Conceptions of Community in Colonial Southeast Asia

A. J. Stockwell

Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th Ser., Vol. 8. (1998), pp. 337-355.

Stable URL:

Transactions of the Royal Historical Society is currently published by Royal Historical Society.

CONCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY IN COLONIAL SOUTHEAST ASIA

By A.J. Stockwell

IT is a commonplace that European rule contributed both to the consolidation of the nation-states of Southeast Asia and to the aggravation of disputes within them. Since their independence, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have all faced the upheavals of secessionism or irredentism or communalism. Governments have responded to threats of fragmentation by appeals to national ideologies like Sukarno's *pancasila* (five principles) or Ne Win's 'Burmese way to socialism'. In attempting to realise unity in diversity, they have paraded a common experience of the struggle for independence from colonial rule as well as a shared commitment to post-colonial modernisation. They have also ruthlessly repressed internal opposition or blamed their problems upon the foreign forces of neo-colonialism, world communism, western materialism, and other threats to Asian values. Yet, because its effects were uneven and inconsistent while the reactions to it were varied and frequently equivocal, the part played by colonialism in shaping the affiliations and identities of Southeast Asian peoples was by no means clear-cut.

I Colonial rule and plural societies

It seemed that no sooner had a nation achieved independence from colonial rule than it succumbed to civil war. Shortly after its inauguration in January 1948 the authority of the Union of Burma was resisted by minorities located on the margins of 'Burma proper'. First the Karens in 1948, and later the Chins, Kachins, Shans, and the Muslim Rohingyas of North Arakan—each of whom had enjoyed a special relationship with the British and felt little in common with Buddhist Burma—rose in revolt against the government in Rangoon which, after half a century of conflict, is now mastering minorities by military might.[1] The vast Republic of Indonesia, which consists of some 13,000 islands and is currently the fourth most populous country in the

---

[1] See Martin Smith, *Burma, Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (1991) and Clive Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia. Decolonisation, Nationalism and Separatism* (1996), 53–80.

world, has been plagued by regional uprisings since its independence won international recognition on 27 December 1949. Sumatra to the west and Ambon to the east have each opposed central control from Java: in 1949 a Muslim-inspired rebellion was mounted from Aceh (north Sumatra) and from April to November the following year Christian Ambonese vainly strove to establish an independent republic of South Maluku.[2] A resurgence of discontent in Sumatra, West Java and the eastern archipelago led to the replacement of Indonesia's parliamentary experiment by Sukarno's authoritarian 'Guided Democracy' in the late 1950s. The geographic fragmentation of the Philippines (some 7,000 islands) has similarly patterned the identities of its peoples and contributed to ethnic risings. In particular, guerilla fighters representing the Muslim Moros of southern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago (a community of about three million people in a total population of sixty-five millions) have been fighting since the early 1960s for the achievement of autonomy.[3] In its early years Malaysia was buffeted by the storms of regionalism and communalism. In 1965 Chinese-dominated Singapore withdrew from the Federation where Malays were politically transcendent. On 13 May 1969 fighting between Malays and Chinese in Kuala Lumpur and its neighbourhood brought the country to the brink of collapse.[4] The '13 May incident' in fact did more than the achievement of independence twelve years earlier to arouse a sense of national destiny: principles of state (the *Rukunegara*) were promulgated as was the New Economic Policy which, in various versions, has guided national planning ever since 1970. In addition Malaysia's apparently cosy relationship with Britain was reviewed. Mat Kilau, a freedom fighter of the 1890s, was discovered in the jungle of Pahang and lionised, albeit briefly, before he died allegedly at the age of 123. Among the eulogies was a tribute from Tun Abdul Razak, the deputy prime minister, who commemorated him as 'a warrior against colonialism' and said that he hoped 'the spirit of Mat Kilau will serve not only as an example but also as a challenge to the people in facing future problems in defending the independence and sovereignty of the nation'.[5] The riots of '13 May' undermined public confidence in Tunku Abdul Rahman, that great anglophile and 'bapak Malaysia' (father of Malaysia), with the result that in September 1970 he resigned as prime minister, yielding power to a younger generation of politicians.

One of these, the minister for special functions and minister for

[2] Christie, *A Modern History*, 108–26, 140–59.

[3] David Joel Steinberg, *The Philippines. A Singular and a Plural Place* (Boulder, 1994), 126–7.

[4] John Slimming, *Malaysia: Death of Democracy* (1969) and Gordon Means, *Malaysian Politics. The Second Generation* (Oxford, 1991), 4–16.

[5] *Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), 17 Aug. 1970.

information, Muhammad Ghazali Shafie, laid Malaysia's racial problems at the door of the British. Maintaining that Europeans first encountered a 'relatively homogeneous area with an appreciably common language and culture', he argued that the British, 'faced with the prospect of a united Malayan nation', resorted to divide and rule. 'It was,' he argued, 'too dangerous to have the local population united and sharing economic and political power.' Therefore, 'by force and subterfuge the colonial authorities established their direct and indirect rule'.[6] Though seminal in the articulation of a post-colonial identity for Malaysians, Ghazali Shafie's indictment of colonialism was neither original nor exclusively polemical. For scholars, too, have argued that imperial expansion, colonial rule and the process of decolonisation preyed on the distinctions between Southeast Asia's communities.

