

The Past as Present
History and the Making of Southeast Asia

Mandy Sadan

Specialists of Southeast Asia, particularly of its history and culture, must be some of the most self-critical of all regional or area studies communities. There is rarely a conference that goes by without at least one panel dedicated to asking what Southeast Asia is, whether it is a coherent entity, whether it should “cease” to exist as notion, or whether it has justified its contested origins as an Area (with a capital “A”). In part this reflects the lack of confidence that many of us feel in what is an increasingly integrated post-Internet world about Area Studies as a disciplinary focus that helps to explain the modern world. The origins of Southeast Asia as a region of study in part explain this dilemma—the region is deemed to have become consolidated as an object of inquiry more fully after World War II.

When the regional map became defined through Cold War interests, Southeast Asia found intellectual substantiation through Area Studies in the higher education institutions of the United States. Southeast Asia as a modern concept, therefore, was inherently defined by the states that emerged after World War II as independent entities. That states had modern borders that did not map easily against the historic states of previous centuries created an analytical problem for the mapping of histories upon modern territories. Looking back through history, all the modern states of the region sought confirmation of their historical authenticity by laying claim to entities that became the genealogical progenitor of the modern nation: the Khmer kingdoms for Cambodia; Pagan for Mandalay; Srivijaya for Indonesia. This had not been a “stateless” region for more than a millennium, but the modern states and the historical states did not converge. The historical claims of the modern states had to be constructed more rapidly than in parts of the world where modern states and nations were rooted in longer territorial histories. Perhaps, in focusing on the perceived problem of “what” is Southeast Asia *ad inifinitum*, regional specialists have failed to pay enough attention to the problem of history itself in the post-colonial transitions to modern, independent states. Rather than seeing problems of internal cohesion in some nations of the region as evidence of a deeper history of “statelessness” that works constantly to undermine the fabric of contemporary political life, subtler narratives need to emerge about the

layering of historical experience in the production of modern states, and the ways in which anti-colonial and post-colonial nationalisms have configured these histories to their own ends.

The debates are rife that Southeast Asian studies require refinement if not complete reconfiguration to be meaningful in the face of globally-oriented studies. But these questions seem to be part of the core critique of Southeast Asian studies with a sense of crisis that is not so apparent (at least to this author) among other regional specialists. Books have been dedicated to the subject; numerous articles and special editions have taken up the “problem” of Southeast Asia in a variety of (very interesting) ways. Indeed, figures such as Willem van Schendel on the concept of Zomia, have been so erudite that they have sometimes established a new and world-leading critique of the region.¹ Zomia, the “anti-region” region, has influenced many beyond Southeast Asian studies in a contemporary take on Braudelian connections produced through environmental contiguities—here mountains, there seas. The work of James C. Scott,² which has developed this idea further and in a slightly different direction as a region rather than simply as an argument against the failings of Area Studies, has in turn taken the “problem” of Southeast Asian history to a whole new set of audiences and established its own fan base of anti-state historical interpretations (although rarely, it must be noted, lauded by historians themselves).

One of the critiques levelled at the region as an object of study is that it is remarkably difficult to pin down its internal coherence. O.W. Wolters established the wider meta-narrative of what he thought made Southeast Asia into Southeast Asia, and we have not really moved very far beyond that in discussions on the wider connections across time and space of obviously very disparate modern nations.³ A deep cultural past rooted in the expansion and hybridization of global religions and the oft-repeated trope of the *mandala* as the model of statecraft have therefore come to dominate the conversation. Yet, it is often said that Southeast Asian people do not particularly aspire to this identity (just as there is no such a person as a self-referencing *Zomian*, unless they deploy the term with political significance after a reading of Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed*) and this is sometimes used as proof of the inherent inauthenticity of the region as a whole. It is tempting to say that this simply does not matter. However, perhaps post-Brexit we should take such issues more seriously; perhaps affiliations to regional identities are significant in the wider politics of integration in the economic and political zones of the post-World War II world, if not in times past. However, I would even question this assertion of the lack of self-identification as Southeast Asian as accurate in many contemporary urban groups. While the students from the region in

¹ See for instance: Wille van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,” in P. Kratoska and H. Nordholt, eds., *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005).

² As referenced here and below, see: James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

³ For instance, see: O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999).

my classes at SOAS certainly do not rise every morning singing the ASEAN national anthem, they seem to have no difficulty as identifying themselves as Southeast Asian. While they may be a particular and largely non-representative group placed in an unusual environment in which such identities have relevance in a broader community, it is also clear that the identity “Southeast Asian” is not a particular *problem* for them, and neither does it seem to force them into myopic self-reflection on whether their self-reference is *historically* relevant.

