



Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor, by Ashley Thompson, London, Routledge, 2016, xvi + 203 pp., US\$145.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 4156 7772 1

Erik W. Davis

To cite this article: Erik W. Davis (2018) Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor, by Ashley Thompson, London, Routledge, 2016, xvi + 203 pp., US\$145.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 4156 7772 1, Religion, 48:2, 310-313, DOI: [10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315559](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315559)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315559>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 17 Apr 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 672



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)


imām. The identification of concepts and places as *people* strikes this reviewer as a stranger and more interesting process than is suggested by the term re-signification. In Velji's book, we encounter texts that frequently seek to transform symbols into bodies and words into material. What makes this elision from symbol to body convincing? Is it the internal textual process of deciphering the Qur'an that powers the 're-signification' of cosmic geography as human being? Or do these striking examples of re-signification gain credence through the institutional practices surrounding the texts?

Given the complex and elusive aspirations of these texts, Velji's work would benefit from a richer integration of his textual analyses with his brief and isolated comments on oaths, tithes, numismatics, and other social and material aspects of the Fatimid Empire. On a more general note, the structure of the book could be smoother for the reader. We find one- and two-page excursions on numismatics, Qur'anic eschatology, and contemporary apocalyptic movements, but the cursory nature of these discussions interrupts the principle thrust of Velji's argument. Though Velji develops a sustained argument from Chapters 3 to 6 through his reading of early Fatimid apocalyptic sources, he does not fully incorporate either the introductory chapters nor the two chapters on the Nizari *qiyāma*.

Despite shortcomings in structure, *An Apocalyptic History of the Early Fatimid Empire* accomplishes its primary task of offering robust and provocative analysis of apocalypticism as a diverse and evolving discourse in Fatimid sources. Velji's approach will provoke incisive and important questions about apocalyptic phenomena that can easily appear as bizarre and unsettling. Readers will benefit from the glimpse that *An Apocalyptic History of the Early Fatimid Empire* offers of both the seething creativity and logical elegance of these Fatimid sources.

William E. B. Sherman

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA

 wsherma2@unc.edu

© 2017 William E. B. Sherman

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315275>



Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor, by Ashley Thompson, London, Routledge, 2016, xvi + 203 pp., US\$145.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 4156 7772 1

Ashley Thompson's new book, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, demonstrates the author's expert grasp of the Angkorian and Middle Periods of Cambodian history. It will be of great use for ambitious graduate students since Thompson has assembled and presented some of the most significant examples for entering the conversation of Cambodian studies, examples which reflect on broader Southeast Asian histories and on the Indic 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' in which Cambodia participated until the end of the kingdom of Angkor. These examples range from notions of the Sanskrit cosmopolis and the Khmer vernacular – the main binary of the book – to the *linga* and *yoni*, phallic and 'yonic' symbols, respectively, widely associated with the worship of Shiva. Along the way, Thompson translates and analyzes several of the most important inscriptions in Khmer history such as the *Sdok Kak Thom* inscription and the *Phimeanakas* inscription, a Middle Period ritual healing text, and the concepts of the animating souls of the living, called *braling*. The skillful selection of these

examples calls to mind J. Z. Smith's description of the diligent self-conscious student of religion, for whom

no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as *exempli gratia* of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion. The student of religion must be able to articulate clearly why 'this' rather than 'that' was chosen as an exemplum. His [sic] primary skill is concentrated in this choice. This effort at articulate choice is all the more difficult, and hence all the more necessary, for the historian of religion who accepts neither the boundaries of canon nor of community in constituting his intellectual domain, in providing his [sic] range of exempla. (Smith 1982, xi)

Among many other questions, Thompson's ambitious project asks, 'what is Khmer cultural identity' (18)? The method Thompson uses to investigate this question is 'the Derridean deconstruction of binary oppositions as a means ... to outline a theory of power attentive to the aesthetics and politics of sexual difference and with the potential to account for the "Indianization" of Southeast Asia' (174). The specific reference for Thompson's method is Derrida's book *Khôra* – a term which refers to the open space around ancient Athens, and subsequently in philosophy, a sort of potential-but-undefined matrix (Derrida 2006; Derrida and Dutoit 1995).

