Maritime Piracy in Southeast Asia

by John Brandon

John Brandon is the Associate Director of The Asia Foundation’s Washington D.C. office. His responsibilities include monitoring U.S. policy toward the Asia-Pacific region and managing the Foundation’s program activities in Washington. He received his M.A. in Political Science and Southeast Asian studies from Northern Illinois University in 1985 and joined the Asia Foundation in 1990. The following are excerpts of a lecture he presented on campus during the 40th anniversary of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

The incidence of maritime piracy has shown a marked increase since the end of the Cold War. From 1991 to 2001, there were 2,375 actual and attempted attacks of piracy worldwide. Of this figure, 66 percent of the attacks occurred in Southeast Asia, making it the most pirate-prone region in the world. To show how dramatic this rise is since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there were only three reported pirate attacks in Southeast Asia in all of 1990.

But these figures do not reflect the true dimensions of the problem as most pirate attacks go unreported. The reason why is that since shipping is such a highly competitive market, shipowners and captains are reluctant to report attacks because they fear rising insurance rates and they do not want to be perceived as unreliable freight carriers. Nor do they want to risk losing time in port for an inquiry, which can cost a ship and its crew anywhere from $10,000 to $20,000 per day. Although estimates are difficult to calculate, it is believed that the financial losses from maritime crime will be as high as $25 billion this year. This figure represents almost a 40 percent increase in losses from just three years ago. While 2003 is not over, the number of reported pirate attacks is projected to meet or surpass the record high of 469 attacks in 2000, most of which were in the sea-lanes surrounding Indonesia.

Several factors account for the increased incidence of piracy. Over 90 percent of the world’s freight moves by sea and provides a ready supply of potential targets. In Southeast Asia alone, about half of the world’s freight (estimated by tonnage) passes through the Strait of Malacca, including two-thirds of the world’s Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) trade. To put this in perspective, the flow of oil in the Strait of Malacca is three times greater than what passes through the Suez Canal and 15 times greater than the flow through the Panama Canal.

Another factor is lax port security at many regional ports. This increases the vulnerability of ships at anchor. Ports in Asia where security is most lax are Indonesia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh. In fact, about 70 percent of pirate attacks occur in harbors when ships are anchored. As many maritime officials are poorly paid, corruption is also a factor as pirates appear to be well informed about ship movements and cargoes. Pirate attacks could not be done so adroitly without inside official information.

I would argue that the rise of piracy has become more pronounced over the past five or six years because of the Asian financial crisis. The spread of poverty and increased unemployment have helped make piracy an attractive source of income. Pirates in Southeast Asia range from opportunistic fishermen, common criminals, ex-members of the armed forces, to sophisticated crime and terrorist syndicates such as Jemaah Islamiyah and increasingly the Free Aceh Movement. Moreover, with cuts in defense spending and depreciation of Southeast Asian currencies, it has been extremely difficult for the Indonesian navy, who saw its budget cut by two-thirds, to effectively patrol its territorial waters. Thus, with the exception of
Korean diplomat who was stationed for many years in Phnom Penh and one of the founding investors in the company. Several ships under the Cambodian flag were suspected of smuggling North Korean ballistic missiles and components to Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq. In September 2002, under pressure from the U.S. and the European Union, Cambodia terminated its contract after a series of scandals involving 1600 Cambodian-flagged ships, including the three I just mentioned.

Before September 11th, most analysts looked at maritime piracy through the prism of how it can disrupt world trade and increase the cost of commerce because of fraud, stolen cargoes, or delayed trips. Over the past 30 years, terrorist attacks against maritime targets constituted only 2 percent of all international incidents as few terrorists over the decades have developed a maritime capability, much less a maritime terrorist capability. Exceptions to this rule were the hijacking of the cruise ship the Achille Lauro in the Mediterranean in 1985, and the attacks on the USS Cole and French supertanker, the Limburg, in Yemen in 2000 and 2002, respectively. But the September 11th attacks illustrate the vulnerability of ships and ports in Southeast Asia and elsewhere around the globe. Whereas planes carrying thousands of gallons of jet fuel crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, freighters carrying large payloads of liquefied natural gas (LNG) could be hijacked and used in attacks similar to those of September 11th.

If such an attack took place in the Strait of Malacca or another major channel for international shipping, trade would be seriously disrupted. If terrorists successfully carried out an attack that closed the Strait, vessels carrying oil to Japan, China, and South Korea—which import more than 80 percent of their oil from the Gulf—would have to be diverted through Indonesian waterways adding an extra thousand miles to the journey. This would spark a crisis in world oil markets and send insurance premiums skyrocketing in the already highly competitive shipping industry. A terrorist attack in the Strait of Malacca would also have a devastating impact on Southeast Asia’s economies. If such an attack involved highly toxic chemicals or nuclear materials, millions of people in the region would be harmed. Aquatic life would also be destroyed, ruining the lives of fishermen in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand as well as reducing the region’s food supply.

Al-Qaeda has the ability to carry out such an attack. At least one of its Southeast Asian affiliates, Jemaah Islamiyah, planned to strike at U.S. naval vessels using the Strait of Malacca and the port of Singapore before its members were arrested in December 2001 in Singapore. This was discovered when a group of American soldiers in Afghanistan found video tape of Malaysian naval patrols in the Strait in a house in Kabul. Since February, there has been a disturbing trend of pirates attacking chemical tankers. In one attack, a group of 10 pirates boarded a chemical tanker in the Strait, captured its crew, and began navigating the vessel. The fact that pirates can take over and navigate a chemical tanker is very worrying. They had to have training to navigate a vessel in order to accomplish this feat.

U.S. intelligence officials believe al-Qaeda controls between one and two dozen cargo ships. However, it is difficult to find and track these vessels given the extent of document fraud in the shipping industry. For example, one of al-Qaeda’s ships carrying cement, sesame seeds, and other legitimate cargo to Africa also carried the explosives to bomb the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Afterwards, it was just an ordinary merchant ship, but one that has never been found.

Maritime certificate fraud has emerged as a key threat to the shipping industry and poses a potential grave danger to the wider international community. In 2001, the U.N.’s International Maritime Organization (IMO) reported there were more than 13,000 incidents of forged ship and crew travel documents. It is not uncommon for ships to be repainted and re-registered under fictitious names. A lot of maritime certificate fraud takes place in the Philippines and Indonesia where terrorist groups exist. Under such conditions, the possibility of terrorists boarding ships while appearing to be legitimate crew members becomes all the greater.

Another disturbing trend is that piracy is becoming more bloody and ruthless. Over the past three years, the International
The Maritime Bureau has reported the number of cases involving the capture and hijacking of entire ships has tripled—from 8 in 2000, 16 in 2001, to 24 in 2002. One of the worst incidents took place in Philippine waters in 2001 when pirates attacked a freighter, beat 20 crew members to death, and used forged papers to change the ship’s identity. Of the 69 people murdered at sea that year, 67 of the murders took place on the waters of Southeast Asia. Last year, a Taiwanese-owned and flagged ship with an Indonesian crew was hijacked. Instead of killing the crew, they were left in life boats and were found by a passing ship. This hijacked ship was found three months later in the Gulf of Thailand with a new paint job, new name, and registered under the flag of Honduras.

The very nature of commercial shipping is multi-national. A ship can be owned by a company in one country, flagged by a second, crewed by the nationals of a third, and carry cargoes of a fourth through the territorial waters of a fifth, to a port of a sixth country. This is like saying George Steinbrenner owns a ship that is registered under the Panamanian flag, with a crew from Pakistan, carrying Japanese cargo, through Indonesian waters, to deliver the cargo to the port of Athens.

