

SECTION FIVE

# Connections



## Squinting at Greater India

Julia Byl

What is a Theravada Buddhist stupa doing in the highlands of North Sumatra? Since 2012, a replica of Myanmar's Shwedagon pagoda has shone out from the Karo Batak highlands in the interior of Indonesia's most westerly island. Karo communities are religiously heterogeneous: bound by strong clan affiliations, indigenous cosmologies coexist with Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Hindu beliefs (Ginting 2003, 232). Vajrayana and Mahayana Buddhist traditions have long histories in Sumatra, practiced by ninth-century Tantric monks (Acri 2019) and twenty-first-century Indonesians of Chinese descent (Chia 2020), respectively. Yet unlike mainland Southeast Asia, Indonesia lacks the institutional Theravada lineages that moved from Sri Lanka to Myanmar from the third century BCE—and so hundreds of saffron-clad Buddhist monks walking along a highland road for a dedication ceremony is an unusual sight.

I did not witness this procession myself—I rely on newspaper accounts and on historian Maitrii Aung-Thwin, who documented the event from Indonesian and Burmese viewpoints (Aung-Thwin 2012). My niece lives nearby and remembers the event, though, so I suspect that its audience included many individuals from the neighboring Batak communities (Karo, Dairi, Simalungun, and Toba, who collectively make North Sumatra one of the most Christian areas in Indonesia). The dedication ceremony began with a speech by Suryadharma Ali, the Indonesian Minister of Religion at the time—and despite his name (revealing Sanskrit, Buddhist inheritances) the leader of the hardline Muslim political party PPP. Perhaps he commenced with the Arabic greeting *as-salam alaikum*, so common in public life in the world's most populous Muslim country. The replica was made possible by Tongariodjo Angkasa, an entrepreneur in the nearby city of Medan and attendee of a *vihara* (temple) featuring a characteristic blend of Chinese Buddhist and Taoist elements. Angkasa donated the land for the replica; currently, he leads

Medan's Indonesian-Chinese cultural society and bears the Burmese honorific, Maha Sadhammajotika.

The description of the ceremony is still available on the website of an Indonesian Buddhist weekly, *Berita Bhagavant*, where it details the names of the monks who visited from Burma and beyond: from Korea, the United States, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, India, and Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> In July 2022—the date of writing, and of the Theravada festival Asalha Puja, commemorating the Buddha's first sermon—the story was framed by extracts from sutras and a link to a sound file of chanting, the contours of the voice shadowed by a meditative flute. Likewise, the monks who visited Sumatra twelve years earlier had chanted prayers for two days, using Pali, the language of the doctrinal Theravada Buddhist texts (the *Tipitaka*), known from Sri Lanka to Burma to Cambodia.

The history of Indic religions in Sumatra involves the transmission of texts and doctrine, but it also moved in more flexible ways. A Tamil inscription from the port of Barus on the island's western coast dates the settlement of the merchant guild Ainnurruvar (or “The Five Hundred of the Thousand Directions”) to 1088 CE. This guild, based in Aihole, Karnataka, moved between India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Sumatra. Tellingly, it left multilingual inscriptions in Tamil, Sanskrit, and Old Malay throughout its trading grounds (Christie 1998). Sanjay Subrahmanyam suggests that it represented not “vertical” institutional state or religious power but “strong bonds of horizontal, or corporate solidarity both in rural and urban areas” (Subrahmanyam 2011, 145). Leonard Andaya asserts that the guild grew to “include several ethnolinguistic groups among its ranks” (Andaya 2002, 378).

Such local groups likely included the Karo Batak, the preeminent traders of the Sumatran interior—in whose domain the Shwedagon was built. Karo families need no inscriptions to claim an Indic lineage; it is encoded within their *marga* (“clan”) names, particularly sub-*marga* of Sembiring (“the black one”): Brahmana, Pelawi, Colia, and Pandia (Ginting 2003, 238). By the twentieth century, many Karo families had converted to Christianity or Islam, and few now know the Indic roots of the old deities or can decipher the Brahmi script of their inherited *pustaka* (“literature”). However, during the brutal Suharto period (1965–1998), in response to anti-Communist policy requiring citizens to specify an organized religion,<sup>2</sup> some Karos turned to a reimagined Hinduism with room for hair-washing ceremonies, ancestor possession, and music to summon gods (Ginting 2003, 238). In recent years, some in the community (Parisada Hindu Dharma Karo) have sought clarification from orthodox Hinduism, moving, like Balinese *pandita*, towards a more rigid reform (Aciri 2013).

So, in effect, the Sumatran Shwedagon Pagoda was a case of one Buddhist lineage borrowing the prestige of another, endowed with power by the chants of an international group of monks and the speech of a national Muslim official, built on Karo hereditary land that has seen Christian missions and a Hinduism reaching far into the past and forward into the future. No wonder we look to Indonesia

for flexible articulations of world religions, whether a moderate version of Islam (Harnish 2021) or an engagement with Indic religious concepts so connected to local articulations of power as to be indistinguishable from them.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter outlines the dynamics of such religious interplay by considering how much attention, and in how much detail, ethnomusicologists should expend on the heritage of Indic religions in Southeast Asia—and at what expense to the interpretive agency of its inheritors. I use “Indic” as a geographical referent but also as a metaphor for more general religious integration, as India provided much of Southeast Asia with its first experience of making sense of foreign religious ideas on native soil. I refer often to Sumatra, the locus of my own research, but hope to convene a broader audience of scholars of Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and even the area called, in the past, “Greater India.” This phrase is a polemic—invoking the fraught terminology of hegemony and diffusion—as we shall see in a brief historiographical study. Yet a discussion of Indic religious circulations gets at the heart of a persistent concern of this volume: how to acknowledge over a millennium of historical sources of the connected beliefs, rituals, and cosmologies that crossed the Indian Ocean, while leaving room for the modern inhabitants of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to interpret, discard, meld, and otherwise transform this legacy through their own intellectual framings and expressive culture.

