

25th Aseasuk conference (2009), Swansea University, Wales

11-13 September 2009

This conference was attended by about 80 participants from all over the UK, Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia), Europe (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey), Australia and the US. It was also the occasion to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Studies in the UK (ASEASUK). It is the first ASEASUK conference held in Wales. We were blessed with good weather if not with British Rail's usual Sunday engineering works replacement buses for the return journey to Cardiff from Swansea.

Entertainment on Friday evening for delegates was a film, Chants of lotus (Perumpuan punya cerita) and on Saturday, Didik Nini Thowok's 'Dwi Muka Jepindo, Bali and Topeng Walang Kekek dance', a medley of three of his compositions. The delegates enjoyed his humorous dances and skill as a female impersonator. Didik uses masks to blend comedic movements which have become identified as his special choreographic style.

Professor Terry King as chair of the ASEASUK Executive Committee made his welcome speech on the Friday evening, followed by another welcome from Swansea University's Pro-Vice Chancellor for Internationalisation, Professor Iwan Davies. For the occasion, Terry has also written A history of Aseasuk to record the Association's activities and this booklet was presented to all participants.

Dr Russell Jones gave a special address to ASEASUK members for its 40th anniversary celebration at the conference dinner on the Saturday evening. Russell delivered his speech with humour, passion and emotion and gave the audience an insight into his own personal engagement with the region. He spoke of the importance of the region and the need to understand it from a range of cross-disciplinary perspectives. He also provided an interesting and thoughtful commentary on the early years of the Association as one of the few senior scholars who was involved in its work from the 1970s. Russell argued for the crucial significance of language and literature studies and the need for the Association to provide a place and an opportunity at its conferences for scholars of Southeast Asian languages to meet together and engage with researchers from other disciplines. Terry King gave a vote of thanks to Russell Jones for his address.

Publishers who participated in book displays at the conference include NIAS Press, Routledge (Taylor & Francis), Cambridge University Press and ISEAS (Singapore).

ASEASUK would like to express fulsome thanks to conference organisers Felicia Hughes-Freeland and Chris Barrow, conference office colleagues Nanale Lewis and Leah Black, student helpers Ramli Dollah and Gillian Rollason, as well as the university's Media Resources and Catering for making this a successful, friendly and enjoyable event.

Below are the reports on the various panels. Unless otherwise stated or that there was more than one convenor for a panel, all reports were provided by the respective panel convenors.

Panel: Gender and creativity

Convenor: Dr Felicia Hughes-Freeland (Swansea University)

This panel took a broad approach to the theme of gender and creativity, and invited proposals about gendered styles of creativity in performance, patterns of gendered creativity in the literature, film, television or other media, the gendering of creativity in everyday life. The speakers presented ethnographic case material from their recent original research into particular societies and groups,

and situated these against the changing dynamics of creative processes arising from distinctive local patterns of gender relations and identities.

The first papers explored gender, politics and society. Mutiah Amini's (Gadjah Mada University) paper, 'To publish or not publish? Private issues and Javanese women's creativity of the family in the last colonial era', argued against the claim that women are often not seen in Indonesia historiography because they operate in the private sphere. Female letters about family life in 'personal columns' in a newspaper published in Semarang, Central Java between the 1920s and 1940s are evidence that the public sphere is constructed from gendered space, and is mutually implicated in the construction of modernity. The construction and contestation of gendered space was also pursued in Julian Lee's (University of Kent) 'Shopping for a real candidate: Aunty Bedah and the Women's Candidacy Initiative's engagement in the 2008 general elections in Malaysia' which explored the strategy of the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) to increase female participation in parliament without joining political parties following the withdrawal of its candidate, Zaitun Kasim, in the 2008 elections. This resulted in the creation of Mak Bedah, a fictive persona wearing a purple headscarf and sunglasses who campaigned for female participation in the largely masculine public spaces of Malaysian politics, attracting considerable national and international media coverage.

The next papers considered gendered agency in the field of sexuality and work. Matteo Carlo Alcano's (University of Milano-Bicocca) 'Slaves of our own making': the 'fabrication' of same-sex identities between Java and Bali' presented an ethnography of migrant Javanese male sex workers in Bali. He explained how they create community using the concept of 'gang' using both physical and symbolic violence to define their identity and to draw a boundary between themselves and other kinds of sex workers. The theme of self-representation in the sexual politics of performance continued in Sandra Bader's (Monash University) 'Experiencing the embodied self: re-negotiating gender identities through dangdut performances in contemporary Java'. It contextualised the sexual politics of dangdut in relation to the polarised images of women during Suharto's New Order, and presented case material about the lived experience of performers, arguing that performance has the power to create life worlds (in a phenomenological sense) to challenge political gender stereotyping.

