From ‘Men of Prowess’ to Religious Militias

Informal Sovereignties in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on Africa, South Asia, and Latin America has sought to theorize twenty-first-century governance by highlighting the importance of ‘informal sovereignties’, unofficial or privatized domains of authority that operate within and alongside domains under formal state control. Analyses of Southeast Asian cases have been notably absent from this work, despite a long regional tradition analysing the centrality of figures of informal authority. This article revisits Southeast Asian analyses in light of scholarship on ‘informal sovereignties’, identifying three qualities that set these analyses apart from comparable work on other regions of the world: their focus on patterns of perennialism in the cultural idioms of informal sovereignties; their view that informal sovereignties can only be understood through their historical relations to the modern state and the market; and their emphasis on the fragility of sovereign power and the importance of spectacle and performance in shoring it up. The article argues that, taken together, these elements provide a culturally and historically contextualized approach for analysing contemporary informal sovereignties, including those religious militias that have garnered much attention in recent years.

Keywords

Southeast Asia – Indonesia – the state – sovereignty – informal authority – militias

Introduction

A growing number of case studies and reports from Southeast Asia, focused primarily but not exclusively on Indonesia, include some rather startling claims about the size of militia groups in the region. Here are just a few examples: Ian Wilson (2006:279) has estimated that Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defender's Front), a nationwide Indonesian militia that gained short-lived global notoriety for preventing a Lady Gaga concert in Jakarta, had as many as 100,000 members in 2005; Kingsley (2012:70) notes that Amphibi, a regional militia on the Indonesian island of Lombok, claims a membership of 350,000, or roughly one in ten of the island's residents; Schulte Nordholt (2015) points to three major militias in Bali, including Baladika Bali, which claims a membership of 17,000 people; Scambary (2009:271), in his examination of gangs in East Timor, cites a study that states that 70 per cent of all males in East Timor are members of so-called 'martial arts groups'; Hedman (2008:373) reports that a vigilante volunteer corps in Malaysia, Ikatan Relawan Rakyat (RELA, People's Volunteer Corps), had an estimated membership of 475,000 in 2007, almost double the total number of police and military personnel in the country; and in the Philippines some estimates put the total membership of private militias working for political bosses at around 10,000.¹ While we should approach such numbers with some degree of skepticism, they certainly indicate a rather sizeable phenomenon.

Furthermore, one should not underestimate the degree to which these groups are policing public life in the region. Not long before the FPI threatened violence if the concert by 'the devil's messenger', Lady Gaga, were to go ahead, a visit to Jakarta by Canadian author and lesbian Irshad Manji was also cancelled due to 'security reasons'.² Soon after, a discussion of Manji's book, *Allah, Liberty and Love*, which took place in Yogyakarta, was interrupted and its attendees attacked by thugs from Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI, Indonesian Mujahideen Council). These cases both enjoyed widespread news and social-media coverage, since they involved international celebrities, but the vast majority of cases of such intimidation go unreported. In dozens of interviews I have conducted over the past several years, Indonesian newspa-

1 John McLean, 2010, 'Philippines massacre: Commission to take on 100 private armies', *Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2010/0107/Philippines-massacre-Commission-to-take-on-100-private-armies>. (accessed 06-05-2015).

2 See N. Karmini, 'Lady Gaga cancels Indonesia's "Born this way ball" show', *The Toronto Star*, 27-12-2012; M. Bachelard, 'Lady Gaga concert under threat from Islamic hardliners after attack on author', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15-05-2012.

per journalists have been virtually unanimous in claiming that the primary source of intimidation and censorship in the post-Suharto era has shifted from the government to militias, or so-called *ormas*,³ and their ilk.⁴ Coverage is skewed by journalists' fears that their editorial offices will be overrun by a mob of angry militants if they report something that offends a group's leader. Similar kinds of intimidation are reported in the Philippines, where violence against journalists is among the worst in the world.⁵ Indeed, Mindanao was the site of the worst single massacre of journalists in recent history, perpetrated by a militia or 'private army' working for a local boss.⁶ One consequence of such violence and intimidation is that the actions of such groups—particularly local actions—often go underreported or are reported upon only obliquely.

