

Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the rise; Pilgrimage and popular religion in Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004, x + 332 pp. ISBN 0.8248.2801.1, price USD 25.00 (paperback).

JOJANNEKE VAN DER TOORN

Attracted by her reputation as efficacious protector, business consultant, relationship advisor, healer and mother, each year over a million visitors flock into the shrine of The Lady of the Realm (*Ba Chua Xu*) in Vietnam. Since the economic reforms of the mid-1980s (*doi moi*), she has been a magnet for devotees from all walks of life and from all corners of rural and urban society. Situated in Chau Doc, on the fringes of the Vietnamese state, her popularity is illustrative of the thriving spiritual life of contemporary Vietnam. The country is characterized by an ever-increasing pilgrimage to religious sites and the Lady's is the most frequented one in the southern Vietnamese Mekong Delta. This recent increase in popularity is explained by her alleged responsiveness to prayer. The Lady's support, however, has its conditions; you have to truly believe in her, deal with her in a correct manner, remain faithful to her, and pay her back. A reciprocal relationship thus unfolds between the goddess and her worshippers.

During several field trips between 1995 and 1998, Philip Taylor accompanied pilgrims on their travels, joined in festivities, witnessed rituals, and spoke to devotees in their homes, at markets and in the streets. His interpretation of the popularity of the Lady of the Realm and other goddesses in the region is substantiated by his lively portrayal of these activities.

*Goddess on the rise* opens with a discussion of the spiritualized definition of borders. While physically located near the Cambodian border, the Lady's shrine emblematically represents southern Vietnam's rural folk culture. Her emergence as a symbol of national significance shows that official conceptions of identity have apparently shifted. The goddess's ethnicity is a second topic taken up by the author. Popular ideas about the Lady's identity, in contrast to official views, illustrate the coexistence of multiple ethnic groups in the region sharing different cultural outlooks on the world. It is significant that a large majority of those venerating the Lady are female. Taylor found that '[s]he is an associate for those who [...] are at the forefront of market relations in Vietnamese society' (p. 276). Amongst these women and other believers, opinions on the Lady of the Realm and the rituals performed in her veneration differ between rural and urban populations. Taylor's analysis extends our understanding of pilgrimage by indicating that Turner's notion of pilgrimage as anti-structure is not sufficient. He gives examples illustrating the consolidation and reproduction of gender inequality through the veneration of the Lady. Existing social dependency relations are thus reflected

and reproduced by the pilgrimage in general, and by the rituals performed at the annual festival of *Via Ba*.

An especially convincing argument is made regarding the mystery surrounding the Lady of the Realm, a characteristic she shares with other goddesses in the region. Her obscure origins, lack of specificity and weak ties to a specific local, social, cultural or political identity allow her to become the locus of diffused meaning and the focus of an extensive following. This makes the Lady relevant to a wide array of this-worldly concerns. In response to Vietnamese scholastic claims to view the Lady of the Realm as a symbol of female autonomy, Taylor again points at this amenability of female deities to different interpretations, illustrating women's diverse concerns and ideas of femininity. Another strong point of Taylor's study is his discussion of the often noted incorporation of Buddhist elements into popular religious spirit worship. He indicates the ethics of reciprocity and mutual obligation characterizing both.

Taylor's solid research and his detailed and vivid descriptions allow for a look at the matter from many angles. Yet, the lack of a clear theoretical framework gives his arguments at times a fragmented flavor, resulting in an uneven balance between empirical description and analysis. It is not until the epilogue, in which the author elaborates on the popularity of the Lady of the Realm in the context of Vietnam's late socialism, that Taylor's thoughts are easily differentiated from the opinions of his informants. Despite these shortcomings, *Goddess on the rise* is a valuable contribution to the study of religion. Philip Taylor invites the reader to join him on a journey, not only along the pilgrims' trail to the shrine in Chau Doc, but also through the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape of present-day Vietnam. This makes his work indispensable on the bookshelf of anyone wishing to understand Vietnamese society and religion in general.

---

Azyumardi Azra, *The origins of Islamic reformism in Southeast Asia; Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'ulamā' in the seventeenth and eighteenth century*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004, ix + 253 pp. ISBN 9067182281. Price: EUR 25.00 (paperback).

HOLGER WARNK

This book is a revised version of a PhD thesis defended at Columbia University in 1992, and published in Indonesian translation in 1994. In the early 1990s many scholars looked at Islam predominantly from a Middle Eastern perspective, ignoring the centuries-long Islamic traditions of maritime Southeast