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Gender Relations and Women's Agency:

Indonesia - India Comparison

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Introduction

- 1. What can we learn from a comparison of Islam and its gender effects in India and Indonesia, home to two of the world's largest Islamic populations yet far from the Middle eastern 'heartland' of Islam? Paraphrasing Marilyn Strathern, what kinds of knowledge can such a comparison produce?[1] Cross-cultural and trans-historical comparison are significant research strategies in gender analysis, and key elements of formulating challenges to gender regimes and gender ideologies. The claims of the natural or ontological, and hence universal, status of gender differences that are deployed to validate patriarchal forms of power are challenged by cross-cultural and transhistorical comparison. This issue of *Intersections* brings a comparative perspective to issues relating to gendered power in India and Indonesia, particularly among their respective Islamic populations.
- 2. Comparison has been a central, although contested, research strategy in anthropology to understand cultural continuities, differences and purported universals. Indeed, scholars of gender have looked to its findings for comparative analysis, to challenge ideas about the ontological nature of gender differences. [2] Anthropologist and gender scholar Tom Boellstorff promotes 'critical regionality' as 'one way of reinvigorating the comparative project'. [3] It 'enables us to think about the wider networks of material and symbolic relations within, and through which, gender and sexuality are made and experienced in particular locales. [4] This fresh approach to area studies, allows 'a shift away from speaking of regions to speaking of processes of regionalization and making of world areas' and this 'provide[s] one means through which we can move beyond the essentialized field of the local' and the unspecified and unsituated field of the 'global'. [5] Because, Boellstorff reminds us, comparison is an act of imagination, [6] the authors in this volume are critically engaged anthropologists and women' rights activists. Their papers consider issues of family law, rituals in 'trans-domestic' space; and women's agency in educational, economic and political spheres. They engage in comparisons of gendered parties within and between nation states.

Islam in India and Indonesia—historical connections

3. Indonesia is a Muslim majority nation—there are 225 million Muslims accounting for 87 per cent of its 238 million population according to the 2010 census. [7] It is the nation with the world's largest Muslim population. In India, 150 million Muslims constitute a minority (14.2 per cent of its 1.7 billion population), but this is the second largest Muslim population in the world. [8] The Muslim populations of these nations are linked by centuries of connection beginning prior to Islamisation, through ancient trade routes across the Indian Ocean. Islam came to Southeast Asia through expanding global trade networks linking the Middle East, Africa, India the Indonesian Archipelago and China dating from around the latter half of the seventh century. The establishment of Islam in

the Indian subcontinent began around the eighth century, and it then spread to the Indonesian archipelago from around the twelfth century on. [9] In both India and Indonesia, Islam accommodated to pre-existing local cultures, their forms of social relations (personal, economic and political) and ritual/religious practices. Early conversion was commonly effected through male traders marrying local women, and the first time a Muslim trader marries a local woman in an emporia and she and her family convert to Islam, the process has begun. [10] Anthony Reid has commented on the utility of Islam's common language and universal set of ethics to enable global trade, as an important impetus to conversion in coastal emporia. [11] But mass conversion came once local rulers made the confession of faith and incorporated Islam into the structures and institutions for the exercise of power.

4. What is involved in a comparison of Islam—and its gender effects—in these two nations, home to two of the world's largest Islamic populations which are far from the Middle Eastern 'heartland' of Islam? What can we learn from a comparative perspective, in particular a comparison of aspects of Islamic doctrine and practice that have a bearing on gender relations? This is a timely exercise. Popular representations of Islam in the West tend to assume it contains a monolithic doctrine and practice, that are restrictive of Muslim women's exercise of agency, even hostile to women (implicitly, in comparison to the presumed freedoms enjoyed by women in non-Muslim countries). The regional comparison of gender orders in these historically and regionally related Muslim populations begun here is a way to intervene in (paraphrasing Boellstorf) the 'unspecified and unsituated' field of global Islam.

