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HISTORY, CULTURE, AND REGION IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

HISTORY, CULTURE, AND REGION IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

O.W. WOLTERS



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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In Memoriam
John M. Echols
1913 – 1982

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Introduction

A shorter and somewhat different version of this paper was presented at a seminar held in Manila in June 1980. The seminar, organized by the East-West Cultural Learning Institute of the East-West Center in Honolulu and the Law Center of the University of the Philippines, focused on “Problems and Progress in Cultural Development in ASEAN”, and the participants were asked to keep in mind the following passage in the 1976 Preamble to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia: “Conscious of the existing ties of history, geography, and culture which have bound the peoples together ...”. Although the proceedings of the seminar have been published, I am grateful for being allowed to revise and enlarge my essay for separate publication. I thank Professor K.S. Sandhu, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, for accepting the revised version.

I have taught earlier Southeast Asian history for a number of years and I have chosen to chart my course through different parts of the region at particular times rather than try to demonstrate that “Southeast Asia” possesses some predestined regional and historical identity which is disclosing itself over the centuries. My approach probably began as a reaction against the general assumption when I entered the field that earlier Southeast Asia could be studied from the perspective of “Indianized states”. More than enough evidence seemed available to indicate widespread Indian cultural influences, and this circumstance undoubtedly encouraged scholars to see the region as having a historical identity of its own. India-ward proclivities never satisfied me, and I increasingly eschewed efforts to organize my lectures around overarching regional-scale themes. Instead, I concentrated my attention on subregional histories wherever the materials made this possible. Thus, the Manila seminar, with its focus on ASEAN, gave me an unexpected opportunity to ask myself whether Southeast Asia was indeed something more than

just a geographical space between India and China. I began to enquire whether a regional history could be distinguished in the shape of cultural communalities and intra-regional relationships.

The reader will decide whether my sudden change of approach has made a great deal of difference to my perception of Southeast Asia as a zone of subregional histories. For my part, the experience of writing this paper has convinced me of the acute problems that would arise if I were to attempt to write a textbook on the subject. Fernand Braudel, the historian of the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century, refers to the "still unresolved debate" on the question of dividing history "into the slow- and fast-moving levels, structure and conjuncture".¹ How much more serious is the historian's predicament in my field, where a wide range of happenings is seldom disclosed anywhere, while the intellectual, social, economic, and political structures within which events at different times took place are still indistinct unless one seeks refuge, for instance, in the phantom of the *devarāja* or other generalizations supposed to do justice to this share of the world's earlier history.

Some may disagree that the difficulty of organizing an outline for a new textbook means that the enterprise should be shelved for the time being. Yet those who study and teach earlier Southeast Asian history may wish, once in their lifetime, to indicate the type of textbook that could take into account some of the themes and subject matter which seem, in our present state of knowledge, to endow the field with an appropriate shape and texture. This publication is not intended to be a miniature textbook but rather a gesture on these lines, and I hope that it may generate discussion of what is meant by earlier Southeast Asian history and the ways in which the subject could be presented.

In the meantime, the most helpful general surveys for me are D.G.E. Hall's *A History of South-East Asia*, first published in 1955 when the author had the responsibility of teaching undergraduates,² and George Coedès's *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, a critical manual of current research, originally written in 1944 and revised under new titles in 1948, 1964, and 1968.³ Perhaps a serviceable new textbook could be written by someone willing to prepare a careful

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1. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 2, p. 1242.
 2. The fourth edition has been published in 1981 by St. Martin's Press, New York. Hall's life (1891-1979) and career are described in C.D. Cowan, *Southeast Asian History and Historiography. Essays presented to D.G.E. Hall*, pp. 11-23.
 3. The 1964 French edition has been translated, with some additional materials, as *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press,

commentary, with ample footnotes and within Coedès's format, which could indicate new materials or revisionary views which Coedès was unable to consider before he died in 1969.

