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1

Reinventing a Region: Southeast Asia and the Colonial Experience

ROBERT ELSON

Scholars have long puzzled over and debated the identity of Southeast Asia. In a centrally important sense, it was ever a region defined by its relationship with other regions rather than by anything intrinsic to itself. Thus, for Indian scholars keen to prove the wonders and intrinsic seductiveness of Hindu civilization, it was 'Further India'. For the Chinese, it was the Nanyang, the regions to the south of their unique civilization centre. For much of its history, this sense of relational self-definition – that Southeast Asia was what it was because of its relationships with others, and not on its own account – was a real reflection of the manner in which Southeast Asians interacted openly and indiscriminately with other places. Thus, great Southeast Asian civilizations gained wealth and power from their capacity to plug into and profit from trading relationships bigger than those of their region alone. From the seventh century, for example, Srivijaya engineered an organizational system that gathered forest products from the hinterland jungles of Sumatra and parlayed them into the China trade of exotic products. Melaka, its functional successor, similarly grew large and rich on its capacity to extract the produce of the sea and the interior through the agency of discrete rivermouth statelets in the Straits region and service the China trade, as well as to feed the spices of the eastern islands and other products westwards to India and beyond, in exchange for cloths, drugs and foodstuffs. In beliefs, as in trade, Southeast Asians were open and

creatively adaptive to the great religions, absorbing and making their own the great traditions of India, the Middle East and China which were mediated through the channels of trade and conquest. Much of the region expressed itself in cultural terms borrowed and freely adapted from the Indic world, while the northern part of what is now Vietnam lived according to the 'Chinese model'. Islamic traditions spread insistently and energetically from the thirteenth century on, especially through the island world. Such modes of expression provided religious and cultural meaning, but also manifested themselves in styles of political thinking and modes of organization.

That outward-looking, engaging sense of self was conditioned in important senses by the region's geographical architecture. Its most prominent features, the mainland's succession of north-south ridges and the lowland basins they shaped, and the shallow calm waters of the archipelago, predisposed to maritime relationships. The former channelled activities down and out to the sea, while the latter bridged the myriad of islands and peninsulas of maritime Southeast Asia. Such features promoted, in some places, the development of distinctive and always dynamic ethnicities – Burmans, T'ai, Vietnamese, for example, in relative isolation from each other (and from the 'savage' hill peoples that occupied the reaches beyond their grasp) – which dealt with the world rather than each other. Everywhere, they ordained a regime of continuing communication and interchange with a multiplicity of entities outside the region.

Early Western Imperialism

The early phases of Western imperialism to Southeast Asia were, in an important sense, just another example of the region's relational and adaptive capabilities. Asia wanted nothing that Europe offered, so there was no sense of reciprocity in trade. European powers could interpose themselves only as brokers of the common items of Asian trade. Portugal's successful conquest of Melaka in 1511 was no more than an attempt to feed off already vibrant trading routes. In the same way, but more strongly and effectively, the Dutch presence – manifested in its first and improbable form in the straggling company of Cornelis de Houtman – sought to intrude upon, control and monopolize the immensely profitable spice trade of the eastern islands of the archipelago. At least until 1800, the Dutch East Indies Company

(VOC) was ‘not intending to build an Indonesian state... [and] Batavia was not the capital of an Indonesian realm [but rather] the centre of the Asia-wide activities of the VOC’ (Tarling, 1998b: 3). Again, English country traders in the late eighteenth century sought to gather the forest products and natural curiosities of the region to trade for the tea of China, so better to stem the flow of British silver into Chinese coffers. Spanish galleons ferrying the silver of America from Acapulco to Manila made the latter port so rich an entrepot for trade with China that the Spanish had no incentive to seek other kinds of economic return from what would eventually become the Philippine islands.

Trade and other interactions with a multiplicity of powers and markets outside the region remained the motif of Southeast Asian life and politics until deep into the nineteenth century; the region’s opportunistic gaze was forever outward. Even then, however, harbingers of a different and more determining kind of Western presence were evident. They expressed themselves in such ventures as the coffee production and trade of the Dutch East Indies company from the early eighteenth century on, which thronged the hills of west Java with imported coffee trees and carried off the produce for sale in Europe. Similarly, the Spanish in the Philippines sought to establish a monopoly over the production and marketing of tobacco in specified parts of Luzon for nearly a hundred years from the late eighteenth century on. From the 1830s, the Dutch forced Javanese peasants in their millions to grow huge quantities of coffee, sugar, indigo and other tropical products for export and sale in Europe.

