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***The Tools of Transition:
Education and Development in Modern
Southeast Asian History***

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Abstract

Although great importance is attached to the role of education in national development in Southeast Asia, its role has been ambivalent. In the colonial period, education was a central way in which societies mobilised to challenge and resist European rulers. Yet education has also been the central vehicle through which colonial and post-colonial states have sought to impose their own visions and discipline their subjects. Southeast Asia's history has been marked by a cultural willingness to borrow and adapt ideas, practices and institutions from outside. Yet this has also been a source of anxiety and conflict. The 'indigenous' is often a product of an immediate post-colonial history, rather than the expression of a longer cultural experience. Historians can try to provide a useful narrative of regional thinking about education and development in Southeast Asia, particularly during its key 'periods of transition', and thus help to set educational developments within in a wider context. Providing a historical perspective, this paper attempts to map some of the region's capacities and capabilities, and to examine how adequately they have been exploited by the formal educational sector.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Education, Development, Colonialism, Nationalism

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In 1935, one of Java's greatest educators, Ki Hajar Dewantara (1889-1957), reflected on modern education and its accomplishments:

It is not an easy task to go through a period of transition, and it becomes even harder when extraneous factors intervene in the renovation process, greatly hindering a normal adjustment.

How often we have been misled by presumed needs which we considered natural but which we later realized were proper to alien forms of civilization. We discover too late that such demands can be satisfied only with difficulty or not at all from our own resources. Dissatisfaction has thus befallen us, and worse: slowly but surely we have become alienated from our own people and our own environment. This alienation would have been bearable had it not been that in our case the abandonment of our own culture did not at the same time bring access to another civilization. Thus we have sacrificed what was ours but have not gained in its place anything that might be considered its equivalent; we have lost our world, but we have not entered another.

Who is to blame? Our answer is that it is our own fault, though only indirectly so. We had to choose, and we made our choice... We have added much new cultural material, the value of which cannot be discounted; however, it often fits so ill with our own style or is so far removed from it that we can use it at best as a decoration and not as material to build with. It is quite understandable why we have been so mistaken in our choice. In the first place, much has to be chosen, and there has been so little to choose from (Ki Hajar Dewantara (1967), 151).

Ki Hajar Dewantara was the driving force behind one of the most remarkable indigenous educational movements anywhere in the colonial world: the *Taman Siswa*, or 'garden of students', which by 1932 had established over 166 schools in Java and Madura, outside the control of Dutch imperial authorities. It was part of a longer tradition of activism by Indonesian elites, stung by what the Filipino nationalist José Rizal called 'the spectre of comparisons' with Europe, to modernise their societies from within (Anderson, 1998). But, in a break with earlier ventures, and many later initiatives, the *Taman Siswa* leaders were deeply ambivalent about the wholesale adoption of western methods. They drew from Javanese cultural practices, built on the growing use of the Indonesian language, and espoused the principle of *kerakjatan*, or 'people-mindedness', which they saw was an essential force of Indonesian culture. In 1936, Ki Hajar Dewantara urged his followers to abandon the language of social hierarchy and call themselves 'brothers in learning'. Yet, at the same time, the *Taman Siswa* was a creative amalgam of the ideas from Europe, of Montessori and Fröbel and the Dalton school system in the United States. Its leaders also absorbed Rabindranath Tagore's critique of western education, and

maintained contacts with his Santiniketan school (McVey, 1967). For two decades, *Taman Siswa* fought a running battle with the colonial government over the recognition of its schools and curricula. However, in spite of these difficulties, the *Taman Siswa* schools in many ways exceeded the provision of the colonial schools of the day, and became the inspiration for the more radical 'wild schools' established by Indonesian nationalists and communists in the 1940s and 1950s. Ki Hajar Dewantara's experience exemplifies a broad grassroots education tradition across Southeast Asia—of village scholars, 'people's schools' and 'guerrilla model' literacy campaigns—but it also signals some of the tensions in the relationship between education and development over the longer term.

The first is that, for all the importance attached to education in national development in Southeast Asia, its role in some ways has been ambivalent. This can be clearly seen in the colonial period. Education was a central way in which societies mobilised to challenge and resist European rulers. But on the other hand has also been the central vehicle through which both colonial and post-colonial states have sought to impose their own visions and discipline their subjects. Education remains the locus of a range of state policy obsessions. But despite its grip on the formal sector, the state has never succeeded in dominating the informal sector, which is often distinguished by more open networks and more experimental forms of schooling. Education is both central to the discourses of state-formation, but also of resistance to them. An overriding question, as Ruth McVey put it for Indonesia after its independence in the 1950s, was:

whether instruction was to be in familiar surroundings and with a minimum of formality, or whether it should be in a place kept apart, which embodied the new order to which the pupil was to be acculturated and which aroused awe and obedience. Governments and established faiths have preferred the latter; new beliefs have often opted for the former, both because it emphasized accessibility and because it required fewer resources (McVey, 1990, 8).

This question, I think, remains relevant today.

A second tension lies in the 'spectre of comparisons' itself. Southeast Asia's history, as its scholars have frequently observed, has been marked by a cultural willingness to compare, borrow and adapt ideas, practices and institutions from outside. Yet, as Ki Hajar Dewantara suggested in 1935, this also been a source of great anxiety and conflict. If anything, historians have sometimes minimised the trauma that such openness to change brings. In Southeast Asia, education has also frequently been portrayed as an expression of the authority of 'indigenous' culture. As will be plain, where the 'indigenous' begins and the extraneous ends, in this limitlessly plural and cosmopolitan region, has always been a matter of contention. The 'indigenous' is often a product of an immediate post-colonial history rather than the expression of a longer

cultural experience. But the idea of the 'indigenous', or autochthony, if you will, has been a strong feature of developmental thought in Southeast Asia before and after independence. The quest for 'an autonomous history' of Southeast Asia has also been a governing scholarly paradigm, and until quite recently this has overshadowed the study of outside connections (Smail, 1961). The cosmopolitanism of the region is an aspect of its history that modern regimes, and scholars, have often found it difficult to come to terms with.

