A New Look at Old Southeast Asia

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As a way of opening this critique of historical writing on early Southeast Asia, I ask, What interest do today's historians have in studying early Southeast Asia? What are they looking for in the early past? An essay by F. R. Ankersmit, in which he talks about what the modern reader brings to evidence from the past, serves as a point of departure for my answer. Rather than labor at accumulating more and more evidence about the past, historians should reflect on the difference between our own mentality and that of an earlier period. The past acquires point and meaning "only through confrontation with the mentality of the later period in which the historian lives and writes." The experience of confronting this mentality Ankersmit calls "the historical sensation," "which is accompanied by the complete conviction of genuineness, truth" (Ankersmit 1989:146). "A phase in historiography has perhaps now begun," he says, "in which meaning is more important than reconstruction and genesis."

The wild, greedy, and uncontrolled digging into the past, inspired by the desire to discover a past reality and reconstruct it scientifically, is no longer the historian's unquestioned task. We would do better to examine the result of a hundred and fifty years' digging more attentively and ask ourselves more often what all this adds up to. The time has come that we should think about the past, rather than investigate it. (Ankersmit 1989:152)

Many historians, particularly of early Southeast Asia, would question Ankersmit's bold assertion that the reconstruction of what has happened in the past is no longer the historian's unquestioned task. There exist materials not yet read or absorbed into the scholarly literature; other materials would benefit from retranslation and rethinking. The thrill of discovery is a motivation of intellectual endeavor not to be sneered at, and scholarship always relishes new data. Early Southeast Asian

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historiography has been all the better for a little digging, real digging in the case of historical archaeology (e.g., Bulbeck 1992; Manguin 1993).

Anticipating the criticism that he devalues fact-finding in the historian’s craft, Ankersmit quickly affirms that historical truth and reliability are not obstacles to a more meaningful historiography. But he does argue that the metaphorical dimension in historiography has now become more powerful than the literal or factual dimensions, forcing the historian to confront the incongruity between present and past. The focus is on the language used to mediate the past in order to transcend the difference in mentalities. Attending to the way the past is textualized leads the historian to think about the activity of remembering and to be conscious of the historical sensations that arise from confrontation with earlier mentalities.

The most recent attempt to consolidate knowledge of early Southeast Asian history, the *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (Tarling 1992), devotes three hefty chapters to early history but pays little attention to the activity of remembering, apart from the first chapter, “The Writing of Southeast Asian History,” written by John Legge. A survey of historical writing in European languages from prehistoric to modern times, this chapter tells of late colonialist historiography; the debate in the early 1960s about the autonomy of Southeast Asian history; the influence of the social sciences on historians of Southeast Asia; and various other paradigms, conceptual models, and theories, including poststructuralism and deconstruction, all of which have had a bearing on the writing of Southeast Asian history. By entrenching itself in the conventional distinction between history and historiography that is being vigorously questioned by the theoretical interventions of cultural studies, feminism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, the *Cambridge History* seems to close off scholarly debate about the nature of the historian’s enterprise. Approaches, paradigms, and models are put to one side in order to pave the way for the consolidation of knowledge that is unambiguously accountable.

A central question not confronted in the *Cambridge History* has to do with who is doing the remembering as much as what is to be remembered. Is it really possible, for example, to survey this field of knowledge without taking into account the histories of early Southeast Asia in vernacular languages? Are vernacular histories simply sources for European-language history, culturally delimited and therefore culturally relativized perceptions of the past? Does knowledge about early Southeast Asia in English pretend to know more than what Southeast Asians themselves can know? Southeast Asia is not, generally speaking, a domain meaningful for study in countries within the region, where national histories are of primary concern, and has been mostly a Euro-Japanese construct. This situation is changing only very slowly. The Toyota and Ford Foundations have tried to promote a sense of Southeast Asia, but, apart from Singapore, scholarly research on Southeast Asia as a whole does not really flourish. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a source of production of knowledge about the region, but this is partial and very specific to the areas of education and the arts. Governments through their foreign ministries divide up the world and create blocs for strategic and trade purposes, but these divisions do not always accord with the directions of academic inquiry.

History has long been important to nation-building in Southeast Asia no less than in other regions of the world. The classical kingdoms located in the Red River delta of Vietnam, Pagan in Burma, Angkor in Cambodia, Sukhothai in Thailand, and Majapahit in Java are woven into the narratives of the modern nation-states of the region. Their material remains are sites for the production of myths about the nation-state: its long pedigree; a heritage of which citizens can be proud; a glorious
past to impress the international tourist. A certain grandeur attaches to the ruins of these kingdoms, a grandeur whose history is traceable to the French, British, and Dutch colonial archaeological services. After independence the fledgling nations used this knowledge to identify noble pasts for themselves.

The age of the state, the longevity of settlement sites, and the inventiveness of early bronze or ceramic technologies have been of vital importance to contemporary national communities, an importance that is translated into issues for today’s scholars. Inside the many linguistic worlds of the region there exists a politics of early Southeast Asian history, as Southeast Asian nationals in universities, the national archaeological services, and public life debate the construction and meanings of the early past they have inherited. Researchers may pit new archaeological and ethnographic data against nationalist historiography. This has been happening in Thailand, for example, where scholars have argued that the Zhuang people of Kwangsi in southern China (significantly, outside the boundaries of the Thai nation-state) possess the “oldest” Tai culture, predating the period of contact with Sinic and Indic Asia (Srisakhr and Praneet 1993). Debates about ancient technology and settlement can stir emotion, and memory of even the distant past can be hurtful.

I recall a conversation in 1969 in Bangkok with a young Mon man from Burma who was agitating for a separate Mon state. Wanting to show off my knowledge of the sixteenth century when the Burmese ruler King Bayinnaung swept southward and imperialized the Mon principalities in lower Burma, I managed to display a lack of sensitivity to ancient historical wounds by asking the Mon man his opinion of Bayinnaung. The reply was as ruthless as it was concise, as if Bayinnaung were towering over us with a sword poised to strike. “We hate him,” said the Mon youth. Do such emotions and polemics belong in the field of early Southeast Asian history? It would seem from what has been produced so far that they rarely have been included. The debate about the authenticity of the first Thai-language inscription of 1292 A.D., for example, has so far failed to provide what one would expect from historians, namely, an account of how rulership in the kingdom of Sukhothai came to be identified as paradigmatic of good government in the modern period (Chamberlain 1991). Academic history in Western universities tends to regard such contentious debates within Southeast Asian public cultures as impediments to the scientific collection of data.

Do older Southeast Asian discourses of the past or oral traditions about foundation heroes have a place in modern historical science, where fact is judiciously separated from the collective memory of the community? By older discourses I mean perspectives on the past lodged in earlier times. I do not have the linguistic resources to deal adequately here with the indigenous historiographies that could be brought to bear in answering this question. A volume of 1979, self-consciously preoccupied with the questions about Southeast Asian historiographies, contained articles by Charnvit Kasetsiri, Supomo, and O. W. Wolters that addressed some of these historiographies (Reid and Marr 1979), and Wolters’s work has been largely concerned with older discourses of the past (e.g., Wolters 1976; 1988). But generally I find that European-language historiography, particularly that of Western scholars, is reluctant to incorporate indigenous, older historiographies.

So just how is Ankersmit’s plea to think about the past rather than investigate it to be translated in practical terms to early Southeast Asian historical writing in English? The quantity of early history scholarship and its vitality in Southeast Asia itself offer a clue that early Southeast Asian historiography helps to define the contours of Southeast Asian studies as a field of knowledge. There is a mutually validating
relationship in this scholarship between knowledge and region, and the most fruitful way of discussing the historical writing is to look at the way it authenticates Southeast Asia as a region of study and a field of knowledge. As I hope to show, this motivation to authenticate Southeast Asia as a region and field of study is connected to modern, contemporary anxieties about authenticity. But in the first instance, I want to look closely at the preoccupations in this historical writing about origins, agency, and difference, for it is these three historical sensations, to use Ankersmit’s language, that help today’s historian to write with conviction. By framing the discussion in terms of origins, agency, and difference, I hope to establish an understanding of what the historiography purports to say and why the historiography of early Southeast Asia has been paradigmatic for the study of later periods.