#### SQUINT OR FOCUS?

When scholars describe the flexible ethos of the Sumatran Shwedagon, we often use the term “Hindu-Buddhism,” which Judith Becker describes as “imprecise and obfuscating” but also “vague but convenient” (Becker 1993, 11). Craig Reynolds cuts a bit deeper, memorably stating that this “sloppy language . . . makes a complex historical process sound like a fisherman’s catch” (1995, 433).<sup>4</sup> Archaeologists and art historians tend to be more specific—referring, say, to a statue with both Buddhist and Hindu attributes (Reichle 2007, 45). Although Barbara Watson and Leonard Andaya occasionally recruit the phrase for broad descriptions of the Malay world (e.g., “the Hindu-Buddhist Influence from India”), they are as likely as British historian D. G. E. Hall to reserve it to describe eras that actually saw the influence of Buddhism and Śaivism within one period, such as the thirteenth-century Singhasari dynasty in east Java (Andaya and Andaya 2015, 154; Hall 1981 [1955], 31). Clifford Geertz uses the term occasionally in *The Religion of Java* (1960), and Benedict Anderson in his study of power in Indonesia (1990), but the last quarter of the twentieth century saw the term taken on as a metaphorical, almost evocative shorthand<sup>5</sup> for a cultural foundation rendered less and less visible with the accrual of subsequent “strata.”

It is this “Hindu-Buddhism” as gesture that has conditioned my own reading of the expressive culture of Sumatra (Byl 2014). However, once I moved outside my area studies cone, I discovered that this descriptive tic drives scholars of South Asia crazy. The phrase “Indic,” or even the old-fashioned “Greater India,” is a little

easier to comprehend—think of how the Ramayana epic populated traditions from Bagan in central Burma to Mindanao in the Philippines, and you understand. “Hindu-Buddhism,” though, is something different, both more specific (two heterogeneous religions, not the generic “Indic”) and infuriatingly vague: these linked adjectives elide diverging histories, theologies, lived practices, and hegemonies over which physical and intellectual wars have been fought. And yet here they are, stuck together with an unassuming hyphen.

Many of the early sources for our knowledge of Southeast Asia are reliant on Indic languages and religious terms, however—gleaned from philological knowledge. In recent decades, the authority of this scholarship has been eroded by its colonial genesis and tendency to “master” local knowledge—yet the libraries at SOAS University of London and Leiden University provide access to the earliest written histories from Cambodia to Kalimantan (Borneo), often inscribed in Sanskrit. One of the most exciting thinkers working at the nexus of historical research, religious doctrine, and modern interpretation is the preeminent Javanese scholar Sumarsam, whose deep research into Tantric and Sufi texts is matched by his attention to contemporary Islamic sermons and *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) masters.<sup>6</sup> Sumarsam uses philological scholarship freely—contemporary and colonial—but cross-checks it with his own lived experience and extensive knowledge of Javanese music and social life. Crucially, a balanced engagement with philological scholarship can document the richness of religious and cultural beliefs that predate European expansion and record-keeping.

For instance, within my own research on the knowledge of Toba Batak *datu* (ritual practitioners)—all but stamped out by colonial and missionary strictures—scholarly catalogs taught me that a word that begins prayers is actually a variant of “om” (Putten and Zollo 2020, 79) and that diagrams danced into village squares illustrate the “churning of the cosmic ocean,” a story found in the Puranas and carved into the walls of Angkor Wat (Schuster 1975, 66). My initial curiosity about the Sanskrit words used for the cardinal directions ended up contradicting a common assumption that interior North Sumatra was isolated before the advent of Christianity. Yet this knowledge is also fraught: the beliefs of the Christian individuals I work with make such a revelation anathema. These musicians find more worth in understanding Toba ritual as a cultural, not a religious, inheritance, thus allowing the musical ensembles that once accompanied Śaivite beliefs to sound in worship services run by the autonomous Toba church.

And so the related question that I pose here is: when does it make sense to recruit specialist knowledge to understand the cultural legacy of the region, and when is this knowledge merely academic, distracting from the agency of complicated, contemporary Southeast Asian actors? Is our lack of Indic knowledge a lazy neglect of a scholarly duty or a defensible ethical attention to the play of the local? For indeed, the abandonment of sites like Borobodur in central Java (leading to its “discovery” by Europeans in the eighteenth century) was not due to the amorphous “advent of Islam” but to the accumulation of new beliefs and priorities of

Southeast Asians in the intervening years. When does it make sense to doggedly focus on occluded histories, and when does it make sense to accept our lack of clarity and squint from afar, subbing out defined details for a blur that might tell us something as well?

#### PARSING HINDU-BUDDHISM

Once the dust is blown off, early twentieth-century scholarship on Southeast Asia reveals stunning findings and historiographical insight. Consider French historian and archaeologist George Coedès's writings that, in 1918, proved beyond doubt the location of Srivijaya, the Mahayana Buddhist thalassocracy that controlled the Strait of Malacca from 900 to 1300 CE and through it, large swaths of the south-east Indian Ocean. From Chinese sources, we know that Srivijaya sent monks to Nalanda, the world's first residential university, in Bihar, India. Srivijaya in turn fostered Tantric Buddhism through its most famous student, Atiśa, the Bengali sage who brought dharma to Tibet in the eleventh century CE (Coedès 1918).

