This course explores the problem of complexity in the religious traditions of Southeast Asia. Scholars and observers have long recognized that unifying terms such as ‘Buddhism’, ‘Hinduism’, ‘Islam’ and ‘animism’ do not adequately reflect the heterogeneity of the region’s history and culture. Yet, prevailing attempts to account for this complexity — in terms of ‘great and little traditions’, ‘syncretism’, ‘hybridity’ etc. — often do little more than to defer the moment of essentialization; and, as a result, their approaches often appear as uncritical as the oversimplified terminology they wish to call into question. Given its long history of interaction with India, China and the Arabian peninsula, Southeast Asia offers a series of uniquely well-suited case studies for addressing the theoretical questions at stake. This course will explore these questions through a close reading of ethnographies from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma and the Indonesian archipelago.

A Course in Two Parts

The course is divided into two parts. The first part addresses the Buddhist traditions of mainland Southeast Asia, while the second focuses on Islam in Indonesia, with a special emphasis on the island of Java. Our work in PART ONE will center on the relationship between ‘Buddhism’ and a congeries of practices described variously in terms of ‘Brahmanism’, ‘magic’, ‘witchcraft’, ‘spirit cults’ and ‘the supernatural’. Through a series of close readings of both classic and contemporary ethnography, we will find that, despite significant differences between them, most accounts run into much the same set of problems in trying to represent the complexity at play in the relationship between ‘Buddhism’ and ‘spirit cults’, ‘magic’ etc. As we shall see, this problem is closely tied to our underlying assumptions regarding history and the nature of precedent. With this in mind we will shift our attention in PART TWO to contrasting views of history, and how these might affect our approach to ethnographic inquiry. Here we will again be reading both classic and more recent publications, this time centered on Islam in Indonesia. Throughout, we shall reflect on how these readings might help us to formulate better research questions.

Course Requirements:

- Complete and careful reading/viewing of all required course material.
- Regular attendance and active participation in seminar discussion.
- At least two in-class presentations. One of these presentations will take the form of a brief summation of the reading for a selected week; the second presentation will comprise a critical response to another student’s presentation. See below for further details.
- A final essay of no more than 3000 words (approximately 12 A4-sized pages in double-spaced 12pt Times New Roman). The final essay is due on Monday, October 14, 2013. Please plan accordingly. Further details will be distributed in class.
- All work must be completed on time; no extensions will be granted for this course, except on grounds of major life disruption.
Reading and Discussion
For each weekly session there is a REQUIRED TEXT (or texts; and, in at least one case, a film) which will comprise the focus for our seminar discussion. For each session a series of SEMINAR QUESTIONS has also been provided. These are meant to guide your reading/viewing and to help you prepare for our in-class discussion. The questions are deliberately challenging, and often open-ended. Their primary aim is to spur reflection, and so critical conversation. You are encouraged to formulate answers to these questions ahead of our meeting, and to bring questions of your own for the group to consider. The BACKGROUND READING is not required, though it may be especially helpful for the sessions in which you are making a presentation. These references are provided more generally for those who wish to develop a deeper understanding of the issues.

In-Class Presentations
Each participant in the seminar will be expected to make at least two presentations during the course of the semester. The first of these presentations will comprise a concise (15- to 20-minute) overview of the required text(s) for the week, summarizing its central argument, and highlighting both its benefits and possible weaknesses. A second student will then offer a brief (no more than 10-minute) critique of the first student’s presentation. These presentations will provide the foundation for seminar discussion. They are, moreover, intended to help you in developing the skills required for engaging in scholarly dialogue and criticism.

Reading Materials
All REQUIRED READINGS for the course are available through Moodle, and/or on reserve through the library. Below you will find references for additional BACKGROUND READING, both on selected general topics (e.g., ‘Syncretism’, ‘Southeast Asian History’) and for each week’s session.

Background Reading on Syncretism, Hybridity and Other Accounts of Complexity
Background Reading on SEA History & Theories of Indianization, Sanskritization Etc.