The influence of such groups extends into the everyday life of ordinary people, too. Indonesian migrant workers living in Malaysia have to contend with the widespread presence of members of *Ikatan Relawan Rakyat*, which has sometimes singled out migrants for violence. Women in Aceh have to continually adjust their dress and comportment—for example, to stop wearing jeans or to stop straddling motorcycle seats—so as not to run afoul of the so-called 'sharia police' or other groups that have sought to make women's bodies a key site for the policing of public morality and religiosity. And throughout Indonesia, people have to figure out how to cope in an environment where groups providing 'protection' for businesses, cultural events, and political rallies are increasingly identifying themselves—through their language, dress, logos and names—in ethnic and religious terms.

3 *Ormas* is the acronym for *organisasi masyarakat*, or societal organizations. Such groups are registered with, and regulated by, the Indonesian government. Some *ormas* also receive financial support from government agencies and many of those registered are shell groups created for the purpose of channelling political patronage (Aspinall 2013:45). During the New Order it was a general term used to describe all civil-society organizations. While certain *ormas*, such as Pemuda Pancasila, had a reputation for violence, it is only in recent years that the term *ormas* itself has acquired the connotation of violence.

4 These interviews were conducted in Bandung, Yogyakarta, Mataram, Makassar, and Ambon. It may be that in some regions of Indonesia the army or other elements of the state retain their powers of censorship.

5 Committee to Protect Journalists, 'Attacks on the press: Journalism on the front lines in 2012', <http://cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-philippines.php> (accessed 19-04-2013).

6 Human Rights Watch, 2010, 'They own the people', <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2010/11/17/they-own-people> (accessed 19-04-2013). This report also includes a helpful overview of the history of militias and vigilante groups in the Philippines.

In what follows I consider Southeast Asian militias as examples of a broader category of phenomena called informal sovereignties. Hansen and Stepputat (2006) employ this term to describe the grey areas of political authority that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, seem to increasingly surround, penetrate, contest and supplement the spheres of formal authority once enjoyed by nation-states. Like sovereign states, informal sovereigns ground their authority in claims to what Walter Benjamin (1978) referred to as 'law-making violence'. They include not just militias, religious or otherwise, but also vigilantes, gangsters, rebel groups, drug cartels, private security guards, sub-contracted armies, and others that use violence to constitute an informal, *de facto* system of rule. A number of scholars besides Hansen and Stepputat have made such groups central to their theorizations of contemporary sovereignty in a global context, including Jean and John Comaroff (2006), Caroline Humphrey (2004), and David Pratten and Atreyee Sen (2008). It is no coincidence that most of these studies focus on states in the global south. As Christian Lund (2006a:673) notes: 'Literature on the state in developing societies [...] generally has a hard time specifying what is "state" and what is not. It seems the closer one gets to a particular political landscape, the more apparent it becomes that many institutions have a twilight character; they are not the state but they exercise public authority.' While avoiding pejorative and normative concepts such as 'failed states', this body of work nonetheless emphasizes the uneven and 'fragmented' (Lund 2011) character of sovereignty in the contemporary era and draws attention to emergent forms of authority within informal and privatized domains.

The anthropological orientation of much of this work has meant that it has been either implicitly or explicitly comparative, looking across cases in an effort to identify the factors operating at various scales that have led to the emergence of informal sovereignties and shaped their characters. Unfortunately, until now, very little attention has been given to cases from Southeast Asia. Most of the work has focused instead on cases in Africa, with a smaller number drawing on work in Latin America, South Asia, and post-Soviet Russia. In what follows, I will make a preliminary attempt to explore some of the ways research on Southeast Asian cases might contribute to this broader comparative discussion.

