

Festive festschrift

In German and Austrian ethnology, the idea of Southeast Asia as an area characterised by a striking quantity of socio-cultural commonalities dates back to the early years of the 20th century. At the same time, the imagination of other European and American scholars was captured by the overseas dependencies of their respective states.

Niels Mulder

Reviewed publication:

Wade, Geoff and Li Tana (eds). 2012. *Anthony Reid and the Study of the Southeast Asian Past*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. xv + 400 pages. ISBN: 978-981-4311-96-0 (paperback)

SUBSEQUENT to the Japanese overwhelming the area in 1942, the Allies established the South-East Asia Command to re-conquer it and ever since Southeast Asia as a particular entity was on the map. As a scholarly invention, it was invigorated at the time of the war in Vietnam when the focus on erstwhile particular colonies became henceforward concentrated in Departments and Institutes of Southeast Asian Studies. Even so, and well into the 1970s, the comparative study of subjects within the Region developed at a slow pace.

As no serious student can break free from the area's baffling diversity, the debate on whether it is more than an accident of geography is with us up to this date. Simultaneously, the works of scholars like Van Leur, Benda, Wertheim, Wolters, Lombard, McVey, Anderson, Evers, Reid, Mulder, King, and Scott, among others, stand out in developing the uniting themes of the various low-land populations of the Region. Among them, Anthony Reid stands out as the prolific, imaginative, and versatile historian.

Whereas the debate on Southeast Asia as a meaningful unit of scholarly investigation will be with us for a long time to come, Reid must be credited with having established the historical reality of pre-colonial Southeast Asia. To succeed in doing this, his persistent focus has been on the 'unmediated' realities of existence in the area and on the experiences and ideas of individual Southeast Asians. Through concentrating on these, he developed Southeast Asian commonalities and points of view that inform the present.

Concurrent with Lombard, Reid identified the pre-colonial Southeast Asian world as an 'Asian Mediterranean' in which the sea both united and divided, and that was richly endowed with commercial, cultural and social interaction. To Reid, Southeast Asia's characteristic diversity was a virtue rather than an obstacle to see the Region as a valid unit of analysis, while giving hope that cultural diversity can coexist with 'globalisation'.

Through persistently pursuing the autonomous approach to Southeast Asian history, the outsiders' gaze on the area's 'Indianisation', 'Sinicisation', 'Islamisation' and 'Westernisation' could be relegated to the wings where it belongs. This latter view of the dominance of outside influences led to gross overstatements and the idea of cultural imitation, and was not helpful to recognise the grafting of external elements on the cultural body of Southeast Asians in their diversity. It was the local genius that captured and domesticated the inputs while shaping them to its own image; it is this own-ness that abundantly dominates. It is Filipino religiosity in Catholic symbols; it is Thai supernaturalism shaping Buddhism; it is Javanese pantheism that enlivens its Islam, etc.

Next to the pragmatic openness to foreign ideas and their localisation, the comparatively favourable position of women in the Region is a persistent theme in Reid's work, even as current technological modernisation imposes restrictions on lower-class women's autonomy.

A third major proposition is the recognition that Southeast Asians have been managing their affairs independent of powerful states and the cultural uniformity imposed by centrist nationalisms. It is these important elements that point to the Region's home-grown potential for generating creative solutions and that give Southeast Asia a special place in global history.

Naturally, Reid's academic excellence prompted in many of us the feeling of being under a—decidedly Southeast Asian—debt of gratitude for raising our awareness and stimulating our thinking. Consequently, as he approached his 'serene seventies', the idea was born to celebrate his sterling achievement with a Festschrift containing fifteen highly readable yet very diverse contributions to the broad field of Southeast Asian Studies.

As may be expected, the first two chapters focus on his life (Wade and Li), and on his scholarship (Cribb). Under "Southeast Asia in the world", we find Lieberman's fascinating historical parallels among the Eurasian rim lands, viz. France, Russia, Japan, and the Southeast Asian polities. Subsequently, Wang Gungwu adjusts the Mediterranean metaphor to the area as 'a two-ocean Mediterranean', which is the right place to introduce Lombard's vision of 'Space and Time' in the archipelagic part of the Region. Following this, Ann Kumar wants to confine herself to its 'Indonesian' sea-farers and their 'Maritime Reach'.