Histories of connections - India and Indonesia

- 5. Historical encounters on the cosmopolitan trade routes that crossed the Indian Ocean shaped the adoption of Islam in Indonesia; the coastal sailors negotiated the Indian Ocean with ease. The Indian coastal regions of Gujarat and Coramandel and sites in the Indonesian Archipelago (Ternate, Java, Sumatra) were crucial nodes in trade networks between China and the Middle East from around the eighth century. The crossing from the Coramandel coast to the Port of Malacca on the Malay Peninsula (an important hub for the Islamisation of the archipelago), was a well plied route but there are also accounts of the presence of Gujaratis in Southeast Asian ports. Islamisation in the Indonesian Archipelago involved the embrace of Islam by rulers and political elites, and the influence of Islam on court culture many of which became sultanates from around the thirteenth century. This was an ongoing process over several centuries, and was far in advance of European trading networks (from the sixteenth century) that eventuated in colonial conquest. In both India and the Indonesian Archipelago, Islam fell on a bedrock of earlier Hindu–Buddhist practices, as well as Chinese influences associated with the coastal and inland polities/trade.
- 6. The historian Daniel Hall emphasises that Indian influence in the Indonesian Archipelago was a two-way street. [13] It was not just traders from India coming to the coastal emporia that developed in the archipelago from as early as the eighth century to engage with the China trade: the proficient Malay sailors were travelling to Sri Lanka and the Coramandel Coast to engage in trade from Africa and the Middle East.

On comparison: Anthropology, feminist scholarship and religious studies

7. Comparison has been a central and contested research strategy in anthropology as anthropologists try to understand cultural continuities, differences and purported universals. Early-twentieth-century anthropology did not engage with historical processes, assuming an essential timelessness of the (mostly) small communities its practitioners studied. For a later generations of

anthropologists, history has provided an important framework for comparison: scholars such as Bernard Cohn, Marshall Sahlins and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have explored local and national histories in a comparative historical framework, but particularly in regard to colonial and postcolonial trajectories.

- 8. Aram Yengoyan [14] further notes that: 'Anthropologists have stressed how the local is constituted and reconfigured in terms of regional and national [and global] processes'; but in all this the local is not passive. Anna Tsing has used the metaphor of 'friction' to describe encounters between the local and the global. This metaphor reminds us of 'the importance of interaction in defining movement, cultural form and agency'. [15] We can apply her analysis of local engagement with global processes to understanding the centuries long spread of Islam. '[E]ngaged universals are never fully successful in being everywhere the same because of ... friction.' She is interested in 'how some universals work out in particular times and places, through friction.' [16]
- 9. In feminist scholarship, comparison has been used to explain apparent continuities and universals in gender relations across cultures and history. Feminist scholarship has been inherently comparative; using frames such as the sexual division of labour, gender 'roles', and gender relations, to identify similarities and differences across cultures, especially in challenging categories deemed to be universal, and justifying the subordination of women as the natural order of things. [17] This is a common position of opponents of feminists' demands for change. Margaret Mead used cross-cultural and comparative studies to argue for a diversity of sex roles across cultures; [18] and that the secondary status of women in western industrial societies was by no means natural or universal. This argument provided a basis for a rejection of the 'naturalness' of socially expressed sex differences.
- 10. The feminist scholars aligned with 'second wave feminism' turned to anthropology for accounts of diverse social formations to contest the argument that forms of gender subordination were universal. They 'rediscovered' Engels' proposition that female subordination had its origins in the development of private property and the nuclear family. His book, *The Origins of Marriage, Private Property and the State*, drew on the nineteenth-century anthropological studies of Lewis Henry Morgan who used comparison to develop a pseudo-evolutionary schema of human cultural development that exhibited progress.[19]
- 11. What concepts have been used as comparative frameworks for gender relations across societies, cultures and nations? 'Women's status' is popular, and has especially been invoked in studies of Southeast Asian societies, with common assertions that women have 'high status' in Southeast Asia. [20] But 'status' is a very loose concept, as Naomi Quinn pointed out. [21] It is a 'synthetic' or multidimensional measure, with a number of potentially graded components. Hence it does not lend itself readily to precise or direct comparison (i.e. what are you comparing?).
- 12. A 'gender relations' approach' is an alternative way to approach our subject, and is more yielding of axes of comparison. [22] It presumes gender relations as a multidimensional structure operating in a complex network of institutions. [23] Rather than just taking a category—like status, gender, or masculinity/femininity—and using it as an axis of comparison, this approach invites us to unpack the category (such as gender, femininity, masculinity) and compare its elements. A gender relations approach focuses on the implication of gender in the exercise of power in society. Conceptually, R.W. Connell breaks gender relations down to: power and politics; economy; relationships of social reproduction/sexuality (adult cathexis); symbolism and ideology.
- 13. Studies of gender have been impacted on by the turn to reflexivity in the social sciences; our social location as researchers inevitably impacts on the way we engage with and interpret social 'data'. Hence methodological approaches in studying gender relations have been highly influenced by the