Europeans exploited identifiable divisions between Southeast Asian peoples in order to win control over them. For example, as they advanced eastwards from Bengal into the kingdom of Burma in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the British came to rely on disaffected minorities who were traditionally in conflict with the dynasty. Lacking information about Burma, where they were excluded from the inner sanctum of the enclosed royal court, the British concluded military alliances with, and gained political intelligence from, hill communities and others on the outskirts of the kingdom.[7] Culturally and linguistically affiliated with the Thais, the Shans in Burma were recognised as a special group by the British who retained the Shans' system of hereditary princes even after they had abolished the Konbaung monarchy in Mandalay in 1886.[8] The support or 'loyalty' of the Muslim Rohingyas, who were descendants of Arab and Persian traders in the area of north Arakan, ensured them protection from the British regime in Rangoon. Other minorities, who had not been assimilated within Burmese Buddhism, were frequently converted to Christianity and recruited into the colonial army. Chins, Kachins, and Karens were all employed as soldiers. The Karens took part in the suppression of the Hsaya San anti-colonial rising in the Irrawaddy delta in 1930–2. A decade later they vainly resisted the Japanese invasion, suffering reprisals for covering the retreat of British and Indian troops to India.[9] Another example where colonial military needs contributed to ethnic differentiation comes from the Dutch East Indies. The Netherlands, a second-rate European power with a first-rate empire, employed different groups

[6] Tan Sri Dato' Muhammad Ghazali bin Shafie, *Democracy: The Realities Malaysians must face* (Kuala Lumpur, 1971), 3–4.

[7] C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information. Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996), 97ff, 128, 141.

[8] Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (1987), 91–8.

[9] Smith, *Burma*, 62–4.

of Indonesians in the Dutch East Indian Army (KNIL), the Ambonese of the Maluku archipelago being especially renowned for their fighting prowess. As the KNIL expanded to subdue revolt and extend Dutch power to the outer islands the number of Indonesian soldiers rose from 5,500 in 1815 to 22,000 by the end of the century (an increase from 52 per cent to 61 per cent of the total force).[10]

For Europeans, whose resources were limited, ethnic compartmentalisation was an obvious technique of administration. A mantra of the Brookes, whose dynasty ruled Sarawak from 1841 to the Japanese occupation a century later, was that 'good fences make good neighbours'. Their regime attempted to keep distinct the boundaries between ethnic groups by constraining the mobility of nomads, by restricting intermarriage or by requiring both partners in mixed marriages to opt for membership of the same community.[11] Ethnic fences were erected throughout colonial Southeast Asia and were reinforced by colonial policy and practice. European conceptions of Southeast Asian identities affected the organisation of censuses (for example, Malaya's census for 1921 identified eight categories of Chinese and nine of Malay), led to the establishment of community-specific administrative departments (such as the Chinese Protectorate in the Straits Settlements), regulated the labour force (which often amounted to the management of immigrant Asians), and was a principle directing local recruitment to the colonial police and armed forces. Similarly the growth and management of colonial cities both reflected and reinforced the ethnic divisions of colonial societies.

In pre-colonial times, when Southeast Asian states were hardly defined in terms of territory and when power was exercised through personal relationships rather than bureaucratic structures, cities were constructed as citadels, hill-temples and royal courts. They projected both secular and cosmic order. As kingdoms rose and fell, so new dynasties selected fresh capitals. Beleaguered regimes could be forced to relocate, thus the Konbaung kings of Burma occupied five capitals in the century after 1752 before coming to rest at Mandalay in 1857. When the Thais were driven from Ayuthia by the Burmese in 1767, the Siamese general, Paya Taksin, travelled south to establish his capital at Thonburi on the River Chao Phraya. After Paya Taksin was overthrown, in 1782 his successor (Chakri or Rama I) founded Bangkok

[10] Martin Bossenbroek, 'The Living Tools of Empire: The Recruitment of European Soldiers for the Dutch Colonial Army, 1814–1909', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 23, 3 (Jan. 1995), 29.

[11] Robert Pringle, *Rajahs and Rebels: The Ibans of Sarawak under Brooke Rule, 1841–1941* (1970), 283ff; A.J. Stockwell, 'The White Man's Burden and Brown Humanity: Colonialism and Ethnicity in British Malaya', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 10, 1 (1982), 44–68.

on the opposite bank of the river. Cities may have represented the royal and religious authority of enclosed kingdoms, but they also provided points of contact with other worlds. It was in cities and ports that European travellers and traders first encountered Southeast Asians and it was usually in existing towns or indigenous settlements that Europeans set up their forts and factories.

European economic needs and political anxieties significantly altered the functions and design of Southeast Asian cities.[12] Initially seeking to control trade, not to dominate territory, Europeans isolated their cities from a potentially hostile hinterland by building walls round them and restricting entry into them. Furthermore, rather than run the risk of becoming dependent upon unreliable indigenous elites, they chose to employ Asian immigrants (especially Chinese) as collaborators and compradores. From c. 1850 to 1940, however, the size and the function of Southeast Asian cities were transformed: they changed from enclaves perched on river banks or on the coast to centres for the political and economic domination of the interior. By the late 1930s over sixteen cities had populations above 100,000; of these Batavia, Bangkok (which in many ways resembled a colonial city), Manila, Rangoon, and Singapore had between 500,000 and one million inhabitants. They grew spatially, too. As migrants from up-country and overseas were drawn in, so affluent colonial suburbs were developed while shanty towns sprang up on the fringes.