Finally, people like Ki Hajar Dewantara and their ideas are all but forgotten today. If they are remembered, they are remembered solely within a larger narrative of 'national awakening', bled of all contradiction and complexity. This is a narrative of modernity, focused on major state institutions and their antecedents. Southeast Asian studies has, as a field, been development-obsessed. The place of education is assumed in this narrative, but has rarely been explored systematically and critically. This is in spite of, or perhaps because of, the faith Southeast Asian elites have placed on education as a tool of national consolidation, ethnic integration and as a bridge to a new social and economic future. Education's role in 'nation-building' was self-evident; 'culture' a given. The quest for rapid economic growth often encouraged quick-fix solutions and a focus on immediate policy issues. In the 1960s, educationalists complained, from their perspective, that education was often taken for granted, subject to a 'general laissez-fairism' (Fischer, 1965). Most were concerned with the immediate needs of advocacy for development, rather than looking at broader historical frameworks. In the 1960s, World Bank interventions favoured larger institutional projects rather than broader-based literacy projects, and, over a longer period, the formal sector over the informal. Culture was off-limits ('we'll be funding temples next') (Jones, 1997). Little research on education in post-colonial world has been truly comparative, a fact attested to by the editors of the journal *Comparative Education* in a review of 20 years of their own work (Little, 2000). Historians of Southeast Asia, since the publication of seminal studies in the first years of independence, have been largely disinterested in education policy. In this area, as in others, post-colonial thought from the 1980s onwards was critical of the progressivist assumptions of earlier scholarship, but unwilling to revisit the terrain with the same depth of research. In many countries, contemporary education policy is a fiercely-politicised, sensitive area, for which good sources are often hard to come by. But there are signs that the scholarly ground is shifting and that, through an accumulation of work on Chinese and Islamic education, the importance of the non-formal sector in particular seems to be coming back into focus.

With this in mind, the potential contribution of historians, it seems to me, is modest and straightforward: to try to provide a useful narrative of regional thinking about education and development in Southeast Asia, particularly during its key 'periods of transition'. This, I think, is something we have not done well. But we can also strive to set educational developments within in a wider context, highlighting some themes which,

over the years, we have treated rather better. In what follows, several suggest themselves:

- a) the sheer diversity of models of development that have marked the region's thought;
- b) the importance of considering them in a transnational context;
- c) recurrent patterns in the ways new ideas from outside have been contested within a Southeast Asian ecumene; and
- d) the long-term historical role of the non-formal sector.

This paper attempts to map some of the region's capacities and capabilities, and to examine how adequately they have been exploited by the formal educational sector. This has been achieved very unevenly.

The longer duration

Over the longer duration, what are the educational resources available to the region? 'Southeast Asia' is a slippery concept. Whilst from the 1950s a first generation of western specialist historians of the region talked confidently of 'Southeast Asia' as a distinct entity, and of the 'autonomy' of its history, they have struggled to define its commonalities from such a diversity of historical and cultural experience. Attempts to do so—chiefly through the 'Indianisation' of the region's early history, or the shared experience of an 'age of commerce' in the early modern period, or in common forms of local state-formation over the longer term—have all run into difficulties when confronted with the diversity of the region's experience and the porousness of its boundaries. Its inhabitants rarely use the term 'Southeast Asian' of themselves. The term first secured international recognition with the creation of 'South East Asia Command' in 1943, and was entrenched by the Cold War, and the politics of the 'Area Studies' framework within the western academy. There is more than a grain of truth in Benedict Anderson's observation that Southeast Asians first came to see themselves as such in the graduate schools of North America (Anderson, 1998, 10). This complicates any attempt to define 'indigenous' capacities and capabilities over the longer duration. Scholars now tend to see the region as a flexible, contingent category, a world drawn together not by shared culture, but by the histories of what the late Denys Lombard termed its 'networks and synchronisms' (Reynolds, 1995; Kratoska, et al, 2005: esp. Sutherland, 2005; Lombard, 1995).

Knowledge was at the heart of these networks and synchronisms. This is an important theme of some of the most important recent attempts to identify commonalities in the

region's experience over long periods of time. Tony Day and Craig Reynolds, for example, whilst rejecting any idea of teleology in Southeast Asia's development, have nevertheless pointed to recurring shapes in the relationship between knowledge and power over different times and places within the region:

This feature is characteristic of all subsequent state formations in the region, namely, the tendency for knowledge to be viewed as inherently 'cosmological' and 'universalistic', a tendency which shaped the relationship between knowledge and power in a particular way. This relationship involved a synthesis of the 'latest' technology and of religious belief in the service of state domination (Day and Reynolds, 2000,: 4-5).

This analysis picked up on an aspect of the early history of the region that was highlighted in the seminal writings of O.W. Wolters: the eagerness and anxiousness of rulers and elites to absorb influences and ideas from outside: 'knowledge was understood to be a fund of timely, and, above all, effective "expedients", another feature of historical experience in the region'. Neither Wolters, nor Day and Reynolds, have discussed education at length—few general accounts of Southeast Asian history do so for any period. But Wolters nevertheless argued that pedagogical theory and practice were vital to unlocking the 'full-bodied story of Southeast Asia' (Wolters, 2004, 223).