Over the past few decades, historians, anthropologists and political scientists of Southeast Asia have created a rich body of scholarship on the region's informal sovereigns, even though they did not describe their work in these terms. Much of this work has focused on social types, or figures, of the informal sovereign: the man of prowess, the *jago*, the *jawara*, the political boss, the *kyai*, the gangster, the *preman*, and now, the religious militia. Each of these figures

rose to prominence against a specific historical backdrop.⁷ Seen against these backdrops, analyses of these figures have the potential to contribute a South-east Asian perspective to a broader comparative analysis of the circumstances under which informal sovereignties emerge and thrive.

In what follows I discuss three main themes that have oriented research on informal sovereignties in Southeast Asian contexts: (1) patterns of perennialism; (2) the state and the market; and (3) the role of spectacle. In each of these domains scholars address questions and identify problems that are relevant for theorizing informal sovereignties everywhere. I will discuss each in turn.

Patterns of Perennialism

When one compares work on informal sovereignties in Southeast Asia with similar work in other places, the thing that most stands out is the acceptance of a certain degree of perennialism in the forms that informal sovereignties take. By perennialism I mean the idea that informal sovereignties are not entirely new, but have deep roots in the region that may even stretch back to pre-colonial times.⁸ The conventional wisdom on informal sovereignties is that their growing importance is a function of the decline of the hegemony of the nation-state. The cohesive 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006) fragments at the same time that neo-liberalism weakens the state and introduces a new kind of government, which is 'less and less an ensemble of bureaucratic institutions, more and more a licensing and franchising authority' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:16). Yet there is a peculiar disjuncture about this argument. While the broader narrative that neo-liberalism is encouraging people to take the law into their own hands and introducing techniques of governing by franchise, the case studies do not always completely bear this out. As Pratten and Sen remark in their book *Global vigilantes* (2008:5):

From above, on a macro scale, private security and vigilantism can look like a reflex of wider, global discourses and dynamics. From below, however, the reflex link is much harder and more complex to delineate since

7 For a discussion of how figures and social types can be used and have been used in social analysis, see Barker, Harms and Lindquist (2013).

8 I borrow this term from David Henley (1995), who was critical of Anderson's argument that nationalism is a strictly modern invention and argued that in some places, such as Vietnam, a case could be made that nationalism has premodern origins—an idea roundly rejected by Anderson.

vigilantism obeys not only the logics of neoliberalism but its own historical and cultural logics.

I will come back to the problem of delineating the link between global, neo-liberal dynamics and particular cases below, but first I want to consider the latter question of what other historical and cultural logics are at work.

It is widely recognized that colonialism has played a key role in shaping contemporary manifestations of informal sovereignties. Most colonial states did not seek a complete monopoly of legitimate violence, but governed in part through indirect rule and by farming out authority. This allowed for the existence of informal sovereignties, some of which enjoyed quasi-official status and some of which remained in the shadows. Case studies in post-colonial contexts therefore frequently trace continuities between colonial-era institutions, discourses and practices and those in the present day. Some even go so far as to argue that in regards to informal sovereignties, we are not really seeing a distinctive post-colonial formation, as Mbembe (2001) and the Comaroffs (2006) have argued, but merely a new way of labelling old practices (Fourchard's [2008] study of vigilantes in Nigeria, and Sundar [2010] on India, are examples).

Beyond the colonial experience, however, the search for cultural and historical logics has been rather scattered and tentative. Lund (2006b) discusses the importance of 'traditional' institutions of authority in a number of African contexts and David Pratten (2008) has some suggestive observations about the ways in which popular justice in Nigeria borrows from traditional repertoires of masquerade performances, and also incorporates supernaturalism—in the form of amulets and invulnerability. But such considerations have not received a great deal of attention. By and large the emphasis in scholarship on Africa, India and Latin America is on the modernity—whether colonial, post-colonial or neo-liberal—rather than on the perennialism of informal sovereignties.

It is therefore all the more noteworthy that in the Southeast Asian context, Benedict Anderson, who was so adamant about the modern origins of nationalism, was actually one of the earlier scholars to emphasize the perennialism of informal sovereignties. In his essay 'The idea of power in Javanese culture' (1990), he drew attention to how pre-colonial ideologies of charismatic authority in Java made a place for what we could call a kind of informal sovereignty at the edges of the state, here represented by spiritually potent persons—such as religious leaders or martial-arts adepts—who commanded a following within their limited realms, and who might one day emerge as centres of state power in their own right.