Origins

The discipline of history, like the disciplines of geology or archaeology in which time is a variable, is a discourse about origins. The intent of colonial knowledge of Southeast Asia, as produced by the Dutch, French, and British archaeological services, was to appropriate the entire colonized entity, past and all, especially the ancient past where the origins of the colonized entity resided. And in the post-World War II period, as new nations emerged from independence movements, the concern for origins in Western historiography helped to give voice to the “birth” of those new nations. At the same time, to provide a pedigree for the independent nation-state, Southeast Asian nationalist historiographies exploited colonial knowledge that had done so much to pursue, locate, and document the state’s origins.

In the face of this complicity of colonial and nationalist historiography in documenting origins, modern history textbooks more often than not see early Southeast Asia as an originating tradition or system that was disabled or thrown out of alignment by European intrusion, which in turn marks the onset of the modern period (e.g., McCloud 1986; Steinberg 1987). This intrusion was once signified by the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, when Europeans first began to disturb indigenous patterns and continuities. Western premodern historiography, exemplified by A. J. S. Reid’s study of what he calls “the age of commerce,” emphasizes this European rupture now more than ever, and in fact Reid pushes the symbolic date of rupture back into the fifteenth century (Reid 1988).

Historians of early Southeast Asia strive to transcend the European rupture to find the echt Southeast that exists on the other side of the European divide. Terms such as “dawn,” “birth,” and “origins” are not uncommon in the titles of works on early history. In this light the historian’s desire to return to a past as yet untrammeled by European intervention may have resulted in an overly benign view of early Southeast Asia, a time in which the region is not seen as conflictual, as warlike, nor as riven by social, economic, and environmental problems as in more modern periods. In any case, the return to the early past involves a search for origins that will enable Southeast Asia to “write back” against the European intrusion. Early Southeast Asian historiography is thus engaged in a postcolonial and an anticolonial project.

What are the elements of this original, this echt Southeast Asia? French and Dutch Oriental scholarship, each of which has its own genealogy of origins, bequeathed to Anglophone historiography the notion of a cultural matrix along a broad band
stretching from pre-Aryan India through island and mainland Southeast Asia into southern China. An important element in the matrix was bronze technology, and so the Dongson culture-complex with its famous bronze drums took a prominent place in efforts to define what was distinctive about the region. The French epigrapher and historian, George Coedès, made a fundamental contribution to this notion of the cultural matrix by endorsing a cultural substratum that featured wet-rice technology, important roles for women, and other distinctive social features and mythologies (Coedès 1968:8–9). Of course Coedès was not solely responsible for formulating the features of this cultural matrix, but his willingness to speak of “this unity of culture” underpinned the consolidation of Southeast Asia as a field of study.

In a brief, stimulating essay that can still be read with profit, Paul Mus first wrote in 1933 about “a religion of the monsoon zone of Asia,” the fundamentals of which lay in worship of the energies of the soil personified in a god. The chief, or delegate of the human community, was the medium of the divinity, and “in him, by delegation, resides the power which assures the fertility of animals and plants, and in general the good fortune of the group” (Mus 1975:15). For Mus, the cult of the god of the soil, which he identified as male, embodied an interdependence between the soil, divinity, and authority over the human community that ran deep in Southeast Asian culture. I use the spatial, structural metaphor of depth self-consciously.

The notion of a Southeast Asian cultural matrix or cultural substratum has never died and has continued to be a linchpin in the formation of knowledge about Southeast Asia. Wolters called the first chapter of his 1982 volume “Some Features of the Cultural Matrix.” The lineage of this matrix is plain in H. L. Shorto’s reconstruction from fragmentary sources of the sociopolitical organization of the Mons, the early mainland people responsible for transmitting wet-rice technology and Theravada Buddhism to later arrivals such as the Burmans and Siamese. In two densely packed articles Shorto (1963; 1967) examined the Mon prototype for the Burmese spirit cult of the thirty-two nat, a cult that drew together divinity, territory, and political authority.1 Relying on analogies with Chinese and Cham cults, and picking up on Mus’s suggestive essay, Shorto proposed that the Mon cults were sites where human communities tapped the spiritual powers of deceased ancestors. Shorto saw the local cults as units which were transformed into “higher” forms of political organization. The Indic numerological framework (thirty-two or thirty-six) functioned as a design for the integration of clan or lineage-based groups into more complex centralized polities. Because of the widespread cluster of elements in the cult—kinship, ancestor worship, and territorial control—Shorto speculated that the Indic manifestations of the cult were transformations of older politicocultural forms. Other examples of cultural processes that condense this cluster of elements defining the cultural matrix abound in the literature. Stanley O’Connor has ingeniously decoded a puzzling sculpture at Candi Sukhuh in Central Java by suggesting how the stone relief may be read as depicting spiritual transmutation. As two men forge a weapon, they engage in a rite of ancestor worship for the liberation of souls (O’Connor 1985).

This notion that an indigenous cultural matrix gave identity to the region is to be found in historiography from the eastern to the western limits of Southeast Asia. Arakanese society was receptive to Indian religion, because it “was familiar in its substratum of beliefs developed in the same monsoon-dominated environment”

1Aung-Thuin’s study of early Burma, subtitled “the origins of modern Burma,” curiously omits mention of Shorto’s work on the Mon cult, so important to early Burman state formation.
(Gutman 1976:320). In his deconstruction of the “Indianization of Southeast Asia” as a “confusion of categories,” Ian Mabbett suggested that the dichotomy between an autonomous, local Southeast Asia and a civilizing, Indic culture was a false one (Mabbett 1977a). But the indigenous cultural matrix, expressed as general “features” or as “substratum,” persists. In the Western Visayas, animism is seen to have affinities with Coedes’s cultural substratum, Mus’s religion of monsoon Asia, and Shorto’s territorial cults (McCoy 1982). The importance of genealogy has been suggested as one of the autochthonous elements, Khmer kingship being a case in point. In putting forward claims to the throne, claimants used matrilineal as well as patrilineal kin relations to gain the widest possible network of allies and supporters (Kirsch 1976). A bilateral system of kinship reckoning gave women in the aristocracy special influence in dynastic politics, even if the throne itself was a male preserve.

The region encompassing Vietnam and southwestern China has been seen to mark a distinctive cultural-ecological continuum of a very different kind, “neither entirely Chinese nor completely Southeast Asian” (Tai 1988:91). Keith Taylor, who has been a persistent critic of formulations that omit Vietnam from the formation of knowledge about Southeast Asia, proposed that Vietnamese animist cults were “folded into” a cult of royal authority in the eleventh century, which he calls “Ly dynasty religion,” in a way that corresponds to the ancestor divinization—territory—chiefly authority nexus found elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Taylor 1986a; 1986b). The metaphor driving these analyses is stratigraphic. Underneath layers of subsequent—and foreign?—accretions lies a bedrock of the icht Southeast Asia. Moreover, it is this real Southeast Asia that provides the agency in historical processes.

Urbanism is another topic that has preoccupied early historians concerned to document origins. Ancient words in Southeast Asian languages, pre-Indic and pre-Sinic, that signify “center,” “nucleus,” or “settlement” and that later come to mean “capital” or “city” may be residues of Southeast Asian urbanism. I am thinking, for example, of Burmese kharain, which also means “heartwood”; Thai muang, which meant “fortified settlement”; and Javanese kraton (royal residence), which derives from Austronesian ratu (or datu), meaning chief. These terms refer to the core areas which gave rise to principalities, kingdoms, and empires. It is possible to speak of pressure from the affiliated disciplines of anthropology and archaeology, in which urbanism was a favored paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s, that pushed scholarship along certain lines. In the case of Srivijaya at Palembang, the presumed “lateness” of urbanization in insular Southeast Asia skewed attempts to fit archaeological series against written history (Bronson and Wiseman 1976). The first modern excavations for material evidence of Srivijaya failed to find anything significant in the ground. The history of Srivijaya, a maritime empire presumed to have been the first known large-scale state in island Southeast Asia, is now being substantiated as a result of new excavations which themselves have led to a new set of exciting questions (Manguin 1993).