One way to take this forward it to emphasise that such a history can only be understood in global terms. The traces of teaching and learning that survive from the early period of Southeast Asian history lie in Hindu and Buddhist manuals of instruction, the development of monastic cultures across Asia, and trails left by the circulation of scholars. Through this, successive world religions, and their traditions of high learning, lodged themselves in the region's cosmologies. In the *I Ching* we can read of schools of Chinese scholars in Sumatra; from the beginning of the second millennium of the Common Era, the trading *imperium* of Srivijaya established outposts of learning in Southern India and in Canton (de Casperis and Mabbett, 1990, 320). From the outset, the role of specific migrant groups in education was pivotal, particularly in maritime regions. In Islamic Southeast Asia, where the faith was propagated by sufis and traders (who were often one and same), certain key communities were important to the spread of schooling and the establishment of new standards and curricula over several hundred years. In recent years, the Hadrami Arabs have been a focus of historians' interest as exemplars of the role of transnational networks in the region's development; in the pre-colonial period, for example, they appear as traders and advisers to rulers, but also as mystics and religious rebels. In the colonial period, they emerge as a distinctive kind of educational entrepreneur: drawing on phenomenal international networks and financial resources to found reformist Islamic schools and printing presses. Before the 1920s, the wealth at the disposal of the community in Singapore for these kinds of projects eclipsed that of the British colonial elite itself (Freitag and Clarence-Smith, 1997; Ho, 2006). But

equally, in this kind of history, the role of South Indian Muslims, Tamil social reformers, Buddhist revivalists, jobbing Theosophists, and Paris- and Leiden-trained scientific socialists was equally significant. Added to this were more regional patterns of migration. The Minangkabau of West Sumatra, largely due to their matrilineal traditions, had a tradition of out-migration, *merantau*, which had with it the idea of eventual return by individuals equipped with new wealth or knowledge. Many chose the path of teacher (Wang, 1985). Pilgrimage created centres of education at stages along the route, whether it be in colonial entrepôts, such as Singapore, or through the large Jawi, or Southeast Asian, communities in Mecca and Medina themselves (Laffan, 2004). What we might term an educational cosmopolitanism lay at the heart of the region's experience.

Secondly, these systems of learning permeated down to a local level. The village-level Confucian scholar was an old tradition of Vietnamese life which the communists exploited in their mid-20th century revolution. When the French traveller, Jean deLanessan, wrote in 1895 that 'even the *nhaques*' (the peasants) could read and write, there was perhaps an element of Orientalist romanticism at play. But equally, Ho Chi Minh's assertion in 1945 that the communists could teach nine out of ten illiterates to read and write adequately in three months was based on some foundation, given their achievements in this regard (Woodside, 1983, 404). The shifting geographies of political power were important to the creation of local educational networks. Whilst the richer monasteries, and the most ambitious scholars, were to be found near the principal courtly centres of the region, these polities were relatively mobile; scholars moved with them, but sometimes they might often be left behind as political authority flowed elsewhere. In the Malay world some of the most vibrant centres of learning were the local sultanates. These remained such, even when colonial conquest had rendered them political backwaters. For example, when, in the late 19th century, the Dutch authorities sought to establish a standardised 'Malay' as a second-tier language for native education, they turned to the quite enclave of Riau, where a network of schools and a distinctive literary tradition continued to thrive. The local variant of 'Malay' was, in turn, taken up by Indonesian nationalists, and this form of 'Indonesian' has become one of the world's most spoken languages and an instrument for some of the most impressive achievements in literacy work in Southeast Asia (Hoffman, 1979; Maier, 1993).

Distinctive pedagogical traditions developed which have persisted into the present era. Two of the most durable and adaptable are those of the *pondok* of the Malay peninsula, and the *pesantren* in Java. This village-based schooling embraced a wide range of institutions, some very small, teaching little more than rote-learning of the Quran in Arabic. But others, by the later 19th century, began to embrace more subjects, and in and around the Straits Settlements and the trading towns of coastal Java, began to benefit from the influence of foreign Muslims. Through sheer numbers (one estimate of the numbers of *pesantren* for Java and Madura in 1885 was 15,000 schools with

230,000 students) they had a wide influence (Ricklefs, 2007, 49-57). Belts of schools emerged in specific locales that supplied teachers for neighbouring regions: the *pondoks* and *madrasahs* of Patani, in southern Thailand, for example, fed teachers into the northern Malay states, and on to the Middle East, and have maintained circulating linkages to South and Central Asia from at least the later 19th century. In the colonial era, the independent Islamic character of Patani earned it the sobriquet 'the cradle of Islam in Southeast Asia (Hasan, 1999,12). Yet it benefited at the same time from the modern communications of British Penang. As we shall see, these old circuits have once again become visible. Village level institutions, away from major sites of political power, often have a longer history and deeper international linkages than more formal institutions closer to them.