Urbanisation during the 'high colonial period' expanded at such a pace as to require, yet defy, strict control. Though a tiny minority, westerners dominated urban space; they created a colonial order of ethnic 'quarters' and demonstrated their authority by the erection of buildings that were prestigious as well as functional, such as government house, the secretariat, and the cathedral. On the other hand, towns posed problems of disorder: they attracted the landless and dispossessed from the countryside; secret societies ran protection rackets; competing communities clashed with each other; print culture and foreign contact stimulated self-awareness. Indeed, urbanisation contributed to the emergence of new identities. Being cosmopolitan, colonial cities served as conduits for new ideas and as dynamos of change.[13]

In addition to the military, political and administrative practices of

[12] Leonard Y. Andaya, 'Interactions with the Outside World and Adaptation in Southeast Asian Society, 1500–1880' in Nicholas Tarling ed., *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1992), I, 345, 361–72; Anthony Reid, 'Economic and Social Change, c.1400–1800', *ibid.*, 472–76, 494–5; Robert Elson, 'International Commerce, the State and Society: Economic and Social Change', *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, II, 168–71.

[13] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1991 ed.).

Europeans, therefore, the dynamics of the colonial economy contributed to the emergence of communal awareness and to the articulation of ethnic identities. These developments occurred not only in towns but in the countryside too. So as not to upset the stability of indigenous societies, immigrant Asians were frequently used to produce export commodities: for example, Chinese and Indians laboured in Malaya's tin mines and rubber plantations; Chinese and Javanese cleared forests and planted estates in Sumatra; Tonkinese were similarly employed in French Cambodia and Cochinchina; and Indian labourers and moneylenders opened up Burma's Irrawaddy as one of the world's principal rice bowls. The Dutch responded to the massive growth of Java's population (by 1930 nearly 70 per cent of Indonesians lived in Java and Madura) by sponsoring emigration to the outer islands of the archipelago and particularly to plantations in east Sumatra (a policy continued after independence as 'transmigration').[14] By the 1920s Burma's economy was in the hands of the British, Indians and Chinese, in that order, while Malaya's economy was dominated by British, Chinese and Indians. Under British rule, Rangoon effectively became an Indian city and Kuala Lumpur a Chinese one. The ancient connections between China and the *nanyang* (southern sea) were enlarged from the mid-nineteenth century as the trickle of Chinese migrants developed into a flood. Fleeing hardships at home and attracted to opportunities in colonial Southeast Asia, overseas Chinese permeated the region. Valued for their enterprise and labour, the Chinese were nonetheless regarded in most colonies (and also to a certain extent in Siam) as transients and legal barriers were erected to prevent their assimilation. Thus were created what J. S. Furnivall defined as 'plural societies' in which ethnic differences were reinforced by the distinct economic functions performed by separate communities.[15]

Ethnicity not only shaped the acquisition and maintenance of empires, it also influenced the process of their decline and fall. European attempts to defeat or delay nationalist campaigns for independence further fostered counter-nationalist identities of race or religion or regionalism. During Indonesia's *perjuangan* or struggle for independence after the Second World War, Ambonese fought on the side of the Dutch against Sukarno's unitarist Republic. Fearful of reprisals—or at least suspicious of a regime perceived to be dominated by Javanese and Muslims—veterans from that campaign were later resettled with their families in Holland. At the same time, the French tried to turn to their advantage the mistrust felt towards the Vietminh by Vietnamese

[14] M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia c.1300 to the Present* (1981), 147.

[15] J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge, 1948).

minorities. In May 1946 Admiral d'Argenlieu (France's High Commissioner in Indochina, 1945–7) launched a scheme to create a separate state for the 'Montagnards' or 'hill folk' of Vietnam's Central Highlands.[16] In another move to undermine Ho Chi Minh's exclusive claims upon Vietnamese nationalism, d'Argenlieu fostered separateness amongst the Cochinchinese by declaring an autonomous Republic of Cochinchina on 1 June 1946. He justified this policy as follows:

> Was not the argument of linguistic unity used by the Führer to force German minorities to join the Reich? In Indochina it has always been, and remains, France's mission to protect ethnic minorities against the Annamite tendency to imperialism.[17]

By contrast, after the Second World War the British substituted 'unite and quit' for 'divide and rule'. They supported Aung San in his attempt to assimilate minorities into a Union of Burma, while in Malaya their policy swung dramatically after the Second World War from their former pro-Malay stance to a new commitment to multi-racialism.[18] Their intention was to bind Malays, Chinese and Indians into a Malayan nation to which they might eventually transfer power and with which they might maintain a cordial post-colonial relationship. This strategy was compromised, however, by the deep-seated communalism to which the British themselves had previously contributed.

II Colonial conceptions of identity

Although Europeans assigned roles to Southeast Asian peoples, the view that colonial needs and colonial practices alone determined their identities should be qualified in three respects. First, however sharply colonialism may have intensified ethnic separatism, it did not create it. Such diversity predated European rule. It was a feature of both pre-colonial urban life and the personal rule of indigenous monarchs. Moreover, the conditions which drew immigrants to Southeast Asia and which correspondingly drove them from their homelands, particularly China, were in place long before the establishment of colonial regimes. Second, the capacity of Europeans to restructure indigenous societies, in the manner suggested by 'strategies of divide and rule', was circumscribed. In most parts of Southeast Asia the duration of colonial rule was relatively brief, its resources limited and its impact skin-deep.

[16] Christie, *A Modern History*, 90–1.

[17] Cited in Martin Shipway, *The Road to War. France and Vietnam, 1944–1947* (Oxford, 1996), 192.

[18] See Hugh Tinker ed., *Constitutional Relations between Britain and Burma: The Struggle for Independence 1944–48*, 2 vols. (1983–4) and A.J. Stockwell ed., *British Documents on the End of Empire: Malaya, 1942–57*, 3 parts (1995).