The historical geographer Paul Wheatley, who pioneered the structural history of the Malay Peninsula from Chinese toponyms, outlined a schema for urban genesis in an essay that he later expanded into a book (Wheatley 1979; 1983). Using concepts from American social theory and comparative work on Africa, the Middle East, and Middle America, he came up with criteria for urbanism that suggested “urban imposition” for the Sino-Viet territories during the period of Chinese overlordship and “urban generation” for the Indic territories. Such a schema bifurcated Southeast Asia, thus excluding Vietnam from the region’s shared history. A critical review of Wheatley’s 1983 book by Keith Taylor argued that Wheatley had misunderstood
the degree of Sinicization experienced by early Vietnam and had denied Vietnamese historical agency (Taylor 1986b). In fact, Wheatley’s schema of urban genesis was a way of getting at a problem that has vexed early historians for the past quarter century, namely, the problem of the state and its genesis. Some historians see urbanization as a feature of late state formation (Kulke 1991). Others are more skeptical that urbanization and state formation go together, preferring to see an upper limit to population growth beyond which settlements tended to fissure and disperse. This is certainly an argument that has been made for Central and east Java (Christie 1991).

What was the threshold of state formation and what did contact with Sinic or Indic civilization have to do with determining that threshold? By no means would all scholars of early times agree to the scientistic way I have posed these questions. There has been real resistance to supposing that “the state” can tell us anything meaningful about the early Southeast Asian past. While some see this knot of questions as monumentally unproblematic, others see it as emblematic of the perils of Eurocentrism, even Orientalism. Is it even possible to escape these modernist meanings by using indigenous, “culturalist” ones? The question of state formation intervenes in Southeast Asian historiography in the early centuries A.D. because the history of the region, narrowly defined here as study of the past from documentary materials, begins when Southeast Asian polities come into view through the medium of sources that already bear traces of contact with India and China. The time before this moment is the region’s “prehistory.”

The distinction between history and prehistory is an arbitrary one created by the specializations of modern knowledge. Archaeology, the methodology used to study prehistory, is employed well into the historical period, often to support interpretations from written sources. Manguin’s excavations at Palembang, recent studies of material remains on South Sulawesi, and Higham’s archaeological analysis of Angkor to the end of the twelfth century may be read as a reply to Hutterer’s criticism that archaeologists had yet “to break the logjam that has been obstructing access to the early social history of the Southeast Asian region” (Manguin 1993; Macknight 1993; Higham 1989). Hutterer had called on archaeologists to fit archaeological sequences to the narratives that historians fashion from chronicles, traveler accounts, inscriptions, and other written materials (1982). The disciplinary collaboration between prehistory and history is now a matter of course.

Prehistorians and historians alike have worked hard to define the moment when chiefdoms, “paramountcies,” or “tribal societies” (Wheatley’s terms, 1983) “on the verge of statehood” (Christie’s phrase, 1990) crossed the threshold into “true states” (Bronson’s term, 1977:40). For Kenneth Hall, Funan was Southeast Asia’s “first state” (1985:chap. 3). The question of the threshold is not specific to early Southeast Asia; comparative prehistory suggests there is a “structural cork” between the two phases (Miksic 1990:92). Manguin’s formulation is typically nuanced, stressing the long-term socioeconomic change that seems to have taken place. He speaks of economies crossing over the border between tributary modes of production and wider ranging networks connected to world economies (Manguin 1991:54).

The transition that historians have sought to document is not unlike the one traced for India as “lineage society” evolved into “state” (Thapar 1984). On the one hand the vast comparative, conceptual literature on the relationship between trade and state formation that was popular in the 1970s (e.g., Webb 1975) has had an enduring impact on early Southeast Asian studies, leading to the proposition that early state formation was trade-dependent (Glover 1992; Hall 1985; Hall and
Whitmore 1976; Kathirithamby-Wells and Villiers 1990). Burma is the exception that proves the rule (Aung-Thwin 1990). The more stimulating studies of what was once called Indianization (e.g., Mabett 1977a; Wolters 1974) emphasized that exchange networks were highly valued not only because they led to the accumulation of wealth but also because they acted as hubs for the spread of knowledge and ideas as well as of goods and raw materials. The trade routes served as a communications net along which material objects traveled to stimulate artistic innovation. Religious images might be bartered and thereafter become models for local artisans to copy and modify. Some of the exchanges that took place undoubtedly enhanced prestige, status, and power and came to have political consequences. Another source of the trade-state formation connection was late colonial writing, for example, Dutch historiography with its distinctive economistic orientations (van Leer 1967). But the relationship between state and trade, between king and merchant, was not unambiguous. It was not always and everywhere mutually reinforcing. The two had “a conflictive rapport,” and out of this conflictive environment arose trade-based political myths that testify to the tension (Manguin 1991:51).

On the other hand, an equally scienistic kind of explanation has been sought in a socioenvironmental “trigger” for the mechanisms that transformed chiefdoms into kingdoms. Wheatley, for one, suspected that this trigger was socioenvironmental stress manifested in agricultural innovation such as wet padi as a staple grain crop (Wheatley 1983:277–78). Prehistorians still associate wet-rice cultivation with a certain level of social integration and military power throughout Southeast Asia, for example, in South Sulawesi (Macknight 1983). Wet-rice cultivation required an intensification of cultivation and a greater relative investment in agricultural labor, which led, in turn, to competition for wet padi, social differentiation, and hierarchy.

In a stimulating essay that has been ignored by early historians, possibly because it lies outside the field of history, so to speak, Michael Dove challenged the thesis about wet padi, arguing that wet rice does not favor the individual cultivator and could not in itself trigger the change that took place (Dove 1985). Cultivators did not change to wet rice because it was more productive per capita. It was not. They would have gradually changed to wet rice because ancient rulers held out the offer of statuses, honors, and other inducements to local overlords to make the land more productive per unit area and thus more remunerative for exploitation by the court. Tony Day and Adrian Vickers have taken the argument further, with a revisionist interpretation of Clifford Geertz’s “theater state,” and suggested that the majesty and display of early kingship had sufficient coercive powers to nudge peasants into engaging in a form of agriculture that was not so materially productive as swidden cultivation. Wet-rice growing encouraged social inequality, which lent itself to manipulation by the Indic court (Day 1994; Vickers 1986). The line between wooing cultivators to settle on land within reach of the court and coercing them by the force of majestic example is too fine to draw.

Geertz’s negara or “theater state” has spawned a subfield in Southeast Asian studies (Geertz 1980). Possibly because it was conceived out of Balinese material on the nineteenth century, and Bali as a field of knowledge stands outside of Southeast Asian studies, the “theater state” merits no mention in the early history chapters of the Cambridge History. The model has, however, been extremely influential in all areas of Southeast Asian studies even as its implications have been strenuously contested. An indigenous, culturally oriented model that is mobilized against Marxian and Weberian notions of the state with fixed boundaries and the rule of law over a given territory, the negara has affinities with the mandala, a formulation favored by Wolters
which has been picked up by many scholars (Wolters 1982). Both models play down the role warfare and violence had in the exercise of royal authority, and in doing so, they perpetuate an exotic, idealist, Orientalist construction of the Southeast Asian past.

