

HISTORY, CULTURE, AND REGION IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

O.W.WOLTERS



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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

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.

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CHAPTER ONE

Some Features of the Cultural Matrix

A remarkable development in Southeast Asian studies since the Second World War has been the steadily improving knowledge of the region's prehistory.¹ The best known discoveries, made possible by scientifically conducted excavations and the tools of carbon dating, thermoluminescence, and palaeobotany, are signs of bronze-working and domesticated agriculture at certain sites in northeastern Thailand attributable to the fourth millennium BC. Iron-working, too, seems to have been under way at one of these sites by about 1500 BC. Moreover, by the second half of the second millennium BC at the latest, metallurgy had become the most recent stage in a local cultural process over a sufficiently wide area in northern Vietnam to permit Vietnamese archaeologists to broach sophisticated sociological enquiries.

For my purpose, the important consequence of current prehistoric research is that an outline of the ancient settlement map is beginning to be disclosed. The map seems to comprise numerous networks of relatively isolated but continuously occupied dwelling sites, where residential stability was achieved by exploiting local environmental

1. For recent surveys of current prehistoric research, see I.W. Mabbett, "The 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia: Reflections on Prehistoric Sources", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (hereafter cited as *JSEAS*) 8, no. 1 (1977): 1-14; the "Introduction" in R.B. Smith and W. Watson, eds., *Early South East Asia. Essays in Archaeology, History and Historical Geography* (hereafter cited as *Early South East Asia*), pp. 3-14; Donn Bayard, "The Roots of Indochinese Civilisation", *Pacific Affairs* 51, no. 1 (1980): 89-114; Nguyễn Phúc Long, "Les nouvelles recherches archéologiques au Vietnam ...", *Arts Asiatiques*, Numéro special, 31 (1975); Jeremy H.C.S. Davidson, "Archaeology in Northern Viet-Nam since 1954", in *Early South East Asia*, pp. 98-124; and Hà Văn Tấn, "Nouvelles recherches préhistoriques et protohistoriques au Vietnam", *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* (hereafter cited as *BEFEO*) 68 (1980): 113-54.

resources to sustain what is sometimes called continually expanding "broad spectrum" subsistence economies. The inhabitants' original skills were those of "forest efficiency", or horticulture, although during the second millennium BC domesticated modes of wet-rice agriculture were probably appearing in the mainland alluvial plains.²

These tendencies in prehistoric research provide helpful perspectives for historians of the early Southeast Asian political systems, for they are now being encouraged to suppose that by the beginning of the Christian era a patchwork of small settlement networks of great antiquity stretched across the map of Southeast Asia. For example, no less than about three hundred settlements, datable by their artifacts as belonging to the seventh and eighth centuries AD, have been identified in Thailand alone by means of aerial photography.³ Seen from the air, they remind one of craters scattered across the moon's surface. The seventh-century inscriptions of Cambodia mention as many as thirteen toponyms sufficiently prominent to be known by Sanskritic names. The multiplicity of Khmer centres, for there were surely more than thirteen, contradicts the impression provided by Chinese records of protohistoric Cambodia that there was only a single and enduring "kingdom of Funan".⁴ "Funan" should not, I shall suggest below, be invoked as the earliest model of an "Indianized state" in Southeast Asia.

The historian, studying the dawn of recorded Southeast Asian history, can now suppose with reasonable confidence that the region was demographically fragmented. The ethnic identity and remotest origins of these peoples are questions that I shall eschew. Before the Second World War, prehistorians framed hypotheses based on tool typology to argue that culturally significant migrations into the region took place from the second half of the second millennium BC. These hypotheses have now been overtaken by the disclosing chronology of much earlier technological innovation established by means of prehistoric archaeology. Rather than assuming migrations from outside the region, we can be guided by Donn Bayard's view that prehistoric Southeast Asia was a "continually shifting mosaic of small

2. See Donn Bayard, *op. cit.*, p. 105, for an evaluation of the evidence of rice-cultivation techniques.

3. I am grateful to Srisakra Vallibhotama for this information.

4. Claude Jacques, "'Funan'. 'Zhenla.' The Reality concealed by these Chinese Views of Indochina", in *Early South East Asia*, p. 378; O.W. Wolters, "North-western Cambodia in the seventh century", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (hereafter cited as *BSOAS*) 37, no. 2 (1974): 378-79; and "Khmer 'Hinduism' in the Seventh Century", in *Early South East Asia*, p. 429.

cultural groups, resembling in its complexity the distribution of the modern hill tribes".⁵ The focus of attention must be on what some of these groups could do inside the region and what they became.

