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By Antonio Gueirrero *

This thin volume edited by two historians of Southeast Asia opens original perspectives on pre-colonial warfare in both mainland and insular areas of the region. Michael W. Charney—currently teaching Asian military history at SOAS, University of London—is a specialist of Burma (Myanmar) and the author of a synthesis on Southeast Asian warfare in the early modern period (Charney 2004). Kathryn Wellen, based in the Netherlands, has written on the Wajo’ Bugis early state polity. This book is partly a sequel to a workshop organised by Charney in 2003 focusing on early modern warfare in Southeast Asia which was published the following year in the Journal *Southeast Asian Research* (Charney 2003).

As the editors rhetorically ask on the back cover, the book addresses two essential questions: “Why is it that warfare in Southeast Asia history is depicted so differently in various historical sources and representations? Why have scholars looking at different countries [in the region] found so many exceptions to regional overviews of warfare?”

The general approach developed by the editors focuses on rediscovering indigenous history on a par with Western discourses on the region’s history, especially in regard to military history and martial practices. In the same line, the editors have endorsed the works published since the 1970s which have stressed the cultural specificity of Southeast Asia as a whole in contrast to Indian or Chinese background influences. This view reflects the mainstream approaches of recent historiographical studies on the region. Thus, the editors have chosen to

[...] examine the ways in which Southeast Asia’s culture influenced its military history, both directly through culturally-specific military practices and indirectly through cultural influences on the politics of warfare. (Charney & Wellen: 6, my emphasis.)

The latter would include the ways military equipment and ideas, from logistics to cannons, are being used and conceptualised within a particular culture in connection to warfare. On the other hand, the book intends to describe the local experience of warfare: “developing an equal historiographical footing as possible in depicting warfare between lowlands and highlands, Java and outer islands, and “centre” and “periphery” (p. 14). The comparative approach is the main value of the book. By integrating pre-colonial mainland and island Southeast Asia in a broad chronological and political range from circa the mid/late 16th century to the late 19th century, it covers the whole range of historical encounters. By and large it corresponds to the transition period from independent states to colonial administrations of various status in the region. During the same period, the interactions between the European powers (Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, England) and Southeast Asian polities increased tremendously. Conversely, it includes also the “technology of warfare”, including the acquisition and development of weaponry.

The introduction and the seven essays composing the book address a series of questions that have been little studied until now. Three chapters are devoted to mainland Southeast Asia: Puangthong R. Pawakan, on Siamese warfare in the “trans-Mekong” region (i.e. across the pre-
sent territories of Thailand, Cambodia and Laos); Vu Duc Liem on Vietnam’s naval warfare from the 17th to the 18th century; Burma with a special focus on the lowland people’s warfare and royal soldiers (Chartney). While maritime Southeast Asia is represented by four essays: A.C. Lopez, on the Southern Philippines, focusing on Maguindanao; Wellen on South Sulawesi (the Wajo’ polity civil wars); Bali’s polities internal and external conflicts (Hägerdal); conflict in aboriginal Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia’s outer islands (Knapp). The editors of the book wrote the contributions respectively on Burma and South Sulawesi.

As a set, the essays raise also the issue of the articulation between warfare, statecraft and state building in the region. Warfare among “upland” small scale societies established on oral tradition is not addressed in a separate contribution, but rather discussed in the introduction and in some passages of the essays (e.g. Knapp on Taiwan, Luzon and the Moluccas). On the other hand, the relation of warfare to trade in the islands is also a key issue, it is considered by Lopez, and Knaap in their contributions.

The volume refreshes the previous literature published on the topic, the starting point was the classic work of W. Quarich Wales based on a hazardous compilation of official texts and ethnographical data on societies of various scales, composing a narrative of “ancient Southeast Asian warfare” (Quarich Wales 1952). It relates also to R. Heine-Geldern comparative work on statecraft and kingship in the region involving a reconstruction of its Indic past (1956). These approaches rooted in “Orientalism” were essentialising the issue at stake. In this regard, as stated by the editors, the book brings together post-colonial views on ancient Southeast warfare, considering at the same time regional characteristics and unique features in each case (pp. 13-15). Clearly, on various aspects of their approach the editors have been influenced by Anthony Reid’s brilliant synthesis of Southeast Asian societies during the early Modern period (circa 16th to the 18th centuries).

**Discussion**

In the first place I shall stress the innovative aspects of the book. For instance, naval warfare is given a special emphasis, i.e. in chapters 3 (Lopez), 4 (Vu) and sections of 7 (Knaap) about the Visayas and the Moluccas. Although Du investigates specifically the Tayson maritime warfare from the late 18th century to the early 19th century, he also stresses the importance of shipbuilding techniques and weaponry, especially bronze cannons, developed in Vietnam during the Le Trinh (Thanh Long, Hanoi), Nguyen (Cochin China) and Tayson periods (Quy Nhơn) in the late 17th early/mid 18th century (pp. 104-105, pp. 109-119).

The book usefully complements other sources on the history of pre-colonial warfare in the region, e.g previous studies focusing on raiding and headhunting in Island Southeast Asia (Hoskins 1996; Warren 1981, 2002).

Perhaps the articulations of warfare and raiding between upland and lowland societies would have needed more refining? Then including Barbara Watson Andaya’s article published in the Social Science Research issue (2003) that addresses these questions would have filled a gap in the volume. I note that one of the essays of the book had already been published as a working paper (Pawakapan). Conversely a contribution on Cambodia as a central military power in medieval mainland Southeast Asia, circa the 10th to the 13th century, would have been stimulating. However, that would have been outside the chronological framework established by the editors and the limited scope of the book.

The main aspects of warfare that are stressed by the contributors are the following: depopulation and population resettlement in mainland Southeast Asia in connection to labour deficiency and, more generally, agricultural development.
in the 18th and early-mid 19th across Siam, Laos and Cambodia territorial areas (Pawakapan, pp. 21-39). Conflicts linked to civil war and the aristocratic rulers’ choices in South Sulawesi (Wellen on the Pénéki war, pp. 61-71); rebellions involving armed rural folk as in 19th century Burma are specific levels of warfare which had not been depicted in detail previously, a set of locally produced illustrations add a graphic representation to the facts (Charney, pp. 155-168). The capacity of Champa war fleets in the medieval period was hinted by Du in his contribution (pp. 105-106), however it would have been useful to give more space to it. The permanence of infighting in Bali and the instability of the local polities is a key element to understand the expansion of Karangasem kingdom in Lombok during the 18th century (Hägerdal, pp. 145-147). He points also to the violent amuk frontal attacks made in Bali, a practice shared with other martial cultures in the Insular region, they have been reported in Sulawesi, Madura and other places (ibid., p. 132). The close connection between warfare, raiding and slave trade in the archipelagoes of the Philippines and Indonesia, especially in the Visayas, Northern Sulawesi, North and Eastern Borneo’s coastal areas and the Moluccas in the 18th century is manifest (Lopez, Knaap). Slavery, showing different forms of dependency, was a main feature of social systems in the region (Reid 1983; Condominas 1998). War captives would become either slaves or dependents in both small-scale societies and state’s formations.

By and large the editors have successfully answered the two questions they put forward to validate the argument of the book: the essays based on sound research describe in vivid detail, how conflicts and warfare were expressed with much variability in the region according to the local backgrounds, and without resorting to excessive regional generalisations. The social and political processes mobilized in warfare, either in small scale actions or large campaigns, are described and