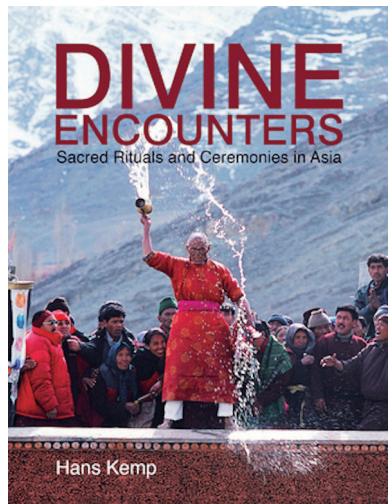


Divine Encounters: Sacred Rituals and Ceremonies in Asia by Hans Kemp. Hong Kong: Visionary World Ltd Publishers, 2019. ISBN: 9789881493927. US\$79.



Weighing in at 3 kg, this large-format book is literally a very heavy tome. However, looking in wonder at the sumptuous photographs taken by Hans Kemp, the Bangkok-based Dutch photographer and author, will exercise more than just your forearms. The reader will be taken on a spiritual journey of “Asia hiding in plain sight, resilient and vibrant” (p. 17), an exploration of “blood-curdling ceremonies and exuberant festivals” (back cover), and of cultures, some of which will probably be quite familiar, others likely less so.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters, with each focusing on a specific ritual or ceremony, from Kerala in India (Chapter 1) to the jungles of Papua New Guinea (Chapter 14). Each chapter begins with a brief introduction explaining the background of the

ceremony together with a helpful map and pertinent country details. Further background explanation can then be found in the detailed captions that accompany each photograph although most of the illustrations speak for themselves. Some of the photos are picture-postcard charming, such as a couple of photogenic kids standing pre-festival in front of hundreds of bullock carts in Myanmar (pp. 170-171) and boys hanging out on a *garamut* drum in Papua New Guinea (p. 346), others jaw-dropping and quite shocking (even if you are aware that these practices exist), such as the young men literally being crucified in the Philippines (pp. 116-117), young men having their cheeks pierced in Phuket (p. 195) and Malaysia (p. 327) or the excruciatingly painful cutting of an initiate’s skin during the Crocodile Biting Ceremony in Papua New Guinea (p. 358). At the end of the book, there is a section on “Further Reading” in which the author has identified articles and books pertinent to each of the ceremonies or rituals covered.

Hans Kemp should be congratulated for capturing the diversity of sacred ritual and ceremonies across an entire continent in the 21st century. This is no small feat and demonstrates he clearly had the patience and the skill required to be in the right place at the right time. His legacy will be leaving a record of cultures that, in some cases, are in danger of disappearing thanks to the “relentless pursuit of economic growth on the environment” (p. 16).

This is an important book, not because the author speculates or pontificates about the spiritual nature of the world or the reasons that people feel the need to engage in ritualism, but because his photos bring each ritual and ceremony to life to the extent that the reader feels immersed in the occasion.

This is not the type of book that I would recommend reading in one sitting. Rather, it is an experience to be visited often and savoured repeatedly.

Paul Bromberg