High Imperialism, State Transformation

In its mature and developed form, European colonialism had serious implications for the sense of region within Southeast Asia. It transformed the landscape of Southeast Asia and the lives and livelihoods of its peoples, and it regularized, fenced and atomized the region in entirely new and foreign ways. In so doing, it seriously diminished the sense that the region enjoyed any substantial and inherent shared identity or characteristics or destiny. It achieved this result in a number of distinctive ways.

In the first place, European colonialism created a whole new state system in Southeast Asia between about 1870 and the early years of

the twentieth century. Tarling (1998b: vii) has remarked, in talking of the current configuration of states in Southeast Asia, that 'we cannot presume that they always existed, or that they were bound to emerge in the ways they did'. Before the impress of mature colonialism, statecraft in Southeast Asia had tended to express itself in traditional forms, based on the principles that control of people was more important than control of territory, and that the preeminent leader, the creator of many-stranded bands of followers, was indispensable. In this configuration, labelled by Wolters (1999: ch. 2) as the 'mandala' concept, flux and change – the product of the enduring tensions and compromises between technological limitation and political ambition and overreach – rather than durability and permanence were the characteristic features of politics.

Incipient European intrusions in the first part of the nineteenth century – for example, in Arakan and Tenasserim and in Lower Burma, in Saigon, in Sarawak – simply added to the confusing plethora of polities. By contrast, by 1920 or so there existed in Southeast Asia just six real states: British Burma, independent Siam – 'an extreme version of indirect rule' according to one scholar (Trocki, 1992: 86) – French Indo-China, the Spanish Philippines, British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies – even if almost three hundred entities within the Dutch imperium described themselves as 'self-governing', and even if 'British Malaya' was a congeries of different 'state' systems (crown colony, federated state, unfederated state).

The methods through which this state consolidation took place were strikingly similar across the region. It was a piecemeal, episodic progress, directed from the rapidly enlarging and busy capitals of the new states. In Siam, for example, the strengthening state centred on Bangkok incorporated previously semi-independent tributary states, as well as non-T'ai peoples living in previously marginal territories. The French 'pacified' the north of Vietnam and brought Laos and Cambodia under their effective (but limited) sway, as well turning their attention to controlling the swiddening inhabitants of the upland spine of Indo-China. The British, unable to create a pliant form of indirect rule in the Burman heartland in the north, destroyed the Burman polity and were forced to institute an accented form of direct rule by which Burma was configured as a province of India. The Dutch, by force of arms or force of 'agreement', rounded out their dominion of the archipelago to form a centralized state, in the process violently dismantling and destroying formerly independent kingdoms like Bali and Aceh. The Americans, newly in possession of the former

Spanish empire, gradually and often violently brought the southern reaches of the islands, the Moro areas, under their control.

New Principles of Statecraft

It was not just that the plethora of states had shrunk in number; the very principles upon which they were based and the purposes they were meant to serve had changed irretrievably. They were now modelled upon the principles of modern – that is, European – statecraft. They had more or less fixed territorial borders (the product of European desires not to provoke unnecessary conflict amongst themselves, there or elsewhere, and a startlingly successful venture at that), within which state sovereignty – and the popular allegiance which it claimed – was, at least in theory, evenly distributed and uncontested.

These states were built on more arbitrary principles in some places than in others. Whereas on the mainland of Southeast Asia they gave new substance and reality to the claims of precolonial cultural and political entities such as the Siamese and Burman kingdoms, in the more jostling and fractured archipelago they were creations of convenience and asserted power. There was no other rationale for an Indonesia than the constructed borders of a Netherlands East Indies, nor for a Philippines than the preexisting Hispano-American colonial edifice. In such circumstances, the age-old trading and social relationships between the Islamic peoples and communities of Sumatra and the Malay peninsula was now sundered – ‘parting brother from brother, father from son, and friend from friend’, as the bendahara of Penang described the 1824 treaty between Britain and the Netherlands (quoted in Andaya, 1979: 2) – and subjected, at least in theory, to new disciplines and controls; ‘in Southeast Asia the sea unites; the Europeans used it to divide’ (Tarling, 1998b: 54). Similarly the Muslim societies of the northern Malay peninsula now found themselves separated by a boundary demarcating the Malay States from Siam. The old Islamic sultanate of Sulu was formally integrated as part of the Christian-Hispanic Philippines. The Chins, Kachins, Shans and Karens of the ridges bordering the Burmese plains were recreated as ‘Burmese’ in a state numerically dominated by Burmans, and destined to have their own emerging sense of their nation-statehood ignored or marginalized. Indeed, in some senses, new ethnic identities were constructed as a result of the classificatory interventions of colonial powers. Thus, the ‘Iban’ of Borneo enjoyed

no sense of ethnic identity until it was manufactured for them by Dutch and British colonizers (Thiong, 2000).

