

Communications to the Editor

On a Review of Centers, Symbols, and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia

Kenneth R. Hall has failed to understand clearly *Centers, Symbols, and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia*, which he reviewed in *JAS* (45, no. 2 [February 1986]: 448–49). His treatment of my article on precolonial Burma is particularly misleading. First, what purports to be my “thesis” was actually my general philosophical stance on approaching Burmese history, i.e., the *emphasis* on continuity, set forth in the introduction of the article to address some of the issues of the “conference” which spawned the work under review. It comprised about four pages of the total forty-one, had an underlined subtitle indicating that it was the “introduction,” and was more than adequately qualified in any case. If Hall really wanted to know what the “thesis” was, all he had to do was read the title—that gave it away. Besides, to wish for an approach emphasizing change, when it was made clear that I see more continuity in Burmese history, is like lamenting an avowed economic historian’s decision not to focus on religious history, or tantamount to suggesting that one’s data somehow be made to support a cherished perspective of the reviewer.

Second, and more serious, is Hall’s remark wishing that I had dealt with “the syncretization of the Theravada Buddhist and indigenous (*nat*) traditions” (p. 449) when that is precisely what I did in the following thirty-seven pages. Not only did I discuss the numerous ways in which formal Theravada Buddhist notions of kingship were reshaped and reinterpreted by indigenous history in the context of Burmese supernaturalism (the *nat* tradition) to create Burmese conceptions of kingship (incidentally, the “thesis”) but I showed quite clearly, by numerous examples taken from all periods of precolonial Burmese history, the continuity and validity of those conceptions of leadership at least until the end of the monarchy in the late nineteenth century; indeed, some would argue that in certain respects, until today. Thus Hall’s unwillingness to acknowledge continuity in Burmese history—even *prima facie* since it is a field well outside his specialization in any case—his preoccupation with that issue as if it were the “thesis” when it was only an introductory summary of my general philosophical stance in the context of the discipline as a whole; and the incredible statement that he wished I had written on a subject that was so obviously the thrust of the article, leads me to only two possible conclusions: one, either he did not read the article except for the first four pages; or two, it was incomprehensible to him.

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