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Changes of Regime and Colonial State Formation

in the Malay Archipelago, 1780-1830 --

an invitation to an international research project

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The island zone of Southeast Asia comprising today's Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines marks the geographical and cultural division between the maritime worlds of the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Since time immemorial the archipelago has acted as a crossroads of cultures and civilizations, or as the Malaysian scholar Shamsul A.B. has aptly put it, as a stage upon which a *plurality of cultures* has interacted. To clarify his argument, he explains that "as a result, we have had [for instance] in Java, a Hindu king with an Arabic name entertaining European traders. In Champa we had a raja ruling a predominantly Buddhist populace trading with India, China and the Malay Archipelago, and so on." [1] He might as well have added the white rajas of Sarawak. According to Shamsul, and here he follows in Furnival's wake, this dynamic mix of affairs as a result of colonial intervention was transformed through a community of "plural societies" with fixed systems of governance replacing flexible traditional polities. In other words, colonial rule laid the ground work for today's nation-states.

Contrary to earlier propositions, which posited the onset of Western Imperialism in the 1870s as the prime fixer of change in Southeast Asia, I would like to suggest that the transformation from plurality of cultures to a community of plural societies actually was initiated at an earlier date -- i.e. in the 1780-1830 period -- as a result of important institutional changes and the transformation of the global economy. In order to

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[1] Shamsul A.B., "Some thoughts on how knowledge on Southeast Asia came to be" in *IIAS Newsletter* 36 (March 2005), p. 3.

understand why this transformation should be sought in this particular time frame it is useful to look once more at the region as a meeting point of world civilizations and cultures from a wider perspective and to realize that around 1800 two revolutions occurred in the West which fundamentally changed the course of global history. Subsequently, owing to its central position, the Malay archipelago was the first region in Asia to be affected by the impact of these external fundamental changes.

The French revolution (1789-1795) shook the foundations of the *ancien régime* in Europe, while the subsequent Napoleonic period with its incessant wars dramatically changed the continent's socio-political landscape, redrawing the map of the Europe and ultimately paving the way toward a more democratic society. The Industrial Revolution also brought forth the factory with its power-driven machinery which enabled Europe, with its low-cost products, to turn the intercontinental trade with Asia from 'bullion for goods' into 'industrial products for tropical goods' transactions, dramatically revising the rules of the capitalist game.

The demise of the *ancien régime* and the birth of modern society in the West first became visible in the maritime trading world of Monsoon Asia in a variety of ways. While Adam Smith, in his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), was heralding a new age of free trade, the power of the chartered East India Companies, which derived their power from monopolistic practices, was being challenged from both within and outside. The nature of the Western presence changed from controlling trade to the exercise of territorial rule, with the English East India Company (EIC) gaining control of Bengal and the Dutch VOC dominating Java and Ceylon. Further, by William Pitt's India Act (1784), the English parliament gained control of the EIC's overseas territories while the Dutch East India Company collapsed altogether and was replaced by the colonial rule of the Batavian Republic in 1795, initiating a long sequence of institutional reform. In other words, the fifty years that bridged the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century constituted a watershed in the history of Europe as well as of the maritime regions of Southeast Asia. As a result of political upheavals in

Europe, the foundations of the Dutch and Spanish colonial régimes in Southeast Asia were shaken, giving room not only for local polities to adjust their positions but also for the English to step in.

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Also, in purely autonomous terms, the 1780-1830 era was a particularly turbulent and complex period in Southeast Asia. It witnessed the burgeoning of the intra-Asian China trade, bringing foreigners to Chinese coastal waters, but sending even larger numbers of Chinese entrepreneurs to the rims of the China Sea in search of tropical and mineral products, as well as employment. A series of restorations of traditional regimes occurred in *continental* Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Burma and Siam), a phenomenon that has been characterized by Anthony Reid as the "Last Stand of Asian Autonomies", and rampant piracy throughout the region, urging the colonial regimes in insular Southeast Asia to regain control of the sea corridors.

By the end of the eighteenth century, new opportunities of international trade emerged in the Malay archipelago. American shipping, the country traders[2], local interlopers, and pirates crowded the trading routes as a result of the phenomenal rise of the China trade connecting the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. At the same time, the networks of Chinese overseas shipping rapidly expanded, connecting the ports of the Southeastern Chinese coastal provinces with new settlements overseas, varying from Chinese towns, *panglong*, and pepper and gambier plantations to gold- and silver mines, all contributing to the overseas expansion of the Chinese economy.