Consequently, Europeans resorted to ethnic differentiation because of a self-conscious weakness rather than in a triumphalist demonstration of power. Third, ethnic compartmentalisation was not simply the product of colonial needs, be they military, administrative, or economic; it also derived from European perceptions of Asian communities.

European perceptions of Southeast Asians were shaped at first by ignorance and later by accumulated knowledge.[19] Early impressions were strongly influenced by ignorance and prejudice, which juxtaposed the rational and the modern of the West against an Orient of super-stition, tyranny, corruption, and the exotic. When Conrad's shipwrecked sailor came ashore in the East Indies he saw 'Brown, bronze, yellow faces, the black eyes, the glitter, the colour of an Eastern crowd.'[20] When James Johnston Abraham landed at Penang, he felt he 'was looking on at a theatrical performance—the cosmopolitan crowd com-posed of every nation in the East appeared so tricked out for effect, the vivid colouring of the Orient smote the eye so insistently'.[21] Differences between East and West were alluded to, though scarcely explained, in metaphors of progress, stagnation and decline. Racial, moral, institutional, or environmental tropes littered the observations of contemporaries who attributed to Southeast Asian societies western paradigms of monarchy and the state, of feudalism and landownership, of community and clan, of religion and criminality. In addition to concepts imported from Europe, they applied models acquired else-where in Asia: for example, in both Java during the Napoleonic wars and in Burma after the conquest of 1885 the British introduced a wholly inappropriate administration based upon their experiences of the village in India. The ascription of identities to Southeast Asian communities was also influenced by Europeans' own sense of community. Life on the frontier and contact with the 'other' sharpened self-awareness and strengthened communal bonds. As numbers of Europeans increased, with some families acquiring an almost dynastic position as a result of generations of contact with certain areas, so colonial societies assumed a hierarchy, homogeneity and ideology that marked them off as distinct communities. Though they recreated 'home' in a way of life, whose totems included exclusive clubs and hill stations, colonial communities differed from those at home, not least in the scarcity of poor whites.[22]

[19] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 52; cf. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978).

[20] Joseph Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative* (1927 edn.), 45.

[21] James Johnston Abraham, *The Surgeon's Log* (1911, 1940 edn.), 52.

[22] For the colonial community of Malaya see John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya 1880–1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur, 1979); for the hill station's centrality to the identity of the British in India see Dane Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (Berkeley, 1996).

Their own sense of community established criteria by which Europeans identified and regulated non-Europeans. In these and other ways, they sorted the unfamiliar into familiar categories of princes and peasants, merchants and artisans, nomads and villagers, the religious and the pagan, the reliably martial and the irredeemably turbulent.

Many Europeans, therefore, looked at Southeast Asian societies through a glass darkly, staying their eyes upon reflections of their own values. Some penetrated further and, after months spent without European company, felt, as did H. Fielding Hall of his experiences with the Burmese, that they 'had been—even if it were only for a time—behind the veil, where it is so hard to come'.[23] Indeed, in order to compensate for shortages of material power, colonials were obliged to acquire the power of knowledge. Like Meiji Japan, imperial Europe sought knowledge throughout the world in order to strengthen the foundations of their rule.

They went about this in three ways.[24] The first was through the assiduous recording of personal observations, as did John Anderson, Daniel Beeckman, John Cameron, Hiram Cox, John Crawford, Michael Symes, Henry Yule, and many others.[25] Secondly, they employed Asians as guides, scribes, translators, and language teachers. When Raffles moved from India to the Malay world, for example, he depended upon his language tutor or *munshi* as teacher, translator and scribe. Munshi Abdullah was of Indian and Arab background and lived in the Straits Settlements; versed in Islamic learning and Malay literature, he provided the British with a bridge into Malay society. An admirer of the British who drew upon Islamic, Malay and European philosophical traditions, Munshi Abdullah also looked at Malay society afresh and 'helped initiate the process by which the Malays acquired a political discourse'.[26] Half a century later Munshi Mahomed Said ('the best informed Malay of his time', according to Swettenham) taught Malay to Frank Swettenham and collaborated with him in making a Malay translation of the Pangkor Engagement (1874) whereby the British established the

---

[23] H. Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People* (1898, 1902 edn.), 2.

[24] Cf. Bayly, *Empire and Information, passim.*

[25] John Anderson, *Political and Commercial Considerations Relative to the Malayan Peninsula and the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca* (Prince of Wales Island, 1824), Daniel Beeckman, *A Voyage to and from the Island of Borneo in the East Indies* (1718), J. Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India: Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley, Malacca* (1865), Hiram Cox, *Journal of a Residence in the Burmhan Empire* (1821), John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy ... to the Court of Ava in the year 1827* (1829), Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (1828), Michael Symes, *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava* (1800), Sir Henry Yule, *A Narrative of the Mission sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855* (1858).