This theme was also explored in Felicia Hughes-Freeland's paper 'Women's impacts on cinema in post-Suharto Indonesia: beyond the "victim-virago dichotomy"?' which argued that such polarisations were being overcome by an increase in female involvement in film production, direction and script-writing. There is a core of urban elite fiction director-producers such as Nia Dinata, Upi Avianto, and Nan T. Achmas, but there is also a resurgence of documentary cinema, repressed during the New Order, at grassroots level which is also shaping high budget film productions in Jakarta to challenge the male gaze of New Order cinema. Ben Murtagh's (SOAS) 'Gay, lesbian and waria audiences in Indonesia; strategies and creativities of the resistant spectator' explored cinematic representations on non-normative sexualities in Indonesia. Data from focus groups representing various non-normative sexualities in Surabaya, East Java showed a variation in their responses to the construction of gender in the mainstream Indonesian films. Gender representation and its performance was also the theme of Margaret Coldiron's (Reading University)'s paper 'Creativity and the performance of gender in Balinese dance, or how I became a demon king'. Rather than thinking of gender as essential and binary, Coldiron drew on the concepts of complementarity or situated practice to contextualise her argument that gender in performance is a matter of technique; a performer can 'change gender' in one dance by doing the steps in the appropriately gendered manner. This insight was reinforced by Coldiron's own experience of dancing the role of Rawana.

Space does not allow me to explore the discussions provoked by these stimulating papers, but the questions they raised undoubtedly moved the analysis of gender relations and representations in Southeast Asia forward from arguments presented in the past decade. Publication of these papers is being planned, and I also hope that there will be a second larger publication to include some contributions which were submitted but could not be presented at the conference, including two papers on the Philippines, three on Thailand and a further three on Indonesia.

Panel: Contesting the state: violence, identity and sovereign practices in Southeast Asia

Convenors: Dr Laurens Bakker and Professor Frans Hüsken (Radboud University, the Netherlands), and Dr Lee Wilson (Cambridge University)

Report by Lee Wilson

This panel was convened as a preparatory workshop for a new research project, 'State of Anxiety', a collaborative endeavour between Radboud and Cambridge Universities. The workshop brought together a group of emerging scholars to explore the relationship between violence, political identity and the state in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. Guerrilla movements, civil militias, community organisations and NGOs are just some of the many kinds of non-state agents whose authority contests or exceeds that of the state within their domains in Southeast Asia. Significantly, the authority of these groups often rests on their potential for violence, not just its enactment. Common to these sites of informal or localised authority are familiar discourses of exclusion and territorial control that are often cited as the hallmark of sovereign relations in modernity. Ethnic and religious identities frequently define the contours of communal relations maintained by these groups. Custom and tradition, often linked to the issue of control of land and natural resources, are offered as principles of local governance and a countervailing force to the authority of the state. Where authority is seen to fail, to be corrupt or linked to crime, community reaction often takes a militant form. The panel thus sought to bring into question notions of sovereignty informed by territoriality and defined by the legitimate use of force in the light of the complexities of localised and multiple kinds of authority in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Jacqueline Baker's (LSE) presentation examined forms of police violence in Jakarta, focusing on the torture and extortion of users of illegal narcotics, to ask to what extent can these types of violence be considered 'of and for the Indonesian the state'? Intriguingly, she attributed increased instances of police extortion to the effects of democratisation programmes that have resulted in the drying up of revenue generated from other illegal activities such as the gambling economy. In his presentation, Laurens Bakker explored the status of civil militia groups as legal entities in Indonesia, looking at the ways in which 'concerned citizens' apply violence legally in the name of society.

