WEEK FIVE
CHARTING THE SHAPE OF EARLY MODERN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
EARLY MODERN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The early modern period is increasingly recognized as a watershed in human history. For the first time the world was physically united by the opening of direct trade routes between Europe and every other corner of the globe. Yet at least by the second half of the seventeenth century, it is now clear, northwestern Europe and Japan parted company from the other Eurasian civilizations to pursue their capitalist transformations. The relations between the countries of Europe’s Atlantic seaboard and the rest of the world became ever more weighted with inequality, not only in military effectiveness (the first sign to appear), but in productivity, technology, scientific method and eventually self-esteem.

While Europe’s “miracle” is difficult to disentangle from its military and economic domination of more populous quarters of the world, Japan followed a very different route. Isolating itself from all foreign contact save that provided by tightly-controlled Dutch and Chinese trade at Nagasaki, the Tokugawa shogunate unified the country, banned the use of firearms, and developed a flourishing urban economy which laid the basis for Japan’s twentieth-century rise. By holding its population constant while substantially increasing productivity and welfare, Japan achieved economic advances in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which matched those of the most advanced European countries (Smith 1988, 15–49).

The Japanese case in particular, and the globalization of the issues in general by many of the most influential modern historians (Braudel, Wallerstein, Barrington Moore, Cipolla, Parker), have made it clear that the early modern period is critical for every part of the world. If the capitalist “miracle” was not limited to Europe, then each case needs to be studied with care to examine what happened and why. We can no longer think in simplistic terms of winners and losers, of capitalist Europe and a third world
doomed to stagnation and poverty, but rather of a variety of ways of coping with the explosive forces at work in the period.

Japan belatedly forced itself upon the attention of economic historians by its spectacular twentieth century performance, which undermined attempts to identify unique socio-cultural features of Europe which made capitalism possible. Although Japan was the first Asian country to complete the transition to industrial capitalism, it is certainly not the last. Southeast Asian economies too, led by Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, have recently grown as rapidly as any known to history. There too economic confidence gives rise to intellectual confidence. Instead of the question what was “wrong” with Asian cultures, as was frequently asked only a few decades ago, attention begins to be paid to what is “right” about them. Neither question is helpful, but it is no longer possible to assume that the place of Asia in the static or declining “third world” was ordained by environment or culture.

In the extraordinary period between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, Southeast Asia played a critical role. The global commercial expansion of the “long sixteenth century” necessarily affected it immediately and profoundly, as the source of many of the spices in international demand and as a maritime region athwart vital trade routes. It was the region most affected by the explosion of Chinese maritime activity at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and the source of the spices and much of the pepper that drew the Spanish to America and eventually the Philippines, and the Portuguese to India and Southeast Asia. The quickening of commerce, the monetization of transactions, the growth of cities, the accumulation of capital and the specialization of function which formed part of a capitalist transition elsewhere, undoubtedly occurred rapidly also in Southeast Asia during this period. The changes wrought in belief and cultural systems were even more profound. Islam and Christianity became the dominant religions of the Archipelago and pockets of the Mainland, while Buddhism was transformed by its alliance with centralizing states in Burma, Siam, Laos and Cambodia.

On the other hand no part of Asia suffered more quickly or profoundly the effects of European intrusion. Through warfare, impregnable fortifications and monopoly commerce, Europeans had by 1650 gained control of the vital ports and products which had previously linked the region to the expanding world economy. Although they remained minor, peripheral players in the ongoing life of the region, they had changed the delicate balance between commerce and kingship. Like Japan, yet even more abruptly, Southeast Asian countries all discovered the negative side of the expansion of global commerce and the rapid advance of military technology. Unlike Japan, they were unable to insulate themselves from it without fundamental change to their political systems.
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A PLACE

For these reasons Southeast Asia is a region which has a vital place in resolving the crucial dilemmas of early modern history. But is it a region at all? Unlike western Europe, India, the Arab World, China or even "Sinicized" east Asia as a whole, it has no common high religion, language or classical culture (except those it loosely shares with India), and has never been part of a single polity. Its very name is an externally-imposed geographical convenience, which has only recently replaced even less satisfactory terms such as Further India or Indo-China.