[26] Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya. Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1995), 11.

residential system in the state of Perak.[27] Charged in 1888 to return to
the Malay state of Pahang after a preliminary visit in order to negotiate
a treaty with its ruler, the young Hugh Clifford was painfully conscious
of the limitations of his local and linguistic knowledge: 'The Malays
with whom I was now associating', he later recalled, 'no longer *wanted*
[sic] me to understand them.'[28] He therefore recruited a small staff of
Malays: Raja Haji Mahmud of Selangor (the Raja Hamid of Clifford's
short stories) acted as go-between in the discussions with the Pahang
court; Raja Uteh, a descendant of Mendeling royalty from Sumatra,
also acted as Clifford's adviser; and Alang Ahmad, a young Perak
Malay, served as scribe. Knowledge could generate empathy, though
Europeans who were deemed to have identified too closely with their
'adopted people', might run foul of colonial authorities for 'going
native' or provoke nationalist politicians on the ground that they were
'subverting' minorities. For example, in 1946 H. N. C. Stevenson, one
of the best-informed officials serving in Burma's Frontier Areas, was
forced to resign from government service, because he urged the
accommodation of Karen claims to partial autonomy. Stevenson was
criticised by Aung San's party (the AFPFL, Anti-Fascist People's
Freedom League), which demanded early independence for a united
Burma, and was ignored by the London authorities which were seeking
a quick escape route out of Burma.[29] A similar fate befell John K.
Wilson ('Budu Wilson') who, as an education officer in Sarawak after
1949, spent years setting up community development projects for remote
Dyak peoples until, having refused to act as a political influence on
behalf of the Malaysian federal government, he was served with
banishment papers on 24 May 1968 and ordered never to return.[30] The
third pathway to knowledge was far more institutionalised; it ran
through the agencies which colonial regimes set up to survey, quantify
and control the human and material resources of the country, notably
the police, land, medical and educational departments. Officials
accumulated, classified and evaluated useful knowledge. In so doing,
they identified communities and ascribed characteristics to them. They
mapped terrain and located communities; they counted heads according
to racial or religious categories; they surveyed land, mineral deposits
and agricultural production, and established ownership; they traced
genealogies and legitimised indigenous rulers.

Information was disseminated not only in government reports but
also by learned societies, such as the Straits (later Malayan/Malaysian)

[27] Sir Frank Swettenham, *Footprints in Malaya* (1942), 16, 33. See also Henry Barlow,
Swettenham (Kuala Lumpur, 1995), 47-9.
[28] Hugh Clifford, Autobiographical Preface to the 1927 edition of *In Court and Kampong*.
[29] Smith, *Burma*, 74-8, Christie, *A Modern History*, 73.
[30] John K. Wilson, *Budu or Twenty Years in Sarawak* (North Berwick, 1969), 279-80.

Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and the *Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient* which opened in Hanoi in 1900. The peoples of Southeast Asia were also presented to a wider public in travel literature and museums. The museum in Paris, established in 1839 by Louis Philippe to collect colonial 'curiosities', expanded over a century and a half, and was renamed first the Ethnography Museum and later the Museum of Man.[31] In Britain the Royal Geographical Society, the South Kensington complex, the Pitt-Rivers and Horniman museums collected ethnographical material relating to Southeast Asia.[32] In the region itself, archaeological and anthropological findings were displayed from Hanoi to Kuching. In 1920 the French archaeologist and painter, George Groslier, designed the *Musée des Beaux Arts* in Phnom Penh in Khmer style to house a large library and exhibit works largely from the Angkor period. After the Second World War, Tom Harrisson, renowned explorer and co-founder of Mass-Observation, created in the Sarawak Museum, Kuching, one of the finest collections of Southeast Asian ethnography. Administrators became scholars and scholars were employed as administrators. For example, bogged down in the thirty-years' war against Muslim Acehnese (northern Sumatra), the Dutch colonial government appointed their leading Islamicist and ethnologist, Dr Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936), as principal adviser on indigenous Indonesian matters. He advocated crushing the *ulamas* (religious leaders) and building up the authority of secular chiefs. This strategy succeeded as regards the short-term pacification of Aceh, though it exacerbated divisions within Acehnese society. As for Snouck Hurgronje, he went on to a chair at the University of Leiden.[33]

Crucial to the control of knowledge was the command of language. Missionaries joined scholar-administrators in converting spoken languages into written ones (as did Dutch and German evangelists working with the Bataks in the highlands of Lake Toba in northern Sumatra) and in transcribing written languages into the Roman alaphabet. French Jesuits, notably Alexandre de Rhodes, working in Annam during the seventeenth century, converted Vietnamese to Christianity and their script to Roman characters or *quoc-ngu*. British and Dutch administrators romanised the *jawi* or Arabic script of the Malays. Just as the flora and fauna of the region were collected and exhibited to European audiences, so indigenous languages were encased in dictionaries. In Malaya, Frank Swettenham, Hugh Clifford, and especially Richard Wilkinson and Richard Winstedt, were lexicographers as well as administrators. A

[31] Robert Aldrich, *Greater France. A History of French Overseas Expansion* (Basingstoke, 1996), 247.

[32] *Cf.* Annie E. Coombes, *Re-Inventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture, and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, Conn., 1994).

[33] Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 137–8.

senior member of the Malayan Civil Service, Sir Richard Winstedt (1878–1966) played a major part in shaping educational policy. In providing primary, vernacular schools for Malays (to make them better farmers and fishermen) but neglecting the children of immigrant races and in adapting Malay language to modern needs, he focused on the traditional values and virtues of Malay rural life. Amongst his publications are a *Malay Grammar* (1913), *An English-Malay Dictionary* (three volumes, 1914–17) and *A Dictionary of Colloquial Malay* (1920). On retirement from the MCS in 1935 he became lecturer and later reader at the School of Oriental Studies, London. He was elected FBA in 1945 and served as either director or president of the Royal Asiatic Society from 1940 to 1964. During this period he published prolifically, including six new dictionaries. Malays said of him: 'God gave us our language; Sir Richard Winstedt gave us our grammar.'[34]