The ancient inhabitants of Southeast Asia were living in fairly isolated groups, separated by thick forests, and would have had powerful attachments to their respective localities. I shall have occasion later to discuss the continuation of the prehistoric settlement pattern in historical times, and I shall content myself here by noting that in Java, for example, local scripts⁶ and local sung poems⁷ survived through the centuries. Or again, Malyāng, a small principality in north-western Cambodia during the seventh century, disappears from the records after the late eighth century but reappears in the late twelfth century as a rebellious area when Angkor was sacked by the Chams in 1177.⁸ The modern names of villages and sub-regions are also often identifiable in early written records.

The multiplicity of settlement areas, each of which could go its own way, means that the historian should be cautious before he decides that any part of the region once occupied only a peripheral status in the general picture. Everything depends on what the historian is looking at in particular times in the past. For example, one still knows very little of the early history of the Philippines, but one should not conclude that these islands remained on the fringe of early Southeast Asia. Their inhabitants did not perceive their map in such a way. They are more likely to have looked outward to what is the Vietnamese coast today or to southern China for the more distant world that mattered to them. Every centre was a centre in its own right as far as its inhabitants were concerned, and it was surrounded by its own group of neighbours.

The ancient pattern of scattered and isolated settlements at the beginning of the Christian era would seem to suggest little prospect that the settlements would generate more extensive contact between

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5. Donn Bayard, *op. cit.*, p. 92. Recent excavations at Ban Chiang in northeastern Thailand have suggested a movement of people into the alluvial plains in the millennium after the transition to wet-rice cultivation at Ban Chiang; *ibid.*, p. 105.
 6. J.G. de Casparis, *Indonesian Palaeography. A History of Writing in Indonesia from the beginning to c. A.D. 1500*, p. 72.
 7. Martin F. Hatch, "Lagu, Laras, Layang. Rethinking melody in Javanese music", pp. 38-50. Old Javanese inscriptions show that those who called themselves "Mahārāja" retained the words "Raka of ..." in their titles to indicate their home territory; see F.H. van Naerssen, *The Economic and Administrative History of Early Indonesia*, pp. 46-55.
 8. Wolters, "North-western Cambodia in the seventh century", p. 358.

themselves. The tempo of communication was probably slow even though linguists have been able to delineate major and overarching language families. The languages of the archipelago can be conveniently defined as belonging to the "Austronesian" language family. The language map of mainland Southeast Asia is much more complicated. In early times, the Mon-Khmer, or "Austroasiatic", family of languages stretched from Burma to northern Vietnam and southern China. The Tai and Burman languages were wedges thrust into the Mon-Khmer language zone. But the reality everywhere in Southeast Asia is likely to have been that the major language families were represented by numerous local and isolated speech variations. Only in later times did some variations take on the characteristics of neighbouring speeches, a development that gradually led to a more widely used standardized speech. Linguistic similarities were not in themselves cultural bridges. When, therefore, we enquire how these scattered settlements were able to reduce their isolation, we have to consider other cultural features with greater possibilities for creating more extensive relationships within the region.

There are, in fact, several such features, though we must bear in mind that not all societies can be attributed with identical features. Exceptions can always be found. Moreover, similar cultural features did not in themselves guarantee that extensive relationships would develop across localities as a matter of course, even if their inhabitants came to recognize that they had something in common.

One well-represented feature of social organization within the lowlands in the region today is what anthropologists refer to as "cognatic kinship",⁹ and we can suppose that this feature was present throughout historical times. In simple terms, the expression means that descent is reckoned equally through males and females and that both males and females are able to enjoy equal inheritance

9. This generalization does not include important groups such as the Chams and Minangkabau. I am referring, for example, to the Burmans, Thai, Khmers, Malays, Javanese, and Tagalogs. I follow Keesing's definition of "cognatic" as meaning: (a) a mode of descent reckoning where all descendants of an apical ancestor/ancestress through any combinations of male or female links are included; (b) bilateral kinship, where kinship is traced to relations through both father and mother. See Roger M. Keesing, *Kin Groups and Social Structure*, chapter 6 and the glossary. Sometimes examples are found of nuclear families and neolocal residence. The *Sui-shu*, referring to Cambodia in about AD 600, states: "When a man's marriage ceremonies are completed, he takes a share of his parents' property and leaves them in order to live elsewhere". See O.W. Wolters, "Khmer 'Hinduism' ..." p. 430. Excavations in Bali indicate burials of nuclear families; see R.P. Soejono, "The Significance of the Excavation at Gilimanuk (Bali)", in *Early South East Asia*, p. 195.

rights.¹⁰ The comparable status of the sexes in Southeast Asia may explain why an Indonesian art historian has noted the unisex appearance of gods and goddesses in Javanese iconography, whereas sexual differences are unambiguously portrayed in Indian iconography.¹¹