Yet those who travel to Southeast Asia from China, India, or anywhere else, know at once that they are in a different place. In part this is a question of environment. Physically marked by its warm climate, high and dependable rainfall, and ubiquitous waterways, Southeast Asia developed lifestyles dominated by the forest, the rice-growing river-valleys, and fishing. Its people grew the same crops by the same methods, ate the same food in the same manner, and lived in similar houses elevated on poles against the perils of flood or forest animals. Its geography militated against the unified empires arising from great rivers or vast plains. It generated instead a multiplicity of political forms interlinked by the ease of waterborne transport.

Paradoxically, it is the diversity of Southeast Asia and its openness to outside influences which is its pre-eminent defining characteristic. Every state of the region was built on cultural trade-offs between internal and external. Overall population density was low, probably averaging no more than six per square kilometre in this period. Pockets of dense settlement around trading cities and permanent rice-fields were surrounded by forests thinly peopled by shifting cultivators. This created a fundamental dualism of hill and valley, upstream and downstream, interior and coast. In coastal waters boat-dwelling "sea nomads" had similar relations with rulers ashore. No state incorporated these peoples fully. They remained an "uncivilized", stateless, or "free" penumbra of the state, often indispensable providers of forest or sea products, messengers, warriors and slaves—tributary but distinct.

Despite their dependence on such hinterland peoples, rulers were more preoccupied by their relations with rival powers controlling other rivers and ports. Even if the stronger rulers claimed through their titles and the architecture of their capitals to be cakravartin world-rulers embodying on earth the Indic gods in heaven, they were all intensely conscious that they inhabited a pluralistic world. Political life was an endless struggle for people, for trade and for status between rival centres. The exchanging of envoys and letters was one of the finer political arts, and words and gestures were studied for the slightest hint of superiority or inferiority. Success in this competitive world was measured by the number of ships in the harbour, of men, boats and elephants in royal processions, of tributaries from nearby and equals from afar who paid their respects to the king.

Between about 1400 and 1700, universalist faiths based on sacred scripture took hold throughout the region. Eventually they created profound divisions between an Islamic arc in the south, a Confucian political orthodoxy in Vietnam, a Theravada Buddhist bastion in the rest of the Mainland and a Christian outlier in the Philippines. Yet even in the process of religious change there was a common openness to outside ideas, a common need for allies from further afield in order to subordinate rivals closer to hand.

Perhaps the key fact that made Southeast Asia a region was that the barriers which separated it from China and India were more significant than any internal boundaries. The majority of outsiders who came to the region did so by means of long sea voyages. Malay-speakers (who in this period included maritime traders of every ethnon-linguistic group) identified their region as "below the winds", in distinction to the world of outsiders (especially Indians, Arabs and Europeans) who came from "above the winds" by taking advantage of the prevailing Indian Ocean monsoon. For Chinese and Japanese, Southeast Asia was the "south seas", also reached by sea. Even adoption of outside faiths did not eliminate the distinctiveness of a region uniquely defined by nature. The mountain barriers across the north of the region, and the sea elsewhere, ensured that while Southeast Asians were endlessly involved in exchanges of territory, people, and ideas with each other, invasions from the rest of the Asian land mass were few and migrations gradual.

Vietnam's relation with China might appear to give the lie to the above. Ruled by the Middle Kingdom for most of the first Christian millennium, Vietnam acquired its writing system and consequently much of its literary culture from China. Yet alone of the southern regions conquered by the Han and Tang Dynasties, the people of the Red River delta retained sufficient of their identity to claim their independence in 939, and reclaim it on each subsequent occasion Chinese armies invaded. The last serious invasion was that of the Ming, who reoccupied Vietnam from 1407 to 1428 but were driven out by the Vietnamese hero Le Loi, founder of the most brilliant of Vietnamese dynasties. Under the Le rulers Vietnamese political institutions were rebuilt in a more Confucian mould than ever, but the centralized mandarinate which resulted was used to ensure that Vietnam remained permanently independent of China.