The point I want to make is that this is indeed a complex problem and in order to effectively address threats to maritime security, cooperation among multiple stakeholders is key. It’s not just security agencies, but also enforcement agencies, port authorities, and industry who have important roles to play. Moreover, ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum need to move beyond just being “talk shops” in developing confidence building measures and begin to create a strategy that would allow its members to engage in security cooperation.

Gregory H. Green
Curator, Donn V. Hart
Southeast Asia Collection

Gregory Green is the new Curator of the Donn V. Hart Southeast Asia Collection. He comes to Northern Illinois University from Arizona State University and the University of Arizona. Gregory worked at ASU Libraries for three years as the Southeast Asia Bibliographer while attending the University of Arizona’s School of Information Resources and Library Science. His graduation in December 2003 added the M.L.S. degree to a previous M.A. in Asian Studies from the University of California at Berkeley (1999) and a B.A. in History and Asian Studies from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah (1995).

Gregory’s interest in Southeast Asia began in 1991 while serving as a missionary for his church among the Lao community in California’s San Francisco Bay area. After two years of volunteer work and language study in California he returned to complete his undergraduate degree at BYU. Having truly enjoyed his immersion into a microcosm of the Lao culture and language, Gregory decided to build upon this initial foundation with a mix of formal academic study and continued interaction with local Southeast Asian groups.

Having lived his entire life in the western U.S. with time in Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon, and Utah, Gregory looks forward to living in and learning more about the Midwest.
September 12
Professor AndrewCausey, Department of Anthropology, Columbia College, Chicago.
"False Starts with Global Flow: Toba Batak Wood Carvers Transforming Traditions".
Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Title VI Program.

September 19
Mary Riley, Visiting Research Associate, Program for Collaborative Research in the Pharmaceutical Sciences (PCRPS), University of Illinois at Chicago; College of Law Student, NIU.
"Collaborative Research on Ethnomedicine in Vietnam and Laos: Progress of the International Cooperative Biodiversity Group (IBCG)".

September 26
Anies Baswedan, Ph.D. student, Department of Political Science, NIU.
"Political Islam in Indonesia: Present and Future Trajectory".

October 3
Professor Kenneth George, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
"Picturing Aceh: Violence and the Politics of Word and Image in Indonesian Islamic Visual Culture".

October 24
Kheang Un, Ph.D. student, Department of Political Science, NIU.
"Cambodia After the 3rd Elections: Where Does it Stand on the Path of Democratization?"

October 31
Peter Ross, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, NIU.
"Representing Southern Thai Muslims".

November 7
John Brandon, Associate Director, The Asia Foundation, Washington, D.C.
"Piracy in Southeast Asia".
Co-sponsored by the Graduate Colloquium Committee.

November 14
Julie Lamb, Research Associate/Outreach Coordinator, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, NIU.
"Outreach Reaches Out: Making Connections in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia".

November 21
Professor Tayudin Osman, College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani, Thailand.
"Islamic Education in Southern Thailand".

Spring 2004

January 30
Professor Meredith Weiss, International Studies Program, DePaul University.
"Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia".

February 6
Hamilton Walters, Graduate Student, Department of History, NIU.
"Tiny Fists: Interviews with Four Forcibly Conscripted Boy Soldiers of the Burmese Army".

February 13
Cynthia Paralejas, Graduate Student, Department of Anthropology, NIU.
"Sobrang Pagtaba: The Filipino-American Cultural Construction of Overweight and Obesity".

February 20
Septiani "Tia" Hendio, Foreign Language Teaching Assistant, Fulbright Program, Institute of International Education.
"Modernization in East Kalimantan".

February 27
Kate Rudasill, Undergraduate Student, Susan Speigel, Graduate Student, and Ellen King, Post-Graduate Student, Department of Anthropology, NIU.
"Buddhism in Cambodia: Report from the 2003 Anthropology Field School".

March 19
Christopher Miller, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, NIU.
"Inventing a Myanma Music".

April 2
Professor Eric Jones, Department of History, NIU.
"Tortured Lives: Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Jakarta"

April 16
Ryan Davenport, Graduate Student, Department of Anthropology, NIU.
"Reconceptualizing Power: Culture Change and Ritual Specialists Among the Minahasa of Northern Sulawesi".

April 21
Professor Michael Peletz, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Colgate University.
"Islamic Courts, Modernity, and Civil Society in Malaysia".
Co-sponsored by the Graduate Colloquium Committee.

April 22
Professor Michael Peletz, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Colgate University.
"Beyond the Charmed Circle: The Pink Triangle, the Urban/Sexual Underground and the Struggle for Sexual Equality at the Crossroads of Asia".
Sponsored by the Graduate Colloquium Committee.
Arakan: Between Islam and Buddhism
by Catherine Raymond
Director, Center for Burma Studies
Associate Professor, School of Art, NIU

Partly supported by Title VI funds to further my investigations of Muslim-Buddhist interactions in Arakan — particularly as they might affect the conservation of cultural properties on both sides of the Burma-Bangladeshi frontier — I returned to Sittwe and Mrauk-U in July, 2003. In deference to that grant, this will be the first in a series of informal Mandala articles touching on the subject.

Arakan is the westernmost state in the Union of Myanmar and borders predominantly Muslim Bangladesh to the west. An independent kingdom for nearly a millennium before being conquered in 1784 by the Burmese, Arakan (also called Rakhine by Arakanese) is where South and Southeast Asia actually meet: culturally, geographically, even racially. Arakan is also, arguably, the site of the furthest eastern penetration of Islam. The Muslim societies of Insular and peninsular Southeast Asia were converted primarily by seafarers.

I first came to Arakan in 1985, while I was a doctoral candidate in residence at Yangon University studying both the Buddhist and Brahmanistic streams in Burmese art and popular religion. I was drawn westward by the distinctively Arakanese styles of architecture and iconography and later came to appreciate how influential Bengali Muslim and Moghul forms were in the conception and design of the earlier Arakanese Buddhist temples and stupas (pre-17th century A.D.).

At that time only a few foreign scholars had been able to work in Arakan since the end of the British colonial era in 1947. I was extraordinarily fortunate to have been allowed to travel there repeatedly and to extensively survey and photograph the main sites, particularly the great monuments surrounding the abandoned former capital of Mrauk-U, supplanted (after the British conquest of Arakan and Tenessarim in 1825, following the First Burmese War) by the present state capital Sittwe. Sittwe, tellingly, was also widely known then by its alternate place name, Akyab. Exceptionally, for a non-Muslim foreign woman, I was even invited to tour the old main mosque of Sittwe/Akyab. But by no means was I then or now a specialist in Islamic art or civilization.

Before going further into the situation of Arakan, I should provide a general introduction to the decidedly non-homogeneous Burmese Muslim peoples.

While Burma/Myanmar is known for being strongly committed to Buddhism, with the Buddhist majority comprising nearly ninety percent of its population of some fifty million, the important religious minorities include Muslims, Christians (both Catholics and Protestants) and animists. Each of these minority communities, not least the Muslims, is notably heterogeneous in terms of ethnic origin and historical roots.

The Muslim population can be divided into three broad groupings. The first group derives from the traders and the specialized mercenary soldiers (bowmen and artillermen) of various origins in the Islamic world whose presence in the former Burmese kingdom dates back at least to the 11th century in Pagan. Their descendants tend to be businessmen and merchants and are located throughout the present Union of Myanmar, largely in the cities.