As noted, throughout the Indonesian archipelago and especially in the thoroughfares between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, shipping was challenged by a sudden rise of raiding and looting by such redoubtable seafarers as the Bugis originating from Sulawesi and the Iranun from the Sulu archipelago. This chaotic turn of events cannot solely be explained from the inner social dynamics of these maritime peoples. Rather,

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[2] That is, private European merchants sailing between India and China, and around the seas between.

close attention should also be paid to the new external players on the scene -- the Chinese entrepreneurs, and Indian and European country traders. Trading Bengal opium for tropical products like spices, tin and pepper and undercutting existing avenues of trade, these private traders thoroughly changed the rules of the game and eventually even gained the ear of the "official mind" in London and influenced official British policies.

The most obvious outcomes of Western interference in the area connected to the rise of the China market and Chinese commercial expansion throughout the South China Sea were, of course, the establishment of the free haven of Singapore (1819) and the division of spheres of interests between Britain and the Netherlands (1824) in the Melaka Straits after the Napoleonic wars were ended. It was out of this imposed division, which gradually led to the drawing of fixed, internationally-recognized borders in the nineteenth century, that the Indonesian, Singapore and Malaysian nation states would ultimately emerge in the twentieth century.

The problem with the study of the period 1780—1830 to date -- in so far that it has been studied -- is that it has been researched by historians of the various academic traditions in a more or less parochial manner. For example: Spanish historians have hardly touched on this period in which the Philippines turned from a Mexican-ruled overseas possession into a colony ruled directly from Spain; China's external trade has been studied almost solely from the point of view of Western enterprise on the China coast; Dutch colonial historians have mainly struggled with the demise of the VOC, the conquest of the overseas possessions and problems around the restitution of part of it by the English after the end of the Napoleonic wars; English colonial historians (Bassett and Tarling come to mind) have been mainly interested in describing the formation of British empire in Southeast Asia; while the new crop of nationalist Southeast Asian historians have conceived their national history in terms of struggle for freedom and Islamic tradition and focused on resistance movements such as the rebellion by Diponegoro on Java (1825-1830) or the Padri movement on Sumatra which followed immediately afterwards. Finally, the rare practitioner of the autonomous history approach in this particular era has looked at the region mostly in terms of indigenous developments. James Warren, for

example, in his monumental researches on the Sulu zone and the Iranun has explained such phenomena that are described in colonial sources as "rampant piracy and smuggling", in terms of them being raiding and free trade of prosperous seafaring ethnicities.

In other words, there is a large range of different approaches. Let us therefore, for clarity's sake, briefly take recourse to "good old-fashioned political history" and focus here on the Indonesian archipelago in order to show the complexity of the era and recapitulate here the main political changes in regime, which are said to have occurred in the region.

The outcome of the fourth Anglo-Dutch war (1780-1784) effectively marked the end of Dutch supremacy in Indonesian waters and resulted in the opening up of the archipelago to British (mainly country trade) shipping. Yet when the Bugis stationed at Riau tried to exploit the power vacuum in the Straits of Malacca, a Dutch navy squadron under Van Braam was still able to restore order by evicting the Bugis ruler from Riau. In 1786, the Bengal government of the English sought a base in the same region by commissioning Francis Light to establish a base at Penang. Ten years later, after the Netherlands were overrun by the French revolutionary army, the Dutch East India Company was liquidated and its overseas possessions taken over by the newly-established Batavian Republic. Stadholder Willem V, symbol of the Old Order, fled to England and issued there the so-called Kew letters, in which the administration of all Dutch settlements overseas was ordered to be transferred to the English as long as the mother country remained in the hands of the French. Most Dutch colonial possessions either voluntarily surrendered or were forced to do so and thus ended up in English hands, except for Java, where the headquarters of the Dutch in Asia was located.

The first fundamental change of regime on Java occurred when Napoleon's elder brother, Louis Napoleon, who became king of Holland in 1806, sent Marshal Herman Daendels as new Governor General to Java to reorganize the army and put the administration on a new footing by integrating the Javanese ruling elite in the administration system, thereby

creating the groundwork for a "modern administration". Daendels indeed carried out rigorous reforms, and is nowadays best (or should we say worst) remembered for the building of the *Grote Postweg*, the highway connecting Batavia with Surabaya, an enterprise completed in record time and at the cost of many lives.

