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SELF-PERPETUATING TECHNOLOGIES OF RELIGIOUS SYNTHESIS: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

In Chinese communities in the Asia Pacific region, religion constitutes an integral element of Chinese cultural identity. However, in Singapore's ethnically mixed environment, religious synthesis is becoming increasingly common with Chinese vernacular religion integrating beliefs and practices from neighbouring ethnic groups. Government policy in Singapore on the management of ethnic groups has been shaped by the aspiration to construct a multicultural nationalistic state, inadvertently fuelling religious acculturation, appropriation, interpenetration, transfiguration, hybridisation and cultural borrowing between ethnic and religious groups. An analysis of the interrelationship between the socio-political and religious arenas highlights varied catalysts that trigger these "technologies of new religious synthesis," and provides illustrations of their fundamental role as "self-perpetuating mechanisms" in multi-faith religious landscapes.

Keywords: Technologies of religious synthesis, Taoist *tang-ki*, religions in Singapore, syncretism hybridisation and transfiguration, multi-faith religious landscapes

DISCOURSES OF SYNCRETISM

All religions are syncretic, and therefore, the central issue in the academic study of syncretism is not proclaiming whether a religious tradition—in this case, vernacular Chinese religion—is or is not syncretic, but instead with analysing the diverse contestations proposed to account for the strategic social processes involved in religious coalescence and synthesis. The term "syncretism" has, perhaps due to the diversity of associated implications, become problematic in anthropology as it has been employed with positive and negative implications in different historic contexts. As a stand-alone

concept to explain religious change, it is now rarely used, and a secondary discourse has emerged shifting the focus from syncretism itself to the tactical social processes and power plays involved in new religious synthesis. The author therefore uses the terms "syncretic," "syncretism" and "new syncretic practices" in relation to the social processes of acculturation, appropriation, absorption, interpenetration, transfiguration, hybridisation and cultural borrowing between two or more distinct religious traditions. These processes, which the author has called "technologies of religious synthesis," have in Singapore, been set in motion largely in reaction to governmental engineering implemented to reshape the social and religious landscapes along multicultural and nationalistic lines. This paper considers these technologies in their role as "self-perpetuating mechanisms" as, by facilitating adaptation, they better the odds of a religious tradition's continued survival.

Incorporating both an emic understanding of religious development on a micro level from the perspective of Chinese religionists, and an etic interpretation on a macro socio-political scale, this paper offers an analytical framework to understand processes of religious synthesis, and to account for the increasing speed of religious change within Chinese vernacular religion in Singapore. Three case studies will illustrate how technologies of religious synthesis work in practice: the influence of Singapore's new "united temples" on the wider religious landscape; the incorporation of Malay Sufi saints (Datuk Gong) and Hindu deities into local folk Taoist worship; and, at the Temple of Mysterious Virtue, new syncretic ritual practices and the participation of Chinese religionists in the Hindu Thaipusam festival. These examples serve to demonstrate how the actions of the Singaporean government designed to promote religious harmony and a Singaporean national identity have acted as a catalysts for new religious synthesis to occur.

While discussing changes in Chinese vernacular religion, the author feels that the term "folk Taoism" remains useful for academic purposes in that it distinguishes the vernacular religion practiced by the laity from orthodox Taoism followed by Taoist priests. Therefore, while applying the term "Chinese vernacular religion" to describe the religion of the masses, and "Chinese religionists" for individual social actors, where necessary to differentiate between the priesthood and laity, the author will employ the terms "folk" and "orthodox" Taoist/Taoism. It should be noted that the term "vernacular religion" is not used within Taoist communities themselves, and that the distinction between the orthodox and folk traditions is only made by a minority of practitioners, the majority simply identifying themselves as Taoists.

The empirical research on which this paper is based was initially undertaken between October 2010 and April 2012 as an element of a broader comparative study of Chinese temple culture in Singapore and Taiwan. During this period, the author worked with Taoist priests and spirit mediums (*tang-ki*)[1] in temples in both locations, and between December 2010 and July 2011 attended weekly consultations with *tang-ki* at the primary case study temple, the Temple of Mysterious Virtue where, in addition to observing, the author became actively involved in ritual processes. This particular temple was selected for a case study as it is broadly representative of folk Taoist temples with an ethnically diverse congregation that are incorporating new syncretic ritual practices as well as Malay and Hindu deities into their religious repertoires. In 2011, the author assisted them in their preparations for the Thaipusam festival, and participated as body guard for the *kavadi*[2] carrier along the pilgrimage route. The research locations were revisited in 2013 and 2014 to add to previous research data and to reconfirm prior observations.

STATIC AND DYNAMIC SYNCRETISM

Rather than discarding "syncretism" as an outdated analytical tool, the author will expand the relevance of the term by considering the implications of static versus dynamic syncretism (Stewart 2004) in relation to the technologies of religious synthesis that bring self-perpetuating mechanisms—strategies that enable a religious or political machine to adapt to social change, into play. The fact that the central elements of Chinese vernacular religion including ancestor worship, a divisible soul, deity worship and divination have survived since at least the Shang dynasty[3] (Adler 2002), and mediumship since the Zhou dynasty[4] (Chan 2006) provide evidence of the efficacy of self-perpetuating mechanisms previously employed.

Due to various factors including antiquity, a vast geographic spread, and independent development in the Southeast Asian diaspora, contemporary Chinese vernacular religion incorporates aspects of Animism, indigenous folk traditions, Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism and orthodox Taoism. It is a veritable "knowledge buffet" (Aspen 2001) where varieties of knowledge and belief which are "only partly consciously and rationally planned or reasoned" (2001: 17) may be selected by a diner where there is no definitive correct meal. As such, in Singapore's non-orthodox temples, an eclectic mix of deity statues fill temple altars, and it is not uncommon to find Mahayana Bodhisattvas, recently deified humans, local

folk deities and folk deities predating religious Taoism [5] worshipped alongside orthodox Taoist deities.

When beliefs and practices have been fully incorporated into the wider tradition, a fixed state of static syncretism may be said to have been reached. From historic perspective, the syncretic nature of many such traditions has largely been forgotten by contemporary practitioners, for example, associating the Chinese Underworld with Taoism even though historically "it was Buddhism which furnished a completely worked out theory of sin and punishment to the Chinese" (Thompson 1989: 35). Diametrically opposed on the static—dynamic line of continuum, the author applies the term "new syncretic practices" to describe embryonic dynamic states localised within a small minority of temples where elements of a competing religious tradition have been intentionally brought into their domain. For example, the use of ritual objects associated with autonomous religious cultures being integrated into a particular folk Taoist ritual, for instance, the Hindu tradition of crushing limes as a means of purification provides a clear example of a new syncretic practice. As Chinese vernacular religion has no central officiating body to recognise or reject new beliefs and rituals, new syncretic practices may be adopted by a minority of temples without making any significant change to the overall religious landscape. However, the author proposes that when a significant accumulation of such practices are adopted by a majority of temples spread across the community, the base tradition[6] may be said to have evolved. There may therefore be a progressive development from the adoption of new syncretic practices by a minority of temples to the widespread adoption of these practices across the religious community. In the latter case, when the additions have reached a sufficient concentration within the religious landscape, a new state of dynamic or static religious syncretism may be said to have been reached. In other words, on a line of continuum with new syncretic practices and static syncretic states at the extremes, as a belief or practice is adopted increasingly in the wider religious landscape, it moves closer to becoming a fixed and therefore fully incorporated syncretic state. Therefore, dynamic syncretism in embryonic stages of development may, if incorporated by a majority of practitioners, contribute significantly towards reshaping a nation's religious landscape. While this in itself is not a new idea, Kong and Tong noting that "culture and tradition, including religion, are constantly adapted and reinvented" and that "cultures are constantly socially constituted and negotiated" (Kong and Tong 2000: 33), charting the development from dynamic to fixed syncretic states helps to establish interconnections between specific socio-political initiatives and the

technologies of religious synthesis that have enabled religious traditions to continue thriving in the modern world.

