

EUROSEAS 2019 Panel Abstract

Boundaries within the flow: the shape of life in Southeast Asian cosmologies

Convened by Monica Janowski (Dept. of Anthropology/Centre for SE Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) and Guido Sprenger (INSTITUT FÜR ETHNOLOGIE, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg)

In Southeast Asian cosmologies and ontologies, life, potency and power are conceived of as a flow; indeed the entire cosmos is arguably regarded as being made up of, or as being a field of flow for, life and power. The cosmic flow is, however, not amorphous; it is (as it were) heterogenized, made up of distinct entities. These entities exist by virtue of the fact that they have boundaries. In the context of a profoundly animistic ontology and cosmology in the region – including among peoples who now belong to monotheistic world religions – all of these entities are regarded as being alive; what flows through them is life itself, which coheres and coalesces in certain places in the flow. Each entity is regarded as possessing or being inhabited by a spirit. Enspirited entities include human and animal bodies, plants, mountains, stones, houses, states.

The boundaries around living entities are not fixed; they may grow larger or smaller, and they may die. The flow of life and power and the boundaries between entities making up the flow of life is believed to be susceptible to management and manipulation – and humans aim to achieve this. The direction of flow, and in particular its concentration in certain entities – individual humans, human-made objects such as jars or swords, naturally occurring entities such as stones or mountains – is the focus of much ritual practice. Boundaries between entities are also the subject of much ritual, aimed at both maintaining and manipulating them – boundaries of the body, when spirit mediumship or spirit-induced illness occurs; those of houses, villages and cities, which may be managed through rituals of purification, fertilization and protection; even those of the state. Ways of managing boundaries and the flows of life include walls, gates, tattoos and numerous others.

This panel invites papers that explore the dynamics of the relationship between flow and boundaries, both necessary features of life and potency. We welcome papers examining ideas as well as practices, apparent contradictions, the tensions between authoritative and marginalized cosmological perspectives, and the uncertainties arising through the question of when to act to encourage flow and when to maintain boundaries.

Please send abstracts to us at:

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Single session panel