- work of scholars in the field of 'standpoint epistemology'. Drawing on the social philosophy of the 'master slave relationship', expressed in the approach of Marx to the study of capitalism, standpoint epistemology argues that social analysis must begin from acknowledging the social situatedness of subjects. As Sandra Harding explains, '[A] maximally critical study ... can be done only from the perspective of those whose lives have been marginalized.'[24] A gender relations approach addresses the relation between gender inequality and other axes of difference/inequality. Social inequality can have its basis in any axis of difference, including class, race, nationality and gender.
- 14. The papers in this volume draw on the traditions of feminist scholarship to engage in their critical and comparative analyses of gender relations in Muslim societies. The papers address many of the modes of accommodation to Islam in local traditions, so that comparative projects find convergences (as well as differences) in 'everyday Islam' including modes of worship, ways of celebrating calendric festivals, and family law notionally based in shar'iah, as well as in everyday economic and political activities.

Studying Islam in everyday practice

- 15. Pnina Werbner's paper in this volume picks up on the Geertzian strategy of comparing Islam across Muslim societies. In his comparative project, *Islam Observed*[25] as Yengoyan explains, 'Geertz utilizes the canopy of Islam to compare two different cultural projects in Morocco and Indonesia'.[26] He drew 'cultural portraits within a broad spectrum of Islamic dogma and scriptural texts which inform each case in different ways and invoke different ideas of change'.[27] Werbner takes an analogous approach, comparing aspects of South Asian and Indonesian Islam by identifying grammars underlying domestic ritual practices and ongoing connections and mutual influences in the contemporary Muslim world. She compares two everyday rituals, the *slametan* (Indonesia) and the *khatam qur'an* (South Asian migrants in Manchester).
- 16. Geertz famously depicted the slametan as a neighbourhood ritual feast attended and convened by men. Similarly the khatme qur'an is usually portrayed as a male-dominated, two-phase domestic ceremony involving the ritual reading of the entire Qur'an followed by the commensal meal of sacrificial foods. Werbner rearticulates how both festivals are portrayed, arguing that neither can be regarded as either household (domestic) or neighbourhood (public) rituals. Picking up on the consideration of female social action in relation to 'the public' and 'private' realms (a hallmark of feminist anthropology), [28] she argues that women are, in fact, primary agents in both arenas through 'inter-domestic' activity. While previous scholars (including Geertz) focus on the front-ofhouse roles performed by men, Werbner foregrounds the crucial roles played by women, which render the rituals as far more complex than all-male affairs. Werbner's term 'inter-domestic' provides an important way of capturing this domain of women's ritual agency that connects the public and domestic. Werbner's analysis challenges assumptions of the exclusion of Muslim women from public life. A gift economy flourishes in this inter-domestic domain in which women take responsibility for food preparations. Khatme qur'an do not entail an immediate obligation to reciprocate, but mirror women's networks based on gifting and reciprocal exchanges. A similar conclusion can be drawn in regard to the *selamatan*; while traditionally its public face has been the communal feast attended by men (but taking place in domestic space), it is the networks of women that effect it. Both types of rituals manifest these inter-domestic networks—in which class, caste, friendship, equality and inequality all find expression.