Graham Brown (Bath University) and Regina Lim argued convincingly that national identity in Malaysia has been predicated on the threat of violence, originally external to the state in the form of communism and konfrontasi. More recently this has transformed, the obvious presence of the state now confronting the perceived internal threat to both state and citizenry presented by the ever present spectre of ethnic conflict. Chiara Formichi (SOAS) looked at changing representations of the leader of the Darul Islam rebellion, Kartosuwiryo, who was presented as a threat to the national unity of the Indonesian republic and a terrorist rather than the leader of a religiously motivated rebellion. Chiara argued that the misrepresentation of Kartosuwiryo has in turn spawned new politicised representations of him as a martyr of Islam in post reformasi Indonesia. Jérôme Tadié (Institute de recherche pour le développement, France) presented a fascinating insight into the roles of fires in transforming the landscape in Jakarta, arguing that patterns of interaction between government agencies, political parties and NGOs become manifest in the aftermath of catastrophe. Kari Telle (Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway) presented on the informal authority wielded by civilian security groups on Lombok, Indonesia. Importantly, Kari stressed that it is not just the potential for violence on which the authority of these groups rests, but the ways in which they are able to emulate authoritative forms of communication associated with the state. Woon Chih Yuan (Royal Holloway) examined alternative imaginings of violence in the Southern Philippines, arguing that these are contested, and that attempting to mediate these representations at a local level may be a way to build a sustainable peace.

The panel was a great success in that it opened up many of the issues that the 'state of anxiety' project aims to explore over the coming three years. Importantly, it showcased the vitality and talent of a new generation of scholars that are tackling issues of profound importance in Southeast Asian studies. The papers will be published in a special journal issue.

Panel: Malay/Indonesian manuscript studies

Convenor: Dr Annabel Teh Gallop (British Library)

This panel on Malay/Indonesian manuscript studies was a truly international gathering, attended by 11 paper presenters from Britain, France, Russia, Malaysia, Indonesia and the United States. As in previous years, the absence of a panel theme was deliberate, to provide a forum for papers on all aspects of the writing traditions of maritime Southeast Asia.

Mulaika Hijjas (SOAS) began the session with her paper on 'Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah in the Malay world' highlighting the differences of depiction in Malay and Arabic sources of the Sufi mystic Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah, said to have lived in 8th-century Iraq. The subject of Hashim bin Musa's (University Putra Malaysia) paper, 'Itqân al-mulûk bi ta`dîl al-sulûk, Undang-undang bagi diri kerajaan Terengganu: Islamic influence in statecraft in a traditional Malay state', was the code of laws printed in 1911 by the order of the Sultan Zainal Abidin III of Terengganu, and its relevance to a recent constitutional dispute. Annabel Gallop spoke on 'Malay sealing practice', and in particular questioned why lampblack should have been the preferred medium of impression for Malay seals.

Farouk Yahya (SOAS), reported on his doctoral research on 'A form of Malay divination: the Five Times (Ketika Lima)' which he has found mentioned in over 40 out of 168 Malay manuscripts on divination and magical matters. Another doctoral student from the EHESS, Paris, Paul Wormser spoke on manuscript 07.92 of the Museum Negeri Aceh, Banda Aceh of Kitab min I'tiqad al-Ittihad wa al-Hulul, the text of which is dated 20 Ramadan 1003 (29 May 1595), and which contains what is so far the earliest known quotation of the Malay poet Hamza Fansuri. The longest part of this session was reserved for Russell Jones, whose presentation 'Paper and watermarks: moving forward' was essentially a call for an integrated international project to document the papers of Malay manuscripts, which would ideally result in a website and database.

After lunch (for those not fasting during Ramadan), Vladimir Braginsky (SOAS) continued his ongoing study of Urdu influences on Malay literature with his paper 'Cetera empat fakir: the earliest translation from Urdu into Malay in a unique Singaporean manuscript'. Adi Yasran Abd Aziz (Universiti Putra Malaysia) talked on 'The manuscript of Undang-Undang Kedah: A canon of law of an early Malay state'. While this text of 1067 AH (1650 CE) is best known from SOAS MS 40329, Adi Yasran was able to point to some better readings in the Jakarta manuscript PNRI MI.25 and a MS in the Royal Asiatic Society.

In the last session, Irina Katkova (St Petersburg Institute of Oriental Studies) introduced the 'The St Petersburg Collection of Malay Letters' formed by N.P. Lihachov and preserved since 1931 in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, containing documents from Buton, Bima, Palembang, Banten, Cirebon and Makassar. Uli Kozok (University of Hawaii) discussed a new project to digitise and unicode the Batak script in 'Digital revitalisation of historic scripts'. The session ended with Fakhriati (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta), whose paper 'An overwhelming heritage in Pidie and Aceh Besar regencies: an elaboration on Acehese manuscripts collected in private hands of the Acehese' presented her project – funded by an Endangered Archives Programme grant from the British Library – to document manuscripts in private hands in two regencies in Aceh.

