

Symposium on Societal Organization in Mainland Southeast Asia Prior to the Eighteenth Century: Foreword

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Using primary historical sources, scholars are seeking to determine what can be said about the societal organization of Southeast Asian states prior to the eighteenth century. Current views on this question divide roughly into two: Advocates of the legacy of Hindu contact see a horizontally layered society with a caste or class arrangement; those drawing on social data from the present see a vertically organized society of semi-independent lords with their own fortresses and villages. Participants in this venture are seeking to determine whether either of these formulations or others better fit the materials.

Data are drawn from Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In pairs, a historian and an anthropologist will address the same critical evidence on a given country or state, reporting their conclusions individually. Commentators will help shape and draw the implications for the societal organization of Southeast Asia.

So ran the announcement for a meeting of scholars that took place 25 March 1983 at the San Francisco meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. With this notice went a letter inviting historians and anthropologists with a specialty in one of the four countries mentioned above to participate, either as a paper writer or commentator on the papers. Their contributions form the body of the papers that follow.

Societal organization is an anthropologist's label for a bundle of mostly familiar matters concerning the various segments of a population. In Southeast Asia the populations are hierarchically ordered into social stations ranging from nobles to slaves. We ask, how is the station acquired, what are its duties and privileges, how does a person change station, etc.? Thus debt slaves may regain freedom by repayment of their debts, while prisoners of war and their children are perpetual slaves. Where the obligations of stations are fixed, we approach a society layered into castes; on the basis of flexible definition of obligation we approach an individualistic ordering of society. If we consider authority over others, it may be centralized into few hands or dispersed to many; so societies vary between absolute monarchy and absolute anarchy.

Less familiar are the models of societies that can be projected by combining two or more variables. Reference in the announcement to "horizontally" and "vertically" organized societies offer examples of model making. They come from combinations of fixed or flexible duties with centralized or dispersed authority. Four societies are possible under these conditions. Combining fixed duties with a centralized authority, we find encasted people ruled by an absolute monarch as in a Hindu kingdom. It is a horizontally-oriented society in the sense that people are confined to their stations and not allowed to rise or fall to another station. On the other hand, a vertically-oriented society results from combining flexible duties with dispersed authority. Such a society operates under many centers of authority; possibly, shortages of workers in these small units

necessitate flexible definition of duties. Competition between the authorities promotes barriers between them. People rise and fall vertically within these small units that resemble Italian city states or the Shan states of Burma. Two other societal designs are possible: One, with flexibly defined duties under a centralized authority, suggests an industrialized state, perhaps like Switzerland. The combination of fixed duties with dispersed authority resembles the black Lolo nobles of Szechwan with their captive slaves. In the present context we are only concerned with the first two: the horizontal and vertical models.

At this moment we lack standards for gauging the fixedness of social duties and the degree of centralization of authority. When someone tells of people rising from rural obscurity to urban prominence, we can agree on the accuracy of the description but may be undecided on whether these rises occur often enough to warrant defining duties as flexible. Sometimes what now looks flexible may result from a short-lived reallocation of labour due to war or flood; soon affairs will return to a more prolonged rigidity. Likewise many states provide for centralized authority, but when we read of yesterday's usurper of the crown or today's coup d'état, centralization is at least ineffective. The number of heads of Southeast Asian states who have survived a decade in office are few, and history shows still fewer who have successfully established dynasties. Perhaps the category "continuous" or "intermittent" holding-of-office should be introduced prior to asking the degree of centralization, for only continuing government can be properly called centralized or dispersed.

To avoid some of these quandaries, the present topic has been set in a different context. Here we have expanded consideration of a single society to consideration of four. Judgments could become less parochial when viewed in comparison with other societies. In addition we have moved the focus from the present to the past. Perhaps then some complexities simplify as details of a receding subject blur into the distance. Time and change are also introduced by juxtaposing past to present, like the new vision of an adult friend after having seen his graduation picture in the High School Year Book. Thus this inquiry has become broadly set in the time and space of the Southeast Asian subcontinent.

Among scholars of this subcontinent, Coedès looms as the great contributor. He called our attention not only to Hindu gods, rituals, and kings but to Hindu caste in the states prior to the thirteenth century.¹ Traces of caste remain in Bali, and the hierarchized pronouns of address in the regional languages may well have survived from this time. The gulf between rulers and ruled could have arisen from this heritage. Rulers had their own royal language, patrilineal reckoning of kinship, residence apart from commoners, and, at least in Thailand, occasional reference to rulers as *kshatriya*.² From this evidence one may suppose that in the final days of these Hinduized states, the stations of society were more rigidly defined and authority concentrated in a single voice. Of course, the effects of this Hindu influence could be better defined, if we knew the societal organization that preceded it, perhaps represented in Ban Chiang and Dong Son cultures. To date we have too little information.