Oliver Wolters (1982) identified this kind of charismatic, achievement-based leadership with a broad social type, which he called 'men of prowess'. He argued

that 'men of prowess' of one sort or another were found in all the pre-colonial polities of the Southeast Asian region. While these societies were hierarchical, they did not have states in the usual sense. Kinship was for the most part bilateral, and instead of power being passed from generation to generation through a lineage, authority was achieved through the actions of charismatic leaders, and attributed to magical or spiritual potency. 'Men of prowess' could become ancestors, who might continue to be worshipped by subsequent generations, but they needed to earn such a status during their lifetimes. Their authority was not institutionalized over time: each generation might see the rise of a new leader with a new constellation of followers. The polities that came into being around 'men of prowess' were thus highly personalized and very fragile.

The story of the emergence of more conventional and durable states in Southeast Asia is generally told as a kind of Weberian narrative about the routinization of this early form of charismatic authority, first through Indianization and later through colonialism. Indianization provided for an encompassing ideology that linked spiritual potency on the one hand to lineage and on the other, to divine power. Colonialism deepened this routinization through the introduction of enduring bureaucratic structures and patterns of succession. But there is a sense in virtually all scholarship on colonial and post-colonial Southeast Asia that this routinization has never been fully achieved, once and for all, as it were.

Many note that the remnants of more charismatic forms of authority survive within formalized states. For example, although John Sidel (1999) argues that the rise of local 'bosses' in the Philippines is a modern effect of the political economy of American colonialism and electoral democracy, he nonetheless sees the 'big man' aspects of these bosses as something perennial to the Philippines and part of the broader phenomenon of 'men of prowess'. Similarly, Anderson's (1972) study of Indonesian revolutionaries and the origins of the Indonesian army, Barker's (1998) work on the culture of the Indonesian police, and Loren Rytter's (2001) work on *preman* who reinvented themselves as parliamentarians, all emphasize the continuing importance of 'men of prowess' culture within the formal state apparatus.

Just as important, 'men of prowess' in various guises reappear again and again at the edges of, and in the interstices of, formal state power. Jeremy Kingsley's (2012) work on *kyai* leadership in Lombok, Ian Wilson's (2006) work on religious and ethnic militias in Jakarta, and Kari Telle's (2009) work on the Dharma Wisesa security group, also in Lombok, are just a few of the more recent examples of scholarship showing the continuing importance of claims about spiritual potency, invulnerability, and charismatic authority for leaders

operating at the margins of state power. Taken together, these studies suggest that with each generation there is at least the potential that new figures of charismatic authority will emerge, throw into doubt the sovereignty of the state, and pose anew the question of how such power can be routinized. As Schulte Nordholt (2015) puts it, such dynamics should be seen as being part of the '*longue durée*' of patron-clientism in the region.

If research on informal sovereignties in Southeast Asia is unique in its acceptance of a perennial logic, it must also be noted that it is generally a weak form of perennialism. Culture is seen as providing an idiom—and even sometimes, as in Anderson's 'Idea of power' (1990) essay or in Tony Day's *Fluid iron* (2002), a theory—of informal sovereignty, but it is rarely seen to be a root cause for informal appropriations of law-making violence. Instead, the cause is generally traced back to some combination or conjunction of factors related to the state and the market.