Networks—of temples, schools, travelling scholars, circulating libraries and print culture—created diverse ecumenes of knowledge in Southeast Asia. In re-evoking this world, there is a slight danger that we might be left with too seamless a picture of migrant webs and fluid connections. It is important to remember that cosmopolitan knowledge was always a challenge to established regimes: whilst they exploited it, and attempted to reconcile it to overarching local cosmologies, this process was often fraught with danger. Periods of transition in knowledge were therefore often marked by attempts by states to command its flow and strengthen orthodoxy. Anthony Reid, in his account of *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, argues that the age of decisive loss of autonomy of the states of the region in the later 17th century was one such period, an 'age of absolutism' of a mounting concern with normative Islamic orthodoxy over syncretic local practice; of attempts by Buddhist monarchs on the mainland, for example, to strengthen their control over the *sangha* (Reid, 1993). A second period of European conquest in Java and the Straits of Melaka in the early 19th century can be seen in a similar light. Here, along with expressions of receptivity to western ideas, there was also a revival of Javanese knowledge in response to the intellectual aggression of the European Enlightenment. In their study of one of the most remarkable and compendious documents of Southeast Asian scholarship in the 19th century, the *Serat Centhini* of the Javanese court of 1814—often seen as the work of a Javanese encyclopaedist—Day and Reynolds see 'a self-reflexive "framing" of cultural practices and values in a period of rapid and violent change' (Day and Reynolds, 2000, 37). By 1900, during a third aggressive wave of European conquest, when a new kind of colonial state was making its presence felt, similar processes were at work. On the one hand, the imperial globalisation of the *fin de siècle* fostered a cosmopolitan consciousness—an 'Imperial Enlightenment'—that created, not least, a new level of local investment in schools (Frost, forthcoming). But it was also the beginning of the cultural resistance of Ki Hajar Dewantara's age of 'transition' and 'comparison'. In each of these periods, challenging new ideas from outside were matched with local reconceptualisations and pedagogical innovation.

A colonial inheritance?

In this context it is hard to isolate the 'colonial origins' of development in Southeast Asia. They are intertwined with, dialogical to, its local dynamics. Both in general terms, and in the field of education, the experience of European rule was focally intense, but unevenly felt. Before the turn of the 20th century, colonial provision for schools was very marginal: it was limited to support for Christian enterprise and a few showpiece colleges, mainly in the port cities. They produced a small local elite proficient in European languages. In the British case, it was smaller domiciled migrant groups—the 'Straits Chinese' in Singapore, Malacca and Penang, for example—who were best placed to seize the opportunity presented by mission school English to claim a privileged intermediary position for themselves. But at the same time, these same groups took a growing local interest in vernacular schooling and literacy.

The Europeans themselves were slower to provide for this than Asian educationalists were. The key innovations arose in the 1900s: the regional standard was the 'ethical policy' in the Dutch East Indies, which, for the first time, equated economic progress with expanded provision for 'native' welfare. In the words of one of its chief apologists, the orientalist Snouck Hurgronje, the aim was of 'lifting the natives up to a higher level of civilisation in line with their innate capacities'. However, early 20th century imperialists, steeped in the hierarchies of racial thought of the day, had a limited view of these capacities and therefore of the scope of colonial provision. For example, it was axiomatic to governing doctrines of 'trusteeship' in the British empire that education should not create new aspirations that could not be met. Therefore, it was the stated object of British policy in Malaya to make the Malays better fishermen and farmers. In practice, this meant the provision of basic vernacular schools, but at the same time it limited access to higher, secondary, English-language schools to the Malay aristocratic elite, who were cultivated as minor civil servants under indirect rule. The local Eton, the Malay College Kuala Kangsar— —the *Bab-ud-Darajat*, or 'gateway to high position' as the Malays called it—existed principally to educate a native petty aristocracy in gamesmanship and table manners, although over time it did admit a modern curriculum and a limited degree of meritocracy (Loh, 1975; Khasnor Johan, 1984).

At one level, the aggregate indices of change were impressive: by the early 1930s in the Dutch East Indies, 9,600 *desascholen*, or village schools, existed, where 1.66 million received, and themselves paid for, the limited vernacular education intended for them. But this was only eight percent of the population between walking age and adulthood. The numbers of Indonesians in European schools amounted to only 0.14 for the total population: there were 178 Indonesians in university and 392 in vocational agricultural or forestry schools, where, under the logic of colonial education policy, investment was supposed to be directed (Ricklefs, 2001, 202-203).

The principles of colonial education had a long afterlife. As Syed Hussein Alatas argued in his 1977 book, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, anticipating arguments made the following year by Edward Said, the rhetoric of later Malay social reformers, including the future prime minister, and 'father of modernisation', Dr Mahathir Mohamad—their calls in the 1960s and 1970s to energise and discipline the Malays through a 'Revolusi Mental'—recycled colonial stereotypes of Malay inertia and resistance to innovation (Alatas, 1977). European educationalists held a mirror up to local tradition so it could find itself wanting. Another enduring feature of regional 'ethical' policies was a system of ethnical preference, in which local elites often connived. This helped entrench a 'racial division of labour' within the colonial economy. In British Malaya, the rationale of vernacular schooling for the Malays was the need to maintain a stable 'yeoman peasantry' and confine them to agriculture. The middle rungs of the commercial economy thus were abandoned to the Chettyars and Chinese (Kratoska, 1975). There was no provision for commercial education. It was the Islamic religious schools that by the 1930s first began to offer Malays courses on accountancy, the *madrassahs* of Sumatra that, by the 1940s, produced some of the most dynamic women leaders and teachers.

Above all, for all the thrusting modernity of the late colonial period, technical accomplishment was acquired by Asians mostly through their own initiative. This was one reason why it became such a rallying cry for young nationalists. In his fascinating study of technology and nationalism in Indonesia, Rudolf Mrázek quotes a patriotic publication from 1939 imaging a future world of mechanised power:

Let us come together, for instance, in a radio course, let us become radio mechanics. In a course like that, high-school graduates can sit in the same classroom with the pupils of elementary schools... As they become good enough to connect a wire, check a *voltmeter* and *ammeter*, and as they learn how to prompt a spark out of *terminals* and *condensers*... they, without a moment of hesitation, will come out into the world (Mrázek, 2002, 190).