The volume's indebtedness to the deconstructionist method is both strength and difficulty. To the extent that it enables Thompson's analyses and insights, it is a strength. To the extent that it confuses possible readers, especially those inexperienced in or not dedicated to deconstruction or continental philosophy more generally, this method can distract. Throughout the book, it is not clear to me that the method is necessary to arrive at Thompson's conclusions, and I am concerned that many of the important arguments and insights in the book may be lost on those who might be intimidated or put off by the book's postmodern rhetoric and approach.

The opening chapter introduces the multiple perspectives that Thompson wishes to open up, even on to her own work. She provides three separate précis for her book-length arguments, each one focusing on a different aspect of the argument. This sets both the tone of challenge for the casual reader, and begins the wealth of examples, which will reward the diligent student of the field.

While Derridean method may drive the approach to the book's subjects, the subjects themselves are some of the best known in Cambodian history. Thompson begins with two seemingly opposed modern texts on the venerable question of the 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia (see Coedès 1968). The first, written in 1996 by Sheldon Pollock, a preeminent contemporary Sanskritist, argues for a history of the region that sees different local areas participating in a Sanskrit cosmopolis, which declined and began to 'localize' around the time of the decline of Angkor, producing the basis for what we see today as vernacular Khmer literature (Pollock 1996). In this way, Pollock reproduces a type of Indianization hypothesis, with cultural influence going primarily from West to East, though his concerns are far different than those that created the earliest versions of this hypothesis.

The second text was written in 1933 by Paul Mus, and represents an early blow against the Indianization hypothesis. From an art-historical and ethnographic point of view, Mus argues that Indic culture was only accepted insofar as locals could put it into use within their pre-existing cultural systems. For Mus then, the question of Indianization was less a question of the Indians who spread it and the culture they spread, than of Southeast Asians who appropriated parts of Indic language and culture, and the culture into which they appropriated Indic cultural components (Mus 1975). Throughout Thompson's text, these two scholars, for each of whom Thompson clearly has great respect, are locked in a debate, though it is a lopsided argument in Thompson's presentation, with Mus generally prevailing, and Thompson extending or elaborating on his project throughout.

The three central chapters deal with different ensembles of examples, ranging from historiographical presentations of aspects of Southeast Asia, such as the relatively high status of women, to concepts within the ancient Khmer cultural world, such as the *devaraja* and the *kamraten jagat ta raja*, the Sanskrit and Sanskrit-Khmer terms for the mysterious ritual/person/object of power that constitutes the earliest Angkorian ensemble symbolizing sovereignty. In chapter 2, Thompson takes on the centrally important *Sdok Kak Thom* inscription which discusses the *devaraja*, and sets up the relationship between the phallic *linga* and the notion of sovereignty itself, which grounds her later psychoanalytic discussions of phallocentrism and phallocratic culture. In chapter 3, she focuses on the *yoni*, or *yonis* 'counterpart' to the *linga*, and the production of the combined form of the *linga-yoni*, which Thompson examines, to represent the relations between a series of binary oppositions: Sanskrit-Khmer, India-Cambodia, *linga-yoni*, and male-female. In her analysis of the *linga-yoni* ensemble, and using Derrida's analysis of the *khôra* as inspiration, Thompson attempts to destabilize the standard 'figure-ground' relationship between these ideas, such that we can re-imagine the relationship. Those familiar with the Rubin illusion, in which vases seem to shift into faces, for example, will understand the effect of such a figure-ground reversal on perception. For Thompson, the Khmer notion of territoriality and sovereignty is bound up in the relationship not only between the king and his ritual *linga*, but between that male-gendered ensemble and the female-gendered ensemble which makes it possible: the *yoni* (or the *khôra*) which represents the unrepresentable and makes representations possible.