I offer this publication for classroom criticism. Teachers and students may soon detect errors, compromises, inconsistencies, and hesitance when I lurch in this or that direction in search of a shape to earlier Southeast Asian history. Not all may be interested in following the path outlined in chapter five where I discuss a particular manifestation of historical processes. Nevertheless, exploring processes rather than devising ways of stating the finished product of history in this region makes the field, in my opinion, exciting as well as difficult. I regret that I have provided too few suggestions concerning the important topic of continuities and changes, while my recourse to a synoptic approach saps the subject of its life and authenticity. Though I move beyond the fifteenth century when it serves my purpose to do so, my focus is on the earlier centuries. My neglect of Theravāda Buddhism, Islam, and Western involvement deprives me of opportunities for delineating the subject more sharply, but I believe that the time span I have chosen has a privileged status in the region's history. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese reached Southeast Asia, and the Spaniards, Dutch, and English followed them within the next hundred years. I do not for one moment assume that almost immediately afterwards sudden and overwhelming changes got under way, but gradually parts of the region and also of the Asian maritime world in general, to which Southeast Asia had so profitably belonged, were no longer left entirely to themselves. The situation had been very different during the previous millennium and more, when what I shall refer to as the early Southeast Asian political systems elaborated their own style of intra-regional relations.

Some critics will bring their special disciplinary competence into play and enquire whether I could have developed alternative and more accurate perspectives. I would welcome this criticism most of all. Over the years my conviction has grown that the study of earlier Southeast Asian history is everyone's business. Not only historians but also anthropologists, art historians, linguists, and musicologists, to mention some obvious examples, must continue to make their contribution by showing ways in which the subject can be profitably studied. Only then will a more substantial rendering of the shape of regional history be gradually disclosed.

1968). For Coedès's life (1886–1969) and career, see J. Filliozat, "Notice sur la vie et les travaux de M. George Coedès", *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 57 (1970): 1–24.

One way of defining the historian's responsibility, at least in respect of the earlier centuries, may well be learning how to study his subject. His colleagues in other disciplines can sometimes come to his assistance. The historian almost invariably finds himself asking what exactly he is looking at when confronted by a piece of evidence or, when he reads a published study, what its wider implications could be in a field where much is still obscure. Harry Benda, the first director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, saw the future as one of inter-disciplinary co-operation when he argued the case for a "structural approach" to Southeast Asian history and proceeded to experiment with the tools of the social sciences.⁴ Uncertain whether an ancient regional infrastructure had as yet been established, he preferred to examine the structure of Southeast Asian history in the social, economic, and political relationships of the "classical period" and especially in more recent centuries.

I must hasten to add, however, that, although I gladly recognize the contribution of those who do not normally identify themselves as professional historians, I do not mean to imply that the historians' skills stem simply from the circumstance that they, and only they, can be expected to assume the responsibility of discovering and criticizing documents. Mary Wright, Harry Benda's colleague at Yale, wrote an essay which cowed historians can read to their advantage. She points out that social scientists and others "are dependent on historians to open up general ranges of [Chinese] experience as it is recorded before they can define important problems in their own field", and she goes on to insist that the historians' function should not be defined as "doing the dirty work with the sources and asking social scientists to do the thinking".⁵ I shall have occasion later to return to Mary Wright's defence of my profession.

I am grateful to friends for criticism of earlier drafts of this essay, particularly James A. Boon, Sunait Chutintaranond, Jonathan Culler, John M. Echols, Shelly Errington, Edward W. Fox, George McT. Kahin, Steven L. Kaplan, A. Thomas Kirsch, Stanley J. O'Connor, Craig J. Reynolds, and Harold Shadick. Not all of them read entire drafts, and none of them should be held responsible for

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4. H.J. Benda, "The Structure of Southeast Asian History", *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 3, no. 1 (1962): 106-38. Benda's scholarly contributions, cut short by his untimely death in 1971, are described by George McT. Kahin, "In Memoriam: Harry J. Benda", *Indonesia* 13 (1972): 211-12; and Ruth T. McVey, *Southeast Asian Transitions. Approaches through Social History*, pp. 4-5.
 5. Mary C. Wright, "Chinese History and the Historical Vocation", *Journal of Asian Studies (JAS)* 23, no. 4 (1964): 515.

what I have written. I also wish to thank Teresa M. Palmer for her typing assistance and for her patience.

The essay begins with some comments on what I believe are features of the cultural background from which the early political systems emerged. I shall then review the style of intra-regional relations which developed during the first millennium or so of the Christian era and begin to ask myself what we may mean by “South-east Asian history”. Thereafter I go my own way but not, I hope, into the wilderness.