So what does seem a problem for these Southeast Asian students in my classes on Southeast Asian history? In many respects, the issue that seems easiest to express at the outset (for example, “I am from Thailand” or “I am from Indonesia”) becomes a more penetrating problem during the course of their studies, especially when identity is translated into a more personalized pronoun (“I am Thai” or “I am Indonesian”). The nature of their civic identities within the states in which they were born and the meaning of that identity map onto much more penetrating problems that are unearthed in their studies: the relationship of the nation to their own sense of national identity, its inclusions and exclusions, and where the ruptures in social cohesion map onto the histories of state expansion into areas where being “Thai” is a more difficult primary self-reference. It could easily be said that this is a small, self-selecting group of people who are predisposed to such angst by interest in the subject matter of a course intended to explore such issues—which can hardly be denied. But there may be more to it than this.

Clearly Southeast Asia taken as a collective of different nations is comprised of modern states that are enormously diverse in their linguistic, ethnic, and religious composition. Books on Myanmar, for example, invariably refer to an extensive list of linguistic groups, mapped onto an equally imposing list of “official” ethnicities, as if this in and of itself should explain why the country has been locked into a series of endless and repetitive cycles of violence, especially in its peripheral states and divisions. The same trope of “diversity” typically is used to introduce the wider landscape of the Philippines. That both Myanmar and the Philippines have been host to two of the longest continuing internal conflicts in the modern world (in the Karen and Mindanao regions respectively) is seen somehow as a validation of the impossible challenge of correlating modernity and the nation with the desires of “minority” groups with opaque histories. In this respect, Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed* has done no great service to our historical understanding to the extent that it naturalizes these conflicts as historically produced, exceptionalizing them from the responsibilities of the modern state in not just “dealing with” these histories of conflict, but actually creating them.

Yet, across the region all the modern states have faced challenges in incorporating diverse communities around a newly articulated sense of national identity within borders that have only been legally confirmed in modern times. Even Thailand—where the experience of direct colonial rule is clearly absent—nonetheless reinvented its national civic model of “Thai-ness” from the 1930s onwards, and has reified the core elements of this model since World War II. Each nation has struggled to define citizenship in ways that could produce cohesion yet also secure protected groups, who retained a primary

control over national identity. Sometimes this related to a clear majority population (Vietnam, Cambodia) and sometimes not (Laos, Indonesia). But what is perhaps most striking when this is viewed comparatively is that there has been such a diverse range of responses to this challenge. Each country has produced idiosyncratic models of citizenship and blended civic-ethnic national identities that are in themselves highly local and historically contingent. From the Laotian concern with geographically-stratified integration of national identity around a core group that is actually a minority, to the Soviet-influenced a-moralizing discourse of ethnic difference in Vietnam, and the racially-bounded constitutional framework of Malaysia, there are distinct and fascinating problems that are unearthed through exploring these comparisons. In none of them can you escape from the need to understand the historical conditions in which they were produced—and the traditional tropes of regional historiography provide severely limited insights.

It is often also said that the problems of history in this region, especially the production of conditions of social incohesion and conflict, lie firmly at the door of the colonial powers that had increasing dominance in the region's historical meta-narrative since the sixteenth century. Beyond this, the influences of China and India are referred to as a separate historical thread, leading back into the early and early-modern periods rather than the histories of modern states (with histories of more recent migration interpreted as an aberration wrought by colonialism). The lack of texture to the colonial narrative is noticeable in many states. Yet, what is perhaps truly distinctive about Southeast Asia as a whole is that the range of imperial systems with which it had to engage in modern times is perhaps exceptional. In Southeast Asia, the Spanish, Portuguese, French, British, Chinese, American, and Japanese imperial systems all collided in a way that was perhaps globally unique relative to any other region. The presence of many colonial powers left diverse legacies for the development of policies of social cohesion in the post-colonial state. Shining a light on a singular nation (paradoxically the default position of the Area Studies specialist) seems to be an inadequate way of illuminating problems of national integration and civic cohesion on a local, regional, and global scale set against this background of colonial experience.

Where does this lead us in terms of appreciating the “past as present” when we seek to understand some of the region's entrenched difficulties in stabilizing contentious identity politics and allowing a national civic consciousness to predominate? We could continue to utilise the traditional frameworks provided by the core narratives of the region's past. This tells us that there were states that were internally weak and succumbed in the face of the changes wrought globally by European expansion and transformations in technologies that permitted these external powers to dominate by force. Encircling these states was a historical netherworld of communities, today's marginalized areas full of “minorities” and conflict, that were incapable of developing state-like capacities and remained largely ungoverned and ungovernable. “Colonialism” (perceived generically as an unequal set of power relations and militarized control) established systems of power that played on divisions, eventually consolidating these divisions into structures of modern political systems that became inextricably combined in the framework of modern, independent states. The difficulty in overturning these simplifications is

that the historical narratives of many, if not all, of the region's modern nations also perpetuate this meta-narrative. It provides the justification of anti-colonial movements that became the ideological basis of post-colonial governments but with limited capacity over wider social incorporation: the historical "state" and identity around which the modern nation would coalesce was excavated from the colonial past by the forces that brought independence. Much of the region's cultural heritage is also predicated on this assertion, either overtly or implicitly, such that Angkor has become the redemptive inner core of Cambodia, while Pagan, the symbol of the Bamar kingdoms, has been redefined as militarized Myanmar. Disorder as the product of historical disruption and the aberration of colonial history is even marked in nationality law, as in Myanmar.