Mention should also be made of Revo Arka Giri Soekatno (Leiden University), who had planned to deliver his paper on 'British Library MSS.Jav.53a: An Old Javanese palm leaf manuscript from Java', discussing the only extant manuscript of the Old Javanese prose text Tantri Kamandaka from the island of Java, and the light it may shed upon the transmission of Old Javanese literature in Java after the rise of Islam. Unfortunately Revo was not able to attend due to the kafkaesque new procedures for obtaining a UK visa from the Netherlands, and while we were sitting in the Swansea sunshine his passport was still stuck on a desk in Düsseldorf.

The panel brought together a productive mix of 'old hands' and those who had never been to an ASEASUK conference before, and was happy proof that there is exciting new work going on in Malay/Indonesian manuscript studies, despite the small numbers of active researchers.

Creating resilient tourism in Southeast Asia

Convenor: Dr Janet Cochrane (Leeds Metropolitan University)

Panel report by Mike Hitchcock

Janet Cochrane opened the session with an overview of Resilience Theory arising from the work of C.S. Holling (1973) that helps to clarify the interaction of social and ecological systems. In short, resilience is 'the capacity of a system to withstand a shock or perturbation and still maintain its core function and identity'. Emma Calgaro (Macquarie University) followed by showing how this theoretical approach could be used to assess vulnerability in two Thai destinations: Khao Lak and Phi Phi island. In particular she discussed the impact of the 2004 Asian tsunami on the tourism capacity of these destinations and described how many investors had sunk their savings into new ventures, leaving them without credit records. Husein Kusmayadi's (Trisakti Institute of Tourism and Hospitality) focus was West Java where the increasing joblessness in rural society was widening social divisions. He discussed the potential social and economic benefits of tourism in the Gunung Ceremai National Park, and the complex religious diversities of the local people.

Returning to mainland Southeast Asia, Adele Esposito (Institut Parisien de Recherche Architecture Urbanistique Société) contrasted Siem Reap's colonial experience with the modern surge for development that began in the early 1990s. Despite the launching of a plan for sustainable development in 2004, hotel construction continued apace, leaving hotel owners with quite low occupancy rates, despite some efforts to design very attractive hotels.

The penultimate session comprised reports on a selection of Southeast Asian World Heritage Sites that had been researched by Terry King and Michael Parnwell (Leeds University), Janet Cochrane, and Michael Hitchcock (Chichester University) over the summer. Despite the fact that the presenters had not had a chance to compare their results, some common themes quickly emerged. Authenticated by UNESCO, World Heritage Sites have proved very attractive to second-home owners who have moved into the environs of these attractions. The sites often have complex management systems involving different authorities that impede their effective management, as is especially the case in Indonesia. Interpretative facilities are also often aimed at international audiences and not local ones, despite the importance of domestic tourism. A discussion emerged with regard to how far resilience theory could be applied to cultural heritage, which is often protected because it is irreplaceable, though a modified theoretical position could well be worth pursuing.

Sin Harnng Luh (Royal Holloway) returned to the theme of resilience in the closing presentation with a critical look at volunteer tourism, as well as a discussion on resilience in uncertain political and economic conditions.

Roundtable: Preliminary Ottoman/Turkish-Southeast Asia findings – British Academy funded project: ASEASUK and the British Institute in Ankara

Convenor: Professor Michael Hitchcock (Chichester University)

The roundtable discussion opened with a presentation by Ismail Hakki Kadi, the project Research Fellow at the British Institute in Ankara, which was received enthusiastically by the Southeast Asia specialists in the room. Ismail noted the wealth of material of Malay-Indonesian provenance in Istanbul, including formal letters between rulers and geographical accounts of Southeast Asia, notably a map comparing the Indonesian islands and Anatolia. There were also newspaper clippings relating to flows of students and religious scholars, and reports of Ottoman prisoners of war held in Myanmar (Burma) by the British. There were also records of contact with the southern Philippines during the period of American domination. Some of the Southeast Asian place names mentioned by Ismail were unfamiliar to the audience, which was interesting given their importance in Ottoman eyes.

