

## Exploring religion, piety and spirituality as empowering forces in Southeast Asia

Religious faith has been discussed as a potential empowering force, contributing to comfort, security, personal growth, a sense of belonging, and to the liberation of subjects and communities (Hood, Hill and Spilka 1985). Instead of portraying faith as a crippling barrier to human agency, recent scholarly production has explored the possibilities of achieving freedom and liberation (conceptualised in multiple ways) through religious devotion.

This panel aims to develop a comparative perspective through the participation of researchers working on religion, empowerment, emancipation, agency, power and other intersecting assemblages in various Southeast Asian countries. One of the questions to be considered is what 'empowerment' might refer to in relation to the evaluation of religion as a human construct itself. Multiple conceptualisations have emerged from development studies to postcolonial feminist theories, leading to postcolonial critiques of 'Western' missionary projects victimising women and minorities without considering their own political potential (Chatterjee 2016; Batliwala 2007; Mahmood 2004; Abu-Lughod 1990).

A further aim of this panel is to explore the linkages between religion, politics and gender through the perspective of the study participants themselves inspired by 'decolonising' methodologies (Sandoval 2000; Smith 2012). From the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement to the Islamic boarding school for transgender Muslims in Indonesia, via multiple other projects throughout Southeast Asia, religion has arisen for some as a critical tool towards personal growth. By evaluating the extent to which Southeast Asian majority faiths and autochthonous tribal religions can be used to empower marginalised communities, transform educational attitudes, fight poverty and 'liberate' human subjects, it is expected to contribute to knowledge on the role of religion in the region in relation to what the concepts of emancipation, agency, activism and power/empowerment might mean in diverse contexts.

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