Vietnam thus became a barrier to any further Chinese southward expansion by land. Although the hills which formed its northern border were by no means impassable, they were sufficient to serve as a stable frontier for a thousand years. By contrast Vietnam's southern border was constantly
changing, as Vietnamese armies had the better of their ceaseless wars first with Champa and later with Cambodia. It is therefore impossible to draw a line round early modern Southeast Asia which excludes Vietnam. Despite its cultural and commercial links with China, Vietnam was Southeast Asian. Particularly so was the southern Vietnamese kingdom established by Nguyen Hoang on former Cham territory. Not only through its intermingling of Vietnamese and Austronesian (Chamic) peoples, but also through its physical environment, its place in Asian trade, and the timing of its rise to prominence, this kingdom was characteristic of early modern Southeast Asia.

A TIME

As historiography has begun to break out of a European mould and consider comparative questions on a broader basis, the category Early Modern has gained currency. As against such older terms as Renaissance, Reformation, or Age of Discovery, it has the advantage of being less culture-bound to a European schema, less laden with triumphalist values. Nevertheless it has its own burden of associations, implying that it is in this period that we see the emergence of the forces which would shape the modern industrial world. That implication seems acceptable at the global level, provided there is no suggestion that all its constituents were somehow locked into the same path.

Definitions vary, but all those who use the term early modern include in it the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with more or less extension backward into the fifteenth and forward into the eighteenth. Southeast Asianists are only now beginning to apply the term to their region, however, and some justification is required as to how we propose to apply it. In the past historians of Mainland Southeast Asia (and to a lesser extent Java) have typically periodized in terms of dynasties (e.g. "Late Ayudhya", "First Toungoo", "Le"), while the rise of Islam and the coming of Europeans have been seen as the major turning points in the islands. Despite the desire of a post-colonial generation to escape from Eurocentric assumptions, those who have generalized about the whole region have found it difficult to avoid the Portuguese arrival at Melaka (Malacca) in 1509 as a turning point.

Only in one respect can this be accepted without qualification. The sources available to the historian change in nature and increase greatly in quantity with the opening of the sixteenth century. The Portuguese, and still more their successors the Spanish and Dutch, chronicled and described Southeast Asia in far greater detail than the Arabs and Chinese before them. The bronze-plate inscriptions which had been the major indigenous sources were already becoming scarce in the fourteenth century. They are replaced by royal and religious chronicles, poetry, and edifying texts written on ephemeral materials, increasingly paper. Virtually no such texts have survived from before 1500. The earliest substantial works surviving are copies from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with only a handful of sixteenth and seventeenth century texts preserved by chance in European libraries.

When we look with care at the factors critical to the early modern era in Southeast Asia, however, most of them begin before the arrival of European fleets. These are examined below under four heads: a commercial upturn; new military technology; the growth of new, more centralized states; and the spread of externally-validated scriptural orthodoxies in religion. While the sixteenth century materials can be read to reconstruct the fifteenth, it must be admitted that the evidence available to document these trends before 1500 remains unsatisfactory. I have argued elsewhere (Reid 1990a, 5-6) that 1400 is a more satisfactory beginning for this critical period of change than 1500, but the fragmentary nature of the evidence makes any such precision highly problematic.

COMMERCIAL UPTURN

The determination of the Portuguese and Spanish to find the sources of pepper, clove and nutmeg was a consequence of their growing importance in European life. In the 1590s about six metric tons of cloves and one and a half of nutmeg reached Europe each year from Maluku in eastern Indonesia. A century later this had risen to fifty-two tons of cloves and twenty-six tons of nutmeg. The spices were carried across the Indian Ocean by Muslim traders of various nationalities to markets in Egypt and Beirut where they were purchased by Italian merchants, predominately Venetians. This was of course only a small branch of Southeast Asia's trade, but its rapid expansion in the fifteenth century was probably replicated elsewhere. The fifteenth century was a time of expansion in population and international commerce not only in the Mediterranean but also in Southeast Asia's largest external market, China. The reign of the second Ming Emperor Yongle (1403-22) was a period of completely exceptional Chinese involvement with the region, which appears to have stimulated the pepper and clove trade, increased the circulation of silver and other metals, and given rise to a number of new port-cities.