Family law

17. Family law is an important site of social and cultural transformation in the process of Islamisation,

- as it has a significant role in initial accommodations between the practices of Muslim traders and sojourners and local communities. Hence, events in domestic arenas such as rites celebrating life cycle events (birth, death and marriage) became inflected by Islamic practice. A critique of kinship studies that arose in the 'second wave' feminist critique of anthropology was that that studies of kinship had focused on politico-juridical aspects of kinship (used as a basis of comparison). [29] Activities of the 'public' domain had failed to adequately address the operation of kinship in the intimate sphere of family.
- 18. Papers in this volume by Lies Marcoes and Fadilla Putri, and by Flavia Agnes take up contemporary issues of Islamic family law and women's rights. Patricia Martinez, a Malaysian scholar, has commented that while colonial regimes restricted the operation of Islamic law for criminal or commercial matters, they were happy to leave shar'iah to operate in the realm of family law.[30] Agnes discusses the impact of this colonial policy in the case of Islamic marriage law in India, and the same is true for Indonesia. Independent Indonesia has enacted a secular marriage law, which is still being discussed in India. In her comparison of India's differing Muslim and Hindu marriage laws, feminist legal activist and scholar, Agnes offers a counterpoint to the widespread critique of India's Muslim personal laws of divorce and alimony. Agnes diverts the focus away from the common [women's] 'rights versus culture' frame and notes the Hindu-majority and Muslimminority politics in these discussions. Referring to a series of legal case studies, she traces how the legal development of Hindu and Muslim marriage laws in the colonial period established the notion of contractual marriage as integral to Muslim marriage, which invested Muslim women with considerable agency to negotiate their rights within marriage and in cases of its dissolution. In contrast, Hindu marriage was framed as sacramental, with the colonial legal order failing to recognise the plurality of Hindu law and elements of women's agency within it. Reform of Hindu law introduced the notion of 'age' to denote 'consent' (an ingredient of the 'contract') which did not adequately address issues of women's agency within marriage and in dissolution, with age no substitute for the complex agency of consent. The new legal order of Hindu marriage strengthened local patriarchies and criminalised acts of Hindu women who stray while shar'iah recognises the autonomy of Muslim women to contract marriages of choice. Agnes' critique unsettles taken-forgranted notions of the 'modernity' of Hindu law and backwardness and gender inequality of Muslim marriage law.
- 19. The secular marriage law enacted in Indonesia in 1974 prescribed a minimum age of marriage. Nonetheless, under-age/child marriage has persisted and may even be currently on the rise. This phenomenon is addressed in the paper by Marcoes and Putri. They are activist scholars from the Muslim women rights organisation, RumahKitaB. In recent years, they issued a challenge in the constitutional court to the minimum age of marriage, arguing it should be harmonised with the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. RumahKitaB's challenge failed, largely because the because of the intervention of the Indonesian Ulama Council which provided the court with a narrow definition (based on the Qur'anic text) about the age of consent/adulthood (balig). RumahKitaB initially tried to combat this decision on theological grounds, arguing for alternative interpretations of the fig. But as a result of this research, which brings a comparative perspective of nine (mainly rural) districts across five provinces, they now understand a complex set of social, economic and cultural factors underlying the reasons for child marriage which indicate the importance of a number of strategies to combat it. Lack of educational and work opportunities for young women, women's migration for work which in some cases gave the impetus to their husbands to marry again to a child-bride are some of the factors identified. But in the current politico-religious climate in Indonesia, there is also the strengthening of religious viewpoints associated with the increase in public piety. The authors found a strengthened expression of the idea that religious proscriptions are above state law. This legitimises child marriage under notions of religious moral legality. In this political climate Marcoes and Putri observed local leaders focusing on local moral issues as one of

the areas where these same individuals have power. Their overall finding, that child marriage cannot be simply slated to Islamic beliefs, and that the choices open to women were a significant factor, leads into the question of women's agency.