The new big states were run by ever-professionalizing bureaucracies which favoured the impersonal and regular routines of modern state administration. It was, therefore, no accident that the regime of revenue farming proved to be no more than a key transitional phase in Southeast Asian state-building. This practice, involving the state renting out rights to private agents to gather taxation on the economic and recreation activities of their peoples (the transport of goods, opium consumption, gambling, pawnbroking), had been crucial for state enhancement in the period when state monopoly was giving way to more unfettered kinds of economic activity. Its existence was a manifestation of relative state weakness, but it did provide income – almost half the Siamese government's income came from revenue farming at the end of the nineteenth century – to construct new and more direct techniques of governance. Accordingly, by the early twentieth century revenue farming was in serious decline across the region. Put simply, there was no longer the need for the state to farm out its taxation authority to private brokers; it now had the strength and wherewithal to gather its revenues itself, mostly through its own monopolies, through land taxes and a through a plethora of taxes and duties on trade, from what it now deemed to be its 'subjects', and even to control the currency with which they now paid their taxes. Indeed, the state was now in constant contact with Southeast Asians – codifying their traditional law systems, counting and classifying them, surveying their lands, overseeing (and often trying to stop) their customary movements, spying on their political activists, dressing up their officials in colonial uniform, creating new conceptions of and laws regarding their land, developing plural legal systems and administrative agencies to enforce ethnic divisions and identities, analysing their cropping techniques and building them dams and irrigation systems – and even making sporadic efforts to protect their environment from the demands of the rapidly increasing population – to enhance their prosperity, imposing administrative languages upon them, and generally trying, in various guises and under various paternalistic labels, to 'civilize' them.

Economies and Production

The new states of Southeast Asia, then, were increasingly internally integrated in ways that often defied both geography and long-held

practice. This development had both a political and an economic aspect. Politically, the colonial powers and neo-imperial Siam consolidated their territories through force of arms, persuasion, and the technology of railways and the telegraph, and peopled its corners with their administrative representatives. Economically, the early twentieth century saw the development of incipient national economies. In the Netherlands Indies, for example, efforts were made to redirect trade to new colonial centres rather than customary nodes of shipment such as Singapore. Through this process of turning the archipelago ‘inside out, away from mainland Southeast Asia towards the small offshore island of Java’ (Dick, 2002: 18), the products of what the Dutch called the Outer Regions (*Buitengewesten*) were increasingly channelled through Batavia, by means of the KPM, the busy Dutch inter-island shipping company, and counted in Dutch colonial accounts. Similarly, once tin and rubber assumed their signal importance in Malaya, British attention moved beyond the strategic imperatives which had driven their initial engagement to begin the construction of self-regarding colonial Malayan economy.

In terms of purpose, the colonial states which emerged at this time were focused on the economic benefits they could bring to their metropolitan controllers. Under the persistent imperatives of the Industrial Revolution and its close relation, trade liberalization, the old monopoly trading systems, both indigenous and colonial, faded into irrelevance. The overweening impulse of the colonial powers from the late nineteenth century onwards was the production in their colonies of a limited number, but vast quantities, of tropical consumption goods (condiments, food and mild drugs) and primary products for industry (rubber, tin, oil). Java produced ever larger quantities of sugar as the Dutch applied the newest technologies to cane production and sugar manufacture, even as they retained the archaic format of requisitioning small tracts of peasant rice land for cane cultivation and employing contingents of cheap peasant labour to harvest and transport cane to the mill. In the Outer Regions, most spectacularly in the vast and newly developed plantation areas of East Sumatra, centred on Medan, the Dutch planted tobacco, rubber and palm oil, beginning the process of turning the regions outside Java into the colony’s economic powerhouse and setting up tensions which would later seek release, unsuccessfully, after independence. In the Philippines, sugar poured from the plantations established in Luzon and especially in the island of Negros, and in Bicol the humble abaca plant was cultivated to meet the industrial world’s insatiable appetite for cordage and binding; thus, ‘Manila rope’. In the lands north of Saigon, vast