Another approach, though it brings cold chills to historians, projects selected features of today's societal organization into the past. Where a given item is broadly spread, such as Murdock's cognatic reckoning of Southeast Asian kinship together with generation-

¹George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1968), passim.

²Phraya Prachackitkaracak, *Phongsawadan Yonok* [Chronicles of Yonok] (Krungtheb: Phrae whitthaya 2505, 6th printing), e.g., pp. 109, 163, 208.

bound nomenclature, there may be grounds for inferring antiquity.³ My own interest in patrons with their entourages has led me to believe these structures are widespread in villages of Burma, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Thailand.⁴ Here is a simple module of societal organization that can be built into multiple shapes, as Tambiah's galactic patterns of political organization indicate.⁵ The module is as simple as a bamboo house, buildable anywhere with local materials, easily erected and easily discarded. The pattern implies a society with fluid positions and multiple authorities.

In one sense these two leads to societal organization are contradictory. The Hindu-based pattern with fixed stations and a single voice of authority is the opposite of the patron-entourage pattern with fluid stations and multiple authorities. There cannot be both a horizontal and vertical organization of society at the same time. However, some of our colleagues preferred to see the two models as extreme positions on continua of flexibility and of dispersion of authority; most societies fit somewhere between these limits. These horizontal and vertical models may also be seen standing at differing points in time. In the eight centuries since the demise of Hinduized states, social rigidity may have decreased and the voices of authority multiplied. This latter formulation lies beyond the scope of the present enquiry while standing firmly as an eventual goal, charting directions of societal change over the centuries.

In the aftermath of our meeting in San Francisco, it has been easier to formulate the objectives of our investigation than was the case in the year prior to the meeting. Michael Aung-Thwin doubtless expressed the quandary of many fellow participants when he wrote me a letter in May 1982 asking, "When you say 'societal organization', do you mean political and economic structure also or more strictly social structure?" In a reply that reached all participants, I answered, "Unfortunately I am as unable to define my 'societal organization' as Michael is." Instead I described the genesis of the problem from my experience. Thus the papers that follow may seem diverse because the objective has only now received a rather more systematic definition. Writers were free to make what they wished of the statement they received, as long as they said something about pre-eighteenth century society on the basis of some primary historical document.

All set out to determine the formally recognized stations in each society, and three of the four pairs of co-workers found legal codes to guide them. These explorers were well aware of the limitations of the cold language of statute. They would have to determine how to read a line on the basis of inference. They might never know on what occasion it was written, who wrote the text, whom it was addressing. Moreover, the line could be read as a proclamation, as cogent advice to some listener, as a vision of a better day, or in half a dozen other ways.

In contrast the Cambodian *chbap*, as a guide to social stations, had the advantage of rising from a clearer social context than the legal codes. These aphoristic verses offer pithy counsel that might embellish conversation, the songs of performers at a temple fair, or a sermon chanted from the pulpit. Apparently they crossed the lips of officials, commoners, and slaves; the poor, pious, and greedy as well. As for the legal codes,

³George P. Murdock, "Cognatic Forms of Social Organization", in *Social Structure in Southeast Asia*, ed. George P. Murdock (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1960), pp. 1–14.

⁴Lucien M. Hanks, "The Thai Social Order as Entourage and Circle", in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society, Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp*, ed. G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 197–218.

⁵Tambiah, S.J., *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), Chapter 7.

scratched on palm leaves and stored away in some lacquered cabinet, they may never have been seen by judges. Neither medium tells us very much about its effect on society, but each leaves behind a differing residue. While legal codes conjure up visions of an orderly society, the world addressed by the *chbap* is chaotic, survival depending on the right decision, made not by the judge but by the actor, who may very well be himself a criminal.

The juxtaposition of historian with anthropologist was intended as mutual reinforcement. The practised eye of historians is indispensable for finding the most pertinent document and for relating it to a particular time and place. Anthropologists' sensitivities to social form add variety and sharpen details of societal organization. While historians move with ease among the clauses of a document, anthropologists grasp wildly in all directions for a fuller context. As the presumption of constancy through time is a cardinal sin for historians, judgments made out of context are cardinal sins among anthropologists. History began with discontinuity; anthropology with continuity. The essays that follow reveal some of the tensions of strangers on their way to better acquaintance.

The collaboration of Aung-Thwin with Lehman, rather than suggesting tensions, reveals easy familiarity. Historian Aung-Thwin could be mistaken for an anthropologist as he lays out the stations of Burmese society and places them in a social whole shaped to counter anarchy. In turn Lehman is freed for the next step, comparing the societal organizations of Burma and Thailand. Before the study of Southeast Asia is complete, many more such comparisons must be made.