Yet the kingdom was not located, as was argued, in Thailand, a place known for Buddhist lineages, or on the shores of the Strait of Malacca itself. Rather, its capital stood eighty kilometers inland on a Sumatran riverine network (Coedès 1918), near the modern city of Palembang (now a primarily Muslim city with a significant Chinese Buddhist minority). By the twentieth century, the site was a bit of a cul-de-sac. One thousand years earlier, however, the interior location was the whole point: this kingdom—with its Sanskrit inscriptions and doctrine—was not a coastal fortress, oriented out, but a meeting place that integrated the Indian Ocean with indigenous land and commerce practices of the interior.<sup>7</sup> Srivijayan temples were built inland and sounded their prayers at transport junctures that provided access to forests containing trade commodities (Andaya 2002, 87). The reconciliation of these disparate elements—the Sanskrit cosmopolis, positioned downstream of indigenous commerce, with Muslim religious conversion soon to come—is instructive enough for us to dwell on in detail for a paragraph or two, and return to from time to time.

Coedès showed the importance of understanding Sanskrit and Buddhist religious terminology in his discussion of the Talang Tuwo inscription—a stone tablet from 684 CE found, face down, northwest of the Palembang site (Coedès 1992 [1930]). The tablet describes the intent of the ruler Sri Jayanasa to create “gardens with dams, ponds, and all the good works . . . may be for the good of all beings, mobile or immobile, and may be for them the best means of obtaining joy. . . .” For the denizens of the garden, the king wished for

continuous generosity, observance of precepts, patience; may energy, diligence, knowledge of all the arts be born in them . . . may they be firm in their opinions, and have the diamond body [vajrasharira] of the Mahasattwas, an unequaled power, victory, and memory of their former lives, all their senses, a full form, happiness, smiles, calmness, a pleasant voice, the voice of Brahma. (Coedès 1992 [1930], 50)

In his discussion, Coedès, a trained Indologist, takes a few erudite jabs at rival scholarly centers, particularly the Dutch scholars van Ronkel and Bosch, who had first translated the inscription. He refines van Ronkel's characterization of the inscription as a "prayer to the faithful," stating that instead it is *pranidhana*, "the initial pledge of a candidate for the Bodhi, representing the beginning of his career as a Boddhisatva" (Coedès 1992 [1930], 51). He continues, "I apologize for reminding the reader of these notions, which are obvious to anyone at all familiar with the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism." To a modern ethnomusicologist, this statement reinforces the role of specific knowledge of Sanskrit religious vocabulary and suggests that the act of inscription was not simply a communicative act but an efficacious act—and one that likely used the "knowledge of all the arts."

But Coedès's snarky correction can also be read historiographically. Within the scholarly world of the early twentieth century, French academics (many associated with the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris) were experts on India's vast corpus of Sanskrit India and applied this knowledge eastward; Dutch insight on Southeast Asia (from Leiden and Utrecht) was conditioned by experiences in the colonies and by some knowledge of the indigenous social, political, and cultural life. Andrea Acri describes the work of French scholars like Sylvain Lévi, Paul Mus, and Coedès himself as "transregional," and Dutch scholars like W. Stutterheim, J. De Casparis, and C. C. Berg, as "autonomous" or "indigenistic." (Acri 2017, 14–16). The argument would be transformed in subsequent years: the Greater India Society, formed in Kolkata in the 1920s by Indian nationalist scholars (Bayly 2004) sharpened the French perspective into a biased vision of India as a benign center of civilization (Acri 2017, 15); scholars at Cornell University in the 1960s focused on Southeast Asia's indigenization of foreign concepts (Wolters 1982); and Sheldon Pollock's watershed writing on the "Sanskrit cosmopolis" inspired a balance of the precise knowledge of the language so valued by elites from Java, Bali, and Cambodia, with a recognition of the inherent flux of the time before "India" (let alone "Greater India") existed (Pollock 2009).

## RELIGIOUS INTERSECTIONS

This last insight positions "Hindu-Buddhism" as a reasonably accurate term, rather than a hedge. To begin with, Tantric Buddhism and Śaivism shared many elements, "to the extent that the two religions participated in an interdependence of discourse in such disparate domains as philosophy, soteriology, ritual, and iconography" (Acri 2019, 4). Secondly, the exchanges of "the Tantric turn" (in the eighth century CE), between religious lineages and across Indian Ocean networks, were not fixed in India and diffused outward. Rather, they developed simultaneously, in a "pan-Asian expansion . . . [of] roughly coeval Asian dynasties," across Odisha, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and into Sumatra, Java, and East Asia (Acri 2019, 7). Considering this reach, it is fitting that the evidence with which Coedès "signed



the birth certificate” of Srivijaya includes Chinese texts (seventh to fourteenth centuries CE), Tamil charters (eleventh century), and Arabic texts about “the rich sovereign of Sribuza” (Manguin and Sheppard 1992, viii).

Here we move to musicology, and to Judith Becker, the ethnomusicologist who has most thoroughly theorized this subject (and the mentor who has formed my own interest in it). Becker’s 1993 *Gamelan Stories*—on the medieval musical history of Java and the intersection of Tantrism and Sufis within it—is remarkable for its “periodization” of a non-Western music most often studied in the present and its insistence on the relevance of earlier systems of meaning, preserved in “esoteric” manuals by twentieth-century *kraton* (palace) theorists like Sastrapustaka (Becker 1993, 59). Becker discusses Tantric initiation rites and the Śailendra dynasty, Javanese texts and Leiden philologists, and the connections between the organs of the body, the keys of the gamelan instruments, and the royal *Bedhaya* dancers.

As well as taking Indic teachings seriously, Becker argues that these philosophies and practices were transformed by the advent of Islam, first transmitted through Sufi lineages beginning in the fourteenth century. If Srivijaya or Borobodur appear to have been buried—in time and in mud—as a result of this sea change, Becker argues that the process was more gradual, and that many of the esoteric doctrines connecting humans and the divine became intertwined in practice (particularly *wahdat al-wujud*, the metaphysics of Allah’s relationship with his creation, and the Tantric doctrine of “becoming the deity”: Becker 1993, 95). That such insights are novel, despite strong evidence, is a “scholarly blindness” resulting from inadequate knowledge of Sufism and Tantrism, and insufficient recognition of their common aesthetic and doctrinal terrain.