Annabel Gallop responded to Ismail's presentation with an account of exchanges between the Malay courts and Ottoman courts between the 15th and 19th centuries. She noted that letters were often accompanied by gifts such as pepper and cloth, kain, sometimes entrusting them to European and American sea captains to deliver. Interestingly, the Ottoman world was often referred to as 'Rum' after the pre-Ottoman Byzantines who inherited part of the former Roman Empire.

There was a discussion about the wrappings and materials used for these letters with observations by Russell Jones and Michael Hitchcock on what this told us about the intentions of the senders. For example, one of the letters appeared to have been wrapped in a supplementary weft fabric (songket) emblazoned with motifs that could well have had talismanic properties. William G. Clarence-Smith drew attention to the importance of household collections in the hands of Hadrami families, as well as the work of other scholars who could throw light on pan Indian Ocean connections.

Panel: Environment, sustainability & livelihoods

Convenors: Dr Chris Barrow (University of Swansea) and Dr Becky Elmhirst (University of Brighton)

Report by Becky Elmhirst

The aim of this panel was to explore some of the ecological, social and political dimensions of environment, sustainability and natural resource-based livelihoods in Southeast Asia. Five papers were presented, covering environmental themes in Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia, and representing a range of disciplinary perspectives. David Blake (University of East Anglia) and Philippe Floch (University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Vienna) provided a critical analysis of the official and civil society discourses that construct Northeast Thailand (Isan) as 'poor' and 'dry', and that therefore have justified a series of mega projects aimed at delivering irrigation to farmers in this region. The authors show how wider political forces feed into and shape water resources management discourses, constructing problems and in turn producing the objects and subjects of development.

Jonathan Rigg (University of Durham) and Albert Salamanca's (Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok) paper also focused on Thailand's Northeast, but rather than focusing on development discourses, considered its small-scale effects, reporting on a re-study project that has tracked village-level changes over 25 years. Over this period, the nature, management and transmission of risk has changed as new forms of livelihood mean environmental management and the productive capacity of land are no longer connected to poverty, risk abatement or accumulation. The prevalence of migration and non-farm work has brought considerable 'wealth turbulence' where some families that had been in the poorer cohorts had entered the realm of the wealthy, and the converse had happened to others.

Chris Barrow reported on British Academy-funded research that he has been undertaking in the Cameron Highlands, Malaysia, with N.W. Chan and T. Bin Masron from Universiti Sains Malaysia, looking at agrarian practices of family farms in a marginal upland environment where environmental degradation is associated with the entrepreneurial farming practices of this group of ethnic Chinese Malaysian farmers. The paper explored the strategies being adopted by farmers as they responded to market pressures, and the potential conflicts between their risk mitigation strategies (e.g. the use of plastic to protect soil) and tourism based on landscape aesthetics.

Technological innovation was also the focus of Dimitrios Konstadakopoulos' (University of the West of England) paper, which looked at factors affecting decisions to adopt green technologies in 'craft villages' in Vietnam in order to mitigate noise, air and water pollution. Principal influences appeared to be customers (e.g. Ikea) rather than other enterprises within these clusters. Knowledge about clean technologies tended to come from the media, or more importantly, from customers themselves, whilst regulatory frameworks had limited impact. Finally, Anna Katherina Hornidge (University of Bonn) presented a paper co-authored with Fabian Scholtes on the implications of climate change for everyday life in Toineke Village, West Timor, where local people were adapting to livelihood

uncertainties associated with floods. The paper considered different kinds of strategies adopted by people, and noted a deterioration of peoples' capability to act in the face of changing climatic conditions. In contrast to Rigg and Salamanca's findings, the authors suggested that changing environmental circumstances and uneven capacities to mitigate environmental risks were leading to existing patterns of inequality becoming even more pronounced.

Connecting all the papers is a sense in which environmental risks and strategies for their mitigation in Southeast Asia are being re-scaled in the face of the challenges and possibilities presented by global scale risks (e.g. climate change), commoditisation and the stretching of livelihoods across space, and the influences wrought by transnational (private sector) environmental regulatory frameworks.

Panel: Emerging scholars

Convenor: Dr Fiona Kerlogue (Horniman Museum)

The panel included 11 papers, six from scholars linked with UK institutions, three from mainland Europe, one from Australia and one from the United States.