Wyatt and Kirsch show themselves adventurous students of a little-known code of law from northern Thailand. In Wyatt's paper we find the historian scrutinizing the document as if it were a botanical specimen of unknown genus needing precise description and comparison. Style and literary traditions provide clues for his judgment. Kirsch nimbly reaches for the Ram Khamhaeng inscription, Buddhism, ecology, familiarity with Thai culture, and much else to form a context for the provisions of the code. The outline emerges, built from a hierarchic core where power centers on the king reinforced in his power by the code itself.

Chandler, having selected the *chbap* as a lens to sixteenth-to-eighteenth-century Cambodia, could find no social stations firmly defined but many stations indicated by polarized concepts: the wild succumbs to the civilized; the new is false, the tried is usually true; while ordinary people speak rashly, those of good family speak wisely. Ebihara found few of these stations firm enough evidence for shaping a society, so that she turned to the descriptive literature to reach the vertical and horizontal dimensions of Cambodia.

In Vietnam we discover that scholarly enquiry has passed beyond description of societal organization to examining changes in definition of stations through the centuries and seeking causes for these changes. The seventeenth-century Lê dynasty code then becomes the fixed measure against which Whitmore and Haines reckon change or its absence. Comparing Vietnam of this period with China and ethnographic features of Southeast Asia, Whitmore notes greater similarity of Vietnam with Southeast Asia. Haines is less confident of this similarity. China's period of contact has lasted more than two thousand years, but how deeply Chinese ways have penetrated and at what rate is yet to be defined.

The duration and effect of any change in societal organization is a late question in the sequence of scholarly enquiry. The underlying questions are still being posed in most parts of Southeast Asia, so that the areas for inquiry remain vast. Though grateful for

these stout beginnings, we dare not blind ourselves to the enormous labours required to complete the panoramic sequence of a subcontinent in space and time.

The search for a broader vision of patrons, clients, and entourages prompted this collaboration. I shall long be grateful to these colleagues for their painstaking responses to my question. They showed, first, that to be useful in the context beyond Thailand, my question needed reshaping. To be sure, they found specimens of patrons, etc. throughout Southeast Asia. Though in Vietnam vestiges survived in the voluntary aspects of kinship, fixed mechanisms of societal organization predominated. More importantly, these colleagues indicated the need to examine the particular social context of the patrons with their entourages. They pointed to the easy utility of patrons and clients in shaping a group. As Aung Thwin maintained, Burmese society depended on forming a hierarchy to achieve a working order, a type of relationship that was apparently needed in other Southeast Asian states as well. The patron-client relationship is one of the mechanisms for attaining this kind of order and is a simple means ever ready for action but one that is fragile over time, better for the emergency than the long haul.

Social organization, anthropologists tell us, aids the survival of a society by helping it adapt to the environment in which it is located. Because of its simplicity, the entourage may cope best with the Southeast Asian scene of the past, when population was scant and hands for common work scarce. It would be useful to see whether the abandonment of the entourage corresponds with the gradual cumulation of a stable population. As an ample supply of hands emerges, more enduring mechanisms may be substituted that require less attention for their workings. Here hereditary obligations and socially fixed stations may enter.

The societies which have been reviewed here all have these more enduring offices and self-perpetuating groups. Simplest were the northern Thai city states, while Vietnam in Lê times appeared to be institutionalized with greatest complexity. All of them, however, stood successfully for a time, since they left tangible evidence of their existence for scholars to examine. To complete the perspective that is proposed, we would have to examine the organization of those that failed, a job well beyond the scope of the present undertaking. Yet an instance of transition may have passed in view when the Lê code in Vietnam lapsed in favour of Chinese law. Could this have been a governmental response to a more complex society as well as to living in the shadow of China?

In Cambodia we may have been witnessing an era of simplification where population was diminishing, yet old offices remained vestigially. The *Chbap* often referred ironically to officials; unofficial, self-made authorities were more dependable; people seemed to be turning for guidance from a weakening state to whatever source could be found. Here could be the scene where patrons and entourages might be revived.

Whatever be the fate of these patrons, clients, and entourages, these papers seem to fit the more catholic interests of today's Southeast Asian scholars, who are turning from the single quarter where they are literate to a broader view. Battles that we knew only from the word of one protagonist can be now viewed more frequently from multiple perspectives. Lehman's comparison of Burmese with Thai officialdom is a fruitful move toward this larger encompassment that will reveal similarities as well as differences between states. Tracing the directions of common or parallel development among the more isolated societies lies farther ahead, but other students may find guidance from the liabilities and assets of this study.