tracts of land were devoted to rubber production. To produce industrial products like tin and rubber, British Malaya organized the transfer of large number of Chinese and Indian immigrants respectively to work the tin mines and tap the trees in rubber plantations. To feed them, the British imported huge quantities of rice from the rapidly developing rice frontier of Lower Burma, the Central Plain of Siam, and the Mekong delta region of southern Vietnam. In these three monoculture rice-bowls, smallholder peasant rice cultivation expanded dramatically in the late nineteenth century, as increased security and certainty ('law and order'), greater freedom from traditional imposts like *corvée* labour and slavery, enhanced mobility, much improved infrastructure (roads, canals, drainage systems, dykes, irrigation facilities, milling capacity) and especially accelerating international demand for rice and much enhanced marketing and credit networks built upon and further stimulated peasant production on a scale unprecedented in both magnitude and duration. The same imperative drove peasant smallholder to produce rubber in Sumatra and Malaya, and copra in eastern Indonesia and the Philippines.

Production came not just from cultivation but also from mining and gathering. By the early twentieth century, the demands of the second industrial revolution promoted the oil industry in places like Sumatra and northern Burma and the ever more efficient application of new and expensive technology, in the form of the giant dredge, to suck tin from the soil in Malaya. Coal production from the mines of northern Vietnam increased more than fourfold in the two and a half decades after 1913. The teak forests of Siam and Burma were exploited for their fine timbers, producing between them almost a quarter of a million tons of teak for export around the turn of the twentieth century.

In their turn, the colonies were expected to consume the products of the industrialized world, particularly machine-woven textiles and industrial manufactures. What ensued was not far short of a revolution for many Southeast Asians. Now they sold most of what they produced, and purchased on the market much of what they had to consume; domestic industry, notably textile production, declined and in many places disappeared altogether.

Social Implications

All these developments stimulated an extraordinary increase in Southeast Asia's population. Tarling has remarked of this earlier

period in Southeast Asia history that ‘though there were many peoples in the region, there were not many people’ (Tarling, 2001: 8). But it is clear that the creation of long-term peace and political stability created the conditions which transformed the region’s demographic profile. Thus, Java’s population, perhaps 5 million in 1800, had reached 29 million a hundred years later and 42 million by 1930. The 7.6 million souls in the Philippines in 1903 had more than doubled in number to almost 16 million by 1939; in the century after 1818, the population grew by a factor of five. Sumatra’s population almost doubled between 1900 and 1930. A small part of this increase was the result of immigration from outside the region, especially from southern China, but much the greater part came from natural increase, for the most part attributable to a rapid reduction in mortality. This extraordinary phase of population growth laid the basis for the current dimensions – half a billion people – of Southeast Asia’s population.

There were other serious social implications of these dramatic changes. As the formerly empty frontiers of the region filled with people and industry, the value of people as such declined, and the importance of the possession of productive means grew. The methods employed to relieve this press of population – extension of the cultivated frontier (as in Lower Burma, where the area devoted to rice grew tenfold between 1855 and 1940), and the employment of much more intensive methods of agriculture (double-cropping of rice, the insertion of dry-season crops between rice plantings) in already familiar sites – could provide only temporary relief. One consequence of these larger processes was rapid growth in land fragmentation, in tenancy, in landlessness (especially as land became more commodified), in credit dependency, in general territorial mobility, and in the variety of occupations practised. Peasants who had previously devoted much of their time as owner-occupiers in the cycles of rice production now found themselves employed part of the year as paid labourers in harvesting and in off-farm work in fields, factories and other sites of employment, often distant from their places of residence.

Authority and Opposition

In the high colonial period, manufacturing itself remained seriously underdeveloped, a consequence of the colonial status of much of the region. Apart from low-level consumer manufacturing activity

(for example ice, soap, cigarettes, building materials), it was mostly associated with export product processing – cane and rice milling, tin smelting, rubber processing – and engineering and repairs to service those industries. The colonial economies of Southeast Asia saw no logic in attempting to duplicate and rival the productive prowess of the metropolitan powers, at least until the exigencies of the 1930s Depression manifested the need to develop greater manufacturing self-sufficiency.