Women's agency

- 20. The papers by Tanya Jakimow and Minako Sakai examine emerging possibilities for Muslim women's agency in civic and entrepreneurial roles. They challenge the stereotype of a global uniformity in the social and political lives of Muslim women. Jakimow analyses the importance of emotions and embodied experiences to possibilities for selfhood and agency in two cultural contexts: municipal councillors in India and volunteers in Indonesia. Like Werbner, she explicitly uses an India–Indonesia comparative frame in which to develop her argument. She explores two different kinds of public arenas: voluntarism and formal political representation. This strategy allows her to arrive at the arresting and perhaps unexpected idea that enabling women to occupy roles from which they were previously excluded is only part of the answer to enhancing women's agency. Her comparative case studies demonstrate that women must have access to emotional experiences that potentially transcend the self-narratives and 'emotional repertoires' that reinforce limited 'gendered selves'. In both her cases, these emotional repertoires were often connected to care, as opposed to new expressions of emotion that can seem to transgress gendered norms.
- 21. Sakai focuses on Muslim women entrepreneurs in Indonesia in the period of democratisation following the end of the Suharto era in 1998. This period has been marked by an increased importance placed on the public performance of Muslim piety among the middle class; and Sakai argues this throws up challenges in terms of contradictory gender expectations. The women entrepreneurs she engaged with draw on Islamic discourses to facilitate their economic activities and to mitigate potential gender-role tensions. They self-consciously use Islam to promote and legitimise women's empowerment. These female entrepreneurs see themselves as propagating Islam in two ways: they deploy appropriate Islamic discourses to support their economic activities; and disseminate their message through their work and faith. Sakai argues that local values expressed in Islamic terms can serve to achieve women's economic empowerment.
- 22. Zazie Bowen's paper is also explicitly comparative in its approach, comparing two ethnographies of Indian Muslim women to explore the role of gendered identity in women's informal learning. In both cases, Bowen found that learning is embodied and profoundly shaped by how women are situated in social space. The Indian Muslim women subjects, occupying the contentious position of being female members of India's minority religion, applied their learning in ways to downplay and ameliorate Muslim—non-Muslim differences and emphasise the common inter-religious experiences of women's social and economic struggles.

Conclusion

23. Collectively, the papers set up comparative frames for addressing the social participation of women in a number of Muslim societies. The women are not defined by their religion in their social and cultural practices, even those ostensibly concerned with religion, such as the performance of rituals. The papers challenge the axiomatic assumption of the patriarchal character of Islam, that it is always a barrier to women's agency and women's social participation. The authors find spaces for women's agency, including within everyday Islamic practice. Minako Sakai discusses the ways pious women deploy their religion to support new kinds of entepreneurship. Tanya Jakimow's paper in particular demonstrates how the emotional and affective dimensions of their social relations are critical to their social practice.

- 24. In the case of family law, in her comparison of Islamic and Hindu personal law in India, Flavia Agnes challenges the common assumption that Islamic family law is worse for women, and that Muslim women would benefit from a universal marriage code. Muslim marriage is based on contracts which confer more rights on women than does the Hindu code, which has adopted the colonial/Christian perspective of marriage as a sacrament. But in addressing the problem of underage marriage in Indonesia, Lies Marcoes and Fadilla Putri identified the influence of local leaders' interpretations of Islam in the perpetuation of child marriage. In this instance national secular law reform would not necessarily lead to a change in practice. Bowen's paper challenges the domestic—public binary, the common analytical trope that foregrounds Muslim women's seclusion in the domestic space. Her engagement with Indian Muslim women's active learning and the application of informal knowledge foregrounds women's own ways of self-creating new open spaces, crossroads (chaurasta) in the sense of public meeting places, both physical and metaphorical.
- 25. It is perhaps noteworthy that these articles discuss contemporary Islamic practices in the Muslim 'periphery'. In the contemporary world, the global flow of influences that was integral to the Islamisation of both India and Indonesia operate at a lightning pace. The claims of the Arab world as the heartland and the site of Islamic authenticity rub against views that the large Muslim populations of South and Southeast Asia are sites of authentic and distinctive forms of religious practice. This home-grown religious pluralism is being challenged in the contemporary world by Salafi groups who want to take Islamic observance back to its 'authentic' expression from the time of the Prophet. Such fundamentalism is associated with constraints on women's social participation.

