation for financial support.

For more information see:
http://www.en.ethnologie.uni-muenchen.de/andaman-research/index.html

FRANK HEIDEMANN (UNIVERSITY OF MUNICH)
IS CIVIL SOCIETY A DEMOCRATIC FORCE?

Sarbeswar Sahoo
Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi

What is the relationship between civil society and democracy? In his classic study *Democracy in America* Alexis de Tocqueville presented civil society as the indispensable counterpart to a stable and vital democracy. In late 1980s, during the solidarity movement in Poland and the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia, civil society played a major role in the democratic transition of countries in Eastern Europe and ever since, it has come to be considered as an indispensable instrument for the survival and sustenance of democracy. A robust civil society, it was believed, will encourage citizen’s participation, empower the marginalised, and make the state responsive and accountable.

Given this, the governments of the industrialized West and various international donor agencies actively promoted the ‘building’ of civil society in the Third World by supporting NGOs and community-based organizations. Data suggest that by the end of the 1990s, the US was spending more than US$700 million a year to implement democracy programs in some hundred countries of the World.

This shows that the democracy promotion project assumed civil society: (1) as a democratic force, (2) as a homogeneous entity, and (3) as ‘doing good’ unencumbered and untainted by the politics of government or the greed of the market’. However, in this paper, I would argue that civil society is neither inherently good nor inherently bad; it is a sphere that includes both civil and uncivil actors ranging from benevolent NGOs to violent mafia groups. Because of this varied nature of actors, civil society may have different implications for democracy; it may even sometimes undermine democracy. By examining the role of Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKP), I will demonstrate how civil society.

The RVKP is a non-governmental tribal welfare organization; it is affiliated to the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS – National Volunteer Corps). The RSS and the RVKP believe that India, that is Hindustan, is the land of Hindus. For them, the Muslims and the Christians are foreign aggressors who have forcibly converted Hindus into non-Hindu religions. The RVKP thus sees these two communities as ‘the intimate enemy’ and thus seeks retribution for the wrongs they have done to Hindus.

In order to stop the Muslim dominance and the Christian conversion in the tribal areas, the RVKP was established in south Rajasthan in 1978. It has since then been working on education, health, economic development and other welfare activities. Data suggest that the RVKP currently runs 865 developmental projects, 248 village committees, 7 urban women committees and 116 rural women committees. Of the development projects, it has 120 pre-primary one-teacher schools, 13 tribal students’ hostels, 85 child care centres, 60 basic health attendants, 128 sports centres, 32 agriculture development centres, etc.

Economic development is not the primary objective of the RVKP; instead, it has utilised these welfare activities as a medium to politically socialise the tribals into Hindutva ideology. These projects have also helped the RVKP to mobilise electoral support for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP – Indian People’s Party), RVKP celebrating the birth centenary of Sri Guruji
which has in return, after coming to power, provided financial, legal and moral support to the RVKP. Because of the state support, the RVKP has often used violence against the Muslims who are projected as exploiters and the Christians who are depicted as proselytizers. As a result, violence against religious minorities has increased significantly in Rajasthan during the BJP rule.

This shows that the RVKP has utilized decades of its community-based social work and developmental activities not just to strengthen its politico-ideological support base but also to manufacture distrust towards religious minorities. Instead of promoting democratic and secular values, civil society organisations like the RVKP have contracted the democratic space and created a sense of fear and insecurity among the minority communities. In this regard, they have also received active support from the institutions of state, which shows that the politics of the developmental state was also partly responsible for the rise a non-secular and exclusivist civil society organisation like the RVKP, which threaten the cultural diversity and pluralism of Indian democracy.