To be fair, without collaboration, few modern Indologists or scholars of Sufism have the training to register such a transfer; and even the Dutch Orientalist “localists” persistently underestimated or misconstrued Islam’s significance: in Jacob van Leur’s famous words, applicable to both Hinduism and Islam, “the sheen of the world religions and cultural forms is a thin and flaking glaze” (Leur 1955, 95; see also Laffan’s historiographical characterization of “past Islam as safe Islam” 2011, 103). But more recently, scholars have gloried in these connections between religions and possess the linguistic skills to understand them. In *Islam Translated*, for instance, literary scholar Ronit Ricci explores the movement of Islamic literature across the Indian Ocean, through Arabic, Javanese, Tamil, and Malay texts (2012). She explicitly models her “Arabic cosmopolis” on Pollock’s “Sanskrit cosmopolis,” and her larger work studies the overlap of these systems at the point of conversion, working against seeing each ecumene as separate, bounded complexes.<sup>8</sup>

Taking our lead from Becker and Ricci, then, let’s consider a description of the movement of Islam into the Sumatran kingdom of Pasai on the northeast coast of Aceh—an early foothold of Islam in the region, and the site of first Malay epic text, *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* (ca. 1390 CE). This epic describes the successive dockings of a ship that sailed the monsoon between India and Sumatra, bringing with it

significant religious cargo: a collection of wind instruments called the *nobat* (spelled *nawba*, *nowbat*, and *naubat* in Arabic, Persian, and Hindustani, respectively). This ensemble of “kingly power” was used from at least the eighth century CE to initiate rulers and mark the call to prayer in Islamicate states throughout Western and South Asia (Byl 2014, 105–6). In Pasai, the music was followed by a dream of the Prophet Muhammad—which instantly converted to Islam an indigenous “raja,” and later, a Hindu yogi, overawed by the Islamic power that the Sumatran sovereign commanded in his new name, Sultan Ahmed:

Overcome by the sanctity of the Sultan’s presence, the yogi fell to the ground in a faint. The Sultan was amazed to see what had happened to him in spite of his deep knowledge of the magic arts. Afterwards the yogi embraced the faith of Islam. (Hill 1960, 74)

The yogi-convert was said to have come from Kalinga, a historical region of South Asia on the Indian Ocean. In light of this, it might be wise to expand what we understand by “Hindu-Buddhism” and “Greater India”: the formulation could also include Islam, which arrived in island Southeast Asia from Mecca and Cairo, but also via Gujarat or Kerala (Laffan 2011), and then intertwined with local and localized religious practices. Indeed, when I write about Hindu-Buddhism, often I am not referring to foreign religions at all, but to indigenous modes of understanding new teachings and assessing their ability to access an extant spiritual power. Note that the Sultan recognized both the yogi’s Indic “magic arts” and his own *Muslim* “sanctity,” which surprised him even as he channeled it. Conversion can be an emotional or intellectual process, but sometimes it is a pragmatic decision of self-interest, or the result of powers suddenly unleashed. This last description is actually a feature of Tantric, or “lightning bolt” (*Vajra*) Buddhism—enlightenment taking hold in an instant.

#### ENERGETIC SOIL

In Malay, the individuals who wield such power are called *datuk* and linked to Islam; the Batak equivalent, *datu*, also harness power, but through mostly Indic religious concepts. Regardless of affiliation, the work of both practitioners is regularly glossed as syncretic. Consider, for example, a magical formula from colonial Malaya (ca. 1900) used by *datuk* to harness jinn, “spirits” answerable to Solomon, whose mastery over them is mentioned in the Qur’an (13:12–14); in the incantation, one particular jinn is alternatively named “the land demon” and “the destructive side of Śiva, i.e., Kala” (Skeat 1900, 93–94). Alternatively, look at figure 11.1, a shrine to “Datuk Kong,” a power worshipped by Malaysians of Chinese descent. “Tuk” is also from *datuk* (which can mean “grandfather”), and devotees ensure that offerings to him are halal;<sup>9</sup> “kong” connotes Taoist nature practices from East Asia (DeBernardi 2009, 152). And the place where I took this picture? The beachside Sri Singamuga Kaliamman temple on Penang island, a compound opening onto the Indian Ocean. These religious practices at play seem clear evidence of syncretism and hybridity.



FIGURE 11.1. Datuk Kong, Pulau Pinang. (Photo Julia Byl)

Yet despite the links of shrine (Taoist, Muslim, Hindu) and jinn (Muslim, Śaivite) to specific religious traditions, we can sometimes better understand what is happening by ignoring doctrinal elements altogether and instead considering what compelled their amalgamation in the first place—a fusing impulse powerful enough to draw in elements from all religions. The object in the brightly painted shrine is not a statue, nor a text—but a heavy rock, dug out of local soil. And the impulse that melds these mixed religious elements is not syncretism (a term of after-the-fact description, not of generation), but an investment in what anthropologist John Clifford Holt calls “the power of place.” In this refraction, the deity—Śiva, Tuk Kong, Solomon<sup>10</sup>—is not a religious representation, but an avatar of local power requiring the offerings and worship of anyone in that place desirous of channeling it, regardless of religious affiliation. In his book *Spirits of the Place* (2009), Holt grapples with this terrain using the work of an Indologist/philologist: Paul Mus’s *India as Seen from the East* (first published in French in 1933), which asserts the importance of local powers vis-à-vis imported Indic deities. Originally

suspicious of Mus's<sup>11</sup> "master narrative," through his studies of Laotian *phi* (nature or village spirits), Holt comes around to agree with passages like this one: "It is important to stress that this [place/soil/stone] is not the lodging, the 'seat' of the god, but the god himself, consubstantially. Not the stone of the genie, but the stone-genie" (Mus 1975 in Holt 2009, 25). Or as Holt puts it, drawing on his studies of Sri Lanka, "there *always* seems to be a deity who is referred to as 'the god who is in charge of this place'" (24). For the Durkheimian Mus (and by extension, Holt), the social act is key:

The "energy of the soil" was experienced within the social context of *events*. Its value was then valorized within ritual. In that sense, then, the subsequent constructions of hierarchy, in both supernatural and social forms, are not simply understood as calculated political machinations designed to legitimate the establishment of hierarchically imposed power, but rather as indices to those values that have been deemed worthy of consecration by the community. (Holt 2009, 28)

During my research into Tamil communities in North Sumatra, I found a description of a ritual that illustrates Holt's point precisely—featuring diverse individuals united by an efficacious event and a sacred site. In 1976, Singaporean sociologist A. Mani traveled outside of Medan to the Bekala Rubber Estate to attend a Theemithi (firewalking) ceremony at the unassuming wooden Mariamman temple complex built for the plantation's laborers. The first group of Tamils arrived from Penang in 1873; after the Dutch "Coolie Ordinance" of 1880, tobacco and rubber plantations drew laborers directly from the Coromandel coast (Mani 2006 [1993], 53). In 1976, Mani could still count forty-eight temples spread throughout the plantation lands (n43); many were abandoned after sovereignty in 1949.<sup>12</sup>

During the ceremony, Mani observed the faithful moving around the complex with oblations to Śiva, Viṣṇu, Murugan, and Kali. On the temple's right side, they passed by a shrine dedicated to "Nagoor Aardavan" (the Lord Nagoor), though without offering devotional hymns or camphor incense. A Tamil Muslim family stayed behind to offer flowers, though, confirming Nagoor's identity as the Sufi saint Shahul Hamid Nagore (who anchored this volume's introduction). Tamil Muslims were clearly a part of the "consecration by the community," then, even when expressing their beliefs differently. Nor was the ethnicity or piety of the participants constrained: "numerous couples participated . . . in the hope of overcoming infertility . . . an elderly Mandeling [*sic*] Batak man played the *parai* (or *thappu*, a type of Tamil drum) in appreciation of a boon Bekela Mariamman was said to have granted his family" (Mani 2006, 77).

This is a pregnant detail for us: in India, the *parai* is emblematic of Dalits and non-Brahminical religious traditions (Sherinian 2014, xix); by now, we recognize a "Batak" as an interior Sumatran, but Mandailings are mostly Muslim. Hybridity,<sup>13</sup> perhaps, in some form: the gratitude was routed through the practice of Tamil religious music, and although the man could have been playing Batak *gordang*

rhythms, at minimum, the loan of the *parai* shows fellow feeling. But the boon granted was fertility, among the most universally human desires, and one quite elemental at that. Indeed, natural power and common practice is right there in the temple's name—*Sunggu Sappi*, a Tamil approximation of *sungai sempit* (Malay: “small river”), a reference to a local water source important for ritual purification within Indic, Muslim, and indigenous practices alike.

It is more than this, though. A hand-drawn map of the complex shows a shrine, in the central temple space and adjacent to that of Śiva, dedicated to a “village deity” (Mani 2006, 71). No more information is given, let alone musical description, but Mani's explanatory footnote is perhaps relevant here, stating that unlike in South India, with its strict agamic rules, “the ranking of deities within a temple, from those housed in the central sanctum sanctorum to those considered as minor or guardian deities and housed in outlying shrines, reflects local social conditions rather than a formal hierarchy. Ultimately, for its devotees, each deity is of equal importance as an aspect of God.” (Mani 2006, n. 29). Or perhaps as an aspect of local potency, made manifest in a shrine or in the camphor incense that suffuses it—the very forest commodity that propelled Indian Ocean trade, the rise of Srivijaya, and the proximity of diverse Indian Ocean populations. For the “spirit of the place” is also present in the ways communities form around it: communities made of people drawn to the efficacy of spiritual power, resonating through Hindu Tamil hymn singer or Muslim Batak *parai* drummer alike.

#### CONCLUSION: SOCIETY IN THE ROUND

In her recent article on “Greater India” in the Dutch East Indies, cultural historian Marieke Bloembergen invokes the name of Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore, though she withholds the customary reverence given him:

Writing about the Balinese [in the 1920s], without ever having met them, he inferred, “These people, who had their seclusion that saved their simplicity from all hurts of the present day . . . have, I am sure, kept pure some beauty of truth that belonged to India.” (Bloembergen 2020, 193)

Bloembergen is unconvinced, and sees such “purity” as an exhibit of an “exclusive Greater India mindset,” with Southeast Asian traditions as “ornaments to a shining center” rather than worthy studies in their own right (Bloembergen 2020, 193, 177). For me, Tagore's quotation jars most in its shunting aside of human experience, conclusions reached without ever having met a Balinese person. (The quote was gathered in Amsterdam, at a colonial museum.) Indeed, when I write on arcane topics like this one, the ethnographer in me worries about scholaring in the absence of interviewing, discussing, and playing. Completing ethics for fieldwork, I must stipulate the grade of language that I will use



to write informed consent forms: if “high school” level is deemed too restrictive, what would be said of esoteric communications with strange diacritics?