Notes

All URLs in these references were operational when the paper was first published.

- [1] Marilyn Strathern, 'Foreword,' in *Anthropology, By Comparison*, ed. Andre Gingrich and Richard G. Fox, pp. 1–7, London and New York 2002, p. 2.
- [2] See Andre Gingrich and Richard G. Fox (ed.), Anthropology by Comparison, London and New York: Routledge.
- [3] Tom Boellstorff, A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 184.
- [4] Mark Johnson, Peter Jackson and Gilbert Herdt, 2000, 'Critical regionalities and the study of gender and sexual diversity in South East and East Asia,' *Culture Health and Sexuality* 2(4): 361–75, p. 372, DOI: 10.1080/13691050050174396, cited in Boellstorff, *A Coincidence of Desires*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 184.
- [5] Johnson, Jackson and Herdt, 'Critical regionalities and the study of gender and sexual diversity in South East and East Asia,' p. 373.
- [6] Boellstorff, A Coincidence of Desires, p. 184.
- [7] Badan Pusat Statistik/Statistics Indonesia, Penduduk Indonesia/Population of Indonesia: Sensus penduduk 2010.
- [8] In the 2011 Census of India, Muslims accounted for 172,245,158 persons of India's total 1210,854,977 population.
- [9] Ira M. Lapidus, A History of Islamic Societies, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 (2nd edition).
- [10] John H. Meuleman, 'The history of Islam in Southeast Asia: Some questions and debates, in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Political Challenges for the 21*st *Century,* ed. K.S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, pp. 22–45, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2005, p. 26.

- [11] Anthony Reid. Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680, Volume One: The Lands below the Winds, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- [12] Boellstorff, A Coincidence of Desires, p. 184.
- [13] Daniel George Edward Hall, A History of South-East Asia, London Melbourne Toronto and New York: Macmillan and St Martin's Press, 1968.
- [14] Aram Yengoyan, 'Comparison and its discontents,' in *Modes of Comparison. Theory and Practice*, ed. Aram Yengoyan, pp. 137–159, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006, p. 138.
- [15] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 6.
- [16] Tsing, Friction, p 10.
- [17] See Henrietta Moore, Feminism and Anthropology, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.
- [18] Margaret Mead, Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies, London: Routledge and Sons, 1935.
- [19] Frederic Engels, *The Origins of Marriage Private Property and the State*, 1891, cited in Karen Sacks, 'Engels revisited: Women, the organization of production and private property,' in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, pp. 207–22, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974.
- [20] Kathryn Robinson, 'What does a gender relations approach bring to Southeast Asian Studies?' in *Methodology and Research Practice in Southeast Asian Studies*, ed. Judith Schlehe, Jü:rgen Rü:land and Mikko Huotari, pp. 107–27, Houndsmill, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. She notes that George Coedes and Anthony Reid are among the authors who have invoked this appealing stereotype, of the 'high status' that women in certain non-western societies enjoy relative to women in western societies. Reid bases his conclusion on historical commentaries from European observers.
- [21] Naomi Quinn, 'Anthropological studies on women's status,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 181–225, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.an.06.100177.001145.
- [22] R.W. Connell, *Gender & Power*, Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1987; *Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.
- [23] Robinson, 'What does a gender relations approach bring to Southeast Asian Studies?'
- [24] Sandra Harding, The Science Question in Feminism, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- [25] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- [26] Yengoyan, 'Comparison and its discontents,' p. 146.
- [27] Yengoyan, 'Comparison and its discontents,' p. 146.
- [28] The anthropological discussion of these concepts is reviewed in Susan Rasmussan, 'Gender and Space,' *The Ashgate Research Companion to Anthropology*, ed. Andrew J. Strathern, Routledge, 2015.
- [29] For example, using kinship models in distinguishing state versus stateless societies.
- [30] Patricia Martinez, 'This Islamic State of the state of Islam in Malaysia,' *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23 (2001): 474–503, DOI: 10.1355/CS23-3E.

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