Note: This paper is derived from chapter 6 of the author’s book, Civil Society and Democratization in India: Institutions, Ideologies and Interests (London, New York: Routledge, 2013)

This article uses theory developed in the study of NRMs to analyze strategies of legitimation employed by one Wang Xiangliu (1876-1937) as he sought to spread a new form of esoteric Buddhism in 1930s China. It discusses the specific historical and religious context in which Wang was operating in order to identify the particular tensions that existed between the new Heart-of-Mind Method and the dominant culture. This context resulted in the specific issues that Wang focused on in arguing for the legitimacy of this nascent tradition, which included: 1) claims in society that esoteric Buddhism is “superstitious;” 2) changing cultural and political attitudes toward Japan and Tibet, which were the sources of much esoteric teaching in circulation in China during that period; and 3) the religious demand that any esoteric lineage be based upon a legitimate, traditional lineage, which had the potential to undermine apparently *sui generis* traditions like Wang’s.

This article grew out of my primary work on science and early twentieth century Chinese Buddhism. I encountered this school in another context, and in studying its foundation and history I found that some of the things I had read in NRM studies could help me make sense of what I was seeing. Lineages such as the one articulated by Wang are not entirely unusual in China, but I felt it might be beneficial to show the community of NRM scholars that the religious scene in early twentieth-century China has much to offer in terms of data. As noted at the start of the article, I originally presented this before scholars in that field at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in the fall of 2011. The reception I received was favorable, so I went forward and published this. This is a fairly modest piece of scholarship, but it is my hope that those of us who do not already use the insights of NRM scholars in our research on early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism may consider doing so.
IAN READER
(Lancaster University, UK)

NEW BOOK

Ian Reader's most recent book, Pilgrimage in the Marketplace, was published by Routledge in early 2014. Based on extensive fieldwork on pilgrimages in Japan, along with studies and fieldwork visits to sites in France, India, Ireland and elsewhere, it challenges predominant assumptions about pilgrimage as located in the realms of the ‘sacred’ and argues that it should be seen as very much a worldly enterprise based in the marketplace of commerce, marketing, competition and publicity, all of which are crucial to the success or otherwise of pilgrimage sites. Viewing pilgrimage in global contexts, it uses Japan as a primary lens through which to develop new analyses of global pilgrimage dynamics and to challenge the previous Western/Christian hegemony of pilgrimage studies. In so doing it argues that pilgrimage sites operate in a world of competition and promotion, in which various actors (including priests, commercial agencies and pilgrims) operate in conjunction with each other in the construction of the ‘sacred’. It demonstrates how priestly promotions, media representations, the sale of souvenirs and the activities of commercial and civic enterprises are every bit as important to the development and sustenance of pilgrimage as are miracles, asceticism and concepts of the sacred, and shows how pilgrim desires, the activities of merchants and the development of transport systems and related phenomena such as guidebooks and more recently websites, have shaped pilgrimage, democratising the practice and making it increasingly suffused with tourist themes and concepts of cultural heritage.

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AMONG RECENT ARTICLES:

“MURDER ON THE TOKYO SUBWAY: NERVE CENTRES, RELIGION AND VIOLENCE”, SPACE AND POLITY 2013: 17:3, 377-392

The 1995 Tokyo subway attack by the Japanese religious movement Aum Shinrikyō represents one of the most dramatic examples of violence by a religious movement in modern times. Initially urban-based but with a rural communal presence, Aum believed that it had a mission to transform the world and fight in an imminent apocalyptic war between good and evil, and it engaged in numerous conflicts with the secular world it despised. While emphasizing the significance of religious visions in Aum’s activities this article examines the degree to which Aum’s associations with the city of Tokyo also featured as an element in its violence.

(available online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2013.850824)


CONFERENCES & LECTURES:

Ian Reader presented a talk titled ‘Japanese studies of pilgrimage’ at the Conference ITINERARIES, GAPS AND OBSTACLES IN PILGRIMAGE STUDY: RESEARCH TRADITIONS IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT (October 3-5 2013) at Museum of the Mediterranean, Marseille, France. Ian’s talk examines how Japanese scholars have studied pilgrimage methodologically and form various disciplinary perspectives, from folklore studies to economic history to anthropology and how such perspectives have created a self-standing genre of pilgrimage studies that differs from the Anglocentric tradition.

Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader delivered a joint presentation titled Competing for the Spotlight: New Religions and Media Interactions in Japan, at Lancaster University, Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion, on Feb 26 2014. The lecture examines how competition between new religions, and their interactions and conflicts with the mass media, shaped the dynamics of new religions in the 1980s and 1990s.

Ian Reader gave the Keynote Lecture ‘The Problem of “Religion” in Japan after the Tokyo Subway Attack: Dangers, Redefinitions and Wider Implications’, at the NEW RESEARCH IN LANGUAGE-BASED AREA STUDIES Conference, which was held at the University of Manchester, UK, on 13-14 March 2014. The keynote address examines the political, legal and social issues raised in Japan specifically and in liberal democracies in general over the issue of freedom of religion, when religious movements commit criminal acts.

Ian Reader presented ‘Millenialism with and without the Violence: An Examination of Late Twentieth-century Japanese New Religions’, at the NUMATA CONFERENCE IN BUDDHIST STUDIES ON VIOLENCE, NONVIOLENCE, AND JAPANESE RELIGIONS: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE, Honolulu, University of Hawaii East-West Center, March 20-21 2014. Ian’s paper argues that the prevalent pattern in Japanese millennialism among its new religions has been peaceful and that cases of violence (such as Aum) are an exception that share more common with Western millennial groups than with those in Japan.
Yogācāra Buddhism has not hitherto featured as a unifying system of thought, linking disparate intellectuals, in histories of republican-era China. However, far from being peripheral to intellectual activity during the period, Yogācāra influenced some of its seminal political and philosophical projects, and engaged some of its most notable thinkers. Although key texts were no longer in circulation by the Yuan Dynasty, the late nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in Yogācāra as many of these lost texts were procured from Japan. This volume aims to show that as a result of this interest, Yogācāra became established as an important feature on the late Qing and republican-era intellectual landscape.

The volume emerged from a project that was funded by the Australian Research Council, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, and the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek. These funds enabled contributors to meet for a series of workshops at which individual papers were presented at various stages of their completion. As a result of this process, each chapter could be written with the intention of making it speak to the others.

The collection begins with an overview of Yogācāra’s Indian origins. It then moves to consider appropriations of Yogācāra ideas in the late Qing (Tan Sitong and Zhang Taiyan), the role of Japan in the revival, Yogācāra and science in the Republic (Taixu and the Wuchang School), Yogācāra and Confucianism (Liang Shuming and Xiong Shili), efforts to delineate “genuine Buddhism” (Ouyang Jingwu and Lű Cheng), as well as Mou Zongsan, and the decline of Yogācāra as an influence on New Confucian thought. The chapters show how many thinkers responded to common themes, and also shared historical connections.

The volume was edited by John Makeham (Australian National University). Besides me, the project included another scholar associated with the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia: Erik Hammerstrom (at Pacific Lutheran University, who wrote on the Wuchang School). Other contributors included Eyal Aviv (George Washington University), Jason Clower (California State University, Chico), John Jorgensen (Australian National University), Chen-kuo Lin (National Chengchi University), Dan Lusthaus (Harvard University), Thierry Meynard, S.J. (Sun Yat-Sen University), Viren Murthy (University of Wisconsin-Madison), and John Powers (Australian National University).

My own two chapters deal with Tan Sitong (1865-1898) and Taixu (1890-1947). Tan was remembered as a martyr by both Nationalists and Communists, having been executed after the Hundred Days’ Reform. Yet the significant role Yogācāra plays in his most famous work, the 1898 book An Exposition of Benevolence, is less recognised. Tan combined science, and aspects of the Christian-inspired New Thought Movement, with ideas from Neo-Confucianism to offer a comprehensive philosophical framework structured within Yogācāra’s cognitive system. Taixu, who was inspired by Tan’s work early in his monastic career, identified similarities between Yogācāra and science in areas such as biology, psychology, social evolution, and physics. However, he also considered Yogācāra able to render scientific explanations complete, and improve on the scientific method itself.
Taixu put forward a Buddhist view of modernity that established him not just as a modernising monastic, but as a republican-era intellectual.

