

Significance & the supernatural

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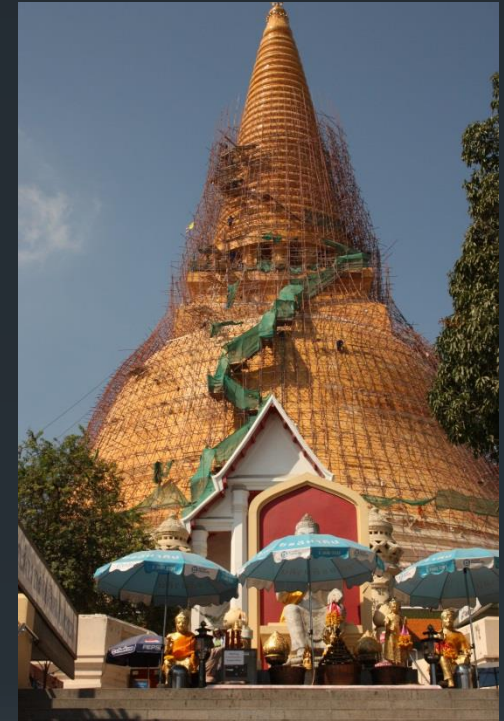
- My reference is to Southeast Asia and China and to the field of what is known as 'popular religion', including folk Catholicism in the Philippines, popular Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, and the cults of popular gods in China and across the Chinese diaspora.
- In popular religion the focus not on orthodox, canonical teachings and liturgies but on the real presence of deities, spirits, saints or the Buddha in the world around us and the tangible expression of this presence in the form of magically or miraculously efficacious places and things such as temples, shrines, graves, churches, statues, trees, rocks, amulets.

The principle of contagion

- The idea that divine force can ‘jump’ between objects and between objects and people via touch.
- E.g., the efficacious power of a relic buried in the core of a Buddhist stupa flows to the surrounding fabric and outward to the bodies of pious believers.

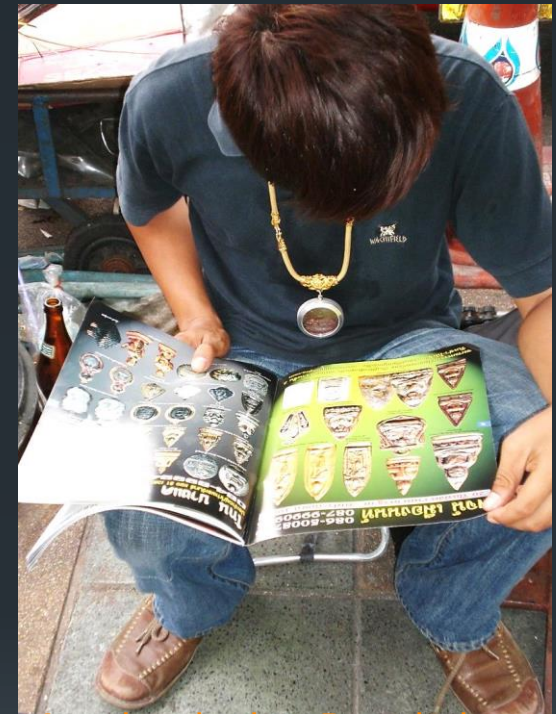
The principle of responsiveness

- Believers are constantly monitoring and assessing the efficacy or responsiveness of divine beings as manifest in the fabric of their sites. They are keen observers of the efficacy of temples, monuments, statues, amulets and so on.
- The performance of spirits and deities via their sites helps determine whether people will repair, restore, or elaborate temples and shrines.



Phra Pathom stupa, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand (Denis Byrne 2010)

- Popular religion continues to flourish in Asia
- Yet most significance assessments and programs of conservation carried out on the infrastructure of religion in Asia fail to engage with the supernatural, are blind to miraculous efficacy, and end up treating buildings and fabric as inert matter.
- The secular-rational trend in Western culture since the Reformation continues to be played out in heritage practice, modern archaeology, and art history.
- In Asia, the effacement of the supernatural in heritage practice perpetuates the anti-superstition campaigns of the Christian missionaries and of indigenous nationalist modernisers of the 19th and 20th centuries.
- The modernisers saw popular religion, glossed as superstition, as an obstacle to science and to the technological progress and economic advancement of their nations.



Amulet dealer, Bangkok
(Denis Byrne 2010)

- The magical-supernatural realm of popular religion presents a radical alternative to heritage's way of conceiving & assessing significance.
- While heritage conservation remains resolutely secular-rationalist practice, elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences there is a new new openness to the liveliness and vibrancy of matter (in our terms, 'fabric'). The 'new materialities', while it rejects mysticism, has in common with popular religion an understanding that matter is not inert and passive.
- The following are some of the terms in which matter and objects are described:

Popular religion

Magical
Supernatural
Miraculous
Divine
Efficacious

Rationality

Inert
Passive
Nonagentic

New materialisms

Vibrant
Lively
Agentic
Uncanny

Secularizing Aboriginal heritage

We see a similar tendency to secularize on the part of heritage experts working with Aboriginal heritage in Australia.

- A dichotomization of the sacred and the archaeological, embedded by the 1960s, continues to condition the recording and assessment of Aboriginal heritage sites.
- E.g., shell middens in NSW are almost always framed entirely in archaeological terms and are precluded from having spiritual significance.
- Heritage professionals are in danger of reiterating the missionary message that belief in the sacramental nature of the landscape was childlike and evil.
- To reconcile heritage practice and 'the supernatural' we need to better understand the context our practice has in modernity.

This paper draws on research published in: *Denis Byrne, Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia*. Routledge 2014.