Informal Sovereignties, the State, and the Market

It is a truism that informal sovereignties emerge to greatest prominence under conditions where states are 'weak'. There are a number of factors scholars have pointed to in trying to explain state weakness. A prominent factor, particularly in scholarship about Africa and India, is colonialism. In colonial states, the reliance on indirect and ad hoc systems of rule, the presence of powerful private companies with quasi-state power, and the tendency to treat colonies as places to experiment with new modes of government and control combined to produce what Hansen and Stepputat (2006:302) describe as 'a twilight zone of multiple, indeterminate configurations of power and authority'. Post-colonial states have often inherited these uneven and patchy configurations of power, providing spaces for informal sovereignties to emerge. Another factor frequently cited for state weakness is the rise of neo-liberalism, which has seen state functions hollowed out and privatized, parcels of territory given over to free trade zones, and citizens and communities encouraged to take care of their own needs, including in the area of law and order (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Hansen and Stepputat 2006). State weakness may also be exacerbated by other kinds of political transitions, such as shifts from authoritarian to democratic rule, from socialist to post-socialist rule, or from civil war to peace (Pratten and Sen 2008:16). In case studies focusing on South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria, post-Soviet Russia, and Bolivia, it is generally a conjunction of the above factors that are shown to create the conditions for the emergence of informal sovereignties.

One of the great strengths of scholarship on informal sovereignties in South-east Asia is that the weak-state hypothesis has been elaborated with tremendous subtlety in some contexts, and forcefully challenged in others. Accounts of the rise of the figure of the *jago* in nineteenth-century Java are powerful examples of the former approach. The *jago* was a man of prowess for the colonial era: a tough who claimed magical powers such as the art of invulnerability, seen by some as a criminal or a thug, by others as the strong arm of the law, and by yet others as a local hero.

Java in the nineteenth century was for the most part ruled indirectly through governors, or *bupati*, and their underlings. Javanese cultural constructions of social hierarchy emphasized that leaders—who were a part of nobility—should remain aloof from their followers, who were seen as commoners. As Onghokham (1984) has shown, this social distance between rulers and ruled was one of the factors that created a space for *jago* to emerge as key power brokers between governors and the village world, since leaders could appear aloof, while *jago* worked in the shadows to impose a strong-arm order.

There were a number of forces over the course of the late nineteenth century that served to heighten the power of the *jago*. First, there was a gradual deepening of bureaucratic rule, which exacerbated the social distance between the Javanese nobility and villagers, creating what Henk Schulte Nordholt (1991) has described as an 'administrative vacuum', into which the *jago* stepped. At the same time, rural areas in Java were undergoing a process of capitalist enclosure and there was a deepening of market penetration, which meant that the colonial regime demanded a greater degree of 'peace and order' (*rust en orde*) at the village level. As local enforcers and spies, *jago* were increasingly criminalized by the Dutch, while also serving as one of the main means for establishing this order. Yet it was not always clear whose order they were establishing. James Rush's (1990) study of nineteenth-century opium farms in Java suggests that the entire apparatus for establishing law and order at the village level—the police, the courts, village heads, and most importantly, *jago*—was effectively hijacked by the owners of opium farms in their competition over market share. There was a significant black market for opium that had grown up alongside the legal market and one way to handicap a competitor was by having their distributors arrested for black-market activities. Opium was not unique in this regard, as a similar dynamic was evident in the livestock market (Schulte Nordholt 1991). In both cases, *jago* appeared not just as power brokers moving into the gaps resulting from the 'incomplete development' (Schulte Nordholt 1991) of the colonial state, but also as key brokers between legal and criminal realms.

Research in urban Java has highlighted a similar pattern, whereby a wide range of informal sovereigns—*jago*-like toughs, martial-artist gurus, neigh-

