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On Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia: The Making of Southeast Asia

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Book Reviews

ON PRE-COLONIAL SOUTHEAST ASIA

THE MAKING OF SOUTHEAST ASIA, by G. Coedés, translated by H. M. Wright. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966. xvi, 268 pp.

There is a flood of books on Southeast Asia these days for the simple reason that it is perhaps the most troubled area in the world today. Most of the books, however, are either written in the style of Tillman Durdin's *Southeast Asia* which is based on reportorial documentation and which hardly goes beyond the heritage of colonialism or in the textbook approach of Brian Harrison which is admittedly spotty when it comes to the pre-colonial period.

Occasionally, one comes across a book such as P. B. Hilton and D. J. Tate's *Southeast Asia in World History* designed to meet the requirements of students, in this case, of Malaya, who must be introduced into all three areas at once, namely, the Asian, the Southeast Asian, and the Western, thus making the book unsuitable for the more advanced reader to whom much of the materials on Western civilization, for instance, or the heritage of India and China, might seem to be redundant.

Seldom does one come across a book which is written for the layman yet scholarly enough to satisfy even specialists—and even more important — limited enough in scope as to avoid covering much of the same ground treated in most Southeast Asian books. Such a book is G. Coedés' *The Making of Southeast Asia*.

Written by a man who actually worked with French archaeologists in the ruins of Angkor and who was responsible for many of the significant epigraphic translations on monuments and temples in Thailand and Cambodia, *The Making of Southeast Asia*, as sug-

gested by the title, covers only the formative period up to the sixteenth century. It is thus unique in the sense that it explores precisely the period in Southeast Asia's history which is seldom, if at all, adequately treated by most Western historians.

This is not to suggest that Coedés is the only Western historian to delve into the pre-colonial period of Southeast Asia. He shares the distinction with at least a handful of his countrymen, not to mention Dutch scholars, who must be credited for having made a similar study of pre-colonial Southeast Asia based on literary, archaeological, and anthropological sources. However, most of the books written by this specialized body of historians tend to be written for a closed circle of fellow specialists and thus unsuitable for the wider body of lay readers.

Not so in the case of Coedés' book which, as the author mentions in his introduction, "is intended for the general public rather than for specialists, and may be regarded as a sort of outline sketch indicating the lines on which a future balanced history of Indochina might be planned." The main areas of emphasis in this book, by the way, have to do with the development of Laos, Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam. In a word, its main focus is mainland rather than island southeast Asia. Thus, it would have little to do with places such as Java, Sumatra, Borneo and the Philippines, to mention only a few.

One remarkable feature of this book is the author's insistence on avoiding the common failing of attempting to explain everything according to one single principle. Take the case of how Indian cultural influence was spread in Southeast Asia. Coedés, instead of relying on one neat theory, explores at least four. First, he said it might have been the work of high-caste Indians "who ventured forth to seek their fortune in the lands of gold and spices." Second, he noted the influence of commercial expansion and advances in navigation as well as the propagation of Buddhism. Third, he suggested Indian literati "who visited Southeast Asia and introduced manuals of ritual and technical treatises" as possible bearers of Indian culture. Fourthly, he cited as an even more important reason Southeast Asian natives "who returned to their own country after spending some time in India."

One of Coedés' theories, however, which was criticized by Dutch scholars as "untenable" and which he makes it a point, ten years later, to clarify in this book, has to do with his idea of "an 'Indian superstructure' superimposed upon an indigenous substratum." Said Coedés: "When I spoke of a superstructure, or referred in a more general way to Indian civilization in Cambodia, or some other

Indianized kingdom, what I had in mind was of course the civilization revealed by inscriptions and archaeological evidence.

"This civilization was that of an elite, and only included certain special spheres, such as religion, art, philosophy, and literature, as well as the concept of the State and of the monarchy. The social structure as a whole, the mode of life and beliefs of the common people, the economic conditions—these belong to another sphere about which very little is known."

Perhaps the weakest section in Coedès' book is the one devoted to prehistory. Although he very clearly stipulated the avenues of approach in a manner which promised to shed considerable light on this dark period in Southeast Asia's development, namely, the prehistoric remains left by man, the migrational movement, the distribution of language, and the study of social organization, the 23 pages devoted to this section failed to live up to the reader's expectation. The author, in fact, had to hedge here and there with stock phrases such as "there are good reasons for supposing," "an attempt may now be made," "according to the views generally accepted," "there is very little direct information" and so forth.

This book, as mentioned earlier, relied rather heavily on epigraphic materials. However, mention must be made of the excellent documentation and translation done on Chinese sources. The reader, for example, acquires a fairly good picture of Funan through Chinese sources which noted such things as slavery, raids against neighbors, trade in gold, silver, and silk, and how the king lived in a multi-storeyed palace. Readers, on the other hand, acquire a fairly vivid though not faltering description of marauding Indonesians from Sanskrit inscriptions such as the one at Nha-trang which said they (Indonesians) were "men born in other countries, men living on food more horrible than corpses, terrifying, thin, and entirely black, and fierce and remorseless as death, who came in ships."

However, what makes this book stand apart from other histories of Southeast Asia is its scholarly concentration on the formative period of mainland Southeast Asia — Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Vietnam and its analyses of the diffusion of both Indian and Chinese culture on the mainland. The selected photos and the single map of mainland Southeast Asia may be found wanting, but the same cannot be said of the stress which the author gave in endeavouring to depict, as accurately as possible, the rise and fall of Southeast Asian culture and civilization before the coming of Western man.

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