Late Qing and republican-era China did not always see clear boundaries between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ worlds. In this context, Yogācāra Buddhism gave prominent figures the tools to further their own intellectual, social and political projects beyond Buddhism. While it enabled key thinkers to respond to modernity in new ways, and influenced the development of New Confucianism, the Yogācāra revival also helped scholars approach Buddhism with fresh perspectives. It is therefore hoped that the volume will show how, besides Western disciplinary thought, Yogācāra—with its origins in India—was also an important part of China’s engagement with modernity in the first decades of the twentieth century.
NEW BOOK

ASCETIC PRACTICES IN JAPANESE RELIGIONS,
Routledge 2013

Ascetic practices are a common feature of religion in Japan, practiced by different religious traditions. This book looks at these ascetic practices in an inter-sectarian and inter-doctrinal fashion, in order to highlight the underlying themes common to all forms of asceticism. It does so by employing a multidisciplinary methodology, which integrates participant fieldwork – the author himself engaged extensively in ascetic practices – with a hermeneutical interpretation of the body as the primary locus of transmission of the ascetic ‘embodied tradition’. By unlocking this ‘bodily data’, the book unveils the human body as the main tool and text of ascetic practice. This book includes discussion of the many extraordinary rituals practiced by Japanese ascetics.

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Conclusion
Western policymakers, political activists and academics alike see patronage as the chief enemy of open, democratic societies. Patronage, for them, is a corrupting force, a hallmark of failed and failing states, and the obverse of everything good, modern governance ought to be. Healthy democracies must stamp out patronage. South Asian presents a frontal challenge to this consensus. Here the world’s most populous, pluralist and animated democracy is also a hotbed of corruption with persistently startling levels of inequality.

Patronage as Politics in South Asia confronts this paradox with calm erudition: sixteen essays by anthropologists, historians and political scientists show, from a wide range of cultural and historical angles, that in South Asia patronage is no feudal residue or retrograde political pressure, but a political form vital in its own right. It argues that patronage is not foe to South Asia’s burgeoning democratic cultures, but their main driving forces. This landmark volume is essential reading for students of South Asia, political scientists, policymakers and anyone interested in the politics of the Indian subcontinent and the wider world.

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Hinduism in Context

This course is part of our first year BA programme of Religious Studies and as such requires no previous knowledge about Indian religions and cultures. Students will be introduced to basic aspects of Indian society and religion, in terms of social structures (caste, sects, tribes) as well as key-cultural ideas (hierarchy, auspiciousness, power). “In context” here means that the course deals with what has been regarded as typical aspects of “Hinduism” (Brahman ritualism, bhakti, asceticism) in comparison to religious practices and societal structures of Indian highland societies or Adivasis.

Lecturer: Dr. Peter Berger

ECTS: 5.0

Schedule: Semester I (September-December 2013)

Form: lectures and seminar sessions

Women, Religion and Culture in India - Hinduism and Buddhism

What are the doctrinal and textual views on women in Hinduism? And in Buddhism? Who are the Hindu goddesses? And is there any ‘divine feminine’ in Buddhism? What are the social position and the role of women in a Hindu society, in the past and present? And how about Buddhist women? How are women portrayed in Hindu literature and fine arts? And what happened in a Buddhist context? This course addresses these questions by looking at the past and present situation in India and also beyond India, and thus covers Hindu community in the West and Buddhist women in East Asia.

Lecturer: Dr. Stefania Travagnin

ECTS: 5.0

Schedule: Semester II (February-May 2014)

Form: lectures and seminar sessions
The women’s dancing and singing calls the deities. Ritual preparations in the sacred grove at the annual flower festival.

“Who are the Santal today?”, “What do their rituals look like?”, “How will I gain access to their cultural practices and their ideas?”, and “Will this fieldwork really contain blood, sweat and tears, as I had so often heard during my MA studies in Berlin?”. These were the thoughts running through my head as I flew to Ranchi, Jharkhand’s capital to begin my anthropological fieldwork in 2011. Ranchi airport welcomes its visitor with large billboards portraying the state’s rich cultural diversity. Colorfully dressed people, dancing to the beat of large drums catch travelers’ eyes. Little did I know at that point, that these cultural portraits, this performance of identity, were to become a constant topic in my research as it unfolded in the following years.