Much of this is well known. But what has been less studied is the complex, many-layered role that Southeast Asians played within colonial institutions in their 'period of transition'. The memoir (in English, and the first such) of the leading Malay educator Haji Abdul Majid bin Zainuddin, *The Wandering Thoughts of a Dying Man*, is a fascinating oblique commentary on imperial trusteeship. Abdul Majid was a teacher at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, and outwardly one of the most vocal empire loyalists of his time: he was an advocate for Malay recruitment into colonial armies, and served as the British government's representative in Mecca, partly in an intelligence role. But he describes his views on education in very different terms:

I was convinced that, coming as I did from a life of having associations with people of the 'Old World' straight into the life under the changed conditions of the 'New World', I would be the best person to advise the educational authorities how or in what form that education should be to give the best results to the Malays in their condition of being transformed from their ideals of the old into those of the new world.

He did this by exploiting the logic of colonial policy in very specific ways: so that his support for military recruitment can be seen as an attempt to recover the martial spirit of the Malays. As a teacher at the Malay College, he observed that the British policy of religious instruction for the boys, on a Sunday, followed the model of Bible classes in English public schools, and that this offered new possibilities to expand the realm of religious instruction of the Malay elite, which had hitherto been confined to Quranic recitation. Abdul Majid used the opportunity to launch modernist *kitab* classes and recruit a new generation of reformist religious teachers (Roff, 1978).

If we move beyond a generalised picture of the retrogressive colonial impact on local initiative, there were areas in which it contributed to the building of indigenous capacity. Under the mantle of colonial indirect rule, the kinds of improvisations made by Abdul Majid were widespread, and often led to enhanced scope for investment in the non-formal sectors of education. Abdul Majid was a prolific translator and producer of primers, for Malays and non-Malays, and reminds us that the cottage industries of language training and translation in Southeast Asia were a vital field for national initiative, often spearheaded by graduates of second division colonial institutions, such as the vernacular teacher training colleges. In Frederick Cooper's words: 'colonial history reminds us that in the most oppressive of political systems, people found not just niches in which to hide and fend for themselves, but handles by which the system itself could be moved' (Cooper, 2005, 242).

The late imperial meridian of the 1920s and 1930s was the highpoint of Southeast Asian educational entrepreneurship. New groups began to take the lead. Before the 20th century, the Chinese worlds in Southeast Asia were an imperfect reflection of society at home; pioneering communities of traders and labourers, with few literati or divines. By the turn of the century, new community initiatives were launched and education was their focus. In the inter-war years, new-style Chinese tycoons, presiding over transnational operations, invested heavily in national type schools. Even the organisers of the *Taman Siswa* looked to Chinese merchants for support. Technical training was offered by Chinese private schools. Existing rural traditions were re-energised: in Indonesia, the left took over the 'wild school' model; in Vietnam, the beginnings of the 'guerrilla model' of education can be discerned. It was a time of great innovation, of cross-cutting experiments, of a local sociology of comparison. Above all, the connection between education and democracy, seen in the work of Ki Hajar Dewantara, became general. But all this signalled a final phase of the colonial impact in education: a revived hostility to

outside influences and connections, and a paranoia at the pan-Islamic protest, international anarchism and Bolshevism that many of these educational initiatives seemed to represent. The heirs of old scholastic pilgrims were shadowed or imprisoned. Access to education overseas became more circumscribed.

By the later 1930s, the growing insularity of colonial society was marked by a general clampdown on nationalist activity. This did not extinguish educational initiative: it was *because* open politics became so difficult that nationalist energies were diverted into the cultural sphere. But it also meant that education became deeply politicised, and there was a price to pay for this. The failures of colonial policy were nowhere more poignantly displayed than by the fact that some of the most distinctive local educational initiatives that occurred in these years took place among the concentrations of graduates and educators in the colonial Bastilles of Indochina, and the Dutch isolation colony of Boven Digul in remote West Guinea (Zinoman, 2001; Mrazek, 2002).

Finally, the colonial inheritance was complicated by the presence of Japan as a model and as a colonial power. The Meiji experience was widely admired and emulated across the region by people ranging from Malay theocrats to radical nationalists. Many key Asian educators and nationalist thinkers sojourned and studied in Japan. Japanese rule in much of the region after 1942 gave, in its early stages at least, a high priority to the re-education of its subjects away from a slavish colonial mentality and to the inculcation of the *Nippon sheisin*, the élan of imperial Japan. Despite the disintegration of Japan's constructive colonialism into war imperialism and repression, several aspects of this experience endured. The first is that the numbers of Southeast Asians sent to Japan dramatically increased in number. The evidence shows that many played a role in post-colonial education and that their worldview was significantly shaped by their time overseas (Akashi, 1978). Secondly, the methods of Japanese schools in Southeast Asia themselves influenced many more local educators: especially their military discipline, the use of songs, the vigour and élan. Thirdly, the Japanese placed great weight on language as medium to forge a new consciousness. This excited the imagination of a generation already committed to new vernacular tongues; the idea that language was 'the soul of the nation' would have a great influence on educational policy after the war. Above all, the Japanese emphasis on the role of the state deepened the conviction of the emerging new national leaderships that the state was the crucial vehicle for economic and social transformation. This was tantamount to a new civil religion. Recent work on the Japanese in Asia over the course of the 20th century has pointed out the swiftness with which Japanese influence in the region reasserted itself after the war, not least in the field of education and the possibilities for cultural diplomacy it provided (Abu Talib Ahmad, 2003; Koh, 2007).