Bloembergen slices through to the ugly side of academic discourse: “why do we construct ideas about space in moral and civilizational terms?” (2020, 174). This question might resonate with scholars of nonelite Indian religions, who decry the focus on elite knowledge at the expense of all other traditions. After all,

The boundary between great and little traditions is impossible to draw: possession is both a Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit idea; *yoga* is a mixture of great and little traditions, as are ghosts and spirits; *acara*, local usage, is given the sanction of legal authority in the Sanskrit lawbooks; literary Sanskrit culture itself consists of a number of regional schools with their own local twists.”<sup>14</sup> (Mabbett 1975, 159)

Southeast Asian scholars are conflicted, too, about whether Sanskritic traditions can really document the beliefs of nonelite segments of society: Alexis Sanderson, an Indologist and scholar of early Cambodia, admits that “if our sources allowed us to see Khmer religion and society *in the round* we would no doubt recognize that Indian forms clothed Khmer beliefs and practices” [my emphasis] (2003, 379). Not everybody chisels their thoughts into stone; others may pour ideas into a dance gesture or a drum pattern.

Yet there are always those rare individuals who attend to both texts and performance. Ida Wayang Granoka Gong is a contemporary Balinese master: a Brahmin scholar named after Bali’s most spiritually powerful instrument, the *gong agung*,<sup>15</sup> who inspires followers by “bringing together the works of the Old Javanese court poets with Vedic hymns and ancient Greek philosophy [and] the writings of modern-day anthropologists, philologist, theologian, and authors of pop science” (Fox 2018, 141). Rather than policing the “purity” of any of these traditions, Granoka moves through them all with improvisatory abandon, as recounted by his interlocutor, anthropologist Richard Fox (2008, 141, translation by Fox):

*ding . . . gending . . . das ding . . .*

*Ding* [the musical note] . . . musical phrase<sup>16</sup> . . . the thing . . .

*das ding an sich . . . dalam arti kuasa yang mahakuasa*

the thing in itself . . . meaning the power that is all powerful [i.e. Tuhan, or “God”]

Had Tagore heard Granoka’s “unruly assemblage” (Fox 2008, 141) he could have parsed *mahakuasa* as the Sanskritic *mahāvaśa* (“all powerful,” from वश) and been reassured about Balinese Indic knowledge—but the invocation of Immanuel Kant’s “the thing in itself” as gamelan-inflected sound might just have scrambled his idea of “Balinese simplicity.”

The ideas of Mamu Mahmood, a Tamil Muslim librarian, are equally virtuosic, and also end with a musical coda. Literary scholar David Lunn and I met Mamu Mahmood in 2014 in a library in Penang, Malaysia, where, for over an hour, he

led us through a dizzying discourse on religion in Southeast Asia, from the vantage point of his own experience as a Tamil Muslim. We spoke about the *wali songo* (“nine saints”) who spread Islam to Java (“I like Sunan Kalijaga the best, he focused on Indonesian rather than Arab culture”), and the founder of Malacca, the Srivijayan prince Paramasvara/Iskandar Shah, whose name, in Sanskrit, refers to supreme lordship, and in Persian, to Alexander the Great. We discussed the Andalusian theologian Ibn ‘Arabi and the tendency for Tamil Muslims to be marginalized vis-à-vis the larger Tamil Hindu and Muslim Malay communities (Nasution 2014), a grievance that probably explained Mahmood’s insistence that Tamil was the original language spoken by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The session ended with a song: Mamu Mahmood was learning Urdu, the scholarly specialty of David—and when he discovered this, he immediately launched into a stanza of qawwali music (“*Mashallah!*: Glory Be to God”).

So far, I have presented you—bewildered you, surely—with the multiplicity of religious interpretations in Sumatra and beyond. With more than a millennium of multidimensional religious history, it could not be otherwise. And yet, although I lack a consistent approach to such issues across all times and communities, my study has left me with two theoretical stances that I have found steadfastly helpful. The first is to learn as much as possible about the trajectories of the past without an expectation of relevance to or fidelity by those in the present. The unexpected interpretation is often agency at play. In the centuries before an appeal to Hindu or Muslim orthodoxy became possible, island Southeast Asians were cut off from “true doctrine” and created meanings in the gap. Elements of a new religion—whether a sacred word in a prayer or a novel musical instrument—were integrated into local knowledge systems, powerful not in spite of but *because* of the lack of lexical or doctrinal content. Secondly, although seeking out specific knowledge allows the tracking of meaning across time—an activity that Granoka Gong and Mamu Mahmood both took pleasure in—there is much to be learned from individuals in proximity: the connection of different religious paths through social, affective means. Individuals can stand in for the traditions that have formed them—a Tamil Muslim, a Batak Christian—but they can also create a mutually transformative interface by the act of listening to another—even playing each other’s instruments—and being heard in return. I’d like to end this chapter, then, by recalling its opening: the interface between individuals and ideas from India and interior North Sumatra, told from the present.

Although I carried out fieldwork in Medan for years, I had never engaged with its Tamil population before the Indian Ocean project. The city’s Tamil community is profoundly marginalized, living in a small enclave next to a filthy river. In 1972, a Tamil Jesuit priest named Father James Bharataputra came to Sumatra from Tamil Nadu and later purchased a parcel outside the city as a refuge. This area became the site of the Graha Maria Annai Velangkanni shrine mentioned in the introductory chapter of this volume: a structure resembling a South Indian Hindu temple



FIGURE 11.2. The  
Graha Maria Annai  
Velangkanni.  
(Photo by Julia Byl)

that hosts mass for congregants on Sunday, and on other weekdays, aids those who seek the Virgin Mary's help, from any religion whatsoever. Father James insists that the "graha" ("house") is simply a sacred place, open to any seeker in need of healing power (figure 11.2).