Background Reading on Buddhism in South & Southeast Asia


Background Reading on Religion & Culture in Java

- Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1991) *This Earth of Mankind*. New York: Morrow. [This is the first book in the author’s Buru quartet, which also includes Child of all nations, Footsteps and House of glass.]

COURSE OUTLINE
PART ONE: BUDDHISM IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

1) Course Intro: Theorizing Complexity
Monday, April 15, 2013

2) Tathātā: The Idea of Buddhism
Monday, April 22, 2013
REQUIRED TEXTS:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• Define the following terms: dhamma/dharma, kamma/karma, buddha, dukkha/duhkha, anatta/anātman, saṃsāra Pāli, Theravāda, 4 Noble Truths, 8-fold Path, saṅgha, bhikkhu/bhikṣu, sutta/sūtra.
• What is this thing called Buddhism? Where do we find it? And under what conditions might it be taken as an object of anthropological inquiry?
• How did Gombrich’s ‘metaphysical neutrality’ play out in his social history of Theravāda Buddhism? What precisely is a ‘social history’? What other kinds of history are possible?

BACKGROUND READING:
3) Burmese Buddhist Supernaturalists?
Monday, April 29, 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• Again, what precisely is ‘Buddhism’? What is ‘supernaturalism’? And how are they related to one another — both in practice (i.e., ‘on the ground’) and critically (e.g., in Spiro’s estimation)?
• What is the nature of the relationship between canonical text and the practices of Burmese Buddhists?
• How did Spiro retrospectively characterize the relationship between his work and that of other scholars, such as Keyes, Kirsch and Tambiah (see esp. pp. xix-xliv)?

BACKGROUND READING:

4) Buddhism, Brahmanism and Cambodian History
Monday, May 6, 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• “What can we know about religion in ancient Cambodia? Were the old Khmer effectively ‘Indianized’, or did autochthonous deities survive their exposure to foreign influences by putting on a suit of Indic clothing?” (p.1)
• What are the primary ways in which we might interpret and represent the co-presence of Buddhist merit-making and human sacrifice within a single kingdom? Are they part of two largely incompatible religious systems? Alternatively, do they together comprise key elements of a single syncretic system? Or perhaps is the language of system itself misleading? If so, what might be some of the alternatives? And what do we sacrifice in forfeiting the idea of system?
• What is the nature of the relationship between empirical observation and theoretical presupposition? How might our answer to this question affect how we evaluate contrasting interpretations of Cambodian history?
BACKGROUND READING:

5) How Lao… The Spirits of the Place
Monday, May 13. 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• What do you make of Holt’s language of ‘substratum’ and ‘ontology’?
• More generally speaking, how would you compare Holt’s approach with those of Spiro and Harris?
• Why do you think state interests would favor an orthodox *sangha*-centric Buddhism over relations with ‘spirits of the place’?

BACKGROUND READING:

NB: No class meeting on Monday, May 20. 2013, for Pfingstmontag.

6) Popular Buddhism Today
Monday, May 27. 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• According to Kitiarsa, ‘the focal point for students and specialists should be not the harmonious continuities and transformations of a syncretistic religious system, but rather the ruptures and breaks from its seemingly homogenous tradition’ (p461). On what grounds did he make this argument? Were you convinced? Why, or why not?
• What is *hybridity*? And, on Kitiarsa’s account, what benefits does it offer over previous approaches centered on *syncretism* and the like?

• Would Kitiarsa’s approach—with its emphasis on disjuncture and *hybridity*—render interpretations that differ significantly from those of Spiro, Harris and Holt?

**BACKGROUND READING:**


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7) **Ghosts, Monks and Movies... Oh My!**

Monday, June 3, 2013

**REQUIRED TEXT AND FILM:**

• Film: *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*.


**SEMINAR QUESTIONS:**

• Reflecting on the film, and on the ethnographic projects we’ve considered to date, is it possible that scholarly discourse is *necessarily* inadequate to its object? If not, why not? If so, in what specific ways do you think this to be the case?