The second group, known as the Panthay, is a specific Chinese Muslim subculture who settled originally in the northern part of Burma, where they mostly remain centered around Mandalay. Largely traders, the Panthay have for centuries maintained relations with China and continue to speak Chinese, the language in which they ordinarily still conduct their businesses.

The third group of Muslims, with broadly Indian roots, mostly arrived during the British colonial period. They were recruited in large part by the colonial regime to fill perceived vacancies in the labor force. (Until the 1930s, British Burma was administratively only a province of the Indian Raj, which infuriated Burmese nationalist sensibility.) Coming in overland through adjacent Bengal as well as by sea, Indians occupied positions ranging from coolies through civil servants even up to administrators. A significant part of this community, however, actually long predated the coming of the British — especially Chittagonian lowland rice farmers and petty traders in Arakan. Some of these were annual migrants and some permanent settlers.

While many or even most of the Indians originally transported during the Raj were Hindu, to avoid forfeiting caste Hindus tended to return to the subcontinent after making their fortunes or fulfilling their contracts in Burma. Muslims, in contrast, were more likely to immigrate permanently.

The descendents of this group, which were always largely urbanized, are distributed throughout the cities of modern Burma, but their concentration remains especially large in Arakan State, where in certain rural districts adjacent to Bangladesh they may well comprise a majority. This in part reflects the longstanding Chittagonian presence there.

In Burmese, the highly pejorative term kalaḥ was originally applied to Indians only, but it now encompasses foreigners generally. Throughout the British period, anti-colonial tensions and racial violence were directed disproportionately towards the Indian and more specifically, towards the Indian Muslim minority, in part because they were more visible and certainly more vulnerable than were the British themselves. While this may have dissipated after independence, when many Indians emigrated from Burma following their especially harsh situation during WWII, even today many Burmese resent what they remember as too many Indians holding important positions in the British administration.

In 1990-92 I was in far southeastern Bangladesh to participate in an ambitious cultural patrimony survey of the remaining Rakhine architecture and iconography in the regions downcoast of Chittagong and centered around Ramu, at the foot of the hilltracts east of Cox’s Bazar. This entire reach of the Bay of Bengal shoreline had been under the full control of the Rakhine Buddhist kings for hundreds of years before it was retrieved for Muslim Bengal in 1666 by the Moghul sultans, as Arakan fell into decline a century prior to its final conquest by Continued on page 6
Burma. By this time, of course, the British had become the masters of Bengal.

By coincidence in 1992, I was based in Cox’s Bazar at the very apogee of the third (and largest) exodus — forced or otherwise — of several hundred thousand “Rohingya” refugees who had been recently invited to leave Arakan by the Burmese military. They were welcomed more or less by the Bangladeshi government, and were housed and fed by the UNHCR, along with other humanitarian NGOs, including Islamic NGOs.

“Rohingya” was the widely-used (and generally non-pejorative) term for part of the Muslim community in Arakan, who were ethnically very close to the Bengalis and who spoke a Chittagongian dialect of Bengali. There seems little question that the refugees then included some families who had been in Arakan probably before the British ever arrived, as well as other families who were much more recent, and nominally illegal, immigrants from Bangladesh. (At least two districts of Arakan bordering Bangladesh had become majority Muslim in the decades following WWII, although there were furious disagreements over how that had come about.)

The refugee camps were concentrated in the vicinity of Cox’s Bazar. Whatever their past glories, the remaining Arakanese people there had not only become a tiny minority in a sea of native Bengali Muslims, especially since the emergence of independent Bangladesh, but were suddenly vastly outnumbered even by the refugee population. They were not very positively disposed to the Arakanese Buddhist community, and even then a jihadi tendency was stirring.

Several historical Arakanese stupas nearby had been destroyed just prior to my arrival in Cox’s Bazar, whether by treasure hunters or jihadis (or both) was unclear. Buddhist temple lands were increasingly being squatted, some by Rohingya refugees, some by opportunistic locals, and irreplaceable religious art was being looted and openly sold in the curio shops of Gulshan, Dhaka.

Conversely, on the Burmese side of the border, since 2000 one of the most ancient mosques had been destroyed in the former royal capital Mrauk-U to establish a military camp. Several lesser mosques also had been torched — in one case while worship was underway. While most of the Rohingyas who were then in the camps have been permitted to return to their former homes in Burma, there are certainly elements of the Rakhine Buddhist community including within the sangha itself that would like to see a renewal of ethnic cleansing. Complicating the situation is the fear of the central government in Rangoon that too robust a local suppression of Rohingyas would likely lead to empowering the long-simmering but heretofore marginalized Rakhine Buddhist separatist tendency!

The question of whether and to what degree Arakan was actually Islamic five centuries earlier continues to be fraught with the largest political significance, as activist Muslims today make claims for “restoring” Arakan to the “Umaa” and to dar-al-Islam, predicated on numismatic evidence, e.g., coins minted by the profoundly Buddhist Rakhine kings with Arabic and Farsi epigrams indicative of relations with the Moghul sultan in Delhi, and respectful of the Bengali Muslim populations then ruled from Mrauk-U.

Other scholars and historians have meanwhile begun to work more seriously on exactly these issues, e.g., in “These Buddhist kings with Muslim names” Jacques Leider of EFEO has been re-evaluating the numismatic gestures of the 16th century Rakhine kings in light of pressing commercial considerations along the Bay of Bengal littoral. Swapna Bhattacharya of Calcutta University is analyzing relations between the Bangladeshi, Indian and Burmese governments in the event of a potential confrontation between emerging radicalized Rohingyas and traditionally “moderate” Bengali Muslims.
Conference, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada, May 23, 2003. This paper reported on the feasibility of collecting student performance data from several different locations over the Web and then storing that data in a central location for analysis. In this way, several small samples could be combined to provide statistically significant results. The study found that there were no important technical difficulties, but that the coordination and communication among the various sites needed more attention.

Dwight Y. King (Political Science) gave a lecture, “Update on Indonesia and East Timor” at the Institute for Learning in Retirement, Northern Illinois University on January 22, 2003. In February 2003 he participated in the panel discussion on “Southeast Asia: The New Front in the War on Terrorism?” at The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. On March 22, 2003 he gave a recorded telephone interview with BBC-London about U.S.-Indonesia relations. On September 26, 2003 he gave a lecture, “Democracy in a Majority Muslim Nation: The Indonesian Experience,” at a conference for high school teachers on New Ideas in History, NIU. During January 17-25, 2004, Prof. King traveled to Indonesia for the Carter Center to assess the need for and receptivity to a delegation of International Election Monitors who would monitor the Indonesian elections this year. On March 6, 2004, he also participated in a roundtable at the AAS meeting on “Indonesia’s Elections: What Can We Expect?”