Notwithstanding the dimensions of the changes engineered, the imposition of colonial control rested upon very tenuous foundations. As their proclaimed reach and their pretensions expanded, so did the colonists' capacity to impose their will through force alone decline. The development of colonial armies (often peopled by ethnic minorities whose status and rewards were firmly tied to the maintenance of colonial power, thus Ambonese in the Netherlands Indies and Karens in Burma) aimed to compensate for this problem; their purpose – even in the case of independent Siam – was internal policing rather than defence against external threat. Increasingly, colonial authority rested upon an artificially enhanced distance between themselves and the people they ruled, upon the projection of white superiority (colonial administrators had virtually shed their earlier Eurasian temper with the arrival of large numbers of European women) and the consequent 'prestige' it bestowed (something indigenous reformists found ever more suffocating and irritating). To exercise their authority, colonial governments generally employed traditional elites, transforming them into quasi-bureaucrats in theory, but essentially putting their inherited popular legitimacy at the service of the new states at the same time as placing limits on its arbitrary exercise. Only later would these brokering bureaucracies be remodelled along more modern and 'rational' lines. Then the positions they held became the most sought after source of social mobility, wealth, privilege and prestige amongst the indigenes. It was much preferable to be a bureaucrat rather than a businessman; in much of the region, the task of business fell to 'outsiders' like Chinese traders and Indian Chettiars.

It was only as these large states matured that indigenous consciousness of new political possibilities began to grow. In some cases, as in Vietnam and in Burman Burma, anti-colonial nationalism was fed by a strong sense of cultural identity which included shared language, traditions and memories which predated colonial intrusion. In Siam, fear of European incursion generated a similarly strong sense of cultural nationalism even though it brought, in 1932, a diminution

of the king's absolute power at the hands of a small inner group with strong links to French-educated Siamese students. These were examples of nations, more or less, recreating themselves as states. In other places, as we have seen, first in the Philippines (by far the earliest manifestation of modern nationalism in the region) and only much later in the Dutch Indies, the nation-state to which indigenous politicians laid claim was itself the outcome of colonial invention.

In all cases, indigenous political imaginings relied upon the infusion of Western ideas of political organization – the nation-state, for one, but lower-order models as well, such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association of Burma, a conscious copy of the YMCA – and Western political thinking, usually of a radical cast, sometimes mediated through Asian prisms such as the Indian Congress and Japan's experiences of coping with and creatively and successfully adapting Western modernity. Much of the ideological groundwork for these new ways of thinking came from a fertile yet often personally and intellectually confusing conjunction of young indigenous minds and modern Western political tradition and practice. Students from Java, Sumatra and elsewhere in the Indies, sent to Holland to learn the professional and technological skills which the new Netherlands India demanded, found themselves interrogating the moral limitations and economic depredations of Dutch colonialism, as well as identifying themselves with an advanced form of the Netherlands Indies to which they applied the anthropological term 'Indonesia'. Some thinking was of a more limited kind. Thus the manifestations of Malay nationalism were not so much directed against colonial oppression as towards the establishment of a strong and permanent platform which could defend Malay identity against encroachment from other peoples, particularly the immigrant Chinese; such a platform could be built only on a basis of allegiance to the British, with their demonstrated predisposition to sympathize with and protect Malay interests. In Vietnam, indigenous activists first looked to Japan to find examples of how to control the damaging impulses of the West; in the end, they themselves adopted liberal and radical variants of Western political thinking, aggressive nationalism and Marxism, to confront the French.

The Limits of Nationalist Thinking and Action

What was remarkable about these emerging movements was the close identity between the conceptions of state and statecraft of the colonial

powers and that of their nationalist opponents. Thus, what Burman nationalists wanted was possession of the stable, secure colonial state based in Rangoon and laying claim to all of 'Burma'; this claim, indeed, was made in the face of British concerns to provide special treatment for the Shans, already politically constituted as the Federated Shan states in the 1920s. Pretensions of the Karen for their own state received similarly short shrift from mainstream Burman nationalists. What Indonesian nationalists wanted to seize was not an old Mataram, nor a new Java, nor even a novel version of the Minangkabau region of West Sumatra, but the totality of what the Dutch had constructed in the archipelago, including its modernity. Filipino nationalists wanted possession of the whole Philippine Islands, including the Moro areas whose claims to separate statehood were not to be indulged in any respect. Even in Siam, such muted calls for some kind of political expression among the Malays of the south was met with fierce opposition from Bangkok. The corollary, of course, was that 'national minorities', either deemed to be sojourners or thought too peripheral to mainstream concerns, retained the lowly and uncertain status that was their lot under colonial rule; their railing against their discrimination brought them nothing by way of improvements to their situation, and often the reverse. Chinese minorities remained a particular target for suspicions amongst nationalist groupings in different places.