bourhood watches, and militias—are accepted as *de facto* rulers over particular domains of the city. Often emerging together with new markets and new industries, over the past few decades the sheer ubiquity of such groups has led to a situation where cities are effectively carved up into thousands of micro-territories, each of which has an informal, self-appointed guardian who extracts tribute from those in his territory and brokers relations with capitalists and elements within the state. The degree of autonomy such guardians enjoy has been highly variable. In periods of political instability and genuine state weakness, as during the Indonesian revolution, they have had significant powers in their own right. Writing about Bandung, John Smail (1964) referred to highly autonomous '*jago* republics' emerging to guard security and control the distribution of goods. Robert Cribb (2008) noted a similar dynamic in revolution-era Jakarta. But in the post-colonial period such autonomy has been much more circumscribed and variable, as such guardians have often themselves sought backing from elements in the state, and the state has sought to capture and routinize the power of co-optable informal sovereigns, while criminalizing and killing the rest. Elsewhere (Barker 1998), I have argued that the tremendous growth in private security in Indonesia since the 1980s should not be seen so much as the state surrendering authority to informal sovereigns, but rather as an attempt to formalize informal sovereignties and establish control over them. In this regard, the supposed 'incomplete development' of the state and the supposed autonomy of informal sovereigns can sometimes be seen as alibis for elements in the state to gain control of lucrative protection rackets and gain leverage over voting blocs, while delegating responsibility for violence to para-state actors (see also Tadié 2002; Bertrand 2004; Wilson 2006). Under such circumstances, state and para-state actors sometimes share an interest in inflating the reputation of charismatic, informal sovereigns and emphasizing the supposed 'weakness' of the state, since this explains the failure of the state to enforce the law while also increasing opportunities for predatory actions. The reputed strength and brutality of informal sovereigns can also be used as a justification for their violent repression by the state.

A more direct challenge to the weak-state hypothesis has come from John Sidel's (1999, 2004) work on bossism in the Philippines. Bosses are essentially local despots who enjoy a monopoly over the economy and violence, both formal and informal, in their bailiwick. Sidel argues that the rise of bosses is best explained not by state weakness, but by state strength under conditions of primitive accumulation, when people are highly susceptible to the vagaries of the market but have yet to be fully integrated into wage labour. Under these precarious conditions, particularly in areas where control of the levers of gov-

ernment is necessary for capital accumulation (either to control disbursement of state largesse or to facilitate black-market enterprises), bosses emerge as opportunistic brokers of state power. In Sidel's account, the power of bosses has become particularly strong in the Philippines because the structure of democratic government introduced by American colonialism allowed local leaders, along with their henchmen, to dominate a wide spectrum of economic and coercive powers within their region. In more recent work (Sidel 2004), he has pointed to scholarship on Thai gangsters to suggest that bossism might also be on the rise there. Even in Indonesia, where local despotism has for the most part been restricted to the village level, there are indications that administrative decentralization and the advent of elected governors, *bupati* and mayors has opened up the possibility that some provincial, district, or city bosses might emerge.

These are just a few examples of how the scholarship on informal sovereignties in Southeast Asia offers some valuable correctives to the weak-state hypothesis. First, it suggests that the weak-state hypothesis cannot always be taken for granted.⁹ At times it is precisely the strength of the state that helps to create conditions for informal sovereigns to emerge and try to capture state power. But it also shows that even in cases where a weak state does seem to open up a vacuum for informal sovereignties to emerge, a state-centric analysis is still important. Too often scholarship on vigilantism, especially, has tended to treat vigilante groups as phenomena unto themselves, rather than analysing them in relation to shifts in state power. Second, this scholarship highlights the importance of situating informal sovereignties in relation to the emergence and control of markets. While the theoretical literature about informal sovereignties makes broad claims about the effects of neo-liberalism, which privatizes and franchises state power, Southeast Asian cases suggest that informal sovereignties are not just an effect of privatization but have been integral to the expansion of capitalism from colonial times onwards. Rather than seeing them as an effect of franchising, they should be seen as a product of active informalization that facilitates the protection and domination of markets. Ironically, in the Indonesian case, the privatization of security that started in the 1980s, which on the face of it might be seen as an example of franchising out

9 Bridget Welsh (2008) makes this argument quite forcefully in her account of vigilante *keroyokan* (mobbing) killings in Indonesia in the early 2000s. While she acknowledges that government decentralization created a vacuum of authority that may have encouraged people to take the law into their own hands, she finds that local dynamics—sometimes including the tacit approval of the police—also played an important role in creating the conditions for such violence.

state authority, in fact was an attempt to formalize informal sovereignties in order to bring them within the tent of the New Order regime. Finally, the Southeast Asian cases highlight the need to take claims about the power of informal sovereignties with a heavy dose of salt. Both informal sovereigns and elements in the state can have strong interests in inflating the former's power (and, for that matter, their numbers).