The initial aim of my research was to study the hunting rituals of the Santal as a “total social fact” in Mauss’ sense, in order to gain access to Santal cosmology. The Santal number more than 6 million and live in the eastern parts of India. They speak an austro-asiatic language, one very different from Hindi, and are culturally distinct from India’s mainstream Hindu population. During my first two months in Ranchi, where I attempted to study Santali at the Institute for Tribal and Regional Languages, my fellow Santal students were in fact keen to emphasize that they were not Hindus, but had their own religion, the “religion of the sacred grove” called sama.

After two months in India I went with one of these students to her native village in East Singhbhum district, a several hour journey from Ranchi, and I was thrown into “Santal culture” from the moment I arrived. Soon after receiving me in his house, her father handed me a brochure describing the goals and activities of the religious organization he was involved in, with the words: “We can teach you many things about Santal culture”. In the following days I attended several village flower festivals, saw goat and chicken sacrifices, possession, night-long dancing and cheerful socializing accompanied by much rice beer consumption. The confidence and eagerness with which many of the Santal I met spoke about their culture, amazed me, especially since I had expected a more difficult entry into the field.

The communication of a certain cultural identity to others is not new among the Santal. In the 1940s a Santal schoolteacher named Ragunath Murmu invented and began spreading Ol Chiki as a script for Santali. Today, Ol Chiki is still widely promoted by several socio-cultural organizations, among them All India Santal Writers Association.
Although I found that only a small and educated minority knows Ol Chiki in villages, it does serve as a strong marker of Santal identity. The script often accompanies other markers of Santal identity, reminding the traveler that the area is in fact one with a strong Santal presence: One finds the writing on walls built around sacred groves and on statues of Santal cultural heroes placed strategically at road intersections and market places. Another Santal organization active in the area where I did my fieldwork is All India sarna dhorom, a movement dedicated to reforming Santal ritual practice. Its members are further involved in demanding state support and protection for what they call “sarna religion” (sarna dhorom).

This public affirmation of Santal identity came up repeatedly during my fieldwork. The quote “We tribal people worship nature” mentioned in the headline of this piece is to be understood in this context. At several different Santal flower festivals, which celebrate the onset of spring in sacred groves once a year, I encountered such statements. One of the apparent strategies of Santal socio-cultural organizations and activists is to draw a picture of Santal society as inherently close to nature. Their wider claim seems to emphasize that they are the best stewards of the environment, because an environmentally friendly attitude has always been engrained in their cultural practices. In doing so, they also make a conscious effort to draw parallels to other indigenous organizations around the world, who often emphasize similar points.\(^1\)

While reviewing my field notes, I began to contemplate these claims to environmentalism made by my Santal informants. I began wondering, if there is truth to it. Are Santal lifestyle and religion really more environmentally sound than others? Or are those claims rather a political strategy exercised by those making these statements? Clearly, much of Santal religious practice incorporates trees and the surrounding landscape, for example it takes place at the base of trees in sacred groves, where village deities are located. In these places trees should not be felled, and the forest and mountains in general are fearfully respected. However, in the same society few had reservations about cutting down trees for profit or were little concerned about the pollution caused by nearby copper and uranium mines. Young men involved in the organizations making these claims, preferred to ride their motorbikes everywhere, even short distances to meet a friend at the nearby market. Walking apparently did not belong to their claimed environmental attitude. They also regarded villages located in the forest as backward and uncivilized, assuming a certain social evolution from forest backwardness to urban progress.\(^2\)

The difference between activist portrayals of Santal identity and actual practice in Santal villages by those, who are only remotely concerned with the performance of their identity, is a recurring theme in my work. During my fieldwork it was much more difficult to gain access to the latter. Researching Santal hunting rituals (sendra bonga) or a large Santal clan sacrifice (jom sim bonga) involved a lot of socializing and negotiating before I could participate and gather any relevant information about these topics. But it was during those ritual complexes that I gained an understanding of Santal attitudes towards the environment.