From its root meaning of circle and its metaphoric meanings of totality and the perfection of Buddhahood, mandala has come to be a trope for the cluster of features that encode ancestor divinization, territory, and chiefly authority. Both archaeologists and historians have found the state-as-mandala productive in their thinking for two reasons. First, it is an “indigenous” model and therefore “protects” early Southeast Asia from Eurocentric concepts. Actually, of course, it is not indigenous; it is Indic. Second, it is a cultural concept, and its very resistance to pat definition as a model of state formation gives it interpretative power. To criticize mandala, as Kulke has done (1991:21), because there is little evidence from early sources that the term was used in such a comprehensive way, is to miss the point that it is a hermeneutic aid, not a thing whose existence has to be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. Higham, for example, has shown how the notion can be pushed to its limits. He expands its use to cover Champa and even the Han commanderies in the Red River delta, precisely that part of Southeast Asia excluded in Wheatley’s schema of urbanism (Higham 1989:chaps. 5–6).

Several scholars have argued that models of the state inhibit inquiry. Tribal societies or chieftdoms acquire the character of static, ideal types that have lost their interpretative powers (Kennedy 1977:28, 32). The term “state” is overburdened with Weberian meanings, such as “patrimonial bureaucracy,” not found in parts of Southeast Asia as, for example, in the Philippines before Spanish intervention. The largest sociopolitical unit in the pre-Hispanic Philippines was the barangay, or village, over which the chief (datus) presided. The chief’s status was determined locally, rather than by “attachment to a structure of authority emanating from another realm” (Rafael 1988:141; Scott 1982:96–126). Spanish descriptions of early Tagalog society do not mention “elaborate mythologies” connecting the cosmic and human orders or “meticulously compiled genealogies” that might privilege one group or family over others (Rafael 1988:146). The barangay were politically autonomous until they were gradually but incessantly brought within reach of the colonial state apparatus. The vocabulary of state formation does not appear to be apposite for the pre-Hispanic Philippines, and this is one reason the Philippines often drops out of the premodern historiography of Southeast Asia.

Wolters has offered a lively refutation of the idea that Funan was Southeast Asia’s first state, on the grounds that its existence cannot be disentangled from Chinese preconceptions that a state should have rules of dynastic succession and fixed boundaries (Wolters 1982:13–14). But even in the face of the modernity and Eurocentrism of Weberian meanings or the presumptions in Chinese sources, early historians have sometimes locked themselves into a formal and mechanical conceptual

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\(^2\)For these affinities see Tambiah 1985:chap. 7. Higham (1989:239) credits I. W. Mabbutt for advocating mandala in 1978, but it actually crept into usage along a number of paths. Wolters himself wrote his own gloss some ten years previously (1968).

\(^3\)For gentle criticism that scholars have missed the point see Sunait 1990, which is the best published study of the genealogy of mandala; see also Reynolds n. d. As in India and other parts of Asia, the mandala concept was clearly incorporated into temple design. Kath O’Brien has demonstrated the use of the mandala as a blueprint for the construction of Candi Jago, a thirteenth-century tantric Buddhist temple in East Java. Without knowledge of how a mandala works, the narrative bas-reliefs have no apparent order (O’Brien 1988; 1990; 1993).
framework. What they want to understand is the persistence of a type of state, a
type that is seen to be fragile and to have inherent structural weakness (e.g., Kulke
1991:21). It is almost as if the evidence of so-called fragility and weakness disqualifies
these entities from proper historical inquiry.

Kulke’s attempt to chart the trajectory of the early Southeast Asian state through
its local, regional, and imperial phases (i.e., chieftdom, early kingdom, and empire)
was sufficiently general to place it as the initial essay in an important volume of
1986 (Kulke 1986). But his thesis stressing synthesis, comparison (Java, Cambodia,
Burma), and comprehensive generality was largely undercut by the essays that followed
it. Kulke has maintained his interpretative framework of consecutive phases in recent
work (1991). However, his discussion of the dynamics of local-regional-central relations
in their details was more interesting than the proposition that the core areas of early
Southeast Asia had undergone an “overall (though not homogeneous) process of state
formation” (Kulke 1986:5). What gets lost in a framework that conceives time
developmentally is the sense that even in the early stage, tiny centers had a sense of
geopolitical significance and looked outward to the world, and that even in the
later stage empires took care to pay homage to the local loyalties that rooted them
to a specific place and sustained them.

Kulke’s analysis also betrays a preoccupation with structuralist formulations and
evolutionism typical of continental, European scholarship of a certain kind (Kulke
1986:17). The same can be said of Renée Hagesteijn’s structural-functionalism, even
as she tries to adapt it to Southeast Asian cultural realities (Hagesteijn 1989; Reynolds
1992). Historians have been encouraged to avoid such structuralism, because its
formalism renders opaque the cultural characteristics that give the region its character,
a view that is as distinctively American as the other is European (Bentley 1986).
Substituting “spiral” for linear trajectory as the shape of early Southeast Asian time,
as Aung-Thwin has proposed, simply mires us in geometric quibbles (Aung-Thwin
1991). Nevertheless, structuralism-formalism is a mode of inquiry that helps to
retrieve otherwise hidden information, and in the hands of some historians it has
promoted the study of meaning, which the field should encourage—a point I shall
return to later.

Questions of the origin of the state turn on rulership and its connections to the
social and spiritual bonds of community. Rulership is difficult to discuss without
coming to terms with charisma, one of the foci of the meanings of “state” in Weber’s
work, although the term is eschewed in early historiography precisely because of
its Weberian, to say nothing of its modern, telegenic overtones (Reynolds n.d.).
In characterizing the powers, capacities, and spirituality attributed to kings, early
historians are working towards a Southeast Asia-specific notion of charisma. Kingship
was a heroic attainment, not an institutionalized office.

Wolters coined the term “man of prowess” for early kingship, the “abnormal
amount of personal and innate ‘soul stuff’ which explained and distinguished their
performance from that of others” (1982:6–7). Is this not charisma by another name,
thereby avoiding the Weberian references? What Burton Stein said of medieval Indian
kingship could be said of kingship in parts of Southeast Asia. The king was not a
manager but an overlord, a term Wolters has favored from time to time. The Indian
king “demanded submission to his claim of superiority, rather than obedience to
his orders” (Stein 1975:77). How different is Wolters’s “man of prowess,” a concept
that has been welcomed by archaeologists and historians alike, from Burton Stein’s
ruler who had little administrative control but immense ritual significance (Stein
1980:275)? The affinities between Wolters’s mandala or “man of prowess” and Stein’s
"segmentary state" are more fruitful than early historians have recognized. Overlordship is common to the vocabulary of both. This perceived affinity between Indic and Southeast Asian kingship carries on an old collaboration, exemplified by Kulké's scholarship and, earlier, that of Gonda's (1966). But how many Southeast Asianists would have read what Kulké writes in the field called Indian studies? Because of the way Southeast Asian studies is constructed as a field of inquiry, cross-area comparisons, such as that of Subrahmanyan, are rare (1986).

Not every historian is enamored with the enterprise of trying to develop a region-specific vocabulary for "state." Jan Wiseman Christie, whose numerous studies have breathed new life into early Javanese history, has been critical of all models of state formation. In her most explicit criticism she was skeptical that the indigenous models (negara, mandala), developed as alternatives to the Eurocentrism of the Weberian state, did little more than reify long-standing Orientalist prejudices about distinct Eastern and Western mentalities, for example, by positing a radically different political "mentality" (Christie 1986). The problem with her dismissal of models is that it presumes historians can deal with epigraphic evidence without any recourse to word-pictures of the social entities that produced the epigraphy. Her criticism assumes the models have been used more or less scientifically to describe early Southeast Asian societies, and thus they are implicated in the joint operations of essentializing and dichotomizing characteristic of Orientalist knowledge. My reading of the recent historiography is that historians have used the models to explore the cross-cultural dissonance that inevitably resounds when one tries to write in one language about something that is untranslatable from another. In any case, Christie's criticism raises the issue of "difference" that I want to take up separately below.

