

Engaging universals - traveling concepts and practices in contemporary Southeast Asia

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In 1997, Cambodian and foreign judges started to work together to try former Khmer Rouge leaders for crimes against humanity within a hybrid court, set up by the Cambodian government and the United Nations applying both international and national law. A few years later, in 2001, the concept of "indigenous peoples" made its way into Cambodian law and, through human rights advocates, into the countryside, altering preceding notions of minority identity in a dominantly Khmer Buddhist nation. These are just two examples of current engagements of global normative ideas and practices in local settings in Southeast Asia.

In a wide area of fields such as transitional justice, rights-based activism, but also humanitarian aid and development, norms, concepts or tool kits travel globally and enter local contexts and communities. Presented as universals but always born in a specific cultural settings, they are usually transported and mediated in between the local and the global by persons such as development experts, rights activists, peace workers, or NGO employees. In the process both, the local and the global, are altered. Scholars have analyzed these different dynamics as frictions (Tsing 2005), translations (Lewis and Mosse 2006) or vernacularizations (Levitt and Merry 2009). Rather than concurring with established objectives and outcomes, such dynamics often give way to unexpected interpretations and developments. They might even engender new conflicts.

This panel invites ethnographically informed contributions that explore how people engage global ideas and practices across Southeast Asia. Where do such traveling concepts and tools originate? Which (human and non-human) actors and currents carry them? How are they translated or vernacularized, and what socio-cultural processes are thereby set in motion?

Double session: 5 presenters and discussant (Alexandra Kent – tbc)