A notable feature of cognatic kinship is the downgrading of the importance of lineage based on claims to status through descent from a particular male or female. This does not mean that early settlements were egalitarian societies; prehistoric graves with sumptuary goods and status symbols reveal hierarchical distinctions evolving from before the beginning of the Christian era. Moreover, the principle of cognatic kinship by no means implies that kinship ties are unimportant. The contrary is the case. Kinship ties are the idiom of social organization in the region and part of its history. For example, when the Khmers founded or endowed religious cult centres, their commemorative inscriptions mention a variety of male and female kinship relationships over several generations. Nevertheless, the forebears, members of the devotees' kin (*kula*), are not presented as a lineage. Certain forebears are signalled out for their personal accomplishments, but the focus of the inscriptions is always on those who are performing and commemorating their own acts of devotion. One inscription explicitly excludes the devotee's parents from enjoying the fruits of his devotion.¹²

The relative unimportance of lineage means that we have to look elsewhere for cultural factors which promote leadership and initiative beyond a particular locality, and I suggest that leadership in inter-personal relations was associated with what anthropologists sometimes refer to in other parts of the world as the phenomenon of "big men". Here is a cultural trait in early Southeast Asia that seems to offer a helpful perspective for understanding much of what lay behind intra-regional relations in later times.

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10. The nuclear family was the typical family in the Lê legal code, and both husbands and wives enjoyed property rights; see Insun Yu, "Law and family in seventeenth and eighteenth century Vietnam". The Chinese census statistics in Vietnam during the early centuries of the Christian era purport to reveal an increase in the number of households rather than in the total population, and one would expect this evidence in a society practising bilateral kinship. I am grateful to Keith Taylor for the information.
 11. I owe this observation to Satyawati Suleiman. For a discussion of female property rights and the appearance of women in negotiations with royal representatives, see J.G. de Casparis, "Pour une histoire sociale de l'ancienne Java principalement au X^{ème} s", *Archipel* 21 (1981): 147.
 12. A. Barth and A. Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites du Cambodge et Champa* (hereafter cited as *ISCC*), p. 20, v. 34.

The leadership of “big men”, or, to use the term I prefer, “men of prowess”, would depend on their being attributed with an abnormal amount of personal and innate “soul stuff”, which explained and distinguished their performance from that of others in their generation and especially among their own kinsmen. In the Southeast Asian languages, the terms for “soul stuff” vary from society to society, and the belief is always associated with other beliefs. The distinctions between “soul stuff” and the associated beliefs are so precise and essential that they can be defined only in the language of each society.¹³ Nevertheless, a person’s spiritual identity and capacity for leadership were established when his fellows could recognize his superior endowment and knew that being close to him was to their advantage not only because his entourage could expect to enjoy material rewards but also, I believe, because their own spiritual substance, for everyone possessed it in some measure, would participate in his, thereby leading to *rapport* and personal satisfaction. We are dealing with the led as well as the leaders.

The consequence of what Thomas Kirsch has referred to in the context of the mainland hill tribes of Southeast Asia as “unequal souls”¹⁴ was that men of prowess, after their death, could be reckoned among their settlements’ Ancestors and be worshipped. Ancestors were always those who, when they were alive, protected and brought benefits to their people. Sometimes they were worshipped with menhirs, and a Javanese scholar has recently suggested that Javanese temples should be identified as the successors of the menhirs.¹⁵ No special respect was paid to mere forebears in societies that practised cognatic kinship.¹⁶ Ancestor status had to be earned.

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- 13 Anthropological studies about “soul stuff” in a regional context do not seem available at the present time. Indeed, James Boon remarks in respect of Indonesia that “the ultimate comparativist accomplishment would be to plot the various soul-power terms — *semangat*, *roh*, and so on — against each other across Indonesian and Malay societies”; see James A. Boon, *The Anthropological Romance of Bali 1597–1972*, p. 240, n. 7. See Appendix A: Miscellaneous notes on “soul stuff” and “prowess”.
14. Thomas A. Kirsch, *Feasting and Social Oscillation: Religion and Society in Upland Southeast Asia*, p. 15.
15. Sockmono, “Candi, fungsi dan pengertiannya. Le candi, sa fonction et sa conception”, *BEFEO* 62 (1975): 455. Sockmono believes that the significance of menhirs should be understood in terms that apply equally to the “continental” Southeast Asian menhirs.
16. Francisco Colin, a missionary in the Philippines in the seventeenth century, provides an excellent account of what could happen to undistinguished sons of distinguished fathers: “the fact that they had honoured parents or relatives was of no avail to them ...”; see F. Landa Jocano, ed., *The Philippines at the Spanish Contact*, pp. 178–79. In Bali, where kinship is very important, the achievement of founding a line of descent is emphasized rather than that of perpetuating an