III Modernisation and Asian values

The colonial mind tended to ascribe characteristics to particular social groups. Although it did not itself create ethnicity, the political, economic and cultural effects of colonialism intensified the demarcation between communities. The impact of colonialism was, however, neither uniform nor consistent. On the one hand, policies could institutionalise some customs and structures of a community to the neglect of its other features, thereby reinforcing and sometimes recreating certain selected traditions. On the other hand, though administrative practice may have generally conserved the old order in the interests of stability, colonialism was a powerful vehicle for change—indeed, it was universally associated with change, whether for good or for ill. Modernisation under colonial rule disrupted customary relationships, destroyed the moral economy of the village, eroded traditional culture, and presented indigenous inhabitants with the challenge of immigrant competition. Thus, the colonial state differed from the pre-colonial state in the increased size, scope and intensity of its government; as it extended its range, so it provided the mould and means for the emergence of new identities. Moreover, the colonial economy differed from the pre-colonial economy. The labour force was concentrated in mines, plantations and towns while an increasing number of peasants were dispossessed to become either labourers on land owned by others or wage-earners outside rural production.[35] Shared predicaments bred common aspir-

[34] *Cf.* John Bastin, 'Sir Richard Winstedt and his writings' in J. Bastin and R. Roolvink eds., *Malayan and Indonesian Studies. Essays presented to Sir Richard Winstedt on his 85th Birthday* (1964).
[35] R. E. Elson, *The End of the Peasantry in Southeast Asia. A Social and Economic History of Peasant Livelihood, 1800–1990s* (Basingstoke, 1997), 239–41.

ations. Furthermore, colonial cities, with their elaborate infrastructure, differed from pre-colonial cities not only in their size but also in the strength of the political and economic grip they exercised upon the countryside. The railways and roads which extended the reach of the rulers also widened the horizons of the ruled. In addition to spreading colonial knowledge, printing and the media broadcast foreign ideas and stimulated indigenous cultural revivals. Colonialism, therefore, sharpened the self-awareness of Southeast Asian peoples who increasingly identified themselves by reference to the 'other'. Reacting to the loss of political power, growth of the colonial state, economic exploitation, Asian immigration, expansion of towns, development of communications, and the spread of print capitalism, Southeast Asian peoples redefined their identities according to a spectrum of values associated with traditional authority, religious revivalism, racial solidarity, and modernity.

First of all, in society after society the colonial take-over provoked a defence of vested interests and a reassertion of traditional authority by monarchs, princes and chiefs who had been deposed or had their authority severely cut. Within a year of the establishment of the residential system in Perak (1875), Malay chiefs rose in a vain attempt to drive out the British who also fought intermittent campaigns against disaffected Pahang *orang besars* (chiefs) between 1890 and 1895. After the deposition of King Thibaw in 1886, princes of Upper Burma tied down thousands of British and Indian troops in a six-year guerilla campaign. Aspirations to restore the monarchy in Burma revived in the early 1930s in the rural uprising led by Hsaya San. In Vietnam, after he had been partly forced and partly duped into territorial concessions, Emperor Tu Doc bemoaned not only the passing of his power but also his inability to fulfil an imperial role ordained by a cosmic order. 'Never has an era seen such sadness,' he lamented, 'never a year more anguish. Above me, I fear the edicts of heaven. Below, the tribulations of the people trouble my days and nights. Deep in my heart, I tremble and blush, finding neither words nor actions to help my subjects.'[36] After the Vietnamese surrender of Tonkin, Phan Dinh Phung and De Tham continued rearguard opposition to the French occupation of the villages. Phan Dinh Phung died in 1897 'suffering from dysentery and clawing at grass roots for food', and De Tham remained free until 1913 when 'his head was cut off and paraded through the recalcitrant provinces'. They failed to save the king and his kingdom from the French.[37] Heirs to a strong, anti-colonial tradition

[36] Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam. A History* (1994 edn.), 91.
[37] Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms. The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam* (Sydney, 1989), 35–6.

born of a thousand-year conflict with China, Vietnamese scholar-gentry maintained their opposition to the French for a quarter-century after their country had been occupied and military resistance quelled.[38]

Secondly, anti-colonialism became entwined with religious revivalism. Burman identity, having been dealt a savage blow by the collapse of the Buddhist monkhood under British rule, was resurrected from the early twentieth century by the Young Men's Buddhist Association, the General Council of Buddhist Associations, and by *pongyis* or itinerant monks in the depressed delta area. Islam not only inspired the armed resistance of the Acehnese and Padri of Sumatra but, in its modernist, revivalist form, it also underpinned Indonesia's first mass political organisation, the *Sarekat Islam* (founded in 1912). In the Philippines, Muslims of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago have mounted successive *jihads* against the Spanish, Americans and post-colonial regimes in Manila, while folk Catholicism was a major ingredient of local protest against Spanish and American colonialism at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though José Rizal pioneered secular nationalism his memory became fused with Christ. Moreover, the Katipunan's appeal to both independence and redemption contained strong elements of peasant faith and, even in the radical-left Hukbalahap movement of the 1940s, there were echoes of the local religious tradition.[39] In Vietnam, on the other hand, local converts to Roman Catholicism became closely associated with the colonial administration; indeed, the formation in the 1930s of syncretist sects, such as the Cao Dai Church (which borrowed from Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist and Christian traditions) and the Hoa Hao (which 'was the closest that colonial Vietnam came to possessing a Buddhist mass movement') amounted to local rejection of the collaboration between Vietnamese Catholics and the French regime.[40]

Thirdly, immigration during the colonial period reinforced communal bonds, aggravated race relations and particularly encouraged anti-Chinese feeling. The Chinese community was an obvious target of Islamic modernism in Java and the Malay States; one of the motives behind the formation of the *Sarekat Islam* was the desire on the part of Javanese batik traders to protect themselves against exploitation by Chinese middlemen. In Siam, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910–25) made a bid for popularity by dubbing the Chinese as 'Jews of the East'. Similarly, when he became prime minister in 1938, General Phibunsongkhram proclaimed 'Thailand for the Thai', a confection of ' "Thai-ness" and Buddhism which, in turn, provided the foundation

[38] David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* (Berkeley, 1971).