While the economic history of the fifteenth century must remain speculative, a peak in Southeast Asian commercial activity in the early seventeenth century is clearer. England and Holland joined the Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese and Indians in competing to buy the products of the region—pepper, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, sandalwood, lacquer, silk
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applied equally to Southeast Asia: "Before the year 1494, wars were protracted, battles bloodless ... and although artillery was already in use, it was managed with such lack of skill that it caused little hurt". (Guicciardini, cited in Parker 1988, 10). Hence the initial impact of the far more rapid fire the Portuguese were able to deliver in their attack on Melaka or later in Maluku was profound (Sejarah Melayu 167; Galvão 1544, 171; Reid 1993a, 219–33, 270–81; Lieberman 1980, 215).

The advantage of surprise was short-lived. Southeast Asian states quickly devoted themselves to acquiring Portuguese-style arquebuses and cannon and the means to manufacture them. Foreign traders appeared the most adept at the new technology—notably Portuguese, Turks, Gujaratis, Japanese and local Muslim minorities such as Chams, Malays and "Luzons" (Muslim Tagalogs). These were bribed or forced to become artillerymen in the campaigns for the more ambitious kings of the sixteenth century, and eventually formed the first professional armies of the region. Two successive Toungoo kings who unified Burma in the period 1531–81, Tabinshwehti and Bayinnaung, made most effective use of both foreign mercenaries and firearms. An Italian visitor claimed Bayinnaung had accumulated eighty thousand arquebuses and adapted them effectively for firing from elephants (Fredericke 1581, 248).

These military achievements undoubtedly helped create an unprecedented accumulation of power, which at its height ruled most of present-day Burma and Thailand. To a lesser degree the same methods helped Demak to become the strongest power in Java during the reign of Sultan Trenggana (1520–51) and mad Aceh, Makasar and Ayudhya (Siam) relatively strong and centralized powers in the early seventeenth century. Nguyen Hoang's creation of a state in central Vietnam also owed much to his mobilization of the new weapons.

The Archipelago states were particularly attracted to the largest possible cannons. In the late sixteenth century Aceh was manufacturing bigger cannon than European visitors had seen, as a result of instruction in the 1560s by Turkish craftsmen. Very large cannons were also being made in Manila when the Spanish took it in 1570, while Mataram and Makasar in the seventeenth century each cast a cannon more than five metres long (Reid 1982, 4; Lombard 1990, II: 179). Poorly mounted and virtually immobile, these monsters were appreciated not so much for the targets they hit as for the awe their semi-magical powers inspired.

New naval technologies were also introduced in the sixteenth century. Chief among them were the fast war galleys which were adopted from the Mediterranean model, with both Turks and Europeans playing a role in their spread. Scores of large galleys were built for sixteenth century rulers of Aceh (Manguin 1993), but this type of vessel had an even longer history in

and deer-hides. Prices were kept high by a massive inflow of silver from Japan and the New World. Indian cloth of all kinds was imported to the region in exchange for these exports. The data suggest that in 1600–40 both the silver influx and imports of Indian cloth were at a peak which was not again reached until the eighteenth century (Reid 1990a, 4–21).

This international competition narrowed to a few players in the second half of the seventeenth century. The Japanese stopped coming by Tokugawa decree in 1635; the Gujaratis, Arabs and Persians found the European pressure too great; the Portuguese lost their stronghold of Melaka to the Dutch in 1641. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) established a monopoly of nutmeg in 1621, and of cloves during the 1650s. Some degree of competition remained in other products, but the VOC's ability to dominate Southeast Asian supplies made these exports less attractive in world markets.

New products were exported from Southeast Asia in the eighteenth century on a larger scale than ever before—notably sugar, coffee and tobacco. These however were plantation crops largely managed by Europeans and Chinese. The now-dominant Dutch and English Companies found opium more suitable than Indian cloth as an import to Southeast Asia, since they could monopolize supply and reap enormous profits.