The first three papers dealt with work on mainland Southeast Asia. Sylvia Brown (SOAS) analysed the roles of those in the youth section of the Karen National Liberation movement, especially in relation to the KNU leadership, in the light of fieldwork undertaken in Thailand. The river basin of the Irrawaddy defined the limits of Marion Sabrié's (EHESS, Paris) study, which looked at social, economic and environmental aspects of change since colonisation. Catherine Newell (SOAS) shared her findings from a wide-ranging and intense examination of Dhammakaya temples, including some surprising details of the founding figures, meditation practices and the relationship with mainstream Buddhism in Thailand.

The second group of papers related to the theme of conflict with the first contribution from Krisna Uk (Cambridge), presenting a positive picture of how Jorai people near the Cambodian border have integrated objects and memories from the war into their lives. Ramli Dollah (Swansea) discussed from a theoretical perspective the ways in which immigrant groups in Sabah have been constructed as a security threat through use of language and imagery by dominant actors in the region.

Javier Gil Perez's (Instituto Universitario General Gutierrez Mellado) study of the methods and ideology of Hiztbut Tahrir through its internet presence was neatly complemented by Claudia Nef Saluz's (University of Zurich) paper, based on fieldwork among student activists in Gajah Mada University, which provided quite a different perspective.

Sunday's papers began with an analysis by Nicola Frost (SOAS) of a group in Sydney brought together by their links with Maluku, including recent immigrants, second and third generation migrants and others. Steve Rodriguez's (UCLA) paper questioned the fit between the notion of a national park and Indonesian concepts of nature, with particular reference to Ujung Kulon Park in Java. Institutional and governmental methods of tackling corruption during Indonesia's democratic transition were the subject of Budi Setiyono's (Curtin University of Technology, Australia) paper.

Lesley Pullen's paper questioned the definition of 'tradition' and its usefulness as a concept in the analysis and evaluation of textiles in the context of modern Southeast Asia.

Publishing: Dorothea Schaefer (Taylor & Francis) and Gerald Jackson (NIAS Press) conducted a very valuable question-and-answer session on how to get material published on Southeast Asia through academic publishers and addressed most of the issues which are raised by potential and current authors with them. They provided information on the kinds of support and guidance that publishers can give and the importance of presenting a manuscript which has both scholarly merit and is conscious of the potential audience and market. A very lively discussion ensued with some members of the audience giving their positive experiences of getting published and working with

academic publishers, and other indicating some of the problems which can arise in seeing a book through to publication.

Panel: Health, knowledge, power – providers, seekers and places of healthcare in Southeast Asia

Convenor: Dr Claudia Merli (University of Durham)

Hafiz Khan (Middlesex University) presented material on a research project conducted together with George Leeson which analysed health issues relating to ageing in a cross-cultural perspective, comparing in particular the situation in Singapore and Malaysia. The study is based on statistical analysis of the largest databank on global ageing, measuring self-reported health (SRH) conditions and activities of daily living (ADL) of adults aged 40–79. From the data obtained it emerges that amongst the socio-economic variables considered, the people who were married reported an overall better health condition. The project is inscribed in a broader consideration of global ageing variations across geographical regions, and of increasing disabilities related to ageing. Of particular importance is the widening gap between life expectancy tout court and active life expectancy.

David Hughes (Swansea University) examined the intricate history of Thailand's health reform since 2001, showing how political conflict between senior management in the central administration reflected on those managers working at the provincial level. Hughes focused on the redefinition of the role of provincial Public Health Offices through the modification of budget allocation and distribution, apparently favouring local engagement and entrepreneurial capacity. He analysed the situation with case studies from three provinces in the Northeast. Since 2002 we have witnessed a return to central control and the pre-eminent leadership of traditionalists within the Ministry of Public Health. The variations in local economic resources and limited funding available have determined the impoverishment of health prevention and promotion in the region, limiting health provision of district hospitals to basic treatment and channelling people towards private clinics.

Claudia Merli presented an analysis of the recent changes in the group ritual circumcisions of Muslim boys in Satun province, Southern Thailand. The increasing involvement of medical and local political authorities raises questions about the role of different agents, explicitly fostering the large rituals with the aim to provide access to a 'medicalised ritual' and to promote integration and harmony through the social activities surrounding the circumcision proper. The availability of these rituals free of charge is an important element for disadvantaged families choosing to enlist their sons, apparently ignoring the fact that recent health policies included circumcision in the universal coverage, providing it free of charge also in district and provincial hospitals. The group ritual circumcision responds to the families' desire to fulfil the traditional religious requirement while ensuring medical standards and hygienic conditions.