In a nutshell, different Santal rituals feature trees and other parts of the landscape as abodes of deities. The hunting god sendra bonga, for example, is seen as especially dangerous.
If upset, sendra bonga sends tigers to protect its domain. In order to avoid its wrath, people offer chicken sacrifices once a year and ask the god to spare the village from wild animals and send rain for the crops in return. The indirect association of the forest with rain emerges from another large annual sacrifices offered at the occasion of buru bonga, a ritual for certain mountain deities located in the nearby landscape. These gods are further closely linked to the first transplanting of rice seedlings, which takes place concurrently.

Another ritual complex I discuss in my work are clan sacrifices in dry rice fields. This place is associated with a group of brothers whose forefathers cleared the forest and tilled the land where their fields are located today. In all these rituals the domains of forest and fields are differentiated, but at the same time articulated as interdependent: the gods of one domain, the forest, provide rain for the other, the fields.

Hence, Santal attitudes towards the environment are closely related to the presence of deities therein. It is the reciprocity between people and deities rather than the “intrinsic value of nature” that shapes Santal ritual practice. Environmentalism, as understood in a Western context, is based on different premises.

Do the Santal, or other tribal people, worship nature? In order to give an adequate answer, we as scholars have to look beyond activist circles and draw a more holistic picture of the society making such claims.

My research shows that even a rather localized anthropological study touches upon many topics, which lend themselves to interdisciplinary collaborations. One of them, only mentioned briefly here, could be to compare the use of the term “religion” emerging in contexts where no such term existed previously. Or why not discuss our findings on how different Asian religious practices relate to the environment? The Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia surely offers opportunities for such collaborations.
I look forward to inspiring encounters and common projects with the scholars it brings together in the future.

1 For cases of indigenous movements emphasizing their ethnic distinctiveness in environmental terms see for example Arora (2006), Burman (2013), Damodaran (2012) for India, Parajuli (1998) for Mexico and Li (2000) for Indonesia.

2 Those who especially emphasize their society’s environmentally friendly attitude often have an urban and educated background. For very similar dynamics and the discrepancy between activist claims to environmentalism and everyday practices and attitudes in villages in India see Shah (2010) and Baviskar (1995, 1997).

References


LEA SCHULTE-DROESCH

Lea Schulte is a PhD student at the University of Groningen, in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. Lea’s PhD title is titled MAKING PLACE THROUGH RITUAL, LAND, ENVIRONMENT AND REGION AMONG THE SANTAL OF MIDDLE INDIA
THE HADRAMI ARABS OF AMBON: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF DIASPORIC IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN EVERYDAY LIFE PRACTICES

I would like to briefly share some experience of research fieldwork that may be distinctive to many prospective PhD students in the field of anthropology since this preliminary fieldwork was carried out prior to defining my PhD research plan. I would rather call my preliminary fieldwork as “a part-time fieldwork” for I conducted it as a non-full participant observer.

I started to live in Ambon, the capital of Maluku province in Indonesia, when I worked as a teaching assistant in a state college in February 2011. Well-known as spice islands, Maluku with its enticing nature attracted me as it might had amused many traders of both foreign (European, Chinese, Arab) and local origins to set their footholds in the former times. The beauty of Maluku’s nature does not neglect the most recent tragic event of the religiously-inspired conflicts between Muslims and Christians during 1999-2005. A relatively equal number between Muslims and Christians makes a plausible explanation why the conflicts happened apart from other social, economic and political factors. Those conflicts have had a considerable impact on social segregation. Both communities lived in their own enclaves and they interacted each other only in limited public areas. Both communities became very sensible (suspicious, cautious) of each other. During the first few months of my stay, a small clash blasted in the city center on 11 September, the date that reminded us about the terrorist attack in the USA ten years before. Having triggered by the murder of a Muslim motor driver in a Christian area, the clash caused the loss of hundreds of houses and several people from both sides. Fortunately, the clash did not turn into a bigger riot. I was about to fly from Java to Ambon when the clash happened but I cancelled my flight. The atmosphere was still very tense when I returned to Ambon one week later. I traveled by a boat from the airport to the town because the main road was blocked. Though the scope of riot was limited, this was not the only small incidence occurring after 2005.