Susan D. Russell (Anthropology) presented two papers at the 7th International Conference on Philippine Studies, held in Leiden, The Netherlands, June 16-19, 2004. The first paper was an invited keynote lecture entitled “Stories of Development: the Dilemmas of Resource Management in the Philippines”. The second paper was part of a State-of-the-Art panel on Philippine studies organized by Bellinda Aquino, and was entitled “Anthropological Perspectives on Environmental Change in the Philippines”. She has also written an article entitled “Feasts of Merit: the Politics of Ethnicity and Ethnic Icons in the Highland Philippines” for inclusion in a festschrift to honor a colleague at the University of the Philippines in Baguio City. Together with Dr. Lina Davide-Ong, she directed the 2003-04 ACCESS Philippines grant funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State. In December 2003, she traveled throughout Mindanao with the in-country coordinator, Dr. Nagasuara Madale, and in-country coordinator’s assistant, Dr. Noemi Medina, to interview semi-finalists for inclusion in the U.S.-based training institute on conflict resolution and inter-ethnic dialogue held at NIU in April, 2004. She also taught a new Title VI-funded seminar in Spring 2004 called “Anthropological Perspectives on Muslim Cultures”.

Daniel Unger (Political Science) published “The Heuristic Value of the Developmental State Model as Applied to Southeast Asia” in David Arase, ed., The Challenge of Change: East Asia in the New Millennium (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2003). In March he was in Washington, D.C. for discussions supported by the Stanley Foundation on U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia and presented a paper, “What are the Determinants of Human Capabilities and How are Individuals Protected Against Economic Instability? States, Social Movements, and Social Security in Middle Income Countries” in Montreal at the Annual Meetings of the International Studies Association.

Ann Wright-Parsons (Director, Anthropology Museum) has worked at reopening the Anthropology Museum and installing a temporary exhibit called “African Dialogues: Contemporary Painting and Traditional Artifacts of the Congo”. She is also working on an exhibit on Islam in Southeast Asia for next year and will host a Service Eldorhostel to conserve the Anthropology Museum’s textiles, most of which are from Southeast Asia. The museum has also received two gifts of rare Southeast Asian textiles.


**ACCESS Philippines Project**

Participating Filipino activists on their first day at NIU.

Dr. Susan Russell, Director, Center for Southeast Asian Studies and Dr. Lina Davide-Ong, Director, International Training Office, welcomed 33 Muslim and Christian activists from the Philippines for a training institute designed to promote interethnic dialogue and conflict resolution. The program was made possible by a $200,000 grant from the U.S. Department of State.

Titled “Bridging the Gap: Engaging a New Generation in the Southern Philippines”, the Northern Illinois University training institute aimed to teach conflict resolution skills, examine the important role of volunteerism in civil society and introduce participants to American institutions that promote tolerance and religious diversity. Participants also studied the historical, ethical, and moral

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Shifting Fields: Reflections on a Year of Ethnomusicological Research in Burma

by Christopher Miller

Christopher is a former FLAS student who earned his M.Mus. degree at Northern Illinois University. He has accepted a position as Southeast Asian Bibliographer at Arizona State University.

"... in many cases a detailed research design turns out to have little relationship to the research that finally emerges from a field trip" (Pelto 1970: 252).

In a sense, my field research in Burma was bound to be different by design alone. Having completed a Master’s of Music degree at Northern Illinois University and having not yet enrolled in a Ph.D. program, I was not necessarily expected to return with material for a thesis. In fact, as a recipient of a Blakemore Freeman Fellowship for Advanced Asian Language Study, my sole responsibility was to maintain an intensive course of study in the Burmese language—certainly something that occupied a great deal of my attention. And, after all, this was Burma. While showing signs of opening to scholars, the country remains a difficult place in which to do research. However easy it may have been to rest on my laurels, though, I did possess an initial research plan that I naively considered well-constructed. That nothing developed as planned is perhaps no great surprise. And while Pelto’s quote above is indicative of my own personal research experience on the surface, I have an addendum to make to his astute observation. Here I hope to demonstrate that the research that eventually emerged from my trip, while not the kind for which I had initially hoped, was not wholly unpredictable nor out of my control. Instead, the shifting fields of my study reflected my own previous experiences, educational history, and musical life. In the end, my own “shadow” kept me in the field long enough to find the topic that now occupies my research well beyond my physical departure from the field.

Though the most visible of all musical traditions known to the country, Burma’s recent political isolation has limited serious inquiry into Bamar music. Current research by Ward Keeler, Gavin Douglas, and Sherry Cox is separated by an entire generation from equally erudite (though inexhaustive) investigation by only a handful of prominent scholars (Judith Becker, Robert Garfias, John Okell, and Muriel Williamson). Output from Burmese scholars, even, has been decidedly narrow. For certain, Bamar “classical” music has not received the intense attention or scrutiny focused on comparable traditions, such as those of Java and Bali. There is much to learn about the Bamar tradition, and I for one wanted desperately to explore. Having developed contacts within the Ministry of Culture, the University of Culture, and independent musicians on a brief visit to Rangoon and Mandalay two years before and benefiting from additional acquaintances cultivated during my tenure at NIU, I felt prepared to begin as I set off in the fall of 2002.

Almost as soon as I had arrived, the tenth annual national performing arts competition was held in Rangoon. Sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, the competition is organized into singing, instrumental music, composition, and dance (including dance drama and puppetry) divisions. Designed to promote what the government calls “Myanmar cultural heritage and union spirit,” the competition features contestants from all fourteen political states and divisions. Interestingly, participants are required to wear the official “national dress” costume of the region they represent regardless of actual ethnicity or the fact that all traditions performed at the contest are Bamar. Though thoroughly investigated in recent ethnomusicological work (Douglas 2000), the competition served as a welcome introduction to musical life both in the capital and (due to participation from all political states and divisions) beyond. While I was encouraged to see the competitions daily over its eighteen-day run, “observation” in the context of my research goals was only a springboard to deep understanding of Bamar musical culture. To follow Titon’s reasoning, I am among those that view field research as more than mere observation and collection; rather, “fieldwork leads us to ask what it is like for a person (ourselves included) to make and to know music as lived experience” (Titon 1997: 87). What I needed most—and found myself lacking from the beginning—was musical interaction. As time passed over the first few months, I came to discover that my previously arranged contacts were quite superficial at best and unlikely to lead to the kind of research I sought. Given Burma’s past political turmoil, musicians for the most part were not able (or in some cases willing) to offer me a participant’s role in musical life (i.e. study among the students at the University of Culture, apprenticeship with an ensemble, etc.). Meetings and private lessons with master musicians were certainly available to me and often welcome; although, I found that these too often removed music from the context of a lived musical experience. Needless to say, the trip began with growing frustrations.

In the meantime, my wife, an Indonesian citizen and trained traditional Javanese dancer, had been invited to participate in a variety of cultural performances through the Indonesian Embassy in Rangoon. Since I had studied gamelan ensembles in Java for over two years, I was also welcomed into the ensemble. In that sense, the first few months of my Burmese research experience was in many ways an Indonesian experience. The encounters with the musical and dance ensembles at the embassy also offered the first interesting research opportunity for my trip. As a matter of practice and symbol of national culture, Indonesian ensembles and consulate general offices are often outfitted with a Javanese gamelan ensemble, although less frequently with Javanese master musicians attached. Therefore, it is rare that a trained Javanese musician is on staff to teach the music properly. Having previously performed with the staff of the Indonesian consulate office in Chicago (led by a Balinese cultural officer) and now with the embassy ensemble in Rangoon (led by a Javanese school teacher employed in the diplomatic school with limited musical training), I began to make interesting observations about the musical traditions that develop in these circumstances. Often termed “outsider music,” I became deeply interested in the music created by these untrained ensembles: at once “wrong” in terms of the actual gamelan tradition as practiced in Java, though “right” in the sense that these isolated communities manage to re-create music in

"The Mandala"

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their own living context. I feverishly recorded (with permission) all rehearsals in Rangoon with the future intent to present research based on my findings, something that would not have been possible for me without previous training in Javanese music.