NEW MILITARY TECHNIQUES

Advances in technology are most quickly borrowed in the military sphere. It is a question of survival. Firearms are a case in point. Their use is documented in India and China in the fourteenth century, almost simultaneously with their first impact on European battles. Naturally cannons and bombardards also came to Southeast Asia, well ahead of Vasco da Gama. U Kalu's usually reliable chronicle of Burma mentions the use of firearms by Indian soldiers in Burma from the end of the fourteenth century (Lieberman 1980, 211). The presence of firearms is much better documented a century later, when the Portuguese describe, perhaps with some exaggeration, the guns they encountered in the region. In Melaka in 1511, they claimed to have captured three thousand pieces of artillery, mostly of bronze, including a huge bombard sent as a present to the Sultan from the ruler of Calicut in South India. Many cannons were imported by Muslim traders from India, the Middle East and even Europe, while others of an ornate dragon type were brought in by the Chinese. Nevertheless there were also gun-founders in the city, allegedly "as good as those in Germany" (Albuquerque 1557, II: 127–8).

Although in this respect also the beginnings of change predated 1500, the remark made by an Italian historian in the 1520s about Europe would have
Maluku, where the *horaboa* dominated naval warfare from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth. There appears to have been little use of firearms on shipboard prior to the European intrusion. Asian vessels adopted small cannon quickly thereafter, but naval firepower and mobility remained one area in which the Europeans retained a decisive edge.

The other such area was fortification. By introducing to Southeast Asia the new European ideas of defence behind low but thick walls surmounted by batteries of guns, with bastions projecting to provide a field of fire along the walls, the Portuguese made themselves impregnable in Melaka, Ternate and elsewhere, the Spanish in Manila and Zamboanga, and the Dutch in Batavia, Makasar and Maluku. During the early modern period these remained enclaves with little direct influence on their hinterlands, but they provided a permanence which few indigenous dynasties could match. Local rulers responded by building forts more substantial than any traditional defence works, but these proved ultimately incapable of defending their major ports against sustained Dutch offensives.

**NEW STATES**

Southeast Asia was a place of fluid pluralisms, where states rose and fell relatively frequently. The early modern period witnessed the rise of many of the states which have defined Southeast Asia’s modern identities, both national and ethnic. In each case the new military techniques played a part in enabling dynamic rulers to come to the top. The expansion of commerce was also a factor in every case, but in different degrees. Fifteenth century Melaka was one of the new states created by commerce, its capital not on a river but directly on the sea (like its contemporary Gresik in Java, and later Ternate, Makasar and Banten), its import tariffs low, its population inherently urban and pluralistic. Such other states as Aceh, Banten, Makasar and Nguyen Vietnam became important during the most intense period of commercial competition and expansion (c.1560–1630), and could not have done so without the spices and pepper of the Archipelago, and the Sino-Japanese trade of Faifo in the Nguyen dominions.

Other factors aided these unprecedented concentrations of power—Islamic and European models in the Archipelago, and the personal character and relationships of Nguyen Hoang in Vietnam (Taylor 1993). In Sumatra, Mindanao and Burma the critical intersection was between the upstream and downstream foci of power. The new factors sketched above gave downstream commerce the upper hand in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, but the agricultural areas upstream eventually escaped from that attempt to construct a centralized state.

Even in the older-established states of the Mainland, the early modern period saw a significant shift. The revisionist scholarship of Nidhi Aewstivongse has advanced the effective centralization of the Thai polity from the fifteenth century to the reign of Naresuan (1590–1605), when it was stimulated by the commercial and military factors already discussed (Ishii 1993). The Burma depicted by Lieberman undergoes the same move towards “political centralization and cultural homogenization” in the sixteenth century, even if for him that process continued largely uninterrupted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although the proportion of revenue the state derived from trade declined after 1630 (Lieberman 1993).

**SCRIPTURAL ORTHODOXIES**

The strong kings of the early modern period favoured, as Lieberman (1993) puts it, “textually-based, externally-validated . . . sources of authority over local traditions”. Whether they always succeeded in moving popular belief in that direction is less clear. Taylor (1993) protests that in Vietnam “the Neo-Confucian ideology adopted by fifteenth century kings actually retreated before a resurgence of Buddhism and animism” in the subsequent two centuries.