I had considered to work on the root-issues of this conflict as a research topic until the incidence described above happened; afterwards I made the Arab community in Maluku as central topic of my doctoral research.

My first encounters with the Arab community were actually coincidental. During the first month of my stay in Maluku, I rented a house belonging to an Arab family. Some of my colleagues came from Arab families as well. The newly elected governor of Maluku was also an Arab descendant who replaced the former Christian Governor. An interesting aspect from the Arabs that I found in that area is the fact that many of them still maintained their own kinship and social stratification. I then decided to delve into a deep scrutiny of the Arabs’ presence in Malukue.

I followed up my curiosity by conducting a general survey of the Arabs in Maluku in order to map their dispersion and their way of life. Unlike their fellow Arabs in other regions outside Maluku, the present-day Arab community of Maluku does not live in a particular Arab quarter anymore, but they are mixed with other Muslims’ communities in city centres and in many coastal areas of Maluku. The way the Arab descendants dress, eat, and speak resembles other Indonesian Ambonese Muslim fellows. In this regard, the Arab community today shares some socio-cultural features with other Indonesian Ambonese Muslims in general in their daily life including their diverse occupations, religious rituals, and political affiliations.
This was my first project that I carried out from October to December 2011.

This was followed by a second study that I conducted in February-July 2012. This second project focused on the relationship between marriage, kinship, and gender inequality among the community. The finding of the research suggests that the Arab community more or less has maintained a certain type of marriage called descent based-\textit{kafa’a} (equality in marriage). With the adoption of a patrilineal kinship system, the \textit{kafa’a} is applied in a way that men should not have a lower but equal descent rank than their wives. Men are allowed to marry out while women are only allowed to marry in. As a conception rooted in Islamic family law, \textit{kafa’a} has become a basis of claim for the Arab descendants to (re)-produce social stratification within the Arab community and a larger Islamic society. Social stratification is thus determined on the basis of whether a person is a descendant of Prophet Muhammad or not, and whether a person is a descendant of an Arab or not. This practice of \textit{kafa’a} has had a tremendous effect on gender inequality.

The last project conducted in January-March 2013 was concerned with the variety of religious rituals involved in the conversion of some Arabs into a Twelver Shi’ite school of thought and its relationship with the changing view of kinship.

All these three small projects were supported and funded by the institution in Ambon I worked with.

I have then begun to reformulate these three small projects into a coherent PhD research project plan that I am now working on at the University of Groningen.

Based on my experience above, doing fieldwork is not an easy task. As I wrote above, I experienced a small riot even though Ambon is a relatively safe area.

My social identity as part of a Muslim community confined my freedom to go around Christian areas because the people often warned me of a potential conflict that could have started unexpectedly. Practicality, pragmatism, and security are among the many factors I considered when I chose the Arab community as my research topic. However, I still faced some problems.

The subject I have been working on is what Huub de Jonge (2002) and Frode F. Jacobsen (2009) called ‘an Indonesia-oriented group with an Arab signature’. As an Indonesian working on the subject of my own society, I questioned myself whether I would be able to do research in an objective manner. Yet I have found a space where I could position myself as an outsider in some respect. I am neither from Ambonese nor Arab origin, although I have no clue about from whom my ancestors of hundred or thousand years ago descended. What I learnt from my researched community is that ‘root and route’ are what matters most for the people.

Albeit sharing some cultural stuff with my researched subject, I had difficulty in convincing these Arab descendants to be my informants. The difficulty to get an access to the Arabs led me reschedule interviews with them for several times, and some appointments ended up with cancellation. The problem in fact not merely lie in my social identity but also in my professional identity as a researcher.
Introducing my ‘peculiar’ identity as a researcher to the Arab descendants led them aware of being ‘an object of scrutiny’ and they thus refused being ‘interviewed’.