Education and national development

The colonial origins of development can only be understood within a Southeast Asian narrative of the development of capacities and capabilities over a longer period of time, shaped by outside interventions that were not directly of the west (Bayly, 2008). What is less clear at this point, to historians, is precisely how these interactions were carried forward into post-colonial policies. Histories of development in Southeast Asia that straddle the colonial/post-colonial watersheds have been few and far between (Amrith, 2006). Southeast Asian archives for this period of transition, for the most part, remain closed. There was, however, a plethora of research in the 1960s on the *mentalité* of the post-colonial elite; it has been all but forgotten, but it is worth revisiting (e.g., Tilman, 1964; Scott, 1968). What is clear from it is that many of the methods of late colonial development were carried forward into the new era. Political transitions, of course, varied dramatically in Southeast Asia. In Indochina, the 'guerrilla model' of education prevailed until the later 1960s. In Indonesia, the colonial and post-colonial co-existed in uneasy ways. In Malaysia and Singapore, there was a remarkable continuity in personnel and practice. Driven by the concerns of counter-insurgency, and uniquely well-financed, the late colonial state was particularly influential in shaping the contours of policy. It crushed the existing politicisation of education, but allowed new kinds of political patronage to emerge. For example, adult education was encouraged by the British as a means for conservative political allies to gain support. The committees of management of rural and small-town Chinese schools, as much as the jungle, were perhaps the key site of the Malayan Emergency campaign (Tan, 1997; Harper, 1999). Despite the differences, by the end of the first decades of independence broader patterns become discernable, patterns in which many of the Southeast Asia capacities before the war became less visible.

First, as the drive for modernisation and economic development dominated state policy, there was a decisive move to more formal models of education. This model was not, as some had suggested, a convergence of existing education types. Rather, it saw a sudden set of interventions to bring education into line with national priorities. The post-war years were an era of dramatic expansion in provision. In Indonesia, the independent regime had promoted education to the extent that between 1953 and 1960 the number of entrants to primary schools rose from 1.7 to 2.5 million, and adult literacy of those over ten years rose to 46.7 percent (as against 7.4 percent adult literacy in the 1930s). In the 1950s there were 280 schools in Jakarta, but only 180 possessed buildings in which classes could be held. By 1984, it was reported that 97 percent of seven to 12 year-olds attended schooling. This was, as Adrian Vickers remarks, in one sense 'a miraculous achievement', but in another sense the development of schooling was dogged by inefficiency, low pay, problems of moonlighting teachers and high drop-out rates, rather than steadily rising skills (Ricklefs, 2001, 290; Vickers, 2005, 132, 189). At

the same time, independent states remained very suspicious of informal grassroots initiatives. This was, not least, because some of the most impressive mass education programmes from the 1950s through to the 1960s were organised by the left. A case in point is the 'wild school' system itself. By the 1950s, the Communist Party of Indonesia had reformed itself and the graduates of the old 'wild schools' led new, ambitious mass literacy campaigns. The doctrinaire Marxism they espoused; their emphasis on science and organisation, the establishment of a people's university (modelled on the *volksuniversiteit* in The Netherlands), all amounted to a major challenge to the state. The campaigns ended with the general extermination of the Communists in 1965-1966, and for those who survived it, in the prison camps of the New Order (McVey, 1990).

A second theme is that, whilst regimes still voiced commitment to the ideal, in the Cold War era of ideological polarisation and uncertainty, the connection between education and democratisation was in many ways broken. The watchwords were 'education for national unity', which was not the same thing as participation and representation. As government control over the finance and curricula of schools and universities increased, their influence on national policy declined, as did that of the many informal educational networks. Education continued to be politicised. For example, in Malaysia, and elsewhere, the colonial tendency towards ethnic preference was seen now as a prerequisite for national unity, and was intensified at the expense of social equity. After ethnic riots in 1969, and another period of Emergency rule, a sequence of laws sought to reverse the comparative disadvantage of the Malays in education and the commercial economy through positive discrimination. This was one of the most ambitious and sustained attempts at social engineering anywhere in the post-colonial world. But it also went hand-in-hand with a new Universities and Colleges Act of 1971, which significantly reduced civil liberties on Malaysia's new university campuses (Selvaratnam, 1985).

This signals a third theme: the role of state ideology. In Indonesia, the *pancasila*; in Malaysia, the *rukunegara*—both roughly translating as 'principles of state'—and in Vietnam, 'Ho Chin Minh Thought', all became enshrined in syllabi at every level. From the 1980s, as authoritarian regimes became more beleaguered, the role of these orthodoxies was, if anything, accentuated. State ideology was driven in no small part by the desire to discipline minorities. In Vietnam, state education policy was part of the wider drive to incorporate indigenous minorities. In Thailand, it was an arm of a long-term project of national standardisation and disciplining begun by reforming monarchs in the late 19th century. In the 1950s and 1960s, funded by US development aid, primary education in Thailand expanded; textbooks enjoined children 'to buy Thai goods; love Thailand and love to be a Thai; live a Thai life, speak Thai and esteem Thai culture' (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005, 172). The overseas Chinese and Indians found that the space for vernacular education had shrunk dramatically. The use of the national language was a primary yardstick of integration right across Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, and elsewhere, this amounted to 'a second wave of decolonisation': one corollary of the

ethnic precedence given to the Malays was an assault on Anglophone culture (Watson, 1996, 305). Not least amongst its ironies was that it was often led by those who had most benefited from late colonial schooling. As in Indonesia, the national language was effective, to a degree, as a tool for reducing illiteracy. But it did not necessarily dramatically enhance rural people's access to new urban opportunities, nor Malaysia's access to the English-speaking world of global commerce (Alis, 2006).