It turns out that one of these seekers is my sister-in-law, Akkang—a Batak woman and practiced healer born in the Sumatran highlands, and living in Medan. I only realized that Akkang considered the Graha as her home church when she accompanied me on my initial "research" visit—and was greeted warmly by Father James, the pastor of her flock. As I passed through the front gates, topped by the architectural designs of Batak houses, a nun called out my name: she recognized me from my doctoral fieldwork twenty years before, when I would collect my younger (adoptive) sister from the Catholic school where the nun taught. Any hope of a formal interview with Father James was gone—my sister-in-law is far too social to sit quietly—but all was not lost. As the head of a church in North Sumatra, the priest knew something about Karo and Toba Batak music: more than fifty years



after Vatican II, the phrases of the Catholic liturgy were infused with local melodies (Rook 2020; Prier 2015).<sup>17</sup> Now, it was time for Akkang to hear something of the Tamil liturgy of Father Bharataputra's childhood. He searched out a small book and sang, his voice forming foreign words that moved in unexpected ways—yet were animated by shared belief.

This was a particularly satisfying exchange. Father James's name, "Bharataputra," means "son of India";<sup>18</sup> indigenous Indonesians or Malaysians are called *bumiputera* or *pribumi* (bumi = earth), terms that paradoxically use Sanskrit terminology for a toxic discourse that divides "native" Southeast Asians from the overseas people they have lived and learned with for millennia (Balasubramaniam 2007). The alliance of Father James and Akkang refutes this logic. So does the shrine to the Virgin Mary, open to Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, and Protestants alike. Its holy waters (accessed by a spigot in the back of the chapel) are drawn up from the soil of Sumatra, and filtered through different beliefs systems. This too is the intent of the Sumatran Shwedagon pagoda, located an hour's drive away: the path of Buddhist merit is not summarily closed to anyone. As I took a parting glance around the compound, I spotted an interior chapel with a large mural dedicated to Pope John Paul II, the pope of ecumenicism who had visited the area in 1989. Surrounding the pontiff were rows of Karo Batak women in their distinctive peaked headpieces, their fingers arcing back in a graceful bend: a kinship gesture, a benediction, a *mudra*, or perhaps all of these at once.

## NOTES

1. <https://berita.bhagavant.com/2010/11/03/peresmian-replika-stupa-shwedagon-di-medan.html>.
2. Citizens could choose from six options: Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, or Confucian. The choice was written on all official documents, including identity cards; since 2018, a supreme court ruling has mandated a more vague description of "*penghayat kepercayaan*," or "believers of the faith."
3. A cursory search of international newspapers after September 2001 shows a rush to describe Indonesian "tolerance" [www.economist.com/special-report/2004/12/11/a-model-of-tolerance](http://www.economist.com/special-report/2004/12/11/a-model-of-tolerance), and more recently, anxieties that this tolerance will soon cease to exist.
4. See Andrea Acri (2017, 8, fn1) for the quote, as well as a discussion of the metaphor of "strata."
5. Consider, for instance, that Margaret Kartomi's sweeping book on Sumatra (2012) refers to "Hindu-Buddhist concepts" (28); "Hindu-Buddhist philosophy" (123); the "Hindu-Buddhist idea of 'the inner being'" (102); "Hindu/Buddhist practices" (101); and a "Hindu-Buddhist" look" (149), alongside the more specific reference to a "king" (177) and "deities" (344). In contrast, Jaap Kunst's work on music in Java uses "Hindu-Javanese," but not the broader amalgamation.
6. See Sumarsam's forthcoming book, newly announced at the time of press, *History and Myth, Interculturalism and Interreligiosity: The In-Between in Javanese Performing Arts* (Wesleyan University Press).
7. In addition, the mangroves on the eastern coast of this area of Sumatra made the building of a residential site difficult.
8. Ricci pays attention to sound and silence (Ricci and Becker 2008), inspired by her coauthor, linguist and area-studies scholar Alton Becker. Becker is best known to ethnomusicologists as the spouse of Judith Becker and coauthor with her of an important article on Javanese gamelan.

9. Personal communication, Tan Sooi Beng.
10. Given, we may be in danger of conflating theologies: Solomon is a prophet, not a deity; the Datuk Kong has a place in a temple governed by a polytheistic religion but you wouldn't find it at a mosque. But for many people, it might not have mattered if Solomon was *dewa* or *nabi*, if he harnessed local power. By this logic, then, the Islamic reform of hybrid laxity is not simply a change in intellectual framing but an orientation away from the local and a denial of its power.
11. Holt's work ranges through Laotian and Sri Lankan practices, while the works by Mus he refers to are about Borobudur and the kingdom of Champa (a historical kingdom in southern mainland Southeast Asia). As such, this discussion allows me to at least *gesture* at expanding my focus to South-east Asia as a whole.
12. See Stoler (1985) for a longer discussion of the effect of the plantation system on Batak and Malay communities.
13. An uncritical invocation of hybridity differs from an intentional use of the term: see Weiss (2008) for this in engagement with the precolonial cosmological *Sureq Galigo*.
14. The descriptors "great" and "little" are a case in point.
15. See McGraw (2019) for a discussion of Granoka's philosophy and musical training.
16. The term "gending" is, of course, more of a musical totality than a specific phrase.
17. For examples of the liturgy, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9D\\_ZruA6tc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9D_ZruA6tc) (*Angus Dei*, Toba Batak style); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUvNjm99MoA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUvNjm99MoA) (*Gloria*, Karo Batak style); and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=smOr4VW8MJw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smOr4VW8MJw) (a Tamil mass).
18. Father James was born Irudayam Singarayar Sebastian James in 1938, but changed his name to James Bharataputra upon receiving Indonesian citizenship in 1989.