The conversion of the lowland Philippines to Catholicism in the period roughly 1580–1650 is the best documented case of dramatic religious change, though the conversion of much of eastern Indonesia to Islam in the same period is hardly less spectacular. I have argued that the advances of scriptural Islam and Christianity form part of a pattern related to the peak of the commercial upswing. The causes in this case are not simply a more commercial mentality, but direct contacts with the sources of the scriptural traditions, the interests of centralizing rulers in legitimation by some external point of reference, and a militant polarization between the two faiths which drew sharp religio-political boundaries (Reid 1993a, 140–92; Reid 1993c, 151–79).

The tendency towards unification of the Theravada Buddhist *sangha*, through state patronage of reforms and reorganizations on the Sri Lanka model, has some analogies with the most religious change in the Islands (Sweater and Premchitr 1978, 20–33; Than Tun 1985, x–xii). Clearly the process was less sudden and dramatic in most cases, however, particularly because the confrontation between Theravada orthodoxy and animist sacrifices lacked the urgency of that between Islam and Christianity. My argument that there was
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a retreat of this scriptural trend in the Archipelago in the late seventeenth century is rejected by Lieberman (1993) for the Buddhist societies. He argues rather a continuing trend towards cultural uniformity and royal control into the eighteenth century and beyond. Nevertheless, the secular advances he identifies in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (through royal examination of monks, and a tendency toward lay writing in the vernacular rather than monastic writing in Pali) may have parallels in contemporary trends in Southeast Asian Islam and Christianity.

CAPITALISM AND THE END OF A PERIOD

While we should not expect every part of a highly complex region to march in step. Southeast Asia as a whole offers a fine laboratory to look at some of the crucial global questions of the early modern period. Do the tendencies we have remarked above continue until they were overtaken by the rise of industrialization and modern imperialism (affecting Southeast Asia chiefly after 1800), or do they reach some kind of crisis or resolution which we might take as the end of the early modern period? There is an important debate about whether the seventeenth century should be regarded as a watershed for the region or should not (Reid 1993a). Alternative turning points have already been identified by historians—the European intrusion around 1500 and the impact of an industrializing Europe around 1800. The candidates for major turning points are not too different from those argued by European and comparative historians, and the choice, as Wallenstein (1980, 7) points out, has much to do with our "presuppositions about the modern world".

From a Southeast Asian standpoint, the argument for a turning point around 1650 rests on the region’s relations with other peoples (primarily Europeans, but also Chinese), and on the place of international commerce in the life of states. In 1600 Southeast Asians interacted as equals with Europeans; in 1700 the inequalities were already manifest. This change in the balance of power became apparent sooner “below the winds” than elsewhere in Asia because of its maritime character and its reliance on the world market for spices and aromatics, but it was essentially a change in the relations between northwestern Europe and the rest of the world. The debate continues as to the causes of this shift. Was it the rise of capitalism in Europe, a decline or critical failure in Asia, or some combination of the two? Were military, economic, technical or cultural factors more central to the way it turned out?

Most historians would accept that the monopoly the Dutch established over supplies of nutmeg (in 1621) and clove (by the 1650s), their conquest of such key commercial centres as Makassar (1669) and Banten (1682), and their strong-armed quasi-monopoly over most of the other export centres of the Indonesian archipelago, constituted a major setback to indigenous commerce in the islands, and weakened the control of maritime states over their hinterlands. The Spanish conquest of the Philippine archipelago was still more profound an eclipse of indigenous polities and their commercial involvement. The open question is whether these losses were part of a more general “crisis” for Southeast Asia (and perhaps some other parts of Asia), of which military defeat was only one aspect (see Reid 1990b, 639–59).

Lieberman has examined this possibility and rejected it for Burma and to some extent for Southeast Asia as a whole (Lieberman 1993, 1997). He concludes that there was some discontinuity in the seventeenth century, through the removal of the capital far inland and the reduced role which seaborne commerce played thereafter in the revenues and the calculations of the Burmese state. In his view the continuities were still more striking, however. The integration of Shan and Mons into a Burman-dominated polity, begun by the First Toungoo kings in the sixteenth century, was continued in the seventeenth and eighteenth with a steadily increased degree of cultural homogeneity. Despite reduced interest in maritime trade, the monetization of the economy continued to increase throughout the eighteenth century.

