



Book Review

Buddhism in Indonesia: A Study of Multiple Revivals

By Roberto Rizzo. London & New York: Routledge, 2024, 230 pages, ISBN: 9781032485218 (hardback), £135.00, ISBN: 9781003389514 (e-book) £35.99

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IN *Buddhism in Indonesia: A Study of Multiple Revivals*, Roberto Rizzo reveals how Buddhism rose, developed, and survived in Indonesia, despite the domination of Islam and Christianity. The revivals to which the subtitle refers are the processes of Buddhism's integrating traditional teaching with local community practices. The book leads us to see Indonesian Buddhism as not just a religion inherited from the past, but a living phenomenon that continues to develop, taking various forms in village communities and large cities. Rizzo explains the significance of the role of young Buddhists in the Surjosari and Temanggung areas and provides ethnographic data on the integration of Buddhist and local culture. By emphasizing plurality, he provides a comprehensive analysis of the roles Buddhism plays in people's lives as spaces for social exchange, identity formation, and economic activity.

Rizzo's introduction provides a relatively long description of the history of the development of Buddhism in Java. Rizzo portrays the history of Buddhism in this part of Southeast Asia as continuous. Its foundation was laid by two large kingdoms, Sriwijaya and Majapahit (16), which once made Buddhism a crucial part of the Indonesian social and political order. However, this narrative is now often drowned out by more recent Islamic and Christian Indonesian historical narratives. For Rizzo, Buddhism survives, whether in the form of cultural heritage or current religious practice.

In chapter one, Rizzo focuses on Buddhism's second revival in Surjosari, which followed a period of decline after the fall of the Sriwijaya kingdom. The first revival occurred when Mahayana Buddhism spread across Java in the seventh to tenth centuries, but waned with the rise of Hinduism and Islam. Chapter two describes Buddhism in Surjosari as a form of resistance to the homogenization of Islamic culture and religion (46). Buddhism in Surjosari blends with local traditions, creating a more Javanese Buddhism. This awakening involves community activities that strengthen social solidarity. Buddhism thus becomes part of a regional identity that persists amidst social fragmentation. This chapter is essential for understanding how the integral religious factor and local social-political dynamics influenced the revival of Buddhism. That said, the chapter could use more attention to the potential for conflict between Buddhism and aspects of local culture, as discussed in Parker Gumucio (2008), or the specifics of this conflict examined in Ricklefs (2012).

Chapter three treats the revival of Buddhism in the mountains of Java in various forms. Here, Buddhism often interacts with local beliefs, creating an inclusive religiosity not tied to any one teaching. This chapter also highlights the role of youth in Buddhist revival, allied to efforts to preserve aspects of Javanese cultural identity threatened by modernity and Islamization. Younger generations are using Buddhism to fight for their



social and cultural rights, reflecting a larger transformation in which Buddhism asserts local identities in the face of globalization. I note that the chapter's arguments regarding the role of youth activism feel somewhat disconnected from the broader Javanese socio-political context. Although it addresses how economic and political factors contributed to the revival of Buddhism in Java, the discussion here lacks depth. The role of economic forces (Qayyum, Anjum, and Sabir 2020) and political dynamics (Fox 2016) in supporting or even influencing this revival could have been included to provide a more holistic picture of the factors that contributed to the revival process.

Chapter four discusses two important Javanese ceremonies, *Nyadran* in Temanggung and *Kathina* in Blitar, that involve Buddhism. Rizzo highlights how these rituals create a strong synergy between the two ceremonies and success, combining traditional Javanese elements with Buddhist teachings. This chapter also explores how Buddhism in Java was transmitted through formal teachings and practices rooted in local traditions (131), as seen in the implementation of the *Nyadran* ritual in Temanggung, where food and prayer are offered to ancestors. At the same time, such rituals reflect the continuity of Javanese cultural values in the religious sphere. Further, the *Nyadran* ritual also serves as a form of respect for the spiritual journey of the individual. It celebrates social transitions within the community, while maintaining the sustainability of thick Javanese cultural traditions.

Chapter five explores how Javanese culture was treated as an “event” in the revival of Buddhism in Temanggung. Here, Rizzo uses the concept of “eventisation” to describe how culture and religion are publicly staged, with previously private activities now becoming significant events involving the public from various social groups (117). In Temanggung, religious rituals and celebrations strengthen social solidarity and local identity. This chapter also sets Buddhism in a cultural and religious reconsolidation, combining traditional values with modern elements to create an inclusive religious experience. The revival of Buddhism in Temanggung reflects the reconstruction of Javanese culture in a more pluralistic Indonesian context. Rizzo shows how religious events become a space for cultural expression. However, he does not consider how this might reduce the spiritual dimension of Buddhist practice, with the potential for a revival that is more commercial than religious.

