

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography, No. 5, 1986. Anthony R. Walker, editor. Studies of Religions and Worldviews. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, Department of Anthropology, 1986. 195 pages. Photos, maps. Price per issue US\$10.00; ISSN 0217-2992.

Like its predecessors, the present fifth issue of *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography* (now published in the U.S.A.) is devoted to a specific topic: this time to Southeast Asian "Religions and Worldviews." Corresponding to the established policy of this journal, the individual articles do not aim at theoretical analysis or explanation, but are rather meant to supply solid ethnographic information. The focus is on so-called "ethnic minority peoples" who live—in a geographical as well as a socio-political sense—on the margins of Thailand, Bangladesh and Malaysia. Most of the ethnographic material is either new or condensed from theses or reports which are hardly accessible to western scholars. It deserves special emphasis that four of the six authors are themselves Southeast Asians, who have so far been under-represented among the scholars publishing in international languages on the societies of that region.

To start with, the volume's last article (Tunku Zainah Tunku Ibrahim: The Mirek: Islamized Indigenes of Northwestern Sarawak) seems to be somewhat out of place in a volume on "religions and worldviews." It forms the final part of a study on the history, society, and ethnic identity of the Mirek, the first and second parts having been published in previous issues of *Contributions* under the same title. As the manuscript was received already in 1979, it would have been more logical to include the present article—which describes how the Mirek are maintaining a double ethnic identity as "Mirek" and "Malay"—in *Contributions* no. 3 (on "ethnicity").

The remaining five articles follow a common scheme: at first the reader is introduced into the general geographical and cultural background of the group in question, after which the author sets out to describe basic cosmological ideas, concepts of spiritual beings and rituals directed towards them. All this is amply illustrated with photographs which give the reader a vivid impression of what is being described in the text. *Worldviews* as such are generally not dealt with in a specific way (except in the narrow sense of religious cosmology), so that it might have been better to omit this term from the title of the volume.

The first contribution, by Jesper Trier on the Mlabri of Northern Thailand, is certainly the most exciting of all. Until fairly recently, this small group of gatherer-hunters was virtually unknown to the outside world. Today we have some knowledge about their economy and material culture, but much of Trier's data on social structure and nearly everything he has to say on Mlabri religion is entirely new. Although the present account is partially vague and tentative (due to the reluctance of the informants to talk about some central concepts, and their unwillingness to let the author observe certain important ceremonies), it becomes sufficiently clear that Mlabri religion is not

as primordial as the "truly autochthonous" character of this people might suggest. In fact, the method of offering sacrifices, the custom of tying strings around the wrist to keep the soul(s?) inside the human body, as well as certain details of the ancestor cult show among other things that many elements of Mlabri religion are firmly rooted in *regional* cultural traditions.

The following two articles (Chob Kacha-Ananda on the Yao, A. R. Walker on the Lahu Nyi) are also dealing with ethnic minorities of Northern Thailand. Yao religion is characterized by the coexistence of popular spirit beliefs (which are once again dominated by regional, rather than specifically Yao, conceptions) on the one hand and elements of Chinese Taoism on the other. However, the frequency of Taoist practices is limited by the fact that they require full literacy in Chinese and thorough religious initiation available only to a few. As far as Lahu Nyi religion is concerned, the editor's own contribution focusses on Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist influences. Examples given are the village temple and its officials, as well as the construction of "merit shelters." Although in the case of the village temples the historical argument (involving the use of Chinese sources) is not quite convincing, it becomes obvious that the Lahu were never isolated from their lowland neighbors. Like other hill peoples, they repeatedly borrowed or emulated elements of lowland cultures and recast them in their own cultural idiom.

The remaining two contributions lead us to the extreme west and south of mainland Southeast Asia. In his paper on the Chakma of Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts, Md. Habibur Rahman describes the coexistence of three distinct religious traditions: indigenous spirit beliefs, elements of Hinduism, and, thirdly, basic conceptions and rites of Theravāda Buddhism (to which the Chakma formally subscribe). As in many other cases of religious syncretism in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere), attempts toward a "native theology" linking the elements of the different traditions to each other seem to be missing. However, the reader feels that the author could have gone some steps further in analyzing the relationship of each of the three religious complexes to specific problem areas of human existence.