Drawing on my previous fieldwork, I have rearranged my research project and my future fieldwork by giving more emphasis on participant observation rather than (formal) interview in order to be able to grasp people’s everyday life practices, as well as to get a more access to knowledge.

Indeed, this first year of the PhD programme at the University of Groningen has helped me to reflect upon my own experience of previous fieldwork and to make a better reformulation of my research project. This has been facilitated by the programme that the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies has set for doctoral researchers. The programme includes intensive training and supervising meetings, methodological courses, post-graduate seminars, conferences, and other academic activities. This encouraging scholarly atmosphere has contributed to enhancing my insight as well as to broadening my social network.

Chanting burdah (religious song texts) held in an Arab family’s house and led by an Arab female preacher

ISTIQOMAH

Istiqomah graduated in the study of Arabic at State Institute of Islamic Studies of Yogyakarta in 2003. Then she completed her master degree in Islamic studies both in State Islamic University of Jakarta in 2007 and in Leiden University in 2010. Since September 2013, she has continued to pursue her doctoral degree at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in the University of Groningen.
NEWS & EVENTS

SUMMER SCHOOL 2014

TRANSFORMATIONS OF RELIGION AND CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: VIEWS FROM THE PERIPHERY

Together with international partners from Germany and India, and in cooperation with other faculties of the University of Groningen Peter Berger is organizing the above mentioned summer school for post-graduate and PhD students here in Groningen (17-23 August 2014). Investigating contemporary transformations in the intertwined fields of religion and culture by focusing on the “periphery” means that are dealing with sections of Indian society usually not associated with the so-called “mainstream”: Adivasis, Muslims and Dalits.

TEACHING STAFF:

• Helene Basu (Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, WWU, Münster)
• Peter Berger (Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, UoG)
• Pieter Boele van Hensbroek (Faculty of Philosophy, Globalization Studies, UoG)
• Sobin George (Institute for Social and Economic Change, ISEC, Bangalore)
• Frank Heidemann (Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, LMU Munich)
• Sarbeswar Sahoo (Department of Humanities, IIT New Delhi)
• Sundar Sarukkai / Meera Baindur (Philosophy and Humanities, MU, Manipal)

For more information please consult the website: http://www.rug.nl/education/summer-winter-schools/summer-schools-2014/transformation-religion-culture/

Application deadline is 1 June 2014

PhD POSITION ‘RELIGION IN CHINA’

Application is now open for a fully funded PhD position (3 years) in the field of ‘Religion in China.’

We welcome applications from candidates with a research project on any topic under the overall theme of ‘Religion in China.’ The project will address one or more of the main religious traditions in China (Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the so-called folk religions), or investigate the concept of ‘religion’ and ‘religiosity’ in China. ‘China’ here refers to the greater region that includes Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; the research project will ideally engage one or more of those areas in comparative perspective.

The proposed PhD research plan should match one of the following trajectories:

• textual studies; research projects on specific texts - including ritual texts - in their doctrinal, historical, and social value, as well as in their production and reception history
• religion and society; research projects on topics such as religion and politics, religion and law, religion and community, religion and media, religion and gender
• theory and method for the study of religion in China; research projects on theoretical and conceptual issues for the study of religion and religiosity in China.

Any other project about the investigation of religion in China within the East Asian context, and thus in interaction with Japan and Korea, is also welcome and will be considered.

The PhD student will become a Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia (www.rug.nl/research/centre-religion-culture-asia) and will be involved in the activities of the Centre. The University of Groningen also hosts the Centre for East Asian Studies Groningen (Faculty of Arts) and collaborates with the Groningen Confucius Institute.

Application deadline: 1 May 2014
Application webpage: http://www.rug.nl/about-us/work-with-us/job-opportunities/phd-positions
Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia

Would you like to join any of the research clusters of the Centre? Get in touch with the cluster’s convenors!

Would you like to be included in the mailing list of the Centre, and receive updates on activities and events? Send an email to csrca.groningen@gmail.com, with the subject CSRCA, and in the text write your name, position, affiliation, area of research, preferred email address.

Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia

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