Pa’O musician. Pa’O Literary and Cultural Council, Taunggyi, Shan State, Burma. Photo by Christopher Miller

Further into my period of study, I was introduced to the director of the Mandalay Myoma Music Association, an ensemble of musicians dedicated to performing both Bamar and Western dance band music. Primarily composed of instruments common to the average, large jazz ensemble (piano, bass, drums, saxophones, clarinets, trumpets, and trombones) with the occasional Bamar drum added in, the ensemble invited me (with my previous training in saxophone performance) to join in performances during the Thingyan festivities. Perched atop the association’s swan-shaped float (elevated thankfully above the water-dousing revelers below) with over thirty musicians and dancers, we rode about Mandalay for two days playing traditional Burmese dance songs mixed in with the occasional Goodman or Ellington tune. The event also led to a fascinating introduction to the innovations of saxophone performance and organology in modern Burma. First asked to share some thoughts on saxophone technique with the association’s musicians, I eventually spent much more time attempting to learn and imitate the complex idiosyncrasies of embellishment in current Burmese saxophone performance. Intense economic hardships had also forced the musicians to adopt innovative practices in maintaining their instruments. Favorite among these was an instrument maker who had developed a process whereby he was able to fashion outstanding saxophone mouthpieces out of the powder used for constructing dentures. A fabulous research and living musical experience for me, I hope to share these findings also in more detail in the near future. The above research opportunities were less random occurrences than they may at first appear. Made possible by previous musical experiences in different places (i.e. Java and the North Carolina School of the Arts), they also awakened me to something painfully obvious in the musical culture of Burma, both nationally and as experienced by scholars. Burmese musical life is much more diverse than is currently represented in the national media, the University of Culture curriculum, the national performing arts competition, and Western ethnomusicological scholarship. Seemingly obvious, this observation is crucial in the fact that Bamar music dominates current consciousness about music in Burma without being wholly representative of a balanced view of national musical life. This has led me to the study of minority music in Burma beginning with that of the Pa’O, a Tibeto-Burman group on the Karenic branch who occupy large areas in the southern Shan, Karen, Kayah, and Mon States. Emboldened to understand more about minority musics in the country, I spent the final period of my research trip documenting and experiencing music as the Pa’O make it. Central to Pa’O music is a tradition of sung texts and religious texts (aside from a small number of Baptist, the Pa’O are devoutly Buddhist) accompanied by khaya, a modified twenty-button Anglo concertina. Apparently adopted during the colonial period, the instrument replaced bamboo mouth organs (also reed instruments) and has been in use for over one hundred years. In contrast to popular assumption, the music is quite intricate and complex, requiring great skill of performers. The singing style is highly nuanced, and khaya performance requires a certain dexterity due to embellishment techniques. Given that there have been only limited attempts to understand minority music (and specifically that of the Pa’O), I found my initial attempts happily welcomed by local musicians. I have also, ultimately, found what I was looking for in a field research experience, the opportunity to learn about a music in its living musical context.

In the end, the tools that I took into the field: my previous musical experiences, my educational history, and my desire to investigate musical life directed me towards a research topic different than the one I had first envisioned. However, if those parts of my musical life had not asserted themselves at the right time in the field, I can only imagine that I would have failed to complete any lasting research at all. In that sense, the part of me that I carried into my field research was key to its ultimate success.

References


dimensions of the ethno-political landscape in Southeast Asia.

Taking part in activities during the program.

The Filipino activists, most of whom are young people, arrived on March 31 and spent the month of April on campus. They came from Mindanao, the largest and least-developed island in the southern Philippines, as well as from Basilan and Tawi-Tawi in the Sulu archipelago. In August 2004, Dr. Russell and Dr. Davide-Ong will join the group in Mindanao again for follow-on activities and cultural immersion field trips. Dr. Nagasura Madale and Dr. Noemi Medina of Capitol University, Cagayan de Oro City, are the in-country project coordinators. The U.S. Embassy in Manila and the International Visitors Program-Philippines are also assisting in the recruitment, orientation, and follow-on program in Mindanao.

Cultural performance by the participants.

Mindanao is home to 13 different ethnolinguistic groups and has been a frequent site of civil unrest. Muslims, Christians and other indigenous peoples populate the region. The project will be renewed for a second year in 2004-05.

The Mandala

Outreach Update

Teachers Institutes on Southeast Asia

Culture and Religion in Southeast Asia, June 14 - 18, 2004

This summer the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University sponsored a five-day institute for teachers on culture and religion in Southeast Asia. The Institute included presentations and demonstrations by NIU faculty, staff and graduate students. The major purpose of the Institute was to provide K-14 teachers and future teachers with accurate and current resources on Southeast Asia for use in their classrooms. Teachers also had an opportunity to meet and network with current teachers who are developing materials and lesson plans for bringing Southeast Asia into the classroom. These teachers are part of the Southeast Asia Master Teacher Program at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University.

For more information see http://www.niu.edu/cseas/suminstitute2004.htm or contact Julie Lamb, Outreach Coordinator, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University.

Global Studies Forum

In March, the Outreach Coordinator attended and presented a workshop on Southeast Asian resources at the Global Studies Forum held in Bloomington, Illinois. The Global Studies Forum is a part of the Illinois International High School Initiative (IIHS) program which is a statewide program focusing on the international dimension in secondary schools. Through partnerships between schools, communities, education institutions, business and non-profit organizations, IIHS helps to create better understanding and communication among our global neighbors. IIHS is sponsored by the International Career Academy (IMSA), the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Consortium for International Education, the Illinois Community College Board, UIUC International Programs and Studies, and e-learning Illinois.

GlobalFest

This year is the second year that the Center for Southeast Asian Studies has participated in GlobalFest. GlobalFest is an annual student conference that focuses on increasing world understanding through language immersion classes, performance, games and workshops. Each year over 1200 high school and middle school students, teachers and volunteers from over 40 Illinois schools meet to practice new languages and learn about new cultures. This year, Theodora Hendio, one of two visiting Fulbright Teaching Assistants at NIU, provided Indonesian Immersion Classes and Julie Lamb provided sessions on using SEA Site. GlobalFest is largely sponsored by the Illinois State Board of Education.

NIU Students Prepare Southeast Asian Food for Cultural Foods Class

In January 2004, four graduate students from Southeast Asia and 16 students from the College of Health and Human Sciences (FCNS 424) came together to learn about the cultures and foods of Southeast Asia. After a panel on Southeast Asia by graduate students Rey Ty (Philippines), Dini Rahim (Indonesia) and Nattira Anakasiri (Thailand), all gathered in the FCNS kitchens to prepare and share dishes from Southeast Asia.
Council on Thai Studies, October 15 – 16, 2004

You are invited to share your research at the annual meeting for the Council on Thai Studies. The Council on Thai Studies, or COTS, is an informal organization of scholars interested in all aspects of Thai studies. COTS provides scholars with a venue for reporting preliminary findings, opportunities to receive pre-publication feedback, and a forum to discuss field and archive challenges. Paper proposals are now being accepted and are due August 30, 2004. Acceptance of paper proposals, information regarding scheduling of panels, and assignment of panel moderators and discussants will be sent in September 2004 to those who submit proposals as well as to those who indicate their intention to attend. If you need more information, visit our website at http://www.niu.edu/cseas/cots2004CFP.htm.