The Role of Spectacle and Audience

The performative dimension of informal sovereignties is another area where studies on Southeast Asia can contribute something substantive to a broader comparative conversation. Outside of Southeast Asia the main person who has made the spectacular aspects of informal sovereignties central to their analysis is Daniel Goldstein (2003, 2004), who describes how lynchings in Bolivia serve as spectacles for making visible the plight of slum dwellers to a broader audience, particularly to the state, but also to the press and its publics. For Goldstein, lynchings are just one kind of performance aimed at establishing such visibility, which he associates with making claims to the prerogatives and recognition that come with citizenship, but which also clearly involve the potentiality of more radical claims to sovereignty.

Attention to the performative aspect of claims to sovereignty in the Southeast Asian context is not new. Both Anderson, in his essay on Javanese power (1990), and Geertz, in his book *Negara: The theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (1980), draw attention to the ways in which the achievement of charismatic power in particular requires effective performance. In his memorable line about 'power serving pomp, not pomp power', Geertz emphasized that performance is in fact integral to sovereign claims rather than being an epiphenomenon of them. Scholarship on figures of informal sovereignty has likewise noted the importance of performance, whether in terms of dress (Telle 2009), styles of speech (Chambert-Loir 1984), or bodily disciplines (Wilson 2002). In this work, many have noted that political communication by informal sovereigns very often takes place through an appropriation and selective display of the visible signs of power, drawn both from the repertoire of charismatic authority (amulets, tattoos and so on) and from the repertoire of the modern state (uniforms, titles, organizational structures). Reciprocally, elements in the state often appropriate the signs of informal sovereigns in order to recuperate or strengthen their authority.

James Siegel (1993) and others (such as Barker 1999) have also focused on Indonesian cases where spectacles of violence and shaming are used as a means

to ward off ontological threats and threats to social hierarchy, while founding a sense of territorial community. In these lynchings it is not charismatic individuals but ordinary neighbourhood residents who become informal sovereigns by participating—either as perpetrators or as spectators—in the public punishment or lynching of thieves, witches, adulterers, and other transgressors (Herriman 2009). Through such performances of sovereign violence neighbourhoods make a name for themselves as cohesive and strong moral communities. But the dynamic in Indonesia is very different from that found in Bolivia, where Goldstein (2003) suggests that the state responds to such spectacles by providing greater recognition to neighbourhoods, in the form of social services and policing. In Indonesia, what we have often seen is rather a tendency for the state to respond with a mimesis of popular violence, as it did during the Petrus killings of the 1980s, and for communities to then imitate state violence in return, and so on. In such mimesis, the distinction between formal and informal sovereign violence begins to break down.

By far the most sustained consideration of the role of spectacle in claims of sovereignty is Danilyn Rutherford's book on West Papua, *Laughing at Leviathan* (2012). Rutherford shows that not only are spectacle and performance integral to sovereign claims, but so, too, is the presence of an audience. Every performance of sovereignty involves a complex exchange of gazes and signs, which engage a variety of audiences, real and imagined, local and global. Anticipating being seen, getting audience approval, expecting that one's performance will be seen by one audience and then discovering it has been seen by another, feeling the pull of expectations from an audience: these can lead to joy and pride of power, but also to embarrassment, and public failure. A focus on audience highlights the fact that claims to sovereignty entail a great deal of risk and are inherently fragile.

Rutherford's approach is a compelling one for understanding Papuan nationalists' performative claims to sovereignty, which involve such a rich tapestry of audiences, from local audiences to the Indonesian government, to human rights NGOs and the UN. But it could have a much broader application, as it provides a way of looking microscopically at the multiple registers and scales within which sovereignty claims resonate, or aspire to resonate.¹⁰ It thus has

10 Another example of a focus on multiple registers is Herriman (2010), who shows how a spate of killings of sorcerers in East Java in 1998 was interpreted locally and in the mass media, implying very different views on where sovereign violence was located. As Herriman also points out elsewhere (2007), these divergent views have important consequences for attributions of agency and culpability.

the capacity to take account of globalization as a shift in patterns of communication rather than just as a shift in political and economic organization.