Christie's revisionist readings of Old Javanese inscriptions have been healthy for early history taking issue with the way the state has been studied, for she has directed attention to wider aspects of early Southeast Asian social formations. Using the epigraphic evidence to illuminate social structure and the religious and social duties of officials, her interpretive methods have strong links with a generation of Dutch scholarship influenced by structural anthropology (e.g., de Casparis 1986; Pigeaud 1977; van Naerssen 1977). Her extensive work on sima grants—transfers of tax rights by the king or local petty ruler—which were the basis for religious foundations have provided a much-needed social dimension to early Javanese history (Christie 1983; Jones 1984:chap. 2). This work articulates the way religion, economics, and politics cluster together, a conjunction that modern historical science tends to overlook. It would seem that the temple—more to the point, the foundation grant—not the state, is the category that repays ardent inquiry. It was through the sima grants that the state took its form and function, spread out yet strong enough and impressive enough in its representations to make local authorities mindful of its presence.

The thrust of Christie's most recent research is to broaden and deepen the focus of study beyond the royal base (kraton). She proposes that the early Javanese state was a dispersed entity. Moreover, the "diffuseness and mobility of political and economic foci" extended down to the Javanese village (wana) (Christie 1991:31). The dispersed nature of early Javanese society stemmed from the dynamics of demography, once the population reached a certain level. Excess population did not aggregate into urban centers but, instead, formed into small residential units, a process that was underway in central Java as early as the ninth century (1991:34–35). Although Christie has placed her work in the context of early state formation, the thrust of it is to push dynastic events to one side and to display an almost
granular texture of early settlement and social relations. A volume of translations from the epigraphy published in 1984 allows the English-language reader to sense the richness of the early Javanese material (Jones 1984). There are clearly methodological obstacles to using epigraphy or the Javanese and Balinese kakawin, epic poetry written in Indic meters, to write social history. For example, the presence or absence of women may be a function of a highly stylized genre rather than an index of social fact. Historians are now confronting such methodological questions directly (e.g., Creese 1993).

An example of a study in which the modern historical imagination plays self-consciously with the memory of the origins of the Southeast Asian nation-state is Keith Taylor’s The Birth of Vietnam (Taylor 1983). The book’s title is not merely one conceived by the publisher to attract readers but reflects a particular kind of interest in early Vietnamese history, the real Vietnam that emerged after its Chinese overlordship. In this reading, the Chinese phase, however important in shaping Vietnamese state and society, was primarily a foreign phase. “Independence,” the title of Taylor’s last chapter, finally triumphed in the tenth century, and a genuinely Vietnamese state emerged. By the late fourteenth century Vietnamese “wild” histories were celebrating cultural confidence and redrawing boundaries in light of Vietnamese, rather than Chinese, proprietary interests (Ungar 1986).

What is at stake in this metaphor of birth but the self-determination of a Southeast Asian people as the integument of foreign overlordship falls away or, as was the case from 1946 to 1975, is thrown off by force? In this modernist reading of Vietnam’s ancient history, a reading that vivifies the ancient Vietnamese past in recognizable terms, Taylor has much in common with Gordon Luce, who found in the early history of Pagan “a thrilling moment of birth and awakening” when the seed of the modern national community was planted (Luce 1969:97; Reynolds 1992:149–50). Similarly, Michael Aung-Thwin calls his study of Pagan the origins of modern Burma (1985). There is no gainsaying the presentmindedness of this enterprise, undertaken in the long afterglow of tumultuous independence movements. Early Southeast Asian historians affirm their duty to reconstruct ancient societies, because these societies bequeathed a sociocultural heritage to the nation-building process (Kulke 1986:17). The study of early Southeast Asian history involves an emotional investment, as historians reclaim a past overridden and devalued by Western imperialism.

Agency

The identification of Southeast Asian agency is closely linked to the trope of origins, whether it be of kingship, cities, or state that motivates the writing of early history. In discussing the way prehistorians and historians have configured the Southeast Asian cultural substratum, I have already suggested that these scholars look for the eht Southeast Asia underneath layers of influence. One of the central problems of origins is that they may have been Indic or Sinic and hence inauthentic. In a word, they are “colonial,” but not Western colonial, as anything from outside is deemed external and therefore “colonial.” In this section I want to examine how

Studies of early Burma and Cambodian society using a similar approach have built up a picture of social and economic life (Aung-Thwin 1976, 1979; Luce 1969; Mabbett 1977b, 1983).
the construction of the real Southeast Asia functions as historical agency. The key processes in the historiography that give voice to agency are "domestication," "vernacularization," "indigenization," and "localization." These are the names historians give to the processes by which Southeast agency may be traced. These processes are the traces of Southeast Asian agency, the consequences of Southeast Asian will. They are evidence of the capacity of Southeast Asian societies to shape change. The stress on localizing agency shifts the focus onto Southeast Asians and their future, away from their suspect origins as mere borrowers and culture brokers.

The idea of the autonomy of Southeast Asian history has a long and distinguished pedigree, its most famous expression in English being an essay of 1961 by John Smail. The essay, reprinted in 1993 and still hailed as "seminal," has been highly regarded for so long largely because it has been fundamental to the rationale and funding strategies for Southeast Asian area studies in the U.S.A. (Smail 1961). A fundamental aim of the enterprise has been to differentiate Southeast Asian studies from South Asian or East Asian studies. Mindful of the false dichotomies and confusions of the terms Europe-centric and Asia-centric, Smail nevertheless was intent on encouraging "a general domestic history of the area" which still remained hidden. In doing so, he called for attention not only to "the autonomous and mutually exclusive thought-worlds" of Southeast Asians in all periods of their history but also to the thought-world of the modern Southeast Asian historian writing about her or his own past. Although "modern Southeast Asia" is explicit in Smail's title and the "autonomy" of Southeast Asia has continued to be a motive force for all periods of historical inquiry, early Southeast Asian historiography has had a special role to play in documenting this autonomy.

But Smail did not invent the idea of autonomy, and it is hardly coincidental that, as a student of Indonesian history who knew Dutch, his first footnote is to J. C. van Leer, the historical sociologist. Basically, Smail, who was critical of van Leer but also inspired by him, was calling on modern Southeast Asian historians of his time to finish what van Leer had begun. Speaking about the history of Indonesia, Van Leer had uttered an eloquent and memorable statement that forged a connection between origins and agency. Foreign cultures and world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam—had, said van Leer, exerted "weak" influence.

They did not bring any fundamental changes in any part of Indonesian social and political order. The sheen of the world religions and foreign cultural forms is a thin and flaking glaze; underneath it the whole of the old indigenous forms has continued to exist—with many sorts of gradations appearing, of course, according to the cultural level (van Leer 1967:95).

The operative terms here are "sheen," "thin and flaking glaze," "the whole," "old indigenous forms," and "cultural level." The idea that world religions and foreign cultural forms are a mere veneer, "a thin and flaking glaze," has been modified, refined, and even challenged. And van Leer's writings have been subjected to trenchant criticism for embodying the very Eurocentrism for which he criticized others (Biros 1992). In an early critique of the historical discourse Smail inherited from van Leer, Tony Day has pointed out how van Leer's image of the ship entrenches the exteriority of the Western observer. From the ship's deck the Westerner—sea captain, colonial administrator, or twentieth-century scholar—peers through the gray and

3The long history of Dutch debates about agency in Indonesian history, especially with respect to Indic cultural history, are summarized in Sudradjat 1991:25–35.
undiﬀerentiated fog of colonial historiography to pick out the multitudinous world of Southeast Asia as the eye wanders "from one delightfully exotic fact to the next." The Dutch scholar's Orientalist theoretics of representation entrenched the exteriority of the Western observer and thus worked against the Southeast Asian autonomy he sought to establish (Day 1984:149–50).