Burma Studies Conference, Center for Burma Studies, October 22-24, 2004

For more information about this conference, visit the Center for Burma Studies website at http://www.grad.niu.edu/burma/.

The Ninth International Conference on Thai Studies (ICTS), April 3-6, 2005

The Ninth ICTS invites papers that embrace a broad definition of Thai studies, including studies of all ethnic groups within the Kingdom of Thailand, as well as Thai/Tai peoples of Southeast Asia, India and China. Papers and presentations from all scholarly disciplines and all intellectual perspectives are welcome. The Ninth ICTS has been intentionally scheduled April 3-6, 2005 at Northern Illinois University so as to follow the March 31-April 3, 2005 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Chicago, Illinois (65 miles east of DeKalb, Illinois, where Northern Illinois University is located). Proposals for papers, panels, and presentations are due by the end of October 2004. For more information or questions, please contact us by e-mail at thaiconf@niu.edu. Please watch the website at http://www.niu.edu/thaiconf/ for further information on registration and other information.

First International Conference on Lao Studies (ICLS), May 20-22, 2005

The Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Northern Illinois University is pleased to announce the First International Conference on Lao Studies (ICLS) to be held on Friday-Sunday, May 20-22, 2005 in DeKalb, Illinois, USA. The main objective of this conference is to provide an international forum for scholars to present and discuss various aspects of Lao studies. The conference will feature papers on any topic concerning Lao Studies. Topics include all ethno-linguistic groups of Laos, the Isan Lao and other ethnic Lao groups in Thailand, cross-border ethnic groups in Thailand, Vietnam, China, Burma, and Cambodia (e.g., Hmong, Tai Dam, Phuan, Kammu), and overseas Lao. Topics are provisionally divided into the following broad categories: (1) languages and linguistics; (2) folk wisdom and literature; (3) belief, ritual, and religions; (4) history; (5) politics; (6) economics and environment; (7) ethno-cultural contact and exchange; (8) architecture, arts, music, and handicrafts; (9) archaeology; (10) science and medicine; (11) information technology; (12) the media and popular culture; and others. For more information, visit our website at http://www.seasite.niu.edu/laoc/events/Conference2005/FICLSD.htm

Joint Conference Between CSEAS at Ohio and NIU:
Call for Papers
Conference on Religious Resurgence and New Religious Movements in Southeast Asia
Date: March 4-5, 2005
Ohio University, Athens, Ohio

Since the end of World War II new movements have arisen in every major religious tradition. In the post-colonial world this resurgence of religion as a political and social force derives from a widespread and profound interest at the failure of modernity and secular nationalism to bring prosperity, a growing gap between rich and poor nations, corruption and abuse of power. In Southeast Asia, Buddhist, Islamic and Christian traditions have developed new forms of civic engagement and played a central role in democracy movements. At the same time militant movements have emerged that challenge traditional religious institutions, and violent conflict between people of different religious traditions has erupted. These dual events have led to increased debate over secularism, modernity and religious identity, and the relationship of religion and state.

The organizers of this conference solicit abstracts for panels on themes related to these issues or individual paper abstracts under the following rubrics: How are religious ideas being used to shape attitudes toward modernity and identity? What are the dynamics of debates over the separation of religion and the state? Is there an increasing essentialization of religious identity? How are debates in different religious traditions about gender and the role of women playing out in Southeast Asia? What is the role of religious education in shaping the next generation? How are religious traditions in Southeast Asian countries being affected by the international and regional factors?

Deadline for abstracts: October 15, 2004. For further information, please contact Karla Schneider (karlaschneider@msn.com), Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Ohio University. This conference is funded in part by the Title VI, U.S. Department of Education grant to the CSEAS at NIU, but is a joint undertaking with CSEAS at Ohio.
Vat Sisaket Museum, Vientiane: From The Frescoes Back to The Text

by Catherine Raymond

Vat Sisaket is the only important structural complex to have survived the complete razing of Vientiane in 1827-28 following a failed rebellion against the Siamese by Chao Anouvong, the last Lane Xang king who only a decade earlier had overseen the construction of the elaborately decorated new Royal Monastery (original name: Vat Satasahatsārāma) on a site then inside the palace wall. Partly now a museum operated under the authority of Vientiane Prefecture, Vat Sisaket remains the most important complex in the Lao capital — historically and aesthetically. The last extensive physical renovation of Sisaket was in 1925, and was designed and supervised by the late Leon Fombertaux, a member of Ecole francaise d’Exteme-Orient with the assistance of Prince Phetsarath, who later became a key political figure of the ancien regime.

The murals inside the sima or vihaan (i.e., the main image hall used for ordination, prayer and meditation) are largely the original paintings from about 1820-22, although they have been overpainted in certain places with mixed artistic success, and are overall obviously deteriorating fast. In their entirety, the Sisaket vihaan frescoes illustrate a single, wonderfully intricate story — the Balasankhaya Jataka — a previous lifetime of the Buddha in the incarnation of Prince Pookharabat, who appointed an honest thief as his Prime Minister, and who ruled with a magical fan.

Fortunately, the complete wall paintings have already been photographed and scanned at high resolution. Meanwhile, the cloister roof leaks badly, the original cloister murals and stenciling have been mostly lost, the peripheral drainage system of the Vat is clogged with debris and cut off from its former outfall, and — partly as a consequence of that blockage — the vihaan wall paintings are spalling badly and will be gone soon unless stabilized. In recent decades, certainly, and likely for long before that, the abbots and senior monks of Vat Sisaket had very little real knowledge of the content or meaning of the vihaan wall paintings, even to the level of identifying which of the Jatakas were actually being so illustrated. Vat Sisaket also houses a most impressive collection of bronze Lao Buddha images dating from the 8th to the 19th century, but potentially vulnerable to theft.

Of the entire Vat Sisaket compound, only the inner cloister containing the vihaan, with the older stupas and the empty library outside, comprise a state museum under the primary responsibility of Vientiane Prefecture. Several times during the year, the complete compound is open to Buddhist festivals drawing huge crowds, when the museum doors are wide open. No admission is charged, and Lao people from inside and outside Ban Sisaket pay homage at the vihaan altar. Such events are planned by the sangha of the actual Vat Sisaket, which surrounds the Vat Sisaket museum, and which never ceased to function as an active monastery across decades when the rest of Vientiane was mostly overgrown ruins.

In 1998 a three-year agreement was signed between the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris and the Ministry of Information and Culture of Lao PDR. This collaborative project, PIIL (Projet d’Inventaire d’Iconographie Lao), started surveying, researching, cataloging and documenting the Buddha images in Vientiane temples. The goal was to offer a database for scholars and students in art, as well as for the Lao authorities to protect the Lao Cultural Heritage. Due to the history of the royal temple, Vat Sisaket was selected to be the first temple to be studied.

Within this project I conducted personal research on the wall paintings inside the Vat Sisaket in order to produce a dozen standing interpretive panels, some of them quite large, for mounting inside and outside the cloister. While intended as a permanent exhibition, these displays — with considerable texts in Lao, French and English — were designed to be portable so they could be temporarily put out of view when the museum buildings were temporarily recaptured by the temple and the ban. In fact, all the new Sisaket panels were left in place during the pi mai (Lao New Year) 2003 celebrations, when they drew a continuous stream of readers but no objections, to the best of our knowledge, over re-branding the sacred image and ordination halls as an internationally recognized cultural property and educational resource.