The difficulties created by this use of the past to explain the present are manifold, and they do a disservice to the nations in which they are produced. In particular, they deny many communities from finding meaningful ways of exploring their shared histories, on their own terms. History itself seems full of threat: it demonstrates the weakness of kingdoms or the vulnerability of nations in the present to both internal and external "foes." It produces a civic culture that depends on demarcating divisions between people in order that their potential for disruption can be monitored and controlled. The most extreme example of a nation in the region with a mature policy of multi-culturalism at its heart, is Singapore—paradoxically the one nation that did not want independence but was forced to accept it. Yet, multi-culturalism in Singapore, as is well-known, is based around a controlling set of categories into which all citizens must place themselves. The dilemma of how Singapore will manage an evolving policy of multi-culturalism to reflect the increasing numbers of migrant groups that are outside the official CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) categorization is one of its biggest social challenges. The "multi" of multi-culturalism in its most elaborate ideological modelling in the region, is not very "multi" at all.

Another danger is that lack of more incisive historical engagement of these representations by policy makers in the region tends to perpetuate a worrying lack of understanding of the historical and contemporary conditions of social incohesion that may lead to conflict. The most extreme example of this may well be in Myanmar, where I conduct most of my own research. There is a blindness to the limitations of the standard historical narratives that emanate around the privilege of the Burman interpretations of the past. The result is that there is a prevalence of the view that conflicts are inevitable in a country where there have long been endemic divisions between highland and lowland peoples, that these are innate divisions and which are therefore naturalized as "normal." These ungoverned spaces are then configured as inherently unruly, and perhaps ungovernable. Their political leaders fail to appreciate the complexities of modern governance and instead wish for impossibly naive political arrangements such as "federalism." The whole historical narrative, from the unquestioning discourse of the rupture of colonialism through to the interpretation that the political demands of minority peoples are "unsophisticated," has generated a set of historical assumptions that have influenced international policy. Yet, these policies have singularly failed to shift those conditions of conflict at all in recent years, even in an era of new and more democratic governance. The narrative of history clearly needs to be changed. These narratives are simplistic in

that they normalize the idea that ethnically, racially, and religiously complex societies were perhaps inevitably bound to find themselves in conflict with each other. Not only does it deny the reality that many of these communities have complex and mutually inflecting histories with each other, but it also absolves the modern state from responsibility for exacerbating issues such as educational exclusions or failing to redistribute resources to improve the economic resilience of marginalized communities. Instead, conflicts are explained as an almost inevitable outcome of colonial interventions and political naiveté of non-national minority elites. While these issues are part of a matrix of issues that have produced very long term conflicts in some areas, they explain only part of the story and not its whole context.

Historians of Southeast Asia need to work on unpacking some of the complexity of these issues in tandem with other disciplines to incorporate useful methodologies for penetrating the histories of apparently impenetrable spaces. The histories of marginalized areas, especially borderlands, explored through key themes in global/imperial history such as flows and mobilities, global wars and militarization, and cultural interaction, also connect the local scale of ethnohistory and memory into the politics of ethnicization, race, and religion. Equally, in the long term, the national narratives of the region's states need to develop the maturity of purpose to see beyond simply the justification and authentication of the modern state, but rather to explore how history can help to discover new kinds of relationships and shared pasts. These shared pasts may not be without conflict, and there may be contest over their meanings, but the voicing of these histories is vitally important to creating conditions of inclusion and social cohesion that presently have failed to secure stable and peaceful futures in many marginalized areas—and these perpetually disrupt the stability of the center. Yet the orientation of modern states is revealed very fully through the discourses that prevail on issues such as citizenship and indigeneity. Policy makers in the modern states have participated in the construction of national histories that project certain central narratives of the origins of the modern state and how certain groups come to predominate by historical right.

We are, as Southeast Asian specialists, perhaps asking the wrong questions. Does it really matter if there is an inner historical core to the identity Southeast Asia? Unless we want to write a pre-history of the emergence of ASEAN, I would suggest it does not (although some people clearly do!). Does it matter if we say that modern states reflect actual political and cultural identities? Perhaps we might question instead the outcome would be if we said that they did not—it is a question with no meaningful outcome. The questions that we need to ask are much more penetrating of the region's past—both recent and distant—than this, and should provide the means to shape not only new histories but also new futures for modern nations and their citizens, as well as those who in the future might become their citizens by birth or migration.

Mandy Sadan is Associate Dean of Research in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at SOAS University of London as well as Reader in the History of Southeast Asia. She has published widely, particularly on issues relating to understanding ethnic and social conflict in Myanmar. Her first research monograph was *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the state in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford University Press, 2013), which won the 2015 Euro-SEAS Nikkei Asian Review Prize for Best Book in the Humanities.