But the states the nationalists imagined, even though similar in administrative kind to the colonial states they inhabited, and mirroring the close identification between people and state engineered by colonial masters, were to have an ideological content far removed from that currently in force. The prevailing states of the high colonial period were notable as successful administrative entities but, with the exception of the Thai state, had narrow governmental agendas and did not have the means to draw the allegiance of their young intellectual opponents. In the first place, they stood for nothing worth dying for apart from the continued prosperity of their metropolitan rulers. There was no nobility or romance to them. They offered nothing by way of moral, political or spiritual advancement for their subjects. Efforts to promote attachments to the metropolis, such as heavy-handed ceremonials commemorating Queen Wilhelmina's birthday, were as unconvincing as they were awkward and even comical. They were what they seemed: imperial artifices to create profit for the mother country. Second, contemplation of this latter fact consolidated the sense among nationalists that colonialism was the essential source

of their poverty (both intellectual and well as material), and that its removal would, of itself, provide the path to a golden future.

Notwithstanding some scattered colonial efforts to create new contexts for development, notably the construction of a Philippine commonwealth and the creation of a Burmese constitution which provided some substance of self-rule in the 1930s, the trajectory of colonial control still seemed to be an enduring one at the end of the 1930s. The varieties of Southeast Asian nationalism, without the power of arms, offered no substantial threat to the continuing domination of Western colonial regimes in the region. A major reason was that nationalists were perennially divided amongst themselves not just about strategy and tactics (should one cooperate or not?), but about the deeper philosophical bases of the new states they sought to create (should our new state be a monarchy or a republic? Should its laws and institutions be based upon Western secular models or a specific religious tradition such as Islam or Buddhism?), and wasted much of their energy and purpose on mutual antagonism. Indeed, one looks in vain for a clear enunciation of a thoroughgoing set of political principles, let alone strategies, which nationalist groups in any colonial area could agree upon, even in the broadest sense. There was, as well, the fact that nationalist ideas barely touched the collaborating elites of the region, who thought their own futures best assured by identifying themselves with the admittedly shallow interests of the colonial regimes. Again, the host of minorities now corralled within colonial boundaries (for example, more than half Rangoon's population in 1931 was Indian) saw little benefit from advantaging the interests of majority nationalist groups, and much to fear from their ascendancy. Further, nationalism did not advance on an equal footing everywhere. There were places, notably Cambodia and Laos, where nationalism showed little strength at all, partly because colonialism was never pursued in those places with rigour or vigour and, perhaps more important, because the indigenous elites preferred the protection afforded their careers and interests by colonialism, and the fact that its absence might portend the resumption of the aggression and dominating behaviours of their near and larger neighbours. Indeed, colonialism's role in subduing long-term animosity between larger states was gratefully acknowledged; thus, the hope of Siam's King Prajadipok 'that the Vietnamese will not easily escape from the power of the French' (quoted in Batson, 1984: 177).

The stability born of colonial obduracy and nationalist ideational gridlock was rapidly destroyed with the onset of the Japanese war in

the Pacific. Nonetheless, the colonial experience, whatever its considerable limitations, had shaped Southeast Asia in new and modern ways which defied rapid or radical amendment. The colonial states and Siam, now Thailand, were to endure in their political essentials as modern states thereafter. The nationalist politicians who finally managed, in some places by violence and in other through peaceful negotiation, to take the helm of these countries had no interest in remaking them politically, but rather in raising them to new moral and developmental planes.

The Region Neglected

Accordingly, the notion of Southeast Asia as a region became ever more seriously attenuated. The boundaries created by Europeans to salve potential colonial tensions had proven remarkably successful, installing a long period of regional peace – quietude might be a better word – in which the states of the region virtually ignored each other, and ignored and were ignored by other extra-regional forces, the exigencies and opportunities of trade to one side. What had come into being was a series of ‘watertight’ (Dixon, 1991: 121) state structures that communicated much more frequently, routinely and easily with their respective metropolitan centres than with each other or with extra-regional entities. Thus, each state had its own rail and road system, but they were for integrating its transformative economic activities and especially for tying its transformed subjects to its centre, not for communing more broadly with the region as a whole. That established, these boundaries became immutable political borders, both in the minds of the colonial and Siamese authorities and those nationalists who sought, in time, to take their place. The colonial period created, directly and indirectly, a fundamentally new Southeast Asia, one with a fundamentally diminished sense of regional identity and belonging. With the passing of colonialism, the task of recreating a new sense of mutually beneficial regional purpose would be strewn with inherited and created difficulties.

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