Van Leur's formulation is, one way or the other, still demonstrably present in how historians think about the early period, for it brilliantly employs two metaphors that contradict each other. One is the stratigraphic one ("the cultural level") I have suggested is omnipresent in early historical writing. The other is the inside-outside Southeast Asia distinction that is embedded in the historiography. The aim was to displace colonial historiography—Smail spoke of van Leur's having "reversed" that historiography—which had once seen the destiny of Southeast Asian societies determined by the British, French, or Dutch East India trading companies, administrations of governors-general, and colonial regimes. Southeast Asia and its history would no longer be the creatures of colonial will and management. Southeast Asian agency would "write back" against the constructions of colonial historiography. Indeed, as is clear from van Leur's statement, Southeast Asian agency was required to write back against any and all external "influences," including Sinic and Indic.

On this issue of inside versus outside a given society, the question of agency in early Southeast Asian historiography intersected with debates in the social sciences generally, particularly structural anthropology, informed by Marxist problematics of agency (e.g., Comaroff 1982:145–46). The debates centered on the question of structure versus subject. To what extent did human will (or consciousness), individually or collectively, contribute to the making of history? To express Smail's argument in this other language one could say that autonomy of another thought-world or culture was a metaphor for agency. In historiography these problematics have generally concerned the colonial and postcolonial periods, but the axis along which the debates have taken place—"traditional" society versus "capitalism" centered elsewhere that renders "traditional society" dependent—is clearly visible in the early historiography of Southeast Asia.

What is the character of this Southeast Asian agent, this prime mover, that has the capacity to work change? H.G.Q. Wales called it "local genius." He asserted that this local genius was alive and active particularly in Java, Champa, and Cambodia. The pre-Indic civilization "survived in the 'subconscious' of the Indianized peoples," and "the people responded to this stimulus" of Indic cultural influences "in the light of their local genius, the continuing effect of their repressed previous civilization" (1957:111). Wales proposed a theory of influence to explain why some foreign cultural elements survived while others were sloughed off (Wales 1951:196–97). The tangled theories from Freudian and behavioral psychology were too mechanically applied for Western historians, and his work is not taken very seriously today. But "local genius" lives on. As recently as 1984 the government of the Republic of Indonesia sponsored a forum on "Local Genius and Indonesian Culture" in connection with its efforts to promote a clearer definition of national identity (Sudradjat 1991). In Southeast Asia "local genius" is taken to be something that needs to be both respected and nurtured. In Thailand it is called "local intellect" (phum panyan), a buzzword that has become the rationale for a rhetoric of self-reliance in rural development as well as for centers of Thai studies in the country.

The notion of "layers" of influence, the "inside-outside" dichotomy, and the all-important role of "the local" are as prominent as ever in the early historiography. Even if not named as such, "local genius" has been a regular motif in political,
economic, and cultural studies of the earlier period. The definitive work on indigenous monetary systems to 1400 A.D. anticipates its conclusion in its subtitle, *The Development of Indigenous Monetary Systems*. Coinage is everywhere localized, with a dichotomy throughout much of Southeast Asia between local valuational systems for exchanges and other systems for extralocal trade (Wicks 1992). Wolters has contributed to the development of the theme of localization as much as anyone, from his now-classic study on the origins of Srivijaya originally published a half-dozen years after Smillie's essay to his 1982 essay on the general features of Southeast Asian history and culture and his more recent work on Vietnam. The success of Srivijaya stemmed from the substitution of Indonesian products of comparable value for Persian products bound for the Chinese market. The shippers as well as the products were increasingly Indonesian (Wolters 1974:chaps. 9–10). I have always thought that Wolters, as a modern historian, had here implanted an element of Southeast Asian cunning in his reconstruction of early Indonesian commercial strategies. In any case, in this history Southeast Asians took control of their own destiny.

With an emphasis on process and consequence rather than on agency, as such, Wolters later put forward what amounts to a theoretical statement about how local cultural statements can be studied to see the effects of Southeast Asian agency.

The term "localization" has the merit of calling our attention to something else outside the foreign materials. One way of conceptualizing "something else" is as a local statement, of cultural interest but not necessarily in written form, into which foreign elements have retreated (1982:55).

The historian's task is to "broaden a process for restoring the effects of foreign fragments when they retreat into local cultural ambiances" (Wolters 1982:66).

Wolters here pulls back from what Wales was eager to talk about, namely, the character of Southeast Asian agency. Instead, we are directed to the "local statement," which may or may not be written. It may be a Visnu image on peninsular Siam or the Indic has reliefs on the ruins of a temple in eastern Java or the Chinese legal code in fourteenth-century Vietnam. The rather backhanded way Wolters phrased the concept—"a local statement . . . into which foreign elements have retreated"—betrayed his reluctance to be too specific about the mechanics of the process or, in contrast to Wales, the psychology of the agent(s) responsible for the process. I suspect he was taking care to avoid the sloppy language that often accompanies discussion of Southeast Asian cultural diversity—"mixing," "blending," "syncretism," "eclecticism"—that makes a complex historical process sound like a fisherman's catch. Localization became for Wolters one of the general features of the region, a "distinctive" feature. The term signifies a purposeful and discriminating aptitude that wants to make local sense of something foreign. Foreign materials were also, of course, localized to emphasize or validate local statements. The historian's task is to locate the consequences of agency in specific, local environments, and semiotics may be a useful tool to do this. In early times Sanskrit or Chinese loanwords did not just rename existing categories, although they were often admitted into local languages precisely because they did this and thus elevated the status of existing categories. They also wedged themselves into the structure of local languages and created new spaces, new relationships. Early historians can use the process of localization to "write back" against the foreignness—of "influences" or of evidence—that must constantly be negotiated because of the nature of the sources for early history. The thing that has an Indic name or is written in Chinese characters is thus made demonstrably Southeast Asian.
In the case of the early historiography of the Philippines this "writing back" against what is foreign is particularly problematic. No indigenous accounts antedate the Spanish conquest of the sixteenth century. Spanish missionary writers of the early seventeenth century described a local script called baybayin, a supplement to learning the correct voicing of Tagalog. Although the script never completely disappeared during colonial rule and there is a "wealth of documentary testimony spread across four centuries," the Spanish marginalized baybayin by introducing romanized phonetic writing as a medium for conversion to Christianity (Rafael 1988:44–45). The Spanish regarded the script as "inadequate, incomplete and unintelligible." The monumental work of William Henry Scott was devoted to the issue of Filipino agency, to the possibilities and limitations of writing the "history of the inarticulate" (Scott 1982; 1984).

The question of agency has also been acute with respect to Vietnamese historiography, because of Chinese political domination and the use of Chinese language in the Vietnamese court. Modern Vietnamese-language historiography has pushed the dating of a distinctively Vietnamese polity back to the seventh century B.C., centuries before the Chinese incorporated northern Vietnam into their provincial control in the interests of establishing an authentic, pre-Chinese polity (Ungar 1986:184). After long exposure to Chinese overlordship, the Vietnamese went through a period of conscious "desinicization and nationalization of Vietnamese culture," in the words of a modern Vietnamese historian (Tran 1986:272). Ceramic production during the Ly and Tran dynasties (eleventh to fourteenth centuries) can be seen to demonstrate that Vietnamese culture was anything but the "pale reflection of Chinese culture" earlier studies presumed it to be (Guy 1986).

The very ability of Southeast Asian societies to bend foreign cultural elements to their own use, to domesticate them, to resist them, or to localize them brings to notice a related feature attributed to the earlier period. This feature is adaptability. Again, examples from Vietnam are instructive. The Vietnamese succession in the later Ly period was open to all sons of the emperor and the royal clan admitted privileged members of the aristocracy. Whitmore labels this kinship system "fluid" and sees this fluidity as characteristic of Southeast Asia as a whole (Whitmore 1986:125). The unspoken opposite of this attribute is the supposed rigidity and inflexibility of the Chinese system. China was a severe and stern teacher, says Tran Quoc Vuong (1986:272). But the Confucianism we find at the late fourteenth-century Vietnamese court, for example, is a Vietnamese Confucianism. "The Confucian canon had always been fragmented in Vietnam to lend weight to specific Vietnamese statements about themselves" (Wolters 1988:39). In order to fragment the canons the Vietnamese Confucian advisers had the capacity to resist its all-encompassing system of relationships and to utilize it in a way that was meaningful to them.