The Part on "Early Modern Southeast Asia" brings together 'Southeast Asian Islam and Southern China' (Wade), the evolution of boat-building (Manguin), 'Typhoons and the Manila Galleon Trade' (Warren), the Portuguese Topasses in Timor (the Andayas), the Cham diaspora in Ayutthaya (Ishii), and 'Tongkin in the Age of Commerce' (Li).

The last Part, "Modern Southeast Asia" contains a chapter on the influence of the Hadhrami business and religious networks on moulding Southeast Asian identity (Kathirithamby-Wells), 'Islamism's belated, troubled engagement with early Indonesian nationalism' (Elson), and 'power and politics in Chinese communities in Bangkok in the early twentieth century' (Koizumi).

Expectedly, the subject matter of the diverse contributions to this collection is located within the broad expanse of Southeast Asia, even as the bulk of them stand on their own and is not necessarily Reid-ian in their approaches to the Region. It is Lieberman and Wang Gungwu's suggestions and Li Tana's research that connect best with Reid's work. Contrarily, Ann Kumar eloquently argues her reservations to seeing Southeast Asia-wide commonalities because of the absence of cultural and religious, linguistic, and political homogeneity. As a result, she draws the line between the Western Malayo-Polynesian area (Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines) and the highly diversified mainland rest.

Whereas I would have preferred to see more direct connections between Reid's reading of the Southeast Asian past and the work of the various authors, the compilation of their contributions has resulted in a festive, appetising *smörgåsbord* that is still complemented with a 24-page appendix of the publications of the toast of the party—altogether, a most readable Festschrift indeed.

Niels Mulder recently published *Situating Filipino Civilisation in Southeast Asia: Reflections and Observations* as a print-to-order book (LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, Saarbruecken, 2012). Though retired, he stays in touch through niels_mulder201935@yahoo.com.ph

Monograph of a Nepalese town



Both images show the temple of Vajra Yogini, Sankhu. (Reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy Flickr)

Reviewed publication:

Bal Gopal Shrestha. 2012. *The Sacred Town of Sankhu. The Anthropology of Newar Ritual, Religion and Society in Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, ISBN: 9781443837705

This book, started in 2002 as a PhD thesis at Leiden University, has grown into a voluminous treasure of field data covering history, mythology, ritual geography, caste and religion, *guthi* organisation and socio-economy – all treated in an anthropological framework. It is this holistic approach (reflecting the best traditions of the Leiden school of cultural anthropology) that determines the book's value, and reference to it should henceforward not be lacking in any serious publication, in whatever discipline, on Newar culture.

The core of this study, linking history, mythology, ritual, and social system – and justifying its title – consists of detailed descriptions of two cults: the local Buddhist cult of Vajra Yogini (the goddess residing in the forest temple above Sankhu, believed to be the creator of the kingdom and first king of Sankhu), and the Svasthani cult originating in Sankhu of which David Gellner, in the Foreword of the book, mentions that its fasting practice (*vrata*) "has spread out, not just to other Newar settlements, but (...) to the whole of the Nepali speaking world ... today this includes Nepalis settled in the USA, UK and the Far East". Local and global, inside and outside, closeness and distance, Buddhist and Hindu, Tantric, syncretist Newar and classical Vedic, caste based discrimination and modern democracy contained in this field of study represent oppositions, dilemmas, contradictions, complementarities, dynamic interactions in various respects, presented from different angles. As an inhabitant of Sankhu the author, by experience, has internalized these dynamics himself. Therefore he was well placed to collect inside information from many sources.

In the light of tradition and modernity, there are in increasing measure threats to the socio-ritual fabric that defines Sankhu as a town and as a 'ritual kingdom', both from outside as well as from inside – and this is the case with most Newar towns

This monograph of a Nepalese town or 'ritual kingdom' in the Valley of Kathmandu, covers sixteen centuries – from the 6th century when the Mahayana *Gum-vihara* in the forest above Sankhu was first mentioned in an inscription, till present-day Sankhu as it appears from a socio-economic survey executed by the author himself. Shrestha has spared neither time nor effort to relate his own meticulously collected fieldwork data to all which is known from archeological, historical, anthropological and religious studies on the religion and culture of the Newar. The end result is a welcome enrichment of all the disciplines mentioned.

Sjoerd Zanen