Thompson uses this destabilization to discuss the widespread conversion to Buddhism from the prior worship of Shiva and other Indian gods that dominated the Angkor kingdom's history. In chapter 3, she examines the *Phimeanakas* inscription – the only Sanskrit inscription from Cambodia we have that is authored by a woman, and is about a woman. This inscription, much damaged at the beginning, describes a queen's great devotion to her husband and her Buddhist ascetic practices, to which the inscription credits her husband's eventual return and political success. In Thompson's analysis, this becomes a case of the queen being possessed by her husband's spirit, and affecting a widespread conversion to Buddhism as the retreat of the Sanskrit cosmopolis began. While possible, strong evidence supporting possession is not described in this text. This chapter claims to take an explicitly anthropological approach to the question of possession, but with few exceptions the most significant sources are dated and occasionally questionable, such as Eliade's book on shamanism (Eliade 1972). There are more recent and far more interesting anthropological studies of possession, including some that make it into Thompson's bibliography, but don't seem to influence her analysis.

The subsequent chapter, however, is a *tour de force*. Thompson builds on more than 20 years of her own scholarship on the topic of the 'calling of the souls' ceremony, the spirits called *braling*, imagined to enliven the Khmer individual, and the ritual implement, called a *babil*, used in this ceremony. Through a very credible analysis of texts, the *babil*, and the ceremony, Thompson argues that the *braling* is derived from *brah+linga*, (sacred *linga*), and that the *babil*, an ovate-shaped plate used in the ceremony, represents the *yoni*; when a candle is attached to the *babil* for ceremony, it becomes a *linga-yoni* ensemble. Significantly for Thompson, the fact that the *babil* is called *babil* regardless of the presence of a *linga*-candle reinforces the notion that a figure-ground reversal has taken place during the Cambodian Middle Period.


The conclusion returns to Pollock and critiques him with Heidegger (*via* Derrida), and introduces an explicitly psychoanalytic dimension to her analysis that brings the notion of penis envy explicitly into her analysis. I do not find the psychoanalytic turn compelling in this case, as Thompson is aware would be the case for some readers, and I find the

defense and use of Heidegger disconcerting in a book that is fundamentally about both 'Khmer cultural identity' and the 'indigenous' in a way that aligns with contemporary Khmer nationalist politics (e.g., 177–178). The most productive intervention Thompson makes here is to reframe the question away from one of binary options: 'Indianization' need not have been either resistance or submission, but have constituted a multitude of options in-between (184). This move away from the binary options that have dominated Cambodian histories and toward a more nuanced approach is necessary and important, though I'm unsure the deconstructive method was necessary in communicating it to the multiple audiences that would otherwise benefit from Dr. Thompson's erudition and dedication to Cambodian studies.

All students of Cambodian history should read *Engendering the Buddhist State*: the depth of conversation on key topics that have constituted the canon of Cambodian studies will be deeply rewarding. Graduate students in particular should engage with the text as a possible pathway through the study of these key examples. Students of sovereignty and the gendering of culture will find well-studied cases pertinent to their field within this text, and practitioners of the methods of deconstruction may appreciate the application of their preferred approach to the novel material of Southeast Asian history.

References

- Coedès, G. 1968. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2006. *Khôra*. Paris: Galilée.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Thomas Dutoit. 1995. *On the Name*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1972. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mus, Paul. 1975. *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*. Translated by I. W. Mabbet and D. P. Chandler. Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.
- Pollock, Sheldon. 1996. "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300 C.E.: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology." In *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*, edited by J. E. M. Houben, 197–248. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Erik W. Davis
Macalester College, St Paul, MN, USA
 erik.w.davis@gmail.com

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315559>



Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World, by Robert Desjarlais, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, 304 pp., US\$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 2263 5587 0

Robert Desjarlais, professor of anthropology at Sarah Lawrence College, tells us that it has not been easy for him to write this ethnographic account of Tibetan Buddhist views on death, dying, mourning, and grief as preserved in the ethnically Tibetan Hyolmo community in Nepal. Being a work that was finalized after a long pause in which the author pursued other projects, the author was, while writing the book, not only confronted with the death of his