Southeast Asian agency is seen to have the capacity, the inventiveness, the genius to adapt, and this capacity is what makes localization, indigenization, and vernacularization work. One even gets the sense that historians are attributing tolerance or adaptability to the region's character, although these words might give the impression of a receptor-like passivity if used in a lazy manner. But it does seem to me that this attribute of tolerance is a clear manifestation of the Western liberal imagination projected onto the region's past.

The source of this tolerance, in the archipelago and in the mainland port polities upriver from the coasts, stems from an outward-looking attitude and openness. Importance was attached to being up-to-date or contemporary. "Now" was the time that mattered. In Wolters's words, "The possibility of being 'up-to-date' was often
linked to and sustained by the sense of being an integral part of the whole of the known ‘world’ rather than merely belonging to one’s own patch of territory” (Wolters 1994:4). Such an attitude was hospitable to merchants and overseas trade, and Manguin has used Malay folk tales and histories to testify to it (1991). There was always, it seems, a dynamic interdependence with the rest of the world typified in the great trading empires (Biros 1992:464). One may detect here quite a shift from the earlier notion of autonomous history, if that means a separate history. The adaptability of Southeast Asian agency that saw itself as part of the whole known world could make sense of just about anything that was originally “foreign.”

I have traced the genealogy of Southeast Asian agency and various signifiers that express it not to be reductive nor to suggest that the concern for agency has inhibited scholarship or constrained inquiry. On the contrary. The persistent appeals to local inventiveness, if now much altered from Wales’s confused formulations nearly forty years ago, and the call for “autonomous history,” which has left its traces in the historiography but is also expressed differently nowadays, have been very productive. I have invoked agency to suggest that it has been instrumental in keeping the formation of knowledge about the early Southeast Asian past continuous and intact. The theme of indigenous agency has been essential to the project of defining Southeast Asia as a field of study.

Difference

The last aspect of this enterprise that I want to discuss briefly is difference. It is through difference that Southeast Asian agency can be glimpsed and brought to life. The historian’s task is to identify, document, and communicate differences among Southeast Asian societies or between a particular society and Western historical experience. While a line of inquiry may be driven by concepts and theories that come from social science or the literature on comparative civilizations (e.g., “state formation is trade-dependent” or “urban generation is stimulated by external cultures that are more complex”), the task of the historian of early Southeast Asia is to domesticate concepts in specific Southeast Asian contexts. The evidence may even lead the historian to contest these concepts. Thus Jan Christie concludes that in central and east Java during the tenth century “urbanization is not a process which can be automatically coupled with that of state-formation and development” (Christie 1991:40). That is to say, there was something different about urbanization in early Java.

One obvious way this is done, by no means unique to early history, is to explicate terms in Old Mon, Old Javanese, Medieval Chinese, Sanskrit, and so forth in indigenous inscriptions, chronicles, and foreign accounts. These are the terms italicized in the Anglophone historiography. Key terms for leadership, units of social organization, and religious terminology are examples of the kinds of things historians focus on in an effort to distinguish Southeast Asian experience and make it culturally specific. They are aids for the imagination to immerse itself in other worlds. Mabbett is at pains to show that varna in Angkor was hardly the same social category as it was in early India (1977b). Similarly, the English term “slave” misses out on the way early Cambodian “slavery” was embedded in relations of patronage and clienthood (Mabbett 1983). To call a tenth-century Javanese settlement a wana is to evoke a pattern of population dispersal and a form of social organization that “village” does
not quite capture (Christie 1991). Much of what Christie has had to say about the *sima* foundation grants also underscores this general point.

Enlarging the canvas, we can see this concern for culture-specific meanings in the way historians explain world views, kinship systems, religious orientations, and so forth. Keith Taylor advances the notion of “Ly dynasty religion” to persuade us that the Ly dynasty wielded a “peculiar type of authority” that was unlike the Chinese-style dynastic institution with its bureaucratic administration (Taylor 1986a:141). Jim Fox argues that the early Javanese kinship system was Austronesian, not Indic (Fox 1986). Belief systems and cosmologies are vital indicators of Southeast Asian difference, as Michael Aung-Thwin has shown for old Burma (1985). In the phrase Khmer “Hinduism” the inverted commas tell us that some kind of change has been wrought that made Southeast Asia different from ancient India, as early Cambodian rulers and priests textualized Hinduism in their own environment (Wolters 1979). Indeed, single terms, some of which are the phantom generalizations against which Wolters warned, become in Western scholarship windows through which we see early Southeast Asia. Mabbett’s 1969 essay on the *devaraja* in early Khmer society was somewhat eclipsed by Kulke’s 1978 study, but his proposition about what the term signified is characteristic of the early historian’s efforts to contextualize categories by unpacking the meanings of words in ancient languages.

We are better equipped to translate the language of Khmer religious symbolism if we regard it as the language of a society, employed to formulate ideas that were important to that society, rather than as the propaganda of a succession of megalomaniacs. (Mabbett 1969)

Here Mabbett has glossed *devaraja* as a keyword in “the language of Khmer religious symbolism,” but his gloss draws us away from the word itself to an entire system of signifiers about connections between the divine and the human.

This particular comment on why it is important to distinguish early Cambodian kingship from caricatures of rulers that can creep into the historiography illustrates that the documentation of difference has an important polemical purpose. Like the “man of prowess” trope, Mabbett’s gloss on *devaraja* may be read as a rebuttal of the oriental despot that dates from the Western Enlightenment and can be traced through nineteenth- and twentieth-century European, especially Marxist, thought. Like the “man of prowess” trope, welcomed by historians, prehistorians, and archaeologists alike, Mabbett’s gloss on *devaraja* shows how Western scholarship is still intent on writing against the stereotypes of an Orientalizing knowledge of Southeast Asia. Mabbett, and Kulke even more so, have tried to cut the *devaraja* down to size and to give it cultural specificity rather than attribute to it powers to unify and integrate that it could not have possessed (e.g., Sedov 1978). The ancestral elements of the cult with the Indic name are manifestly embedded in the Cambodian cultural substratum, in the “common ideology” of peasants as well as the elite, which predated the “Sanskritic” tradition of the cult (Nidhi 1976). Thus “god-kingship,” the English calque of *devaraja*, must never be equated with “oriental despotism,” insists Ian Mabbett (1985:78).

In one sense, there is nothing exceptional in this concern for documenting difference in early Southeast Asian history. Other area studies, for that matter, must also meet demands to recognize difference by documenting cultural specificity. And all historians are trained to analyze what is particular and specific about the moment of the past that concerns them. Most historians take for granted that documenting
difference is one of their essential tasks. But in the name of what is this difference being documented and specified? Despite Christie's criticism that indigenous concepts of the state such as negara and mandala reify long-standing Orientalist prejudices about distinct Eastern and Western mentalities, historians immersed in early source materials on the whole prefer such a vocabulary precisely because it keeps Southeast Asia distinct from other social formations. Glossing terms as keywords need not, they would argue, constitute an act of totalizing Southeast Asia as a distinct "civilization."

Nevertheless, I see the project of documenting Southeast Asian difference as part and parcel of the project of tracing origins and identifying agency. Transcending the period of European intervention in Southeast Asian life to document the ehti Southeast Asia, pushing back the dates of the earliest polities, scrutinizing cultural products to discover how they belong to Southeast Asia and nowhere else all belong to the same enterprise.

Conclusion

I have taken refuge in Ankersmit's admonition to think about the past rather than investigate it, in part because space and my own technical limitations prevent me from doing otherwise. But I do believe that in their eagerness to carve out a topic of expertise for themselves, early historians have often overlooked the connections their work has with lines of inquiry elsewhere in Southeast Asian studies and beyond. I have been suggesting that, while early Southeast Asian history attracts scholars with proficiency in old and difficult languages, the research protocols are driven by themes and polemics that preoccupy historians of more modern periods. I have grouped these themes and preoccupations under the headings of origins, agency, and difference, and I have tried to show how these emphases are discernible in the historiography of early Southeast Asia.