[39] Steinberg, *The Philippines*, 85–9.

[40] David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–45* (Berkeley, 1981), 89–90, 305–6.

for uniformity of the national culture and social values, and the prescribed way of life'. Although his biographer has argued that 'Phibun's nationalism was not particularly anti-Chinese', he accepts that Phibun's 'measures affected the Chinese more not because they were Chinese but because they were the biggest foreign community in economic activities in Thailand.'[41] In neighbouring Burma riots resulting in Chinese deaths occurred in January 1931 in Rangoon and other parts of the Irrawaddy delta region, though the conflict was on a lesser scale than the bitter communalism between Burmese and Indians during the 1930s.

Fourthly, the modernisation of the governments and economies of colonial Southeast Asia contributed to the development of another type of identity—that of cross-communal nationhood. As the colonial state expanded, so it recruited more Asian functionaries. For example, almost 250,000 indigenes were on the government payroll in the Dutch East Indies by the late 1920s.[42] Government service for the Dutch East Indies contributed to a sense of a wider community embracing the archipelago as a whole, of being Indonesian rather than Javanese or Sumatran. Profiles of emerging national identities were shaped by the language of command used in the new states: English was the official language in Burma, Malaya and the Philippines; French in Indochina where the tradition of the *lycée* supplanted that of the mandarinate; *bahasa Melayu* (Malay) in the Dutch East Indies; and Thai in Thailand. Since the Dutch used *bahasa Melayu* throughout the archipelago, so it became the medium of literary and political expression and a tool for the creation of a sense of Indonesian solidarity. In independent Siam, Prince Damrong (minister of the interior and first director of education) employed the Thai language in mass primary education, monastic schools and specialised colleges for the sons of bureaucrats in order to keep colonialism at bay and combat the western perception that the Thai were uncivilised. In so doing, Prince Damrong made 'a reality of Thai nationhood'.[43]

Although Chulalongkorn, Siam's modernising monarch (1867–1910), was 'convinced that there exists no incompatibility between such acquisition [of European science] and the maintenance of our individuality as an independent Asiatic nation',[44] western education led to conflicts of identity. Not only did it add to the distance between elites

[41] Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thailand's Durable Premier. Phibun through Three Decades 1932–1957* (Kuala Lumpur, 1995), 107. On Vajiravudh's idea of the nation, see David K. Wyatt, *Thailand. A Short History* (New Haven, Conn., 1984 ed.), 229–30.

[42] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 115.

[43] David K. Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven, Conn., 1969), 102.

[44] Wyatt, *Thailand. A Short History*, 211.

and the peasant mass of society, it also plunged individuals into uncertainty and sometimes overwhelming turmoil. Attempts to synthesise western and eastern civilisations could founder on contrasting approaches to individualism, as is illustrated by the ideas of Pham Quynh, who dominated Vietnamese intellectual life from 1917 to 1930. A Francophile who worked for greater understanding between French and Vietnamese philosophical traditions, Pham Quynh baulked at the preeminence given to individualism in the West. In his view, individualism and equality struck at the heart of 'a natural order' in which the individual was subordinated to the group. 'Without a fixed set of rules,' he wrote, 'people's hearts are perturbed, society is dangerous'.[45] The appeals of western and eastern values—perceived to be individualism and materialism, on the one hand, and the wider obligations to community and spirituality, on the other—posed all sorts of dilemmas. Take, for example, the contrasts between life in the village and life in the town which are sometimes drawn in the Malay vernacular literature of the interwar years. Whereas the countryside is alleged to embody tradition, conservatism, simplicity and virtue, towns are associated with modernity, change, sophistication, even vice.[46] Another literary theme, this time running through colonial writings about Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is what Europeans regarded as the unbridgeable gulf between East and West. Saleh, the eponymous Malay prince of Hugh Clifford's novels, loses touch with his own way of life as a result of his education in England, but, having been ostracised by the English when he woos his host's daughter, Saleh returns to Pahang and ends his life running amok in rebellion against British rule. In the foreword to *Saleh: A Sequel* Clifford spells out the potential dangers of the British 'endeavouring to impose on their Oriental brethren education of a purely Occidental type', which the fictional British political officer states more dramatically at the end of the story: 'May God forgive us for our sorry deeds and for our glorious intentions!'[47]

Another example of the inconsistent effects of colonialism and the equivocal reactions to it relates to the position of women. Southeast Asian women customarily enjoyed higher status than those in many other regions of Asia and were prominent in agriculture and trade. Colonialism depressed many to the level of prostitutes, domestic servants

[45] Quoted in Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley, 1995 ed.), 84.

[46] William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven, Conn., 1967), 253.