Upon the English conquest of Java in 1811, Lieutenant-General Thomas Stamford Raffles in turn revamped the administrative system, dramatically changing the fiscal structure by replacing the time-honoured system of corvée labour involving compelled deliveries of tropical products with the Bengal-inspired land rent system that was based on cash payments. This was, however, done at a time, as it soon became apparent, when the Javanese economy had not yet been sufficiently monetarized to warrant such a reform.

The defeat of Napoleon at Leipzig and the regaining of independence by Holland reopened the colonial dialogue between the English and Dutch, resulting in the Treaty of London of 1814 whereby Britain for the sake of creating a balance of power in Europe obliged itself to return most of the Dutch colonies, with the exception of Cape Good Hope and Ceylon. The British government deemed it necessary that a newly-created Kingdom of the Netherlands made up from the Austrian Netherlands (today's Belgium) and Holland and the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg would form a strong counterweight against any future expansionist aspirations of France. The return of the Dutch colonies was part of that project.

In 1816, three Commissioners-General arrived in Batavia in the name of the newly invested King William 1, to reform once more colonial rule and turn the loss-sustaining colonial project into a profitable one. Shortly afterwards Raffles, who had attempted to sabotage the return of Java and dependencies to Dutch hands, was able through skilful diplomatic manoeuvring at the court of Johore to establish a new foothold for English trade at Singapore in 1819. Out of this settlement grew a new kind of free port, which had no real links to any local Malay ruler of consequence. As a matter of fact, Singapore became a hybrid Sino-British port, i.e. a free port for English and Chinese commercial

interests in the region under protection of the British flag. Once it became clear to the Dutch during their prolonged negotiations in London that the English would not give up their new trophy, the Treaty of London of 1824 was signed, delimiting the Dutch and English spheres of influence east and west of the Melaka Straits, while safeguarding the independent political status of Aceh.

In the meantime, the Dutch East Indies' Governor General Van de Capellen's well-intentioned attempts to re-establish Dutch dominance, by revoking extended land lease arrangements of European planters in the principalities in Central Java and trying to redress the lack of property among the Javanese there. Ironically, this set the scene for the rebellion by Prince Diponegoro of Yogyakarta who led his people as a *ratu adil* against colonial domination, further inflicting great losses on the capacity of the Dutch to exploit their colonial possessions. In response to the dominant position that English trading firms had achieved on Java with their cheap deliveries of English cotton fabrics during the English interregnum, the NHM or Dutch Trading Society was established in 1824 with the purpose of revitalizing Dutch overseas trade with the Indies. However, it was not until the introduction of the Cultivation System, which constituted a return to the time-honoured practice of depending on the *priyayi* in recruiting Java's labour force, that the constant decline in the economy could be turned around. The introduction by Van den Bosch of the Cultivation System in 1830 marked a partial return to the ancient regime practices of employing Javanese labour for producing export crops. Indeed, the introduction of the cultivation system in 1830 was in many ways no more than harking back to time-honoured practices of the traditional Javanese mode of production, but under modern management.

Strangely enough, little effort has been made so far to tune this narrative of western intervention to the local narratives in the Southeast Asia zone. That is disappointing because it cannot be said that the inspiration for such work has been lacking. I am referring here to *Imperial Meridian, The British Empire and the World 1780-1830* by the Cambridge historian C. A. Bayly, who actually showed how crucial this period was in the transformation of the West and South Asia. In this seminal work, the author draws

attention to the fact while the old colonial system of the eighteenth century and the beginnings of responsible government after the 1830s have been well-studied, the intervening period remained curiously lacking in definition. The only one, he notes, who had made a valiant attempt to define the period was the imperial historian Vincent Harlow in an early essay entitled 'The new imperial system, 1783-1815' and in his later work with the challenging title *The Founding of the Second British Empire*.[3]

Seeking to place British expansion in the wider context of world history, Bayly tries to comprehend the indigenous processes which made empire possible and explain the timing of its creation. He sees the disintegration of the three large Islamic empires, the Ottoman Empire, Saffavid Persia and Mughal India (and also briefly referred to Mataram on Java) as the result of social change in Asia owing to a combination of factors such as political imbalance, as these empires were hollowed out by social and economic change well before they were knocked flat by external aggression. Bayly detects in the dismemberment of these polities such phenomena as a tendency towards regionalization, expansion of a money economy, the occurrence of restive "tribal break-outs" on the borders, and the rise of an Asiatic capitalism which he defined as "the propensity for administrators, merchants and peasant leaders to acquire capital and to devise political forms for its reproduction over generations." [4]

