

Miracles and Material Life: Rice, Ore, Traps and Guns in Islamic Malaya

CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020. 290 PAGES.

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Miracles and Material Life by Terenjit Sevea feels like the grand opening of an independent bookstore you just happened to pass by. The vaults of an enthusiastic collector are finally opened, and every nook and cranny you investigate promises an exhilarating, unexpected spark. The central focus of Sevea's microhistory is the Islamic miracle worker ("pawang" or "bomoh") in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Malaya. Building on his creative engagement with Jawi manuscripts, and wide-ranging scholarship on Sufism, Islamic material culture, and Islam in South and Southeast Asia, Sevea demonstrates how these extraordinary figures manifested Islamic tradition and shaped colonial labor practices, and show how the Sufi networks, local forms of life, and labor contingencies in which these Islamic miracle workers were enmeshed animated their Islamic practice and impacted modern Malaya. This monograph will be especially valuable to scholars working on Islam and modernity, Sufism, and Islam in Southeast Asia. For those fields, Sevea fleshes out critically overlooked facets of Islamic tradition. But Sevea's analysis will also add to fields as wide-ranging as history of science, material religion studies, gender studies, ethnic studies, ecocriticism,

and postcolonial studies. Like the aforementioned bookstore, a short engagement with *Miracles and Material Life* will yield immediate finds, but the real gems will come from a careful combing through during pensive afternoons or intense exploration with curious friends.

Principally, *Miracles and Material Life* is a microhistory of pawangs in Malaya. Through a close reading of conceptually and linguistically labyrinthine Jawi manuscripts, in consultation with Romanized Malay hagiographies and the instruction of living bomohs, Sevea uncovers the historical significance of incantations, lineages, and sacred narratives that past scholars had discounted as mere “magic” and “idolatry.” Not only does Sevea decipher these complex sources, but he also crafts a history of labor, knowledge production, and power relations by reading between and through their lines. The resulting study builds on intellectual histories of transnational scholarly networks in Southeast Asia (Azra 2004), frontier Sufism and labor (Adas 1964; Eaton 1994), and the Islamic economies of the Indian Ocean cosmopolis (Green 2011 and 2015). Sevea astutely excavates the Islamic materialities contained within rice farming, mining, and hunting, thereby indirectly answering the call of scholars like Mayanthi Fernando (2017) and Nadia Fadil (2019) to challenge the secular lenses which dominate scholarship on Islam. In this way, Sevea’s project also adds to the critical conversation around secularism that was pioneered by Talal Asad (2003) and is increasingly vital in the academy (Agrama 2012; Tareen 2020). The resulting analysis clarifies the co-constituency of labor and Islamic materiality in a way that opens up novel channels of analysis.

Structurally, *Miracles and Material Life* opens with an introduction packed to the brim with theoretical, methodological, and historical insights. Sevea organizes the subsequent chapters by theme and source. Chapters 1 and 2 detail the role of pawangs in forest clearing and rice agriculture, as well as the ways they claimed and maintained Islamic authority through the production of cosmologies and their agricultural knowledge. Beyond fleshing out the agrarian and Islamic material details of rice farming from a range of sources, Sevea illustrates how the confluence of genealogical practices, Islamic cosmology, and colonial hierarchies shaped the pawangs’ interpretation of Islamic tradition. Chapter 3 turns

to the role of pawangs in mining operations in Malaya, unpacking the importance of Islamic miracle working for mineral extraction and colonialism. The final two chapters focus on the trapping, domestication, and hunting of elephants, with a particular focus in chapter 5 on the traditions developed around European gun technology. The conclusion ties Sevea's main arguments regarding early modern and modern bomohs to more recent circumstances, such as government attacks on Islamic miracle workers, the capital-driven erasure of sacred spaces, and the rise of Trump and other authoritarian leaders. If one missed it in the earlier chapters, Sevea's conclusion amplifies the resonance between the material world of nineteenth century bomohs and the present day: globalization churns on; technology and political economy shape the reproduction of Islamic tradition; labor, capital, and religious motives fuse as one and the same. As it turns out, this microhistory doubles as a funhouse mirror of contemporary Islamic life.

The abundance of exciting data in this study offers scholars of the Indian Ocean cosmopolis, Malay World, and Sufism many launching pads for future research. In particular, further attention to race and gender could simultaneously add depth to Sevea's microhistory and allow the important details that he uncovers to enrich cutting-edge theoretical conversations. Sevea brilliantly describes the gendered performances of Islamic miracle workers and their fellow laborers, with especially fascinating accounts of the religious economy of gendered labor. Similarly, the processes of racialization in demonology and labor practices are detailed at length. Sevea's complex portrait of gender and race in the Malay World might be even more generative if he and his future interlocutors considered the contributions that queer theory, Black studies, and critical race theory might add to this analysis, as his engagement with postcolonial studies does in his critique of ideology-centric models of colonialism.

The interpretation of Sevea's primary sources might also benefit from further consideration of their emotional content and the reliability of contemporary bomohs. Sevea employs a utilitarian approach to analyze labor involving the unseen (*al-ghayb*), thereby demonstrating the real work done by elements often rendered insignificant in historical analysis.

While incisive, this line of thinking did not account for the fleshy, felt dimensions of magic and miracles that Sevea himself uncovers in these manuscripts—the spectacle, the fright, the awe, and the confidence generated by these acts. What might further attention to the economies of pleasure and regimes of feeling reveal about Islamic miracle-working and the complex relationships between bomohs, reformists, and colonial administrators? In the same vein of inquiry, one wonders if the contemporary bomohs consulted by Sevea are so reliable in their understanding of the concepts in these late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century sources? Perhaps future projects might interrogate the disjunctures and dissonances between contemporary sources and historical ones, as well as the opportunities and challenges inherent in working with such scarce, imperiled records.

In addition to its wide-reaching scholarly value, *Miracles and Material Life* will be an excellent teaching resource. Graduate students and advanced undergraduates will benefit immensely from the introduction's succinct survey of scholarship on Sufism, Southeast Asia, and Islam and modernity. Additionally, individual chapters provide an engaging on-ramp for undergraduates more broadly, such as chapter 5's sketch of "gun gurus" and chapter 3's case study of colonialism- and capital-driven anthropogenic climate change. But targeted recommendations fail to capture this project. The sheer density of excitement that overflows from Sevea's *Miracles and Material Life* make it a must-read for anyone interested in the heterogeneity, porousness, and complexity of early modern and modern Islamic tradition, as well as those invested in autochthonous material ontologies and ecocritical labor analysis.

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