Dhírvat na Ponbejra (1993) has also shown for Siam that older western strictures about a retreat into isolation and stagnation are wide of the mark. European trade with Siam certainly languished after the 1688 revolution, but Chinese and Muslim trade continued and may even have grown to fill the gap. While there was an “administrative decline” after 1688 in terms of the crown’s ability to control its subjects, the mid-eighteenth century was a period of great cultural flowering.

Any conclusion must re-emphasize that Southeast Asia was a region united by environment, commerce, diplomacy and war, but diverse in its fragmented polities and cultures. In this it had more in common with Europe than with the great land masses of Asia. Part of its fascination is the diversity of its reactions to the pressures of the period. Generalizations are always suspect.

The balance of evidence seems nevertheless to be that the seventeenth century, particularly its middle decades, was critical for Southeast Asia’s reactions to increased military and economic pressure from the new Dutch-dominated world-system. These reactions necessarily involved some degree of retreat from what came to appear an excessive reliance on international commerce. In global terms the share of Southeast Asians in that commerce was undoubtedly reduced. When the region is seen in its own terms, however,
words such as decline and stagnation are entirely inappropriate. There was
costant change and adaptation to difficult circumstances. The cultural and
political achievements of the eighteenth century were at least as remarkable
as those of the seventeenth or the sixteenth. Many of the trends set in motion
during the early modern era were developed into the foundations of modern
Southeast Asia.

NOTES

1. The Center for Early Modern History at the University of Minnesota makes the point that
comparative study is particularly fruitful in this period, and that "early modern History requires
equal attention to very different cultures as they come into contact with each other".
2. The University of Minnesota is more expansive, taking in 1350 to 1750.
3. The first use of which I am aware is a Michigan dissertation by James Pfeifer (1972)
referring to 1500–39. More recently Victor Lieberman (1990, 70–90) has taken it up.
5. There is not only a shift in Islamic writing from Arabic to Malay and Javanese in the
seventeenth century, but a further shift from Malay into local vernaculars in the eighteenth—
noteably Acehnese and Bugis.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ISLAMIZATION OF
SOUTHEAST ASIA

Like any other religious tradition, Islam in Southeast Asia presents us
with both inside and outside evidence about its history. The inside
evidence is pious nature, as is, for example, the internal evidence about
the conversion of Britain to Christianity. No historical event could more
obviously be a part of God's purpose for man, and therefore the aspects of
the story recalled by Muslim writers are naturally those which show the divine
purpose at work. While almost all the Southeast Asian chronicles describe
supernatural events which accompany the conversion of a state to Islam, the
differences between the type of divine intervention are certainly instructive.
Malay chronicles like those of Pasai, Melaka, and Patani do not differ
markedly from accounts from other parts of the world. They emphasize
divine revelation through dreams, such as those of the rulers of Pasai and
Melaka in turn; or the miraculous powers of a holy man of God, such as
Shaikh Sa'id of Pasai in his healing of the ruler of Patani (Brown 1953, 41–
2; 52–4; "Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai", 116–20; Hikayat Patani, 1: 71–5; see
also the discussion of these texts in Drewes 1968, 436–8). Although these
chronicles are not averse to describing the powers of rulers and the origins of
states in older pre-Islamic terms of magical potency (sakti) they keep their
description of the Islamization process within bounds which would probably
have been acceptable to Muslims in most parts of the world. In the Javanese
Islamic tradition and its Banjar offshoot, however, one finds more frankly
pre-Islamic religious elements. The clearest religious motive for conversion
offered in the Hikayat Bandjar is that the chief of Jipang in East Java "was
very astonished when he saw the radiance (cahaya) of Raja Bungsu [i.e. Raden
Rahmat]". He knelt at Raja Bungsu's feet and requested to be converted to
Islam (Hikayat Bandjar, 420). From the babuds emanating from what Ricklefs