[47] The novel was written in two parts: the first, *Sally: A Study* (1904), covers his education and collapse in England; the second, *Saleh: A Sequel* (1908), sees his return to Malaya and the desperate uprising. The two were combined and republished in the USA as *A Prince of Malaya* (1926) which was reprinted, with an introduction by J. M. Gullick, by Oxford University Press, Singapore, in 1989.

and lowly-paid textile workers, yet enhanced the roles of others as go-betweens in a man's world and offered opportunities of advancement to a few.[48] Female emancipation exercised those brought up in either the Islamic or Confucian traditions. Islamic reformists, such as Sayyid Shaykh Al-Hadi of the Straits Settlements, urged that women be freed from traditional constraints so as 'to receive education and participate in social affairs'.[49] In Java the Kartini fund was set up in 1913 in memory of Raden Kartini (1879–1904), a campaigner for women's education. The fund endowed Dutch-language education for young women from well-placed families. In Indonesia, writes Ricklefs, 'Kartini is remembered as an early representative of female emancipation and the national awakening' of the country.[50] In Vietnam, the staunch conservative, Pham Quynh, was hard-pressed to reconcile French egalitarianism with the Vietnamese *yin-yang* distinction between male and female roles, and he advocated education for women only in so far as it would enable them to be better home-makers and stronger supporters of family life.[51]

Southeast Asian communities were unsettled by western challenges. Groups and individuals differed in their responses to the European ideological assault which was transmitted through colonial administration and law, education and printing, immigration and urban settlement, capitalism and class formation. The anxieties and varied reactions of Malays have been examined by Anthony Milner who has scrutinised key Malay texts. His analysis has revealed an unresolved dispute between three principal ideological orientations: *kerajaan* (or the tradition of the authority of the sultanate), *bangsa* (the bond of race), and *umat* (affiliation with the Islamic congregation). It is, he has concluded, the discourse between these ideologies that has shaped the identity of Malays through the colonial and post-colonial periods.[52]

Colonialism aggravated tensions and contradictions between over-lapping identities with the result that individuals were frequently torn in different directions according to their allegiances to the affiliations of race, religion, gender, residence, country of origin, ancestry, occupation, and education. In some cases, however, colonially ascribed characteristics were accepted and adopted by Southeast Asian peoples. A glaring example of the assumption by a subject people of an ascribed identity is the stereotypology of the Malay as 'the lazy native'. By succumbing to the 'spell of the colonial image of the Malays', Syed Hussein Alatas has written, some Malays have behaved like 'some

[48] Elson, 'Economic and Social Change', *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, II, 177–9.
[49] Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 78–9.
[50] Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 149.
[51] Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 85–8.
[52] Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*.

American negroes who believe what white racialists say about them'.[53] Seeing similarities with 'Fanon's strictures against the nationalist bourgeoisie', Said has drawn attention to '[o]ne of the sharpest attacks in Alatas's *The Myth of the Lazy Native* [which] is against those Malaysians who continue to reproduce in their own thinking the colonial ideology that created and sustained the "lazy native" idea.'[54]

In reaction to post-colonial cultural imperialism, of which the 'myth of the lazy native' is an aspect, and in an attempt to establish a distinctive identity for Southeast Asia as a whole, contemporary leaders of the 'tiger economies' of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are propagating 'Asian values' in opposition to western imperialism, individualism and materialism.[55] Determined to resist the currency speculation of foreigners, liberal criticisms of ASEAN's authoritarian regimes, diplomatic pressure over the association's relations with Burma, and what he sees as the 'green colonialism' of environmentalism, Dr Mahathir, prime minister of Malaysia, claims that westerners are still clinging to political paramountcy, economic domination and intellectual hegemony. At the time of the Pergau Dam affair in 1994, when *The Sunday Times* revealed links between British aid and Malaysian arms orders, he condemned some British journalists for having 'colonial brains' and dismissed press freedom as 'a myth invented by the so-called liberal west to serve their own purpose'.[56] The previous year, in May 1993, representatives of Asian nations meeting in Bangkok had issued a new definition of human rights that put more emphasis on social stability and economic development than on individual freedom. Democracy, freedom of the press and human rights were regarded as 'western concepts' which are not necessarily appropriate to Asian societies, at least not in the forms practised in the West. The term 'Asian values' suggests, furthermore, that the countries of Southeast Asia share a common culture. Yet, long regarded as the crossroads of world civilisations or as a palimpsest of alien influences, the region is marked more by its diversity than its unity. A geographical expression, which was first used to designate a military command during the Second World War, Southeast Asia, unlike Europe or Latin America, lacks a common cultural core. Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism—each of which transcends not only the frontiers of Southeast Asian states but also the boundaries of the region itself—neither individually nor in

[53] Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos, and Javenese from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (1977), 155, 166.

[54] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), 301.

[55] See the historiographical review by T. N. Harper, ' "Asian Values" and Southeast Asian Histories', *The Historical Journal*, 40, 2 (1997), 507–17.

[56] *The Sunday Times*, 6 Feb. 1994.

combination have provided the foundation for a recognisably regional identity. In short, it would seem that the notion of 'Asian values' suffers from the very simplicity, generality and selectivity that were hallmarks of Europe's 'orientalist' attitude to Southeast Asian communities during the colonial period.

LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 1 -

You have printed the following article:

Conceptions of Community in Colonial Southeast Asia
A. J. Stockwell
Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th Ser., Vol. 8. (1998), pp. 337-355.
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0080-4401%281998%296%3A8%3C337%3ACOCICS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-W

This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.

[Footnotes]

[55] **'Asian Values' and Southeast Asian Histories**
T. N. Harper
The Historical Journal, Vol. 40, No. 2. (Jun., 1997), pp. 507-517.
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0018-246X%28199706%2940%3A2%3C507%3A%27VASAH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1

NOTE: *The reference numbering from the original has been maintained in this citation list.*