The result of these changes was a growing disjuncture between old and new educational capacities. The development decades after independence were founded on the primacy of the nation-state (Berger, 2004). Old cosmopolitan networks were disrupted by new national imperatives. At the height of the Cold War, whilst many non-Communist states in Southeast Asia voiced commitment to internationalism, they were as paranoid about the destabilising effects of transnational linkages as had been the colonial regimes before them. As Lee Kuan Yew, chief minister of Singapore, put it in 1962—explaining to the United Nations Committee on Colonialism the detention without trial of many left-wing activists, many of them educators—their cosmopolitan creed now made them 'anti-national' (Harper, 2001, 43). As part of his campaign against them, Lee also closed down the great achievement of Chinese educational initiatives in Southeast Asia, the Nanyang University, which had been funded by subscriptions from the entire community: taxi-drivers as much as tycoons. In extremis, in Burma for example, this kind of outlook led to an extraordinary degree of state insularity in a globalising world. New international networks, of course, emerged. Susan Bayly's important study, *Asian Voices in a Post-colonial Age*, traces these across several continents and generations, such as in the renewed circulation of Vietnamese intellectuals to new sites of sojourn, the Soviet Union and beyond (Bayly, 2007). By the early 1980s over 7,000 Thais were in US universities: since the time of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) education abroad was an avenue for the old elite to maintain social standing in a more egalitarian age (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005, 151, 165). But there was often a discontinuity between old and new sites of education. Within the region, many educational centres—Rangoon, Penang, Saigon, Bandung—entered a period of decline. It remains to be seen whether any of these cosmopolitan cities revive.

By the 1980s and early 1990s, these tensions came to a head. In Vietnam, where state education policies were some of the most successful anywhere in the region, a mood of self criticism set in. It was unclear to Vietnamese leaders how much modern specialist education had actually achieved. In 1980, the percentage of eligible children who were receiving some form of education at the age of six in northern Vietnam was 90 percent. Yet the percentage of students staying on in school was much lower (a mere 52.1 percent of all pupils in fourth grade were of the appropriate age). This was a striking sign of how the system had declined in efficiency. In the early years—as the 'guerrilla model' gave way to a more bureaucratised one—revolutionary enthusiasm had made up for a deficit in finance. However, the resources were not there to sustain the initiative. There

were not enough opportunities for those who stayed in school—itsself the product of a drive to get people out of agriculture, rather than to improve it. This signalled deeper cultural problems: the inability of the government to educate for a more developed workforce; the mentality of influential village leaders, who still saw schools as part of an elitist literary culture (Woodside, 1983).

Similar problems could be discerned across the region: particularly those of university students graduating into a world of diminishing economic opportunities. In Indonesia, in 1973, only 0.25 percent of the population were enrolled in tertiary education, yet still graduate unemployment existed. Across the region there remained a bias towards the arts and humanities, rather than technical training. In Thailand, numbers in the tertiary sector grew 30 times in three decades to 3.4 million; until 1997 an expanding private sector provided to a degree for many of them. But there were limits to the economy's ability to absorb graduates. In the Philippines by the late 1990s, perhaps 38 percent of young people were in tertiary education, mostly in a plethora of provincial and private 'diploma factories'. But this little served domestic development; instead, it created a globalised worker: in international shipping, hospitality, domestic service and healthcare. There was a great deal of substance to the oft-heard charge at the time of the 1997 economic crisis, that the educational and skills foundations of development in Southeast Asia were thin, and that 'rich foreigners and poor natives did much of the real work of export-developmental growth' (Anderson, 1998, 305-306).

* * *

In the past two decades or so, education in Southeast Asia remains the focus of the state's most cherished visions of the future. Governments continually push for new national standards. There remains in the region an unshaken faith in nation-building; in education for national unity; an unwavering belief in the 'essential "goodness" of nations' (Hau, 2005, 60). State projects have been increasingly large-scale, particularly in the field of higher education, and the pursuit of a technology-driven millennium. The aggregate achievements, on paper at least, remain impressive. Southeast Asia enjoys high literacy levels, and state provision for higher education is, for the most part, increasing. But distortions remain and may even be amplified in the future. Historians may have useful things to say about them, not least because there are signs that some longer-term themes of education in Southeast Asian history may be reasserting themselves. Here I focus on the case of Malaysia.

First, the private entrepreneurship that so shaped local provision is now once again more clearly in the ascendancy, particularly in higher education. In Malaysia, besides the nine major public higher education institutions, there are more than 300 private institutions, centres or colleges which are involved in the provision of some form of tertiary education; 23 of them are engaged in 'twinning programmes' with western universities;

the universities of Nottingham and Monash have been two of the pioneers in setting up large branch campuses in Malaysia. Local private universities have been established by big business: the communications company, Telekom; the power monopolist, Tenaga Nasional; and the car manufacturer, Petronas. They are bidding to draw in students from regional, Islamic and global markets. New kinds of knowledge entrepreneurs have emerged, many from ethnic minorities. For example, the rise of Lim Kok Wing's Limkokwing University of Creative Technology has been phenomenal: the Malaysian campus now claims to host 8,000 students from 100 countries, and it runs other campuses in Indonesia, Botswana, China and the United Kingdom. To quote from the mission statement:

Tan Sri Lim had the vision to see a need where none existed before. He had the passion to do something that had never been done before. And he had the tenacity to keep pushing forward to translate that idea into reality... He married creativity to technology, uplifting public perceptions of professions that were thought to be low-paying and lacking in status (Limkokwing University website).

This kind of initiative can be seen at other levels, such as in the financing of secondary and religious education.