• What resources might *Uncle Boonmee*... offer for approaching the problem of religio-cultural complexity?

• Kitiarsa and McDaniel have offered important criticisms of established approaches to the study of complexity in the Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia. What sorts of questions should define our approach? What presuppositions are better suited to our object of study?

**BACKGROUND READING:**


PART TWO: ISLAM IN INSULAR SOUTHEAST ASIA

8) Islam Observed: The Symbolic Substratum
Monday, June 10. 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• What is Islam? And under what conditions can it be approached as an object of study?
• How is the Islam of Java related to that of Morocco? And to what specifically does this question refer?
• What is the nature of historical change? And how do we know?
• How do the forms of religio-cultural complexity at play in Geertz’s account of Javanese Islam compare with those we saw in Laos, Burma Thailand and Cambodia?

BACKGROUND READING:

9) Islam in Java: On the Flip Side...
Monday, June 17. 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• What precisely is Woodward’s object of study?
• Again, what is this thing called Islam? And through what sorts of practices can it be discerned in Javanese social life?
• In what ways does Woodward’s account of ‘Islam in Java’ differ from Geertz’ account? With reference to what criteria can these differences be evaluated? And how might we compare their respective sensibilities to our earlier reading on Buddhism in mainland SE Asia?

BACKGROUND READING:
10) Structure, Classification, History
Monday, June 24, 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• What is ‘structure’? What is ‘history’? And how are they related?
• What is the nature of the relationship between ‘myth’, ‘ritual’ and ‘social structure’?
• What regularities and disjunctures can you see with both Geertz’s and Woodward’s accounts of Islam and history in Java? And how might this compare with Spiro, Holt and Kitiarsa on the ‘complexity’ at play in SE Asian Buddhist traditions?

BACKGROUND READING:

11) Cultural Essences, Colonial Legacies
Monday, July 1, 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
• How does Sumarsam theorize the cosmopolitan character of central Javanese gamelan?
• What critical work is accomplished through his use of ‘culture’?
• How might his account be compared with the approaches taken by our other authors?

BACKGROUND READING:
12) Southeast Asian Cosmopolitan
Monday, July 8. 2013
REQUIRED TEXT:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
- What precisely is ‘the Arab cosmopolis’? What sorts of unity does this concept articulate? And what kinds of disjuncture does it aim to highlight?
- What is translation? How do we know when it has taken place? As employed by Ricci, what does the idea of translation help to elucidate? And what might it obscure?
- Does Ricci’s approach to the problem of complexity add anything to what we learned from some of our later authors from the first part of the course (e.g., Kitiarsa, McDaniel)?

BACKGROUND READING:

13) Between Tongues
Monday, July 15. 2013
REQUIRED TEXTS:

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:
- Define heteroglossia and polyglossia. What is the nature of Keeler’s commentary on Meier?
- How does the broadly Bakhtinian terminology compare with terms we have encountered elsewhere in our reading, such as syncretism, hybridity and mestizo culture?
- Specifically, how might the approaches taken by Maier and Keeler be compared with that of Ricci? And what resources might this offer us for thinking critically about ethnography, history and complexity?

BACKGROUND READING:
14) When is Neo-Liberalism? Assembling Islam and Capital  
Monday, July 22, 2013  
REQUIRED TEXT AND VIEWING:  
• Training videos from ESQ website: http://www.esqway165.com  
SEMINAR QUESTIONS:  
• What, or when, is neoliberalism? How about Islam? And an ‘assemblage’? 
• To what alternative interpretations did Rudnyckyj oppose the idea of an ‘assemblage’ of neoliberalism and Islam? What potential advantages and disadvantages does his approach engender? 
• What regularities and disjunctures do you see between this approach to complexity and that of our previous authors?  
BACKGROUND READING:  

FINAL ESSAY DUE ON MONDAY, OCTOBER 15....