Besides erecting site signage in distant Huaphan Province as well as in Vientiane, the Digital Conservation Facility of Laos (DCFL) mobilizes funds and expertise — Lao and international — to strengthen regional capacity in museology, archaeology and environmental management. We continue to survey artifacts and sites in the built and natural environments; to document the degradation and sometimes the intentional destruction of unrecognized or inconvenient or low-priority treasures; and to develop locally useful digital conservation products and services that could also be of global interest.

More recently, with support from the World Monuments Fund (WMF), the condition of the Vat Sisaket murals has been evaluated by Rodolfo Lujan, a leading expert in the rehabilitation of Buddhist temple paintings. Recommendations are now being drafted for various conservation approaches, including:

- conventional physical stabilization and restoration of the frescoes themselves, ideally within a larger stabilization and restoration program for all the structures encompassing the Vat Sisaket museum.
- complete virtual restoration, where degraded sections of the murals are repaired or enhanced digitally using image editing software, with the results published in physical media (CD- and DVD-ROM, and/or book) and also mounted on-site at computer kiosks or public workstations, and at least partially
For several years, Sisaket was on the WMF's list of the "World's 100 most endangered monuments," and an American private donor had offered, through the WMF, a $100K matching grant towards stabilizing and rehabilitating the Vat, an offer which has since formally expired. Absent much interest from other quarters in such an extensive restoration project, Vat Sisaket was subsequently replaced on the "100 most endangered" list by another worthy site, but the WMF grants manager suggests that such a matching grant could well be re-extended. Also, we understand that potential private donors in France have been awaiting the completion, finally, of the mural stabilization plan and would also consider a grant request on that order. Actually, nearly every tourist in Vientiane — Lao, Isan (ethnic Lao of northeastern Thailand), and foreign — visits the Vat Sisaket museum (achieving about 150,000 ticketed entries annually, @ $0.20 for locals and $0.45 for others). Most Lao people, including many school children, are quite familiar with the tragic history of Chao Anouvong. The problem there now is less a matter of outreach and education within the domestic Lao community as it is the immediate, crying need for essential stabilization measures and for consistent preventive maintenance thereafter. More ambitious restorations, both artistic and structural, could be performed in due course, concomitant with locating the major funding and meanwhile strengthening local capacity in cultural heritage conservation (CHC).

The priority element now under discussion with Lao stakeholders inside and outside the Ministries and the Prefecture and also with foreign CHC donors is to conduct an on-site, hands-on training workshop in the theory and practice of CHC, beginning with wall painting conservation and masonry repair. We foresee a thirty-day initial training phase for approximately fifteen participants, of which ten would be local, with the Lao trainees coming from Vientiane Prefecture, the Division of Archaeological Research, the Lao National Museum (LNM), the university faculties of Architecture and Engineering, and the Institute of Fine Arts. All of these participants would comprise a core of national expertise in CHC to be mobilized for future conservation and interpretive projects at Sisaket and elsewhere. They would be joined by five post-graduate student-trainees from the USA (Northern Illinois University) and France (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales). The actual stabilization and restoration of the Sisaket vihaan (prayer Hall) interior would begin under this element.

Tasks will include emergency intervention on the wall paintings themselves (fixation and consolidation of detached paint and preparatory layers); emergency intervention on the polychrome woodwork (fixation/consolidation of detached gilding/paint/lacquer layers); outline drawings of the mural stories for new interpretative keys; the eviction of the bat population from the vihaan superstructure; and the presentation of newly restored areas as an example for future work. To the extent feasible, the curriculum and the outcome of this training would be documented on NIU's SEASite: an interactive, Web-based language and culture learning resource (www.seasite.niu.edu).

Presently, we are well along in authoring a multimedia computer installation largely based on the existing archival materials, presenting the treasures of Vat Sisaket and the conservation efforts already underway. We intend it to be mounted on a public kiosk or workstation housed perhaps in a new humidity-controlled shelter within the cloister itself, but which could also be distributed online in abridged form and published in a comprehensive version on CD- or DVD-ROM, including high resolution (real size or better) mapped archival images of the complete wall paintings of the Sisaket vihaan, showing them unrestored, digitally enhanced, and physically conserved by degrees. There will be hyperlinks to the actual texts being illustrated, including capsule translations in modern Lao, English and French; virtual reality (QTVR) panoramas of key building interiors and general settings; a visual and textual catalogue of the 300 most important Buddha statues now on exhibition at Sisaket; the full graphical database of historical and recent maps, photographs, sketches, and architectural renderings; and navigable video clips of the applied conservation practices.

We expect in coming months to also deliver a three-day "sensitization" workshop on cultural heritage for midlevel and higher Lao government officials. Topics to be covered would include the role of CHC in education and in economic development; an overview of physical conservation methodologies and digital museological tools; the national/transnational regulatory and legal instruments for protecting irreplaceable cultural patrimony (not least the relevant LPDR laws and decrees), e.g., the International Convention on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage (promulgated in 1972 and ratified by Laos in 1987); and the engagement of institutions for combating illegal traffic in art objects, such as Interpol and UNESCO.

We are also submitting a proposal soon to the Illinois Humanities Council to produce a breakthrough outreach exhibition at the Lao Temples vats in Rockford and Elgin, Illinois. This initiative will also present the treasures of the VSM to the most active Lao Buddhist communities deep in the prairie heartland — not far from NIU's main campus — with a virtual link to American-supported cultural heritage conservation projects inside the Lao PDR. Materials would include replicas of the Sisaket wall paintings and of the existing interpretive panels there; virtual reality panoramas and other digital representations; plus original examples and also microfiche copies of the actual palm leaf manuscripts comprising the Balasankhaya Jataka texts. The Sisaket Heritage exhibition would coincide with the First International Conference on Lao Studies at NIU, planned for 20-22 May 2005, for which the first call for papers just went out.

This a collaborative project with:

Alan Potkin, Ph.D., Team Leader of Digital Conservation Facility, Laos
Viengkeo Souksavatdy, Director of Department of Archaeological Research, Lao PDR Ministry of Information and Culture
Rodolfo Lujan, expert on Asian Wall Paintings at UNESCO
Footnotes:
1 The Jataka tales comprise hundreds of non-canonical epics and stories — largely derived from various pre-Buddhist literatures — which over centuries have been reconfigured into specifically Buddhist moral instructions and a wellspring of the plastic and performing arts throughout Southeast Asia.
2 Ban Sisaket designates the community living around and supporting Vat Sisaket itself. The words “ban” means village in Lao and other Thai languages.
3 The minimal requirement for a full digital archive of a threatened temple is more than demonstrated in the case of nearby Vat Oup Mong, where the celebrated illustrations of the Phralak-Phralam Jataka, “the Lao Ramayana”, painted in 1938 by the monk Thit Panh and his boy novice assistants, were lost when the vihaan housing them was demolished by the local community in December 2000 to make way for a larger, more prestigious image hall. That decision reflected both the admirable tradition of making thorough temple reconstruction, and the regrettable devaluation of unique local cultural assets — seen instead as deteriorated, old-fashioned and embarrassing.