In this book, which was published some fifteen years ago, Bayly says very little about Southeast Asia and China, and insofar as he does so, seems not very well informed by the recent literature. Yet a mere glance at the developments contemporaneously occurring in Southeast Asia shows us that many of the same phenomena can be witnessed there. One could even make the point that at the end of the long reign of the Qian-long emperor (1736-1796) and during the reign of his successor, Jia-qing (1796-1820), South China underwent many of the same developments.

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[3] Vincent Harlow, 'The new imperial system, 1783-1815', *Cambridge History of the British Empire* (1940); Vincent Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763-1793*. 2 vols., London: Longmans, 1952, 1964: C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1989, p. 8.
[4] *Ibidem*, p.21.

In other words, these fifty years from 1780 until 1830 witnessed the demise of the Dutch East India Company and no less than three changes of colonial regime in the Malay archipelago, all aimed at reforming modes of colonial administration and exploitation. The most obvious outcome of this Western interference in the area was, of course, the establishment of the free port of Singapore in 1819 and the division of spheres of interests between the dominant colonial powers in the region which would ultimately result in the emergence of the Indonesian and Malaysian nation states, not to speak of such unfinished business as the contested political identity of Aceh.

As I noted at the beginning of this presentation, a concerted effort is now being made to establish an international cooperation project to comprehend the indigenous processes occurring in the Southeast Asian region during this particular time frame, which made empire possible in the archipelago and explain the timing of its creation. This will hopefully allow historians to transcend the borders of the present day nation states and integrate the region within the larger sphere of the adjacent polities of East and Southeast Asia two hundred years ago. I am not just thinking of transcending the Indonesian, Malaysian, Singaporean and Philippine borders but also those of close neighbours such as Burma or Siam (and perhaps even Sri Lanka where basically the same developments occurred as on Java), and of course also of the southern coast of China and the coastal waters of Vietnam, which also witnessed waves of piracy and an immense growth of maritime trade and, in the case of Vietnam, a change of regime with the rise of the Tayson dynasty.

As a matter of fact, because of the "crossroads" location that the Southeast Asian region has long enjoyed in terms of flows of religions, ideas and international trade, we are also inevitably forced to cast our net even wider and conceptualize the region and the period in terms of global history and, where necessary, pay close attention to motives and mentalities of such western actors on the scene as the Dutch, English, Spaniards and Americans as rulers, traders, entrepreneurs, adventurers and even missionaries of the Christian religion.

Indeed in this respect, the 1780-1830 period can in political terms best be described as the era in which the metropolitan mind of London and The Hague took over from vice-regal autocracies of Calcutta and Batavia. In economic terms, we also see much institutional change: the emergence of private entrepreneurs, shipping companies and trading houses at the expense of the chartered East India Companies; monopolistic trade practices increasingly replaced by an expansion of "free trade" and the institutions that came with it, including the agency houses (think of the Bombay agency houses dealing in cotton and opium for China but also their subsidiaries established during the British interregnum in Batavia);[5] shifting patterns of trade between Europe and Asia, in particular the introduction of English and later Dutch textiles and machinery; and new ways of exploiting the agricultural and fiscal resources of the colonial territories.

In India's case, Bayly suggests that territorial revenues rather than trade became the chief economic prize for the British in the East during this era. Indeed, the years 1780-1830 also saw -- apart from a massive expansion of British dominion -- the introduction of new techniques of governance and exploitation. Because the introduction of the land rent system on Java would take several decades before it bore fruit, it took the Dutch administration on Java a much longer time before it was able to reach the same goal as the English in Bengal.

There is a veritable embarrassment of choice for studying the period and region from the points of view of autonomous history, regional history, or global history. How should we deal with the widespread "piracy", raiding or freebooting in this particular period? Should it be seen as successful "time-honoured" raiding practices or as the "tribal break outs" that Bayly observed in continental southern Asia? If there is the possibility of readdressing European-Asian relations as Chris Bayly has advocated, why not re-address the relations between South China and Southeast Asia during this particular period too?