As in the past, this growth was in part due to the failings of state provision. To some extent, it has staunched a brain drain from Malaysia: the latest figures show that the number of Malaysians studying in the United States has begun to decline. The Malaysian government responded—in the form of a major 1996 consolidating Education Act—by liberalising the regime for these initiatives and corporatising the public sector. It has expanded state provision for affordable part-time learning (on the Open University model); it has allowed, within certain conditions, more use of English as a medium of instruction. Many of these initiatives have been welcomed, but they are not without their tensions. There is the question of how far western partners can accommodate to the illiberality of the state's regulation of higher education. And there is the uncomfortable fact that most of these initiatives privilege English-medium education; the position of the national language, Malay, remains a sensitive issue, and politically dangerous, not least because some of the staunchest defenders of the national language policy are embedded in the academy and represent politically powerful groups such as schoolteachers (Harper, 1996). Nor is it clear that the policy has reassured ethnic minorities of the long-term survival of their vernacular education. In many ways, the compromise 1996 Act still gave powers to the government to forcibly entrench the primacy of the Malay medium (Segawa, 2007). All these issues relate directly to the historical dilemma of how the new—the necessary perhaps—can be accommodated to dominant local cosmologies.

Older transnational connections are also reasserting themselves, most visibly in the sphere of religious education, with the revivification of long-distance networks of *madrasah*-based schooling. Throughout the 1980s, the Malaysian government became increasingly concerned about this. At the same time, and partly in response to it, the government of Dr Mahathir Mohamad attempted to blaze a trail as an Islamic tiger economy. This meant investment in its own major educational initiatives, such as the International Islamic University, which is based near Kuala Lumpur. This partial Islamisation of the government machinery also meant more investment—ideological and material—in domestic religious teaching. After 1985, a series of confrontations with heterodox movements such as the al-Arqam sect, led to the ‘re-education’ of many ‘deviant’ members; it was significant that many of them came from the very technocratic groups the government was trying to create (Fauzi, 2005). A pressing concern was the over-production of *ulama*: at the beginning of the 21st century, some 125,000 children in Malaysia received an Islamic education in religious institutions. But as the sense of security threat deepened after 2001, the sheer scope of these networks generated something of a panic. The government found it had scant information on them; its estimates of the numbers of students in particular *madrasahs* in Pakistan proved to be only ten percent of the total; there were 6,000 Malaysians at Al-Azhar in Cairo alone (Abuza, 2002, 12). In late 2005, the government finally announced plans to issue ‘non-objection certificates’ to the 10,000 Malaysians leaving each year to study abroad, as well as registration with the overseas mission: previously this had not been mandatory (Parkin, 2005). This reflected the West’s ‘rediscovery’ of Islamic education after 2001.

Yet set against these security fears, which, as we have seen, have a long history, there is another perspective: one that saw these links as less threatening; the forms of education involved as more diverse and less anti-modern than they were sometimes depicted. In particular, it could be argued that, rather than an outside intervention in Southeast Asian education, these kinds of religious institution had been at the heart of it for many decades. Many of the patterns of schooling that had suddenly come into the light were based on old linkages, such as long-standing familial connections. These were by no means solely of a conservative or militant kind. By 2005, a revived internationalist outlook led the leadership of the Islamic Party in Malaysia to pass into the hands of ‘Young Turks’ who sought a closer working alliance locally with other, more secular and even non-Muslim opposition groups. This is a wider pattern. As early as the 1960s, the first modern field studies of the *pesantrens* of Java indicated their versatility and adaptability (Castles, 1966; M. Dawan Rahardjo, 1985). Over the past few years—alongside other groups with a more jihadi message—a ‘new’ *pesantren* has come to the fore: negotiating and defining its own kind of Islamic modernity (Lukens-Bull, 2005). This is not the place to adequately discuss where Islam’s role in civil society might lead. But it is useful to note that there has emerged from this a new interest in the lineage of religious schools, and a more nuanced and anthropological understanding of the kind of informal education they provide, and how it might be harnessed to wider national needs.

It reminds us that the human networks and synchronisms that underplay state initiatives are still imperfectly understood.

Which brings us back to the dilemma of Ki Hajar Dewantara. As Merle Ricklefs has pointed out, Ki Hajar Dewantara was not offering Islam as a solution to the failings of the education of the Javanese (Ricklefs, 2007, 225). In his discussion of language, Arabic was not mentioned. The dilemma was to some extent between western and a Javanese identity: 'Because of the great inferiority complex which we derived from our particular governmental experience, we were easily satisfied with anything that made us look a bit Dutch'. But the educators of the *Taman Siswa* also searched for commonalities in established traditions from outside: the very term 'garden of learning' was a conscious borrowing, for Java, of the German Kindergarten movement. What the *Taman Siswa* movement propounded was a multi-layered approach to education for national unity: local vernaculars as a general language of instruction, a national language for the higher grades of primary school, and English for secondary school. It was deeply rooted in a Javanese context, yet led by individuals keenly aware of the challenges of a global modernity, into which they had been thrust irrevocably by colonial rule.

So much of the history-writing in Southeast Asia, a region where nationalist master-narratives have held so much sway in shaping perceptions of the past, lies in recovering its rich intellectual resources, of which Ki Hajar Dewantara is just one embodiment. Education in Southeast Asia remains imbricated in deep historical patterns. Yet policy debate largely takes place, often on a hair trigger, without reference to this past. History brings, above all, a sensibility of what the Indonesian historian, Taufik Abdullah (2008), has called 'the formation of networks of local collective memory'. There is a pressing need to better understand these layers of experience—and how they intersect with other, cosmopolitan flows of ideas—because they still inform, in crucial ways, what many educators are working for.

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