Burma Interest Group of Northern Illinois University (BIG-NIU)

As one of NIU’s newest cultural groups, the Burma Interest Group (BIG-NIU), founded by Cindy Kleinmeyer (President), Tyler McKellar (Vice President), Rey Ty (Secretary) and Dom Pelletier (Treasurer) with assistance from faculty advisors Professor Catherine Raymond and Professor U Saw Tun is bringing Burmese culture to life on campus through a series of upcoming events and activities. On April 16th, BIG-NIU in cooperation with its sponsors (the Southeast Asia Club, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, the Center for Burma Studies, Believing in Culture, Unity in Diversity and PAISA) hosted the Burma Cultural Night. The Cultural Night’s highlights included a professional Burmese dance, music and puppet performance and a traditional Burmese dinner and dessert. BIG-NIU will also help host the biannual International Burma Conference at NIU on October 22-24, 2004. Other events will include a trip to the Burmese Buddhist temple and a movie night. Membership is free, so check us out online at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/burmainterestgroup/ and join us in celebrating Burma’s rich and vibrant culture!

Student Conference

The 2004 NIU Southeast Asia Student Conference was held on February 28, 2004. The keynote speaker was Jeffrey Winters, associate professor of political science at Northwestern University. His talk was on “Mafia Regimes and High Growth Development”. Other topics at the conference included cultural and social development, art history, economics, foreign policy, Islam and democracy, human rights, and the environment.

There were fourteen papers presented by students at the conference. The best graduate paper was “Liberal Islam Discourse in Indonesia: Its Origins and Themes” by Nico Harjanto (Northern Illinois University). The best undergraduate paper was “Mass Organizations and Economic Policy-Making in Vietnam Woman’s Union” by Kate Hill (George Washington University, Washington, D.C.)

Received Fellowships

Shoua Yang, Ph.D. student in Political Science, received the Dissertation Completion Fellowship for 2004-2005. Cindy Kleinmeyer, Ph.D. student in Political Science, received the Clark and Arlene Neher Endowment for Graduate Studies in Southeast Asian Studies. Cindy will be conducting field research for her dissertation in Southeast Asia on conflict resolution.

FLAS Fellowship Recipients for 2003-2004

Jason Conerly, M.A. student in Anthropology (Thai). Jason’s thesis is on the Menorah ritual: a phenomenon which is essentially designed to appease ancestral spirits and is indigenous to the Southern Thai peoples. He is looking at the integration of power, economics, and beliefs associated with this ritual as well as the Muslim’s conceptualization of personal identity in this Buddhist and Islamic social environment.

Jennifer Gelman, second year law student (Burmese). Jenny’s interests involve refugee and immigration issues. She is pursuing a certificate in Southeast Asian Studies with the aim of addressing the issue of displaced populations in Southeast Asia. Before law school, Jenny worked as a Russian language specialist for a refugee resettlement agency in New York City, assisting Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union.
Jason Johnson, Ph.D. student in Political Science (Thai). Jason's area of specialization is comparative politics with a broad focus on democratization and political economy. His more recent interests include central-local relations and decentralization. He plans to research recent changes in Thai politics at the provincial level and will return to Thailand this summer to study Thai and further develop his research topic.

Michael E. Johnson, M.A. student in Anthropology (Thai). Michael has studied Thai for two years. His interests include Thai culture and applied environmental anthropology in Thailand.

Tyler Gray McKellar, MA student in Political Science (Burmese). On the final stretch of his M.A., this summer Tyler plans to continue in his studies possibly at SEASSI, the Thai border, and in the library.

Dominick Pelletier, M.A. student in Anthropology (Indonesian). Dom's emphasis is on the anthropology of play and play theory. Although based in anthropology, the work also touches on psychology, linguistics, and the fine arts with the purpose of redefining play structure for a practical use in cross cultural education and a better understanding of how we gain knowledge of our culture through play activities. Dom is studying third year Indonesian at the U.S.-INDO program in Jogjakarta this summer.

Kristina Saldi, M.A. student in Political Science (Indonesian). Krisy hopes to go to Indonesia this summer for advanced language training. After completing her program, she hopes to work with a governmental organization such as UNAID or the UN Development Program.

Kheang Un, doctoral candidate in Political Science. He is currently doing the write up of his dissertation on Cambodia's unconsolidated democracy. His research interests are democratization, human rights, and civil society. His most recent publication is in the Journal of Human Rights (Vol. 2, No. 4, December 2003).

Jennifer Weidman, M.A. student in Anthropology (Thai). Jenn is in Thailand this summer to conduct research for her thesis: an organizational study of a multicultural Thai office. After completing her M.A. program, she plans to return to Thailand and apply what she has learned to facilitate relations between Thai and non-Thai people residing or traveling in Thailand. It is her goal to mitigate the occurrence of misunderstandings and their effects on cross-cultural relations.

Carlyne "Lyndy" Worsham, M.A. student in Political Science (Burmese). Lyndy plans to conduct field research in Thailand this summer and next year for her Master's thesis on the impact of the expanded economic sanctions against Burma under the U.S. Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003. She has received a National Security and Education Program scholarship for research in 2004-05.

Nicholas Wiles, M.A. student in Political Science (Thai). Nick's major fields of study in political science are international relations and political philosophy with a concentration in Southeast Asia. His country of interest is Thailand and he is currently in his second year of learning the Thai language.

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- "Maid Visible: Foreign Domestic Workers and the Dilemma of Development in Singapore" by Angelia Poon
- "The Political Economy of Regional Inequality: The Northeast of Thailand 1800–2000" by David Feeny
- "Beneath the Japanese Umbrella: Vietnam’s Hoa Hao during and after the Pacific War" by Tran My-Van
- "Ronald McDonald is a Javanese Saint and an Indonesian Freedom Fighter: Reflections on Globalization" by Ronald A. Lukens-Bull

*The Journal of Burma Studies* Volume 9

- "Coming of the ‘Future King’: Burmese Minlaung Expectations Before and the Second World War" by Susanne Prager
- "Min Ko Naing, ‘Conqueror of Kings’: Burma’s Student Prisoner" by Megan Clymer
- "The Self-conscious Censor: Censorship in Burma under the British 1900–1939" by Emma Larkin

Publications News

2004 promises to be a busy year for Southeast Asia Publications at NIU with several projects nearing completion. Two monographs are on the menu: *The Limits of Kinship: South Vietnamese Households* (1954–1975), a quantitative analysis by David Haines (George Mason University) will become available over the summer, and *Vo Phien and the Sadness of Exile*, John C. Schafer’s (Humboldt State University) study of a prominent Vietnamese writer self-exiled in the United States will arrive in the fall.

Readers should expect three issues of *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* before the end of the year. Volume 17, number 2 will feature articles by Pattana Kitiarsa ("Modernity, Agency, and Lam Sing: Interpreting ‘Music-Culture Contacts’ in Northeastern Thailand"), Julie Shackford-Bradley ("Care: How Indonesian Short Stories Re-Present Urban Space and Public Discourse"), Paul Chambers ("Has Everything Changed in Thai Politics under Thaksin? Political Faction Before and After 2001"), and Seng-Guan Yeoh ("House, Kampung and Tamun: Spatial Hegemony and the Politics and Poetics of Space in Urban Malaysia"). The issue will also highlight the reinstatement of our book review section. Forthcoming volume 18, number 1 will feature an extended essay by Robert Wessing in addition to commentary by other specialists. Volume 18, number 2, guest edited by John A. Lent (Temple University), will be a special issue focused on comic art and cartoons in Southeast Asia.

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**WEBSITES**

- Center for Southeast Asian Studies: [www.niu.edu/cseas/](http://www.niu.edu/cseas/)
- SEAsite: Language and Culture Resources on Southeast Asia: [www.seasite.niu.edu](http://www.seasite.niu.edu)
- Southeast Asia Publications: [www.niu.edu/cseas/seap/home.htm](http://www.niu.edu/cseas/seap/home.htm)

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