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[5] In this particular context, it is also interesting to take note of the fact that during the same period, the organization of Chinese overseas shipping was transformed, as the well-known *Yang hang* of Xiamen were gradually replaced by the *shang hang* from many other ports on the Southeastern coast of China.

Here I finally would like to suggest yet another way of looking at the period by drawing attention to the so-called "change of regime" approach which has become popular quite recently among social scientists and political scientists. It enables us to look at the events not necessarily in terms of "empire" but in terms of political science as such. We have seen that no less than three changes of regime occurred in the period under study. This indicates how successive (colonial) regimes attempted to deal with a quickly-changing situation in insular Southeast Asia. By focusing on changes in administration we of course run the risk of depending too much on the archival data and the colonial mind that is behind them. But nothing restrains us from reading these sources against the grain. We only need to look at what Ann Stoler on Southeast Asian history, countless subaltern scholars on Indian history and postmodernist vigilantes on global history have been telling us, in order to sense the possibilities.

"Transitology" or the study of regime change is a hotly discussed issue nowadays among political scientists, specifically because Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa are undergoing or have undergone periods of political and cultural reconstitution.[6]

Within the recent studies that have been made of regime change, democratization is generally seen as the goal of the transition process. Whether this is always the case can be questioned but we generally do see that in most cases some kind of social contract is reached between the new regime and the people. In that sense, something of a democratic moment can be observed. Moreover the new regime almost always promises a brighter future. The study of régime change and the particular ways in which the events evolve has challenged historians and social scientists to design theoretical models in order to systematize and theoretically analyze the often chaotic events. For the social scientist, it is important to understand how a period of transition unfolds because this critical stage

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[6] See for instance: Ido de Haan, *Transitional Politics and Cultural Reconstruction after Large Scale Violence; an overview of recent literature and a research Design* (Utrecht, public lecture 21-05-2002).

may have great implications on the eventual success of the new regime in establishing itself and consolidating.

There are basically four dimensions to regime change: we may discern a political, a juridical, an economic and a cultural dimension. Let's look at the *political dimension* first: here it is important to observe that we are not witnessing just a change of personal regime, but basically a change of political system. The transitional phase of this change is characterized by an initial phase of *institutional breakdown* and often political conflicts – followed up by a phase of *reconstruction and consolidation*. The institutional breakdown may occur abruptly or through gradual changes of régime that may have exogenous (war, decolonization, military intervention) or endogenous (reforms, negotiations, revolutionary) causes. Among the leaders involved, one may distinguish between hardliners, who are intransigent, and soft-liners who are willing to negotiate. The balance of power between the groups concerned plays a decisive role in how an interim regime is formed.

The success of the second phase of reconstruction, *habituation and consolidation* depends of several factors. Firstly, it is necessary to examine the degree to which a people accept a new government as a legitimate one. Secondly, the character of the preceding regime is important. If there is a transition from a totalitarian regime towards a more democratic one not only does the political system have to change, but its successor will need to include a social component which was lacking during its predecessor's reign. This may create tensions which will dissolve the new regime.

In this connection, the relation between the old and new regime is important. Social or economic conflicts may be solved by a redistribution of the resources. An ideological conflict however will need a change of mentality. Changes of regime in that sense also have a juridical dimension. The law often becomes an instrument of political reconstruction. The law legitimates the new order while it de-legitimates the old order. Finally there is the economic dimension. This will primarily involve economic repair, the

reorganization of the monetary system, repair of the fiscal system, combating the black market, and the restoration of the infrastructure.

In Conclusion

Even if it is taken for granted that the above theories apply to economically relatively developed countries in transition in our own age, it makes sense to inquire to what extent this four dimensional toolkit for régime change can be applied to the era and area under study -- Maritime Southeast Asia at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Changes of régime were of course a common phenomenon in traditional Southeast Asia, to the extent that each succession to the throne – as Schrieke has pointed out in his essays on Javanese court politics in the seventeenth and eighteenth century – amounted to a veritable changing of the guards at the court, often resulting in a great number of deaths, but despite this the general tenor of traditional court politics did not change.

It is indeed a challenge to readdress this particular period in Southeast Asian history by looking at the region not only from local, national, and regional perspectives, but also from a global point of view, and at the same time applying new strategies such as the regime change approach with an international team of historians. A first attempt to set an agenda for this research will be made in a pilot conference, which is scheduled to be co-hosted by ARI and IIAS in January 2006 in Singapore. All those who are interested to participate should contact me at the earliest opportunity.

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