## REFERENCES

- Acri, Andrea. 2013. "Modern Hindu Intellectuals and Ancient Texts: Reforming Śaiva Yoga in Bali." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 169, no. 1: 68–103.
- . 2017. "Local' vs 'Cosmopolitan' in the Study of Premodern Southeast Asia." *Suvannabhumi: Multidisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 1: 7–52.
- . 2019. "Introduction: Esoteric Buddhism along the Maritime Silk Routes, 7th–13th Century AD." In *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Modern Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Andaya, Barbara Watson, and Leonard Andaya. 2015. *A History of Modern Southeast Asia, 1400–1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Andaya, Leonard. 2002. "The Trans-Sumatra Trade and the Ethnicization of the 'Batak'." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 158, no. 3: 367–409.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1990. *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Aung-Thwin, Maitrii. 2012. "The Shwedagon in Sumatra: Transnational Buddhist Networks in Contemporary Myanmar and Indonesia." *Suvannabhumi* 4, no. 2: 1–16.
- Balasubramaniam, Vejal. 2007. "A Divided Nation: Bumiputera Material Advancement and National Identity in Malaysia." *National Identities* 9: 35–48.
- Bayly, Susan. 2004. "Imagining 'Greater India': French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode." *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3: 703–44.
- Becker, Judith. 1993. *Gamelan Stories: Tantrism, Islam, and Aesthetics in Central Java*. Tempe: Arizona State University.

- Bloembergen, Marieke. 2021. "The Politics of 'Greater India,' a Moral Geography: Moveable Antiquities and Charmed Knowledge Networks between Indonesia, India, and the West." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63, no. 1: 170–211.
- Byl, Julia. 2014. *Antiphonal Histories: Resonant Pasts in the Toba Batak Musical Present*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Chia, Jack Men-Tat. 2020. *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity across the South China Sea*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Christie, Jan Wisseman. 1998. "The Medieval Tamil-Language Inscriptions in Southeast Asia and China." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 2: 239–68.
- Coedès, Georges. 1918. "Le royaume Çrivijaya." *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 18: 1–36.
- . 1992 [1930]. "The Malay Inscriptions of Srivijaya." In *Srivijaya: History, Religion, and Language of an Early Malay Polity: Collected Studies by Georges Coedès and Louis-Charles Damais*. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.
- DeBernardi, Jean. 2009. *Penang: Rites of Belonging in a Malaysian Chinese Community*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
- Fox, Richard. 2018. *More Than Words: Transforming Script, Agency, and Collective Life in Bali*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1960. *The Religion of Java*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ginting, Juara. 2003. "The Position of Hinduism in Karo Society (North Sumatra)." In *Hinduism in Modern Indonesia*, edited by Martin Ramstedt, 226–41. London: Routledge.
- Hall, D. G. E. 1981. *A History of Southeast Asia*. London: Red Globe Press.
- Harnish, David. 2021. "Tolerance of Ambiguity: Negotiating Religion and Sustaining Its Performing Arts in Lombok, Indonesia." *Religions* 12, no. 8.
- Hill, A. H., trans. 1960. "Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai." *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33, no. 2: 1–215.
- Holt, John Clifford. 2009. *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kartomi, Margaret. 2012. *Musical Journeys in Sumatra*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Laffan, Michael. 2011. *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Leur, Jacob van. 1955. *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History*. The Hague: W. van Hoeve.
- Mabbett, I. W. 1976. "The 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Historical Sources." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 2: 143–61.
- Manguin, Pierre-Yves, and Mubin Sheppard, eds. 1992. *Srivijaya: History, Religion, and Language of an Early Malay Polity: Collected Studies by Georges Coedès and Louis-Charles Damais*. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.
- Mani, A. 2006 [1993]. "Indians in North Sumatra." In *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, edited by Singh Sandhu Kernial and A. Mani, 46–97. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- McGraw, Andy. 2019. "Resounding Power: Balinese Perspectives on the Gong Agung." In *Hearing Southeast Asia: Sounds of Power and Hierarchy in Context*, edited by Nathan Porath, 254–82. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Nasution, Khoo Salma. 2014. *The Chulia in Penang: Patronage and Place-Making around the Kapitan Kling Mosque, 1785–1957*. Penang: Areca Books.

- Pollock, Sheldon. 2009. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Prier, Karl-Edmund, SJ. 2015. *Panduan Musik Liturgi*. Yogyakarta: Pusat Musik Liturgi.
- Putten Jan van der, and Roberta Zollo. 2020. "Die Macht der Schrift: Die Manuskriptkultur der Toba-Batak aus Nord-Sumatra." *Manuscript Cultures* 14: 1–230.
- Reichle, Natasha. 2007. *Violence and Serenity: Late Buddhist Sculpture from Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Reynolds, Craig. 1995. "A New Look at Old Southeast Asia." *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2: 419–46.
- Ricci, Ronit. 2011. *Islam Translated: Literature, Translation, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricci, Ronit, and Alton L. Becker. 2008. "What Happens When You Really Listen: On Translating the Old Javanese Rāmāyaṇa; Rāmāyaṇa Kakawin, Translation and Essay." *Indonesia*, 85: 1–30.
- Rook, Emily. 2020. "Complex Centers and Powerful Peripheries: Catholicism, Music, and Identity Politics in Indonesia." PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh.
- Sanderson, Alexis. 2003. "The Śaiva Religion among the Khmers." *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 90–91: 349–462.
- Schuster, Carl. 1975. "Comparative Observations on Some Typical Designs in Batak Manuscripts." In *Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts, Xylographs Etc in Danish Collections*, edited by Frede Møller-Kristensen, 52–86. Copenhagen: Royal Library.
- Sherinian, Zoe. 2014. *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Skeat, William Walter. 1900. *Malay Magic*. London: Macmillan.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 1985. *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870–1989*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. 2011. "What the Tamils Said: A Letter from the Kelings of Melaka (1527)." *Archipel* 82: 137–58.
- Weiss, Sarah. 2008. "Permeable Boundaries: Hybridity, Music, and the Reception of Robert Wilson's *I La Galigo*." *Ethnomusicology* 52, no. 2: 203–38.
- Wolters, O. W. 1982. *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.