It remains for me to suggest what I think is at stake in this enterprise, which is nothing less than the authenticity of Southeast Asia. The preoccupations with origins, agency, and difference have to do with the effort to authenticate Southeast Asia as a region and a field of study. As such, the effort is very much a Western, postcolonial project. A few Southeast Asian nationals have "discovered" Southeast Asia as a field of knowledge while studying in the West, and Singapore, whose academic pretensions have distinct colonial residues, boasts an Institute of Southeast Asian Studies devoted to Southeast Asian studies across the map. But, basically, the identity of Southeast Asia as a region and Southeast Asian studies as a field of knowledge are newly imported into Southeast Asia itself.

Just why authenticity should be such an abiding concern is a complex question of general interest outside of Southeast Asian studies. The philosopher Charles Taylor has proposed that authenticity is a moral ideal, prominent in modern society, that has been trivialized and demeaned even as it has been encouraged by certain tendencies in contemporary life. An ideal worth struggling to refine and aspire to in the effort to confront the "ever-deepening hegemony of instrumental reason," authenticity is expressed in our desires for self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-fulfillment. We strive for the ideal in a dialogic engagement with others in order to develop a unique and identifiable self. Through recognizing and accepting diversity we come to have a clearer sense of our own identities. The rhetoric of difference and diversity is
central to the contemporary culture of authenticity (Taylor 1991:27). We cherish
diversity, whether biological or cultural, for its value in authenticating the self.

Whereas Taylor comments on authenticity without explicit reference to other
cultures, they are not far offstage, and I propose that his meditations are related to
the themes I have been shaping in this essay. I see in the early historiography of
Southeast Asia more than a pale reflection of the contemporary anxieties about
authenticity of the self to which Taylor alludes. It would be simplistic to say that
in their endeavors to authenticate early Southeast Asia historians are engaged in a
project of self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-fulfillment, but at the same time,
study of the early past is not driven purely by dispassionate inquiry. As is clear
from some of this scholarship, the project of authenticating the ancient past is a
feature of public culture within Southeast Asian societies today. The nation-state’s
origins, its capacity to act independently of outside “influences,” whether it be with
regard to human rights or trade, and its difference from others—its uniqueness—
are all familiar in contemporary life, and it is little wonder that these themes have
found their way into the historiography. There is nothing new in the collaboration
between history and the nation-state.

We can see the connection between authenticity and knowledge formation when
Southeast Asian studies is most self-conscious, such as when the academy reviews
itself. At these moments disciplinary, institutional, and funding pressures demand
attention, and when the American academy, which has the critical mass of scholars
and the funds, periodically publishes its deliberations, the results are quite specific
to the American educational culture. It has been pointed out that, by European
standards, “Southeast Asian studies in America is something of a freak” (Hirschman
et al. 1992:2). There is only one Southeast Asian center in the educational culture
in which I work (Australia); elsewhere “Asian studies” or “Oriental and African
studies” may be the preferred institutional arrangement.

In the most recent volume to result from a penetrating reassessment of Southeast
Asian studies in America, participants expressed much concern about the
“peripherality” of area studies, of how the disciplines will always marginalize area
studies. For my purposes here what was interesting was the passionate call for the
establishment of Southeast Asian studies as “an intellectually viable interpretive
community.” Because of the “obvious diversity of historical and contemporary
civilizations and cultures,” there is a need for the “interpretive community” to
generate and disseminate knowledge about this diverse region. The knowledge called
for should supply “a set of indigenous texts that are recognized as classics,” particularly
religious and literary texts, in order to compensate for an absent “orientalist tradition.”
Is this to be a textual canon which authenticates the field of knowledge? Such
knowledge should also “identify common patterns” in Southeast Asia (Hirschman
et al. 1992:60–62). Here is a statement explicitly expressing the mutual validation
of regional identity and the formation of a field of study. Create the knowledge
and the regional identity will take shape. Declare the region’s existence as a patch
of the earth’s surface, and the knowledge will follow.

In this context the reluctance of O. W. Wolters to write a textbook history is
worth recalling. The small volume he did finally write, History, Culture, and Region
in Southeast Asian Perspectives, with the emphatic pluralized perspectives in the title,
was an essayist’s attempt to say something meaningful about the region without
taking the notion of region too seriously. Warning against phantom generalizations,
such as devataja, that would fail to do justice to the evidence, Wolters went to
great pains to emphasize cultural diversity and histories of numerous cultural subregions
(Gesick 1989; Wolters 1982). Nevertheless, the role of such a book in outlining a region for study cannot be denied. Despite the fact that a 1989 assessment of Southeast Asian history in the U.S.A. failed to take note of early history as such (Lockhard 1989), and the American review barely makes mention of history at all (Hirschman et al. 1992), the sheer quantity of the early history scholarship is an indication that early historiography helps to define the contours of Southeast Asian studies as a field of knowledge.

James Scott opines that Southeast Asian studies has overemphasized stasis and continuity (Hirschman et al 1992:7). He thinks the reason for this is that the source material and the foci of study have been overwhelmingly elitist and based on formal texts. I think that the fundamental cause of the overemphasis on stasis and continuity is worry about holding the region and the field of study together. The famed diversity of Southeast Asia that defeats all attempts to unify it and sets teams of historians to work on books that can claim coverage of the region puts pressure on the academy to produce a certain kind of scholarly product that emphasizes lineages of development from early times.

The discipline of history, with its finely honed craft of documenting specificity, has been fundamental to building and maintaining Southeast Asia as a field of study. In its preoccupations with origins and agency, the historiography of early Southeast Asia has played a particularly important role. But more thought could be given to where this body of knowledge has come from, what holds it together, and how it might be liberated for wider use. The implications of Donald Emmerson’s essay (1984) on “Southeast Asia” as a contrived identity, reified by scholars, publishers, and educational institutions in the West, have never been pursued. This is doubtless because, notwithstanding the worries expressed in the 1992 American review discussed above, funding bodies, professional associations, and the federal government recognize Southeast Asia studies as a category.

Fields of inquiry are never naturally given, as John Comaroff has put it. “The question of the ‘unit of study,’ far from being a methodological nicety, is a consequential theoretical matter” (Comaroff 1982:144). I suspect that the most trenchant critiques of Southeast Asian studies, the body of knowledge to which the early historiography has given so much, will come from the new anthropology and from cultural studies. This is already happening, as academics with little or no Southeast Asian language training step on to the stage from what we think of as nowhere to make smart, useful remarks about what is happening in the region today. Language study is, after all, one of the pillars that props up area studies. And it is already happening in the work of scholars new to “the field,” a concept I have tried to problematize here, who arrive with reading and interpretive methodologies that have been slow to gain ground precisely because they challenge the principles and strategies fundamental to the formation of knowledge about Southeast Asia. This new kind of history attends to how texts mean, whether they be songs, documents, inscriptions, or secondary sources, as well as to what they mean (e.g., Biros 1990, 1992).

The polemics of interpretation and the theoretics of representation thus exposed will call the project of authenticating Southeast Asia further into question, and the ensuing debate will generate a galaxy of questions that could make Southeast Asian studies more accessible to newcomers. One of the basic questions would be whether, in its energetic efforts to winnow out the _echt_ Southeast Asia from the Eurocentric concepts that have encased it through the colonial and postcolonial periods, the early historiography has met Ankersmit’s challenge that historians should be thinking
about the meaning of the past rather than merely investigating it. I have tried to suggest in this essay that the historiography has already thrown up meanings. We might begin to reset the research agenda by dwelling on them skeptically for what they purport to tell us about ourselves as well as the Southeast Asian past.

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