Religious Militias

How might these three themes—perennialism, the role of the state and the market, and the power and risk of spectacle—inform our understanding of religious militias? And conversely, how might the figure of the religious militia change how Southeast Asianists think about informal sovereignties?

As I signalled at the outset of this article, first and foremost a focus on these themes should at least give us pause before being drawn into the very strong prevailing discourse about militant religious groups and their transnational dimensions. By taking seriously their local cultural forms, and the nature of their relationships to the state and to capitalist markets, we situate these groups within a different frame: a frame that recognizes that they are emerging from particular places, with particular histories. In the case of a group like FPI, which successfully made Indonesia off-limits to Lady Gaga, a focus on this history might mean taking seriously the contention that this group is no different from the other gangs and youth groups that came before it, that they are simply running a protection racket. As a friend of mine who has worked as a consultant to the karaoke bar industry in Jakarta put it, religious militias like FPI are ‘the same thing [as the gangs that came before them], it’s just the garb that’s different’. This would suggest such groups have a familiar relation to both the market and the state. Yet one must also recognize that proclamations of this kind may also stem from an underlying fear of such groups. For many people, particularly those in the security industry, it is comforting to think that such groups are merely thugs, not so different from the thugs that came before. It takes the edge off their radicalism and their claims to acting on behalf of a higher form of law. It might also mask important changes in how the groups are organized and what role they play in broader patterns of capital accumulation.

One thing that is undeniable about religious militias is that they have managed to reach new audiences as they stake their claims. The War on Terror campaign has changed a lot of things, but one of its most significant effects is in practices of listening. Not just intelligence organizations but NGOs, the press, and scholars now listen for Islamic law-making violence above all. Groups like Front Pembela Islam in Indonesia are not only heard globally; they anticipate being heard globally, and stage their actions accordingly. This was not the case for the local gangsters and thugs that came before.

Conclusion

Comparative scholarship on informal sovereignties provides us with a way of reframing the longstanding literature in Southeast Asian studies that has focused on figures of charismatic power. Given the richness of this work (and above I have only begun to scratch the surface of this body of work), it is odd that it has not played a more central role in theorizing the grey areas of authority that so often seem to characterize political formations at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I have outlined a few of the domains where I think work in Southeast Asia can make some promising contributions. We are fortunate to have an anchor for our work in the idea of 'men of prowess', which is at once something culturally specific but also a concept that travels easily, across space and time. With this perennial figure in the background, subsequent figures like the Javanese *jago* and the Filipino boss have allowed scholars to focus on the colonial and post-colonial structures that have shaped the emergence of modern informal sovereignties. This work complicates and challenges the weak-state hypothesis about informal sovereignties, suggesting that state-centric approaches to these phenomena are illuminating. It also demonstrates that there is a close relation between informal sovereignties and the expansion of markets, and that the neo-liberal privatization of security may not have the same significance everywhere; it may, for example, be seen as an attempt to strengthen the state by formalizing informal sovereignties, rather than as an attempt to weaken it through franchise. Furthermore, this work suggests that while the political economy of informal sovereignties may help to shed light on their structural underpinnings, these underpinnings alone cannot account for their political force in the contemporary moment. Much of this force derives instead from their performative and spectacular acts, which implicate local, national and global audiences in ways that can be quite unexpected.

One of the audiences it implicates is that of scholars working on Southeast Asia. And I think for this audience, as for many others, what makes informal claims of sovereignty so fascinating to watch is that they represent the potential—however nascent and however hidden behind stigmas of religious extremism and criminality—for the birth of a new social order arising from the margins. Depending on where one stands, this radical potential may seem frightening or hopeful. But either way, in an age of homogenizing Empire and global economic precariousness, it is the kind of potential that can catch our attention.

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