INCORPORATING THE EMIC INTERPRETATION OF EVENTS

Returning then to the secondary discourse, Goh (2009), after rejecting the Geertzian concept of religion as "an historically transmitted pattern of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms" (Geertz 1960: 2), reconceptualised the causes of syncretism by illustrating two processes of change, "the *transfiguration* of forms brought about by mediation in new or accelerating cultural-economic flows and the *hybridisation* of meanings brought about by contact between different cultural systems" (Goh 2009: 110). These conceptions will be incorporated into the author's analysis as competing technologies of religious synthesis, i.e., self-perpetuating mechanisms. Goh identified "the powerful transcribing and inscriptive force of modernity" (Goh 2009: 113) as a catalyst for hybridisation as, while mass media technologies present local ritual cultures from a rationalistic or scientific perspective, processes of urbanisation, nationalism, education, and high tech industrialisation encroach upon traditional culture. This, according to Goh, results in the modification of both religious culture and "modernity," the latter of which Goh presents as a distinct "cultural system."

However, among local practitioners of Chinese vernacular religion, this etic interpretation of events is not an element of their emic socio-religious comprehension. When the author described Goh's principles to key informants and religious experts, they could neither identify them with their own experiences of religious change, nor with their understanding of the socio-political system in Singapore. From their own perspective, Taoist beliefs and practices are a continuation of an idealised past which is separate, distinct and uninfluenced, except on a superficial level, by modernity. This notion of timelessness in the spiritual world upon which contemporary Taoist culture is based was brought home to me when consulting a *tang-ki* channelling the Underworld deity Tua Ya Pek. On asking the deity's age, the *tang-ki* replied that he is as ancient as he is young, as, after death, in discarnate realms, time does not conform to the norms of the human world. Similarly, when asking a *tang-ki* channelling the twelfth century Buddhist monk Jigong about modernity, his medium lamented that nothing had really changed as people have the same needs and desires in every age, only the material culture developing: minstrels replaced by mass media, horses by cars and planes, huts by skyscrapers, and so forth. Similarly, regarding emic religious self-identity, while the social environment and trappings of

modernity external to temple culture have changed, the core belief systems and temple culture are perceived by practitioners as constants linking modernity to their ancestral cultural heritage.

SELF-PERPETUATING TECHNOLOGIES OF RELIGIOUS SYNTHESIS

Before discussing socio-political developments and religious change in Singapore, the author's use of the terms constituting "self-perpetuating technologies of religious synthesis" require definition.

Acculturation refers to change resulting from contact between cultures which, in multi ethno-religious societies may occur on a macro-geographic scale involving the whole nation, down to a micro level where a deity cult, single temple or an individual may become the catalyst for new diversities to arise. As Berkovitz notes, "this is hardly surprising insofar as it does not depend on a shared social framework" (Berkovitz 2010: 272). Acculturation has come into play in Singapore's new united temples where different religious traditions share a single geographical site, as well as in Housing Development Board (HDB) housing and in industrial neighbourhoods with an above average percentage of migrant workers.

Unlike acculturation which occurs naturally and assumes common consent even if un-verbalised, appropriation refers to taking elements of an external tradition and incorporating it as one's own. This may be politically motivated as in the case of Sri Lanka where, after appropriating Tamil Hindu rituals, their origin in Hinduism was denied by the Sinhalese Buddhists who had appropriated them. This contributed to the overall marginalisation of Tamil culture in Sri Lanka (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). However, appropriation "does not necessarily lead to a uniform, mono-cultured religious system, but allows local alternatives and modifications" (Meiser 2011: 498). Appropriation will be discussed further in relation to the relocation of stylised Datuk Gong in Singapore amid changing power relations on the Malay Peninsula.

The author's use of the term "absorption" sits closest to earlier definitions of syncretism, i.e., where "elements of two different historical 'traditions' interact or combine" (Stewart and Shaw 1994: 10) than to other technologies of religious synthesis. In the case of Chinese vernacular religion, absorption has mostly occurred through orthodox traditions and in historic contexts, and, when fully absorbed, provide examples of static syncretic states. For example, prior to the absorption of a judgemental Underworld by the Lingboa school of Taoism in the fifth century and then

into Chinese vernacular religion, the afterlife was not ethically determined, and souls of ancestors were believed to dwell either in heavenly realms and descend to family altars to accept sacrifices, or alternately, to dwell under mountains and rivers including Mount Tai in Shantung province and the Yellow River (Thompson 1987). A more recent example in Chinese vernacular religion which occurred in Taiwan is the absorption of the 1970s Japanese practice of ritually placating aborted malevolent foetus ghosts to prevent them negatively influencing the lives of their "would be" parents (Hardacre 1997; Moskowitz 2001). In this instance, absorption from Japan's new religious movements into Taiwan's vernacular religion was made possible by a cultural affinity between Taiwan and Japan that according to informants does not exist in Singapore.[7]

Involving exchanges between two religious traditions, religious interpenetration implies mutuality, even though the exchanges themselves may involve dissimilar religious elements with unmeasurable or incomparable values. This occurs when two traditions "enable each other by introducing their own already-constituted complexity into each other" (Luhmann 1995: 213). In this context, the absorption of the Buddhist doctrines into Taoist cosmology illustrates interpenetration as absorption occurred in both directions, Chinese Buddhism absorbing elements of Confucian and vernacular Chinese religious ideology. An example of this can be located in the corruption of traditional Buddhist ethics in the Sui and Tang dynasties[8] as the Chinese Buddhism that flourished closely aligned itself with the family cult, and thus with ancestor worship. Evidence for this is provided by inscriptions in the Longmen caves in Henan province in which after honouring Buddha's and Bodhisattvas and praying for the salvation of all living creatures, inscriptions typically conclude with variations of "and particularly that the souls of our ancestors and relatives may find repose and relief" (Zenryu 1941 in Wright 1959: 59).

Transfiguration, hybridisation and transfiguring hybridisation as technologies of religious synthesis remain as defined by Goh. "Comparatively, transfiguration refers to the changing of forms of practices without the shift in essential meanings… hybridisation refers to the change in meaning with little change to forms of religious practice" (Goh 2009: 113), and transfiguring hybridisation occurs when the two processes occur simultaneously producing change to both practices and meanings.

Lastly, for the temporary inclusion of an external tradition where neither the form nor meaning is subject to change, the author utilises the term "cultural borrowing." Borrowing suggests taking something intact without the intention to either appropriate it into one's own tradition, nor to alter its form. As such, the boundaries between the religious traditions

remain clearly defined. While cultural borrowing may, through repetition, become a catalyst for technologies of religious synthesis, this would be dependent on the changing intentionality of the social actors involved, and in such instances, cultural borrowing would transform into an alternate technology of religious synthesis.

The author therefore argues that religious change occurs when one or more technologies of religious synthesis become catalysed into action in reaction to societal influences that threaten or compromise the successful continuation of a religious belief or community. Furthermore, that understanding of the interactions between societal influences and each technology of religious synthesis can provide an explanation for the rapidity of religious change in a Singapore, where processes of religious synthesis that, in the past only developed in isolated cases over many generations, are now occurring at a vastly accelerated pace.

URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF "UNITED TEMPLES"

At the head of a new nation state, a priority of the People's Action Party (PAP)[9] was to promote a primary sense of Singaporean identity (Tan 2002, 2008; Tham 2008). The Singaporean state has therefore undertaken "elaborate measures to ensure that nationalism and nationhood are intrinsic values woven into cultural and community discourse" (Gomes 2009: 37). With this goal in sight, the government promoted religious harmony by bringing multi-ethnic communities together first in HDB housing estates and then in new united temples. The ethnic integration policy of HDB ownership was intended to create a patriotic nation state where "if one owns an asset in the country, one would stand to defend it" (Teo et al. 2004: 98). To achieve utmost effectiveness, the government "adopted a highly centralised approach to environmental planning and management" (Teo et al. 2004: 28), especially in urban development and the relocation of ethnic groups into public housing managed and regulated by the HDB. Reversing the British colonial tradition of separating European, Malay, Chinese, Arab and Indian quarters, urban restructuring following independence was intended to eliminate segregation and establish ethnic harmony. The government sought to "integrate the different ethnic groups […] in public housing neighbourhoods with representations of Malay, Chinese and Indian residents that were reflective of the ethnic mix at the national level […] 77 percent Chinese residents, 15 percent Malays, seven percent Indian" (Teo et al. 2004: 99), and one percent of other ethnic groups. These policies were

not intended to act as catalysts for new religious synthesis, nonetheless, the implementation of urban relocation and restructuring programmes and the construction of a nationalistic state have directly impacted the religious landscape.

In the past, ethnic Chinese villages were largely populated by those sharing a common family name and an extended lineage, and these groups patronised local village temples. Prior to urban redevelopment, the folk Taoist landscape was therefore based on established ceremonial circles (Lin 1986, 1989; Skoggard 1996) in single ethnicity villages where inhabitants worshipped tutelary deities in local *kampong*[10] temples, or in clan and trade associations dedicated to ancestors and patron deities located in business districts. During the *kampong* era, the local populace was obliged to participate in temple activities through ritual offerings and financial contributions, and *kampong* temples acted as boundary markers maintaining social unity and ethnic integrity between communities. As such, with the exception of an annual tour of the temple's spiritual borders (*yew keng*),[11] devotees took themselves to worship deities in anthropomorphic statue form in their local temples.

After independence in 1965, urban restructuring, restricted allocation of land for religious purposes, and religious engineering in the form of the "Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act" allowed for the distribution of HDB apartments by ballot which effectively removed the existing ceremonial circles from Singapore's religious landscape. This has, to a large extent, redefined both the role of temples in the community and the meaning of temples in relation to ritual space. Hue notes "village temples have become a thing of the past, replaced by spirit medium altars set up within the government-built HDB apartment buildings" (Hue 2012: 165) Moreover, people who relocated to a single locality from different *kampong* now patronise the same temples and multiple ethnic groups now utilise the same communal spaces for religious activities.

The Urban Renewal Programme followed the 1966 Land Acquisition Act allowing the government to relocate private property to optimise land usage for public benefit. This law, broadly interpreted, allowed the state to obtain the property of several hundred registered temples, which, if they possessed sufficient funds, then had the option of leasing land designated by the state. The short term leasing of land to temples at increasingly expensive rates has either forced temple closures, or dramatically reduced temple wealth as the leased land has been auctioned whereby only the richest temples could afford to relocate, and to do so with severely diminished resources. "Successful parties bidding for land designated for building of temples have to be contented with land on a 30 years lease, and the majority

of these are of a size of 2,000 square metres" (Hue 2012: 168). Between 1994 and 2005, the prices for 2,000 square metres ranged from two to 10 million Singapore dollars, not including the price of constructing a new temple (Hue 2012: 168). After expiry, the leases may be renegotiated at the government's discretion, but the government has reserved the right to repossess the land without compensation. Nonetheless, wanting to maintain their material culture and therefore requiring a large ritual space, the wealthiest temples cooperated among themselves and leased land from the government on which new united temples have been built.

The increase in new religious synthesis has coincided with urban relocation and the number of new united temples housing places of worship from two or more religious traditions. This suggests a correlation between these factors, and a flaw in legislation intended to promote multiculturalism by the state. Often forcing temples together which previously had no ritual connections, new united temples have played a role not only in the production of religious harmony, but also in the formation of accelerated acculturation and development of new worship patterns. There are now 69 united temples in Singapore, the first opening in 1974,[12] and the most recent opening at Ang Mo Kio in 2011. Temples on Singapore Island as well as those located on peripheral islands of strategic importance including Pulau Tekong and Pulau Ubin have had their land repossessed and the temples relocated. For example, the Pulau Tekong temples were moved into an industrial zone forming Pulau Tekong United Temple in 1992 and the main temples previously located on Palau Ubin, the folk Taoist Tian Hou Gong and the Theravada Buddhist Ubin Thai temple each joined different united temples (Hue 2012). Tian Hou Gong became a part of Sengkang United Temple[13] and the Thai Buddist temple joined the folk Taoist temples Long Nan Dian[14] and Baogong Miao[15] at the Jalan Kayu United Temple[16] in 2011 (Hue 2012).

Mirroring the Temple of Mysterious Virtue's worship patterns, at Luoyang Tua Pek Gong which opened in 2008,[17] there are a Malay Datuk Gong and a Hindu temple sharing ritual premises with a folk Taoist temple. While it is possible that in other locations in Southeast Asia that these varieties of temple may be located in close proximity, each operates as a discrete ritual entity serving a specific ethnic community. Singapore's religious landscape is therefore distinctive in that religious engineering formulated by the government and facilitated by the Land Acquisition Act has partnered dissimilar religious traditions in atypical combinations in single temple premises. This may well prove to have a profound long-term effect on inter-religious worship through religious re-categorisation. Light (2004) suggests that "it is the categorisation of our symbols which really

defines our religious understanding and behaviour [...] the greatest change occurs when categories themselves are redefined or altered" (Light 2004: 326), and once incorporated, as in the case of a judgemental Underworld, re-categorisations have a tendency to endure as new fixed syncretic states. Singapore's religious landscape is now in a state of flux with the cohabitation of religious premises by temples and shrines from different religious traditions, and it seems as if these new configurations are functioning as catalysts for the creation of various states of new dynamic syncretism.

However, on closer scrutiny, the idea that actual re-categorisation is occurring in new united temples requires further enquiry. Frequent visits to Luoyang Tua Pek Gong and close observation of Chinese religionists worshipping consecutively at Taoist, Buddhist, Hindu and Datuk Gong altars necessitated the investigation into the micro-politics of religious expression. The generic ritual act of deity worship in Chinese vernacular religion is known as *baibai* [18] whereby an individual first introduces themselves to a deity including their date of birth and address, and then offers incense in a ritually prescribed manner. In the process, deals may be struck between the deity and devotee, as rather than a relationship of supplication, it is of a contractual nature (Chan 2006). This brings into question the intentionality of Chinese religionists when performing *baibai* to non-Chinese deities. Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) present a convincing argument that to successfully understand another's action, it is first necessary to grasp the actor's intentionality. In non-ritualised actions, there is a socially agreed meaning associated with actions, for example, waving one's hand when a friend leaves commonly meaning "goodbye" and the intentionality of the actor is clear. However, in ritualised actions, Laidlaw and Humphrey argue that this is not the case, and that the intention of the actor may be entirely different from what an observer perceives it to be.

However, extensive interviewing during this research suggested that when a Chinese religionist performs *baibai* to a Chinese deity, although following a prescribed course of ritual action, that the variations of intentionality are limited by the parameters of the emic understanding of *baibai* itself. Nevertheless, and in agreement with Humphrey and Laidlaw, the same interviews suggested that when a Chinese religionist performs *baibai* to a non-anthropomorphic Datuk Gong or to Ganesha, it is impossible to know on an individual level whether this is based on actual belief, a desire to increase religious harmony, a fear of spiritual retribution from an alien deity, to conform to other's actions, for appearances and so forth, unless actually told. Goh (2009) presents a possible solution to this conundrum. Taking *baishen*, as a distinguishing feature of Chinese religion

and the embodied contents of the ritual acts of worship act as identifiers of religious identity, Goh argues that in Chinese religion, "deity" (*shen*) "is an almost-empty sign, a signifier referring to nothing else except the meaning of 'the spiritual other'" (Goh 2009: 112). The "sign" can be attributed to various associations only limited "by the historical discursive conditions of Chinese religion in a specific social context" (Goh 2009: 112). As the act of *baibai* remains consistent irrelevant of which deities are worshipped, within the specific social context of multi-faith united temples where the spiritual other may be any deity represented, neither the form of practice—transfiguration, nor the meaning—hybridisation has changed. However, while Goh's argument removes intentionality from the equation, it sheds no light on the micro-politics of inter-religious worship, nor on the effect of such worship patterns on the wider religious landscape.

The author therefore proposes an explanation from the perspective of the religious practitioners and temples involved whose interpretations of technologies of religious synthesis will inevitably vary due to contrasting standpoints. From the emic perspective of Chinese religionists interviewed, the process of acculturation at play is recognised and acknowledged to have been catalysed by direct contact with non-Chinese religion in united temples. Cultural borrowing was also implied in cases where individuals did not worship these deities in other cultural settings. As Hindu *puja* (worship) is distinct from Chinese *baibai*, common elements including *arti* (offering light in the form of a flame), *bhakti* (offering devotional love) *prasad* (eating of sanctified food) and *parikram* (circumambulation), from a Hindu perspective, the worship of their deities in a Chinese manner may be seen as an example of embryonic dynamic syncretism and of transfiguring hybridisation as both the practice of and meaning in worshipping Hindu deities has changed. From the perspective of the temples represented at Luoyang Tua Pek Gong as well as those at other united temples, becoming a constituent member is clearly a self-perpetuating mechanism in itself, extending a temple's presence in Singapore's religious landscape for a minimum of thirty years, and increasing the volume and diversity of religious visitors. However, as a proportion of the total number of temples prior to urban relocation, only a small percentage has been wealthy enough to relocate into a new united temple.

Returning then to urban renewal, for the majority of temples, their relocation was involuntary as only temples which had formally registered with the Singaporean government prior to relocation were recognised by the state. As a result of urban redevelopment, city wide public housing projects and the relocation of religious buildings and citizens, only a minor proportion of temples remain in their original locations. Most non-registered

temples, including Malay Datuk Gong shrines, were forced to decommission themselves and place their deities in obliging temples, or relocate illegally inside privately owned HDB apartments.

As a result of temple relocation, new ritual links between temples have been forged. Commonly based on friendship between *tang-ki* and mutual participation in each other's ritual activities, *yew keng* have developed as strategies of public recognition, self-publicity and religious networking. Foot power has been replaced by diesel, and contemporary *yew keng* frequently involve the collaboration of *tang-ki* from multiple temples, each channelling a different deity. As such, deities, either channelled through their *tang-ki*, or in hand crafted icon form now are transported to locations previously beyond the borders of their ritual domain, in effect expanding their sphere of influence across the city state. Therefore, while religionists still visit temples to worship deities or consult mediums, the exclusive role of temples as sacred space has altered as increasingly, rather than devotees taking themselves to temples to visit deities, deities are leaving their temples more frequently to visit potential and actual devotees in new sacred space created along the routes of *yew keng*. Since the early 2000s, the most successful *tank-ki* temples, usually those whose membership and following has outgrown the space confines of HDB apartments have relocated to inexpensive rented spaces located in industrial neighbourhoods. The Temple of Mysterious Virtue has followed this pattern and therefore typifies both independent *tang-ki* temples which have not relocated to united temple complexes, and temples catering to an ethnically diverse community. The growth in the number of such independent spirit-medium temples with a mixed-ethnic membership serves as a reflection of the increasing importance of improvised ritual space and unprecedented levels of inter-ethnic and religious mixing.

DATUK GONG IN SINGAPORE: TRANSFIGURING HYBRIDISATION, APPROPRIATION AND ABSORPTION

Datuk Gong are venerated saints from the Muslim tradition, also known as *keramat*, that were introduced into the Malay Peninsular after the arrival of Islam and spread of Sufism. With reference to Kahar et al. (1974), Goh notes that the "cult has its origins in the syncretism of Malay and Indian-derived Shia beliefs, as well as the mysticism (*tasauf*) of Sufism… saint worship incorporates Malay animistic notions of souls (*semangat*) throughout the natural world" (Goh 2011: 153). In common with Taoist

tutelary deities including Tudi Gong and Tua Pek Gong, Datuk Gong reside in the locality over which they have guardianship.

From the first wave of Chinese settlers, Datuk Gong were worshiped as local spirits who occupied and thus wielded supernatural authority over land in their guardianship. In terms of cultural precepts, new immigrants had obligations to spirits with whom they had to interact. "Trespassing land meant that Chinese needed to seek first the permission, and then the blessings, of spirits who reside in the locality" (Chiew 2008: 11). In essence, Datuk Gong had been appeased as tutelary deities in Animistic forms by Chinese religionists with offerings for over two centuries before the Land Requisition Act required their relocation.

In contrast to Sufi saints in India which Van der Veer describes as at "the centre of Hindu-Muslim syncretism" (Van der Veer 1994) and to those in Penang, Malaysia where their worship "could be read as a metaphor of Malay Muslim political dominance" (Goh 2011: 152), Datuk Gong in Singapore have remained on the political and religious periphery. As a comparatively small casualty of the Land Acquisition Act (1966), they have been relocated and redefined to a backdrop of major socio-political and religious restructuring. Nonetheless, in response to political manoeuvring, technologies of religious synthesis were set in motion, and it is to these that the author wishes to draw attention. The author will therefore discuss the absorption of Datuk Gong into Chinese vernacular religion in context of the dual processes of transfiguring hybridisation and appropriation. In the former, due to government legislation, the sacred space associated with Datuk Gong has been renegotiated and Datuk Gong reinvented as anthropomorphic and highly stylised Chinese deities. In the latter, many such statues have been rehoused in folk Taoist temples.

Datuk Gong in Singapore were originally represented by rocks swathed in yellow cloth symbolic of Malay royalty, in natural objects such as trees, or worshipped at their actual tombs. Prior to urban redevelopment, in what was then a static syncretic state, Datuk Gong were worshipped by Chinese religionists in all these forms. The process of relocation was also one of rapid dynamic syncretism in which both the form of worship, transfiguration and meaning of Datuk Gong veneration, hybridisation, dramatically evolved.

Since the 1960s, their position as locality deities has become modified as the result of relocation. The removal of villages organised on ethnic lines and the relocating of the residents into HDB developments by ballot, as well as the sequestration of land for military use, has created a culture of eviction and redefinition (Chiew 2008) in which surviving Datuk Gong have been removed from their original vicinities, and have been

relocated to Chinese temples as honorary deities in new multicultural urban environments. No longer tutelary deities of their traditional localities, their jurisdiction and hence ontology has changed. In line with the goals of the government to create ethnic harmony within a nationalistic state, they have been reinvented as guardians, not of individual neighbourhoods, but as protectors of their followers throughout Singapore. Mirroring the development of a primary Singaporean identity among the population, the author noted a sense of nationalistic pride in contemporary Datuk Gong worship among Chinese religionists who, aware of their ethnic origins, often spoke of them in terms of difference in relation to those elsewhere in Malaysia.

While a small minority of Datuk Gong are still represented in their original forms—the most famous being located on Kusu Island and at Luoyang Tua Pek Gong—most, including the Datuk Gong housed at the Temple of Mysterious Virtue, have been reinvented in anthropomorphic form. New traditions inherently possess recognisable rituals and symbols which help establish a continuity with the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In the case of Datuk Gong, ethnic symbolism has been appropriated and reincorporated into the new tradition, while their stylised clothing and facial expressions closely resemble that of other Chinese tutelary deities making it hard to tell them apart from other deities massed on Chinese temple altars. The appropriated symbolism that reveals their ethnic origins is found in their associated paraphernalia: their shrines are painted yellow, and Malay implements such as walking sticks (*tongkats*) and Malay daggers (*kerises*) ornament their altars. Further reinforcing the indigenous origins of Datuk Gong are the offerings made to them, *datuk liao* which include betel leaves with lime paste, native tobacco, areca nut flakes and limes. Benzoin incense, which is not usually burned in Chinese temples, but at exorcisms as a purifying agent to combat evil spirits, is used as an offering and to open communication between the devotee and the Datuk Gong (Ng 1983: 118). It may well be wondered why they have been anthropomorphised at all.

It has previously been speculated that by worshiping deities in anthropomorphic form, that humans gain a measure of control over them (Chan 2006; Cohen 1978; Hansen 1990). Hansen reports two incidents from the Song dynasty where people "coerced the deities by threatening to or actually harming their images" (Hansen 1990: 57–58). In the first, after using divination blocks to communicate with two uncooperative deities, bandits attempted to drown them for refusing to give them permission to burn down a city. In the second, in a time of drought, a magistrate removed the statue of a local temple deity, and after locking it behind bars, threatened that "if it does not rain in three days, I will destroy the temple" (1990: 58).

Following this line of reasoning, only after conforming to the norms of Chinese Vernacular religion by assuming an anthropomorphic form could hegemonic control be held over a Malay deity previously believed to be the rightful spiritual guardian of the land over which it held sway. In changing both the meaning and form of Datuk Gong, control over them has been transferred from the Malay Islamic sphere of influence to that of the Singaporean Chinese, and this has coincided with the Chinese controlled PAP forging a strong, independent and fiercely nationalistic state.

TECHNOLOGIES OF RELIGIOUS SYNTHESIS AT THE TEMPLE OF MYSTERIOUS VIRTUE

Within the theoretical framework proposed, syncretism focuses attention on the workings of dynamic intercultural processes—in this instance, accommodation, absorption, hybridisation, transfiguration and ultimately interpenetration, all of which, hastened by interactions within the mixed ethnic Chinese, Malay and Indian assemblage—have occurred within a decade at the Temple of Mysterious Virtue. The catalyst for change at this temple was the healing of one Tamil Hindu devotee, Uncle Manium, which ultimately led to vernacular Hindu practices being incorporated into this temple's repertoire. Uncle Manium himself is an elderly gentleman of Tamil descent born locally while the Malay kingdoms were still British protectorates, and was a youth when Singapore joined and then left the Federation of Malaya. As such, he is tri-lingual and facilitates communication between the temples multi-ethnic members. In 2000, he was diagnosed with cancer, and having heard rumour of the efficacy of so called "graveyard medicines" provided by this temple, approached their Underworld deity Tua Ya Pek as channelled through his medium to request a cure. The medicines proved successful, and cancer free, he now worships both Chinese and Hindu deities. With the permission of the Lord of The Dark Heavens "Xuan Tian Shang Di," colloquially referred to as "The Boss," he introduced a statue of the Indian deity Ganesha into the temple and a ritual space was made for an altar where Indian deities could be channelled through their spirit mediums. This established a multi-ethnic environment in which the exchange of traditions, interpenetration, flourished at a micro-religious temple level.

On one side, aspects of Malay and Hindu ritual have been adopted by Chinese religionists including the smearing of coloured talcum powder (*abir*) onto their foreheads, the devotional burning of Benzoin incense to Chinese deities, and the incorporation of the smashing coconuts and the crushing of

limes into Chinese healing rituals. On the other, Hindu devotees performing *baibai* to Chinese and Malay deities, using talisman in ways prescribed by Chinese vernacular religion, and paying obeisance to Chinese deities channelled through their *tang-ki*. From the perspective of practitioners, due to the multi-ethnic makeup of the temple community, these practices have been absorbed into their personal religious repertoires out of respect, convenience or conviction. However, when standing at the temple gates and looking in, from an etic perspective, the author noted changing forms of practices not possible prior to Uncle Manium's healing, nor heard of prior to Singapore's urban restructuring, yet without any major shifts in the essential meanings of the ritual acts themselves.

The temple's main altar is organised in a unique self-styled manner by the founder who was instructed in the details by the highest ranking deity that he channels, The Boss—Xuan Tian Shang Di. The altar is tri-level raising from the floor to ceiling with the top layer housing the highest ranking deities that have existed since pre-history, the middle section housing deified humans and animals deified in human times that constitute the middle and lower deity ranks, and the bottom layer housing the Underworld pantheon. Whilst the Underworld elite including its ruler Dong Yue Dadi and City Gods (Cheng Huang) are considered deities as they move freely between Heavenly and Netherworld realms, the majority of statues on the altar belong to Underworld enforcers including Tua Ya Pek and Di Ya Pek who, due to their low status in the overall pantheon are often described by followers as half-deity half-ghost. The altars to Datuk Gong and Ganesha, in common with those for the Jade Emperor, Taisui,[19] Generals of the Five Directions, God of Literature and the Tiger God, are located individually towards the front of the temple. Temple visitors offer a total of 11 incense sticks at different censers, and those offered to Ganesha and the *Datuk Gong* are made between offerings to the Taisui and to the Generals of the Five Directions. While this worship pattern is unique to this temple, it is indicative of a growing trend towards absorption in Singapore, and non-Chinese deities are being included in the worship patterns of a growing number of folk Taoist and new united temples. On each level of the altar, benzoin, as opposed to Chinese incense is continually burned serving as a reminder that this was once Malay land under the protection of a Datuk Gong, implying both a religious continuum and restructuring of ethno-political authority.

All religions are respected within the temple, and both Chinese and Indian spirit-mediums channel there. The deities most frequently channelled include the Chinese Underworld enforcers Tua Ya Pek and Di Ya Pek, the twelfth century Buddhist monk Jigong and "The Boss," all of whom are

channelled by the temple's founder. Hindu mediums channel deities with varying regularity, and communication between the mediums and collaboration in each other's rituals is commonplace. From the Tamil Hindu pantheon, Madurai Veeran is channelled by a dark skinned sword wielding Tamil medium, who, lacking Chinese and English, communicates with non-Tamil devotees in Tamil, grunts, yells and body language translated into Singlish[20] or Malay by Uncle Maniam. A female medium trances the Hindu Snake Goddess Nageswaran Amman,[21] and often enters a spontaneous trance state, where watched over by her husband, hisses as she weaves her way snakelike between the altars. She too is assisted by Uncle Maniam as interpreter as between hisses she speaks in an Indian dialect.

Illustrating multiple processes of absorption, hybridisation and reinvention, Madurai Veeran's status has been reinvented to fit within the temple's micro-religious spiritual hierarchy. In Hindu mythology, Madurai Veeran, meaning "Warrior of Madurai" was the son of a king and a great warrior who lived in the 14th century. According to legend, he entered the army as a commander, enforced strict discipline, and passed harsh laws to help eradicate criminals. However, his enemies persuaded the king that Madurai Veeran was a criminal himself, and he was sentenced to mutilation causing a hand and a leg to be removed, and he died as a result. After death, due to this injustice and to his virtuous character, he entered the Tamil folk pantheon as a Heaven deity. However, when both Tua Ya Pek and Madurai Veeran are channelled through their spirit mediums, even though Heaven deities hold a superior rank to Underworld enforcers, the latter plays a subservient role and obeys Tua Ya Pek's orders. Seeking clarification, the author questioned key Hindu temple members and was informed that in this temple, it is the Tamil Underworld counterpart of Madurai Veeran that is channelled. This reinterpretation of the deity's status, politicised by cultural dominance, has served to absorb this erstwhile Heaven deity into the temple's Underworld hierarchy beneath Tua Ya Pek. Nonetheless, Chinese and Malay devotees consult and receive blessings from the Hindu spirit medium and offer incense to Ganesha, and likewise, Hindu visitors pay respects and receive blessings from the Chinese deities channelled through their mediums, and offer incense to both the Chinese deities and to the Malay Datuk Gong represented on the various altars.

The Temple of Mysterious Virtue has therefore created a sacred space where "legitimated religious diversity" (Formichi 2014: 3) has been be freely renegotiated, and through the process of interpenetration, traditional boundaries of religious diversity have been traversed within the multi-faith community.

Having described the processes of interpenetration and absorption that have occurred, the author will revisit the notion of syncretism as "combinations of different historical traditions" to question which aspects of this new religious synthesis qualify as truly syncretic. The author's standpoint is that neither a Taoist performing Hindu rituals in a Hindu fashion, nor a Hindu performing Taoist rituals in a Taoist fashion can be counted as syncretic as in both cases, no actual synthesis has taken place. Only when a Taoist performs a Taoist ritual incorporating aspects of Hindu ritual practice, or a Hindu performs a Hindu ritual utilising facets from the Taoist ritual process, does synthesis occur and the resultant practice become syncretic. Therefore, while the use of Benzoin, coconuts and limes in folk Taoist ritual and non-Chinese practitioners performing *baibai* illustrate actual religious synthesis, in contrast, Chinese religionists receiving *abir*, and the use of talisman and paying respects to *tang-ki* by non-Taoists are examples of cultural borrowing as no actual synthesis has occurred. However, when considering the actions of any individual within a group, only the social actor performing a ritual knows their intentionality, or understands which religious boundaries are being negotiated through ritual and personal lived experience. The Thaipusam festival represents an extreme arena in which the micro-politics of religious expression and personal boundaries are explored and renegotiated by Chinese religionists through individual experience in a non-Taoist ritual space.

THAIPUSAM: IDENTITY, MEANING AND INTERPRETATION

The participation of the Temple of Mysterious Virtue in Thaipusam reflects both the empathy between the ethnic groups that utilise the temple, and a growing trend among Chinese temples and religionists in Singapore to participate in Hindu ritual events including Thaipusam and fire walking at the Sri Marianmman Temple. According to informants, such affinities within Chinese temples housing either Hindu deities or spirit mediums are becoming increasingly common. Similarly to the Temple of Mysterious Virtue where the catalyst to interpenetration was the curing of Uncle Manium, other temples reported that encounters with charismatic individuals had prompted inter-religious cooperation and exchange, and the shared use of ritual space.

Thaipusam is Tamil Hindu in origin and the author was informed by Singaporean Tamils that it is celebrated with more gusto in Singapore than in India itself. In Hindu mythology, Thaipusam commemorates the occasion when Parvati gave Murugan, the son of Lord Shiva, a spear to vanquish the

evil demon Soorapadman. It is celebrated on the full moon in the Tamil month of Thai which falls in either January or February. The word *Thaipusam* is derived from the month name *Thai* and *Pusam* which refers to a star that is at its highest point during the festival. The main activity is the carrying of deity statues, of milk pots, or of lemons hanging from the body on hooks from the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road on a four kilometre pilgrimage to the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple in Tank Road.

The deity statues are carried on top of a *kavadi*, a complex contraption weighing approximately 60 kilograms which is attached to the body by a belt and held in place by 108 metal spikes. This number holds significance in both Taoist and Hindu numerology. In the former, 108 represents the combined forces of the 36 celestial armies commanded by Xuan Tian Shang Di and the 72 terrestrial spirit armies commanded by the Generals of the Five Directions charged with combatting the forces of evil. In the latter, there are 108 holy scriptures comprising the Upanishads, 108 beads in a mala to count repetitions of holy mantras, and in context of Thaipusam, 108 names of Lord Shiva.

The finale for each group that participates is presenting their offerings at the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, and an energetic whirling dance performed by the *kavadi* carrier in front of the six faced Lord Muruga. The festival lasts for 24 hours during which there is a constant stream of bare footed pilgrims walking the route which has been cordoned off from traffic.

At the Temple of Mysterious Virtue, it is the Chinese *tang-ki* and not one of the ethnic Indian mediums who carries the *kavadi* along the pilgrimage route. Even though it is not his intention, this reinforces existing power relations within the temple. Trance possession is not involved in the process meaning that the *tang-ki* is fully conscious of the 108 steel spikes piercing his body which help hold the *kavadi* in place. He explained that "when you carry a *kavadi* you cannot go into trance because the obstacle is a human obstacle, overcoming yourself, so it is your own choice to clear the obstacle, not the god's." He then added that he carries the *kavadi* to give thanks for blessings received in the previous year, and to bring fresh blessings from Lord Muruga in the coming year for his family and temple. Other ethnic Chinese participants informed me that they chose to carry lemons on hooks or milk pots to give thanks for previous or to make requests for future favours and blessings from Hindu deities which ordinarily operate outside the spiritual parameters of the Taoist cultural universe. In essence, and supporting the notion of Chinese vernacular religion being "highly pragmatic, problem-oriented, result oriented and this-worldly" (Kong and Tong 2000: 41), participation was a pragmatic act of

devotion based on faith in Hindu deities that they believed had some influence over their lives.

The initial preparations of building a *kavadi* started weeks in advance. Then, three days before Thaipusam, all participants, the majority of whom were ethnic Chinese, came to the temple to making offerings and pray to Ganesha, and to informing him of their forthcoming participation. A piece of yellow string blessed by Ganesha to provide spiritual protection was then attached to their writs. Further suggesting an absence of syncretism, the *tang-ki*'s wife noted that their major concern when they first participated in 2005 was that they knew nothing about Hindu culture, and they did not want to offend Hindu Gods by performing rituals or saying prayers incorrectly. In essence, as Taoists, their intention was to perform Hindu rituals and prayers in a Hindu way. From an emic perspective, rather than a move towards cultural dominance or uniformity, or an attempt to accrue some power of authentication over Hindu ritual, it appears at first as if nothing more that cultural borrowing has occurred. On a macro-political level, their inclusion may be interpreted as an extreme example of acculturation arising as an unintentional and unforeseen result of the promotion of multiculturalism, religious harmony and a shared Singaporean identity.

On Thaipusam eve, the final preparations including the sharpening the tips of the 108 long steel skewers and lemon hooks with abrasive papers to remove steel splinters were undertaken before loading the various elements of the *kavadi* onto a truck. In total approximately thirty temple members participated, two thirds of them being ethnic Chinese, and the author himself. The participants and sacred objects were ritually purified by both Taoist and Hindu deities channelled through their mediums. Tua Ya Pek and Jigong used incense for the purpose, Nageswaran Amman applied coloured powders on each participant's forehead, and Madurai Veeran used his sword and a war cry. A visiting medium channelling one of the 108 incarnations of Lord Shiva, Muneswaran Jada Muni, utilised a long and well maintained bull whip for the purpose. For him, each participant knelt to be blessed and then raised their arms above their heads while the cigar chewing medium, with a look a relish, lashed their wrists with his cleansing bull whip.

Soon after midnight, the truck was loaded and we left for the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple. The square in front of the temple had been cleared for participants and was thronging with devotees, each participating group allotted an area in which an altar was erected to Lord Shiva, Ganesh or Murugan, and in which the participants could complete their preparations. While an altar to Ganesh was being set up, milk jugs filled and hooks dug into the flesh of lemon carriers, three of the men who had built

the *kavadi* dressed the *tang-ki* in it while he stood in stoic silence. His plan was to complete the pilgrimage during the night and avoid the heat and traffic fumes that begin around dawn.

By 3.00 am preparations were completed, and led by the *kavadi* carrier and his body guards, the group left the temple compound to undertake the four-kilometre pilgrimage. The walk itself was undertaken in silence as for the first time, and in the name of religious harmony, the Singaporean authorities had banned the playing of amplified music along the route. However, as the crowd approached the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, the sound of live music could be heard emanating from within and wafting over the heads of the long queue of devotees waiting to enter. Even though the author and crowd began the walk at 3.00 am, many other temples had left earlier, and a human traffic jam of *kavadi* carriers had developed, and it took an hour to progress to the front of the queue. The atmosphere in the temple was exhilarating as in a wild and euphoric finale, *kavadi* carriers performed a whirling devotional dance in front of a statue of Murugan to the accompaniment of a host of drums. The experience however was fleeting as within two minutes, the author and crowd were ushered out of the temple to make room for the next *kavadi* carrier. According to the temple, "The *kavadi*-bearer enjoys a high state of religious fervour. He dances in ecstasy. His very appearance is awe-inspiring; there is divine radiance on his face. Devotees often experience the state of feeling united with the Lord."[22] After removing the *kavadi* and lemons, and having poured the devotional milk over the holy spear (*vel*) in the temple sanctum, the group group returned to the Temple of Mysterious Virtue in an elated state.

While the ritual paraphernalia were being cleared, the author asked the *kavadi* carrier about his experience. He replied that for him, "after completing Thaipusam, it feels like being reborn, like a fresh start to a good life as the five elements are now in balance." Clearly, while his intention had been to perform Hindu rituals and prayers in a Hindu way, his interpretation of events incorporated fundamental aspects of Taoist cosmology. Likewise, on closer scrutiny, the blessings from Jigong before the festival, and some imagery selected to decorate the *kavadi* both hailed from Taoist rather than Hindu traditions. Ornamentally stamped in a dull metal, and providing decoration to the three layers of the *kavadi*, were depictions of deities. The bottom layer comprised, as expected, of multiple images of Ganesha and Lord Shiva, but the middle layer comprised of Jigong accompanied by the Thousand Armed Guan Yin, and on the top level, beneath the platform to hold offerings, a golden coloured Jigong looked out. The *kavadi* carrier explained, "it's actually the same to me. Jigong is here because it is a Chinese temple, and he comes down to bless all the devotees.

He also tells us what time we have to start, perform rituals, and when to end. So we will tell him any problems about the *kavadi* and that's why we call him to come down. For clothes, we actually follow Hindu style as a form of respect." In adding these additional elements into a Hindu ritual, and in his interpretation of the events, both the meaning and the practice had deviated from the prescribed Hindu version of the ritual, and from the metaphysical notions of sacredness attached to the event. Their inclusion in Thaipusam was not only syncretic, Taoists performing a Hindu ritual in a Taoist way, but also an example of transfiguring hybridisation and appropriation made possible as in this temple, due to prior religious synthesis, interpenetration had blurred the boundaries of religious exclusivity.

SELF-PERPETUATING MECHANISMS: WHAT HAS ACTUALLY BEEN PERPETUATED?

Returning to the case studies, united temples came into existence due to the combination of forced relocation, prohibitively high land prices, and strict allocation of land for religious purposes. The first united temple in Singapore was an initiative undertaken by five temples located in the rural Toa Payoh area, each confronted with expropriation by the state who proposed to redevelop the area into an HDB estate. Land and construction costs were prohibitively high, so each called for contributions from devotees, then merged their finances to purchase a plot of land from the HDB on a renegotiable thirty year lease, the maximum time permitted for a religious building. The new united temple was completed at Toa Payoh Lorong 7 in 1974 (Hue 2012: 158–159). A similar model was followed by other temples, in actuality, perpetuating their existence for an initial 30 years with the possibility of renegotiating a price with the government for a renewal. In addition, each constituent member of a united temple increased their visibility in the religious landscape creating the potential for a higher membership and increased finances. In cases of multi-faith united temples, acculturation occurred at an accelerated rate allowing for unlikely combinations of new inter-religious worship patterns to develop, with all constituent temples financially benefiting.

While the same Land Acquisition Act was responsible for the relocation of Datuk Gong, their shrines were not officially registered with, and therefore not recognised by the government. As local villagers worshipped them in Animistic form, their fate was very much left in the hands of individual devotees, who, once relocated into HDB apartments, often took the Datuk Gong with them to be placed in suitable religious

premises close to their new locations. From the late 1980s, statues of them began to appear, either locally made or imported from Malaysia (Chiew 2008). During research, the author heard various explanations of how they became anthropomorphised, the most frequent suggesting that initially either a *tang-ki* had been employed to communicate directly with a Datuk Gong residing in a natural object, or that divination blocks had been thrown asking "yes" and "no" questions to ascertain the physical characteristics and clothing of the deity. Their images soon became stylised incorporating Chinese characteristics, but maintaining their indigenous accessories. From the perspective of the Datuk Gong tradition, once placed inside a temple, they have received offerings of incense and *datuk liao* necessary for their comfort and survival, and some have been channelled through a *tang-ki*, in both cases, perpetuating Datuk Gong worship into the present. Relative to the host temple, the relocated Datuk Gong have attracted additional devotees, and provided the host temples with greater legitimacy as within the internal logic of Chinese vernacular religion, it is often claimed that a particular Datuk Gong has intentionally chosen to reside in, and thus bless a particular temple.

The Temple of Mysterious Virtue encapsulates a growing trend in Singapore's independent spirit medium temples of catering to a multi-ethnic religious community underpinned by a strong nationalistic Singaporean identity. Ironically, governmental efforts to "neatly define ethno-religious boundaries" (Formichi 2014: 7) by relocating Singapore's temples and population in balanced measures to create a multicultural society, coupled with restrictions on land available for religious buildings, has resulted in the construction of numerous independent temples in unconventional ritual spaces ranging from discarded cargo containers to industrial warehouses. These temples have become multi-ethnic mixing grounds where, coupled with the micro-politics of religious self-identity and expression, the technologies of religious synthesis have developed largely beneath the political radar of the state. While each individual temple has followed a unique path of religious synthesis, at the Temple of Mysterious Virtue, the route emerged from the interactions between the temple's owner and Uncle Manium. Adding Ganesha and a Hindu ritual space at Uncle Manium's request has served to perpetuate Tamil Hindu mediumship in Singapore, and has also increased the temple's membership, its ritual scope, and allowed practitioners to explore the boundaries of religious identity through diversity. As a metaphor for individuals that catalyse the technologies of religious synthesis in the face of multiculturalism, there are numerous "Uncle Maniums" and willing temple owners waiting to emerge from Singapore's

sacred spaces. As such, independent temples have emerged as instruments through which the boundaries of religious diversity have been renegotiated.

Thaipusam provides a clear example of this. The level of tolerance shown by the Hindu community towards non-Hindu participants illustrates the harmonious relationships between Singapore's religious communities which is atypical when envisaged in a comparative context on a regional level. However, this level of accommodation brings into question whether the policies promoting multiculturalism and religious harmony were implemented to protect the religious integrity of Singapore's ethno-religious groups, or simply to foster a growing sense of a Singaporean national identity. Suggesting the latter to be warrantable, when questioning participants from both ethnic groups, the author was made aware of multiple "Thaipusam" occurring simultaneously in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Tamil Nadu, most narratives suggesting a nationalistic pride of ownership in Thaipusam—no longer simply Thaipusam, but Singapore's Thaipusam. From the Hindu perspective then, lending support rather than resistance to the assimilation of Thaipusam into the Singaporean national consciousness has become a self-perpetuating mechanism in itself. On the part of the Temple of Mysterious Virtue, participation has worked as a self-perpetuating mechanism on multiple levels. In terms of legitimisation through repetition, it has reinforced both the authority of the temple owner, and the high regard in which his temple is held by both ethnic communities. As a communal activity, it reinforced unity among the closest temple members through shared ritual experience. It has also served as a training ground for the owner's son, who, it is hoped, will carry the *kavadi* in the future and help perpetuate the temple's inter-religious ritual inclusion in years to come.

CONCLUSION

Government policy in Singapore on the management of its ethnic groups between 1965 and 1979 "was characterised by the drive to build a multiracial state" (Tan 2002: 114), and this has contributed towards acculturation, paving the way for the development of new religious synthesis originating from varied ethnic and religious traditions. As a result, "the traditionally accepted 'boundaries' of the respective religions have become amorphous and ambiguous" (Tong 2008: 50). This much has been well observed and documented. What surfaces though through this research is how mixed ethnic temple communities, which are in themselves a microcosm reflecting the wider socio-political and ethnic structure of

Singapore, are beneficiaries of the various technologies of religious synthesis. In the Singaporean context, this has resulted in the uncharacteristically rapid evolution of beliefs, meanings and practices within Chinese vernacular religion. The construction of multi-faith united temples; the appropriation of anthropomorphic Datuk Gong; multi-ethnic sacred spaces where rituals contain elements from competing religious traditions, and the participation of Chinese religionists in Thaipusam represent just one selection of possible combinations of technologies of religious synthesis catalysed in reaction to a specific set of socio-political influences, and which have acted, as is their nature, as self-perpetuating mechanisms for the traditions or religious groups concerned.

Also emerging from the research are two fundamental differences in behaviour in regards to earlier syncretism that occurred in dynastic China, and the new syncretic practices emerging within contemporary Singapore. First, in the creation of anthropomorphic Datuk Gong, the inclusion of Hindu elements in folk Taoist rituals, and in participating in Thaipusam, Chinese religionists are aware that the practices have Malay and Indian origins, and still choose to take part. Second, unlike the assimilation of Datuk Gong into Chinese temples and the participation in Thaipusam by the Temple of Mysterious Virtue, in the worship of Hindu deities, there has been no attempt to hybridise, transfigure or to Sinicise the practices. These two factors suggest a growing confidence among Chinese religionists in their own self-identity while participating in a non-Chinese religious traditions. There is also a correlation between escalations in acculturation and interpenetration and the increasing adoption of a state promoted Singaporean identity suggesting that at this stage in Singapore's socio-political development, that Chinese political hegemony negates the need to rigidly enforce traditional religious and ethnic boundaries. In promoting a primary sense of Singaporean identity, and forcing urban restructuring in an environment where "the 'laws of man' supersede the 'laws of God' in the management of contemporary problems and needs" (Eng 2007: xlv), the government has not only promoted nationalism, religious harmony and modernity, but in bringing multi-ethnic communities together in HDB housing and united temples, also provided the fuel needed for accelerated acculturation to occur. As such, modernity, far from being a threat to religious conviction in Singapore, has become a driving force animating religious change, catalysing technologies of religious synthesis, thereby increasing the likelihood of any given religious traditions continued survival amid competing political, cultural and religious ideologies.

The case studies have illustrated these technologies of religious synthesis from multiple perspectives; the emic and etic, micro and macro,

and from the perspective of individuals negotiating the boundaries of religious identity. From analysing the various standpoints in relation to technologies of religious synthesis, the socio-political forces that induce self-perpetuating mechanisms become apparent. Acculturation, the most basic requirement for religious synthesis, has been fostered in Singapore by the careful construction of religious harmony to support a nationalistic state. This has involved urban relocation prior to which, in both single ethnicity *kampongs* and in a city segregated by colonial authorities along ethnic lines, insufficient acculturation occurred to foster extensive religious synthesis. In the Singaporean case, the Land Acquisition Act of 1966 directly led to the creation of multi-ethnic urbanised communities that form both the core membership and regular visitors in Singapore's independent spirit medium temples which the Temple of Mysterious Virtue broadly typifies.

Religious synthesis, in the Singaporean case, has relied on two further elements. First, that "national culture is unity in diversity… religious difference is depoliticized" (Van der Veer 1994: 198), and on the micro-politics of negotiating personal boundaries of religious expression and religious identity in a multi-religious environment. The former has removed political barriers to religious exchange, and the latter has allowed individuals to negotiate their own national and religious identities. Both have been facilitated by the removal of the previous *kampong* system of temple organisation based on ceremonial circles and the subsequent creation of a multicultural urban environment. This has led to hybridisation which requires the partial breakdown of two cultural systems where "hybridisation is the displacement of the authority of modern symbolic meanings by partial native knowledge" (Goh 2009: 114) and to transfiguration which necessitated that the technologies of modernity reshaped "the materiality of everyday life and existential order" (Goh 2009: 113) that previously underpinned the relative inflexibility of religious traditions. The construction of a nationalistic nation state, urban restructuring and government initiatives to increase and strengthen the forces of modernity in Singapore has therefore become catalysts for hybridisation and transfiguration. It seems then that unless a society is either in a utopian paradox whereby there can be no progress without the loss of utopia, or, completely void of competing religious ideologies, catalysts for technologies of religious synthesis are inherent within socio-political systems as self-perpetuating mechanisms are dependent on the need to adapt to external societal change.

The construction of multi-ethnic worship and living spaces and the permissibility of reciprocal inclusion in religious traditions have rendered Singapore's religious landscape significantly different from previous

antecedents, and to comparative Chinese religious landscapes elsewhere in the Asia Pacific region where self-perpetuating mechanisms have been triggered in reaction to different socio-political conditions.

Given Singapore's singular socio-cultural and political development, it is reasonable to conclude that the specific combinations of technologies of religious synthesis and societal influences described here are unique. The Singaporean example illustrates that when two or more distinct religious cultures come into contact with a political system, that technologies of religious synthesis will be catalysed by changing socio-political variables. The author argues that ultimately, the strands of societal influence that catalyse religious change do so by triggering self-perpetuating technologies of religious synthesis which allow religious traditions to acclimatise to changing states of modernity, thus maximising their chances of survival in each forthcoming era. As such, while the possible combinations of societal influences and reactions to them in different cultural settings are unlimited, the framework of analysis the author has applied to Singapore may be transposed to other locations with two or more competing ethnic or religious groups.

NOTES

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1   The hokkien term meaning "divining youth" most commonly used by religionists to describe spirit mediums.

2   A Hindu term describing a metal exoskeleton worn to bear deity statues during the Thaipusam event.

3   1600–1045 BC.

4   1045–256 BC.

5   For example, the earth god Tudi Gong who dates back to the founding of the Zhou dynasty (Adler 2002). Religious Taoism (as opposed to earlier schools of philosophical Taoism) is generally accepted to have originated with the Way of the Celestial Masters (Tian Shi Tao) movement which was founded by Zhang Daoling in 142 CE.

6   Fundamental precepts and long established practices.

7   During World War II, many atrocities were committed by the Japanese in Singapore over a three year period. In contrast, where Taiwan was a Japanese colony from 1895 to 1945, the Japanese are remembered for restoring law and order and for building public amenities including roads, sewerage, hospitals and universities.

8   581–618 AD and 618–907 AD.

9   The ruling party in Singapore since 1959.

10 *Kampong* is a Malay word meaning "village." The *kampong* era existed prior to urban redevelopment.

11 A Hokkien term meaning "a tour of the territory," the Mandarin being *raojing*.

12 Wuhe Miao which is located at Toa Payoh Lorong 7.

13 Located at 70–72 Sengkang West Ave.

14 A Nine Emperor Gods Temple.

15 A temple dedicated to Justice Bao (Baogong).

16 Located at the intersection of Sengkang West Avenue and Jalan Kayu.

17 A new united temple located at 20 Loyang Way.

18 Literally meaning "worship worship." Goh (2009) and Elliott (1955) use the term *baishen* meaning "worship deities."

19 There are 60 Taisui, each a general representing a star, one for each of the 60-year cycle of the stem-branch zodiac calendar. The deity statue is therefore changed every year.

20 Singaporean English—mostly English with the addition of Malay, Hokkien and Indian words with its own unique grammatical structures.

21 The Snake Goddess temple is the Sri Vadapathira Kaliamman Temple at 555 Serangoon Road.

22 Cited from the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple website, http://www.sttemple.com/sri-thendayuthapani-temple/festivals.html (accessed 5 May 2014).

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