The final example of native Southeast Asian religions comes from the Besisi, a small group of "Orang Asli" living on the southwestern coast of peninsular Malaysia. The author, Satkuna Mathur, lived altogether only eight weeks among them, and so her rather vivid and readable account is not complete and remains unclear on several points. This is all the more regrettable since published ethnographic material on this "aboriginal" group is still scarce. The focus of Besisi religion seems to be on beliefs and practices regarding a host of malevolent spirits haunting the environments of the villages as well as a smaller number of ancestral guardian spirits, to whom major community-wide ceremonies are directed. It is remarkable that, despite a long history of culture contact and a heavy presence of Malay loanwords in Besisi religious terminology, the impact of Islam has obviously remained marginal so far.

Although syncretism was not an explicit topic of the volume under review, most of the contributions demonstrate clearly that the amalgamation of different religious traditions—ranging from regional autochthonous traditions to elements of the great world religions—is a normal phenomenon even among reputedly "backward" cultures of Southeast Asia. This illustrates once again the well known notion that Southeast Asia is one of the world's major cultural cross-roads, a fact which has to be taken into account by scholars working among seemingly marginal ethnic groups of this region. Besides, the present issue of *Contributions* makes a recommendable reader for anyone interested in how autochthonous Southeast Asian peoples conceive of, and deal with,

spiritual aspects of their environment.

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JAPAN

UMESAO TADAO 梅棹忠夫 and MORIYA TAKESHI 守屋毅, editors. *Matsuri wa kamigami no pafōmansu: geinō o meguru nihon to higashi ajia* 祭りは神々のパフォーマンス——芸能をめぐる日本と東アジア [Festival as sacred performance: Traditional performing arts in Japan and East Asia]. Tokyo: Rikitomi shobō, 1987. 474 pages, Photos and illustrations. Cloth, Yen 2,500. ISBN 4-89776-401-7. (In Japanese)

It is refreshing to discover a book on the traditional Japanese performing arts (*geinō* 芸能) that refuses to focus on their alleged uniqueness as corroboration, or result, of the hoary nativist (*kokugaku* 国学) notion that Japan, too, is unique and stands somehow alone above the mundane fray that embroils all other cultures. The bulk of Japanese *geinō* research has been locked into *kokugaku* circularity, with scholars maneuvering fiercely to proclaim some new angle on Japanese uniqueness but all the while simply drawing from the old presuppositions: *geinō* are unique because Japan is or vice versa. Some Japanese scholars have even cited Western acknowledgements of the historical isolation of *geinō* as proof positive that the traditional Japanese performing arts are unique, distinctive, different, pure and, by implication, even superior to the performing arts of foreign cultures.

This approach is hardly enlightening, redounding rather to the discredit of those who propound it and to the detriment of any objective analysis of Japan's traditional performing arts. The clear-cut corollary of this strange intellectual stance is that no one beyond the borders of Japan can understand the intricacies of *geinō*. Yet, the obvious inconsistency of citing Western scholars to prove the uniqueness of *geinō* apparently has escaped notice in Japan. The question then arises as to why so many Japanese scholars expend so much time and energy defending the uniqueness and purity of *geinō*. Why persist in maintaining that outsiders cannot understand what outsiders cannot understand? Why say anything about it at all? Their approach smacks of preaching to the choir, not to mention whacking at dead horses.

One of the most fascinating phenomena in the development of twentieth-century Western theatre is its rich cross-fertilization with various manifestations of traditional Japanese dance and theatre, from folk and religious festivals to classical forms. Major aspects of the work of William Butler Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, Sergei Eisenstein, Paul Claudel, Jean-Louis Barrault, Gabriel Cousin, Paul Goodman, Jerome Robbins, Merce Cunningham, Lee Breuer, Robert Wilson, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Theodora Skipitares, among many others, would be inconceivable without the impact of Noh, Bunraku, Kabuki, or certain of the traditional Japanese dance forms such as Gagaku and Buyō. Coupled with this artistic appropriation, Western scholars in the past thirty years have produced scores of excellent translations and studies of Japanese *geinō*. Not to accept that these traditional performing arts have gained a substantial measure of appreciation and genuine understanding beyond Japan is myopic at best. *Geinō* have become a truly international phenomenon.

The present volume goes a long way toward dispelling the weary *kokugaku*-inspired notions of uniqueness and purity that have characterized Japanese scholarly discourse