In chapter six, Rizzo focuses on the role of Buddha statues, especially those made of andesite, in religious change in Java. These statues serve as religious symbols and strengthen the spiritual ties of the Buddhist community. As in Vihara Samanggi Jaya, Blitar, the Borobudur-style Buddha statues were meant to constitute a donation to the Sri Lankan Theravadin sangha as a symbolic act for strengthening the relationship between the two monastic communities (137). Here, religious artifacts serve as a visualization of the existence and development of the Theravāda school. At the same time, the materiality of the statues—especially those made of stone—has an intrinsic power that allows it to generate meaning and influence the social life around it, both within and outside the Buddhist community (156).

Chapter seven discusses the role of shrines (small temples or altars) in Javanese gardens. Shrines are not only places of worship but also part of a visual culture that reflects the revival of Buddhism in Javanese society. These temples/gardens, both private and public, allow Buddhists to express their religion in natural spaces reflecting Buddhist aesthetics and philosophy. Here, Rizzo explores the relationships between physical space, aesthetics, and religious practice, as well as the role of visual elements in strengthening Buddhist identity amidst Javanese cultural diversity. Rizzo highlights that, unlike previous practices that employed statues more as decorative elements or historical symbols, for example showing the Buddha lying down in *parinibbāna* (139), today Buddha statues in the *dhyānamudrā* position are actively used in personal meditation to encourage serenity and contemplation, especially in modern practice rooms (146, 154–155). This change marks a new aspect in the revival of contemporary Buddhism in Indonesia.

Chapter eight turns to the integration of Buddhist teaching with the business world in large Javanese cities, such as Jakarta and Surabaya, describing how Buddhism focuses on spirituality and yet is translated into successful entrepreneurial practices. Dharma teachings are now marketed with an emphasis on achieving happiness and well-being through mindfulness and meditation, which are becoming part of urban lifestyle trends. For instance, Rizzo discusses the success of wellness centers such as Buddha Mind, where mindfulness meditation is at once an individual practice and a profitable business model targeting urban professionals seeking stress relief (194). Rizzo shows that Buddhism in large Javanese cities is both a matter of religion and lifestyle, adapting to the existing social and economic demands of urban contexts. While the book focuses on these economic factors, the ethical implications of this revival are crucial as they shape how Buddhism interacts with local traditions and addresses potential conflicts in a predominantly Muslim society. This focus on economics does not diminish the importance of considering these ethical challenges, and I hope future studies will complement the book's findings in this area.

In the final chapter, Rizzo explains the critical role of Indonesian Buddhist youth in the revival of Javanese Buddhism. Organizations such as *Pemuda Buddhis* (Buddhist Youth), *PATRIA Pemuda Theravāda Indonesia* (Indonesian Theravāda Youth), Buddhist Reborn, YBA-I (Young Buddhist Association of Indonesia) are modernizing Buddhist practice, linking it to global and national aspirations, and introducing new ways of spreading Buddhist teachings through social media and community activities (190–194). As examples, *Pemuda Buddhis* advocates unity in religious and social activities, *Pemuda Theravāda Indonesia* provides space for Buddhist youth to develop their leadership within the university, Buddhist Reborn invites youth to be actively involved in more modern activities based on social media, and YBA-I focuses on promoting dharma in the broader sphere.

Rizzo outlines how Buddhism in Indonesia, especially in Java, is able to surf strong currents of modernity. This creates a revival that is a form of adaptation amid the demands of the times and the dynamics of socio-political and economic conditions, especially through Buddhist youth organizations that continue to relate Buddhism's teachings to Indonesia's ever-changing religious conditions. One of the key strengths of Rizzo's work lies in his nuanced exploration of the dynamic development of Buddhism in Indonesia, the evolution of which transcends domestic and global boundaries, actively shaped by local traditions as well as global Buddhist movements and networks. The book also demonstrates the evolution of Buddhism, which is actively shaped by two local traditions as well as the influence of global Buddhist movements and networks.

Rizzo might have contextualized Javanese Buddhism in contemporary Buddhism in other Southeast Asia nations. In fact, the book is focused on Buddhism in Java, not Buddhism in Indonesia, so its title is a bit misleading. It might also have paid more attention to Javanese Buddhism within the Chinese community, which historically has a strong relationship with Buddhism. Finally, Rizzo might have further explored how religion and capitalism work together, as, for example, Peter Jackson does in *Capitalism Magic Thailand* (2022). These critiques aside, *Buddhism in Indonesia* presents a new view of contemporary Buddhism in Java. In doing so, it opens up important areas for further study. First, the relationship of the local and the global in Indonesian Buddhism and Southeast Asia Buddhism more broadly. Second, the contemporary local specifics of the rise and revival of minority religions without abandoning traditional roots. As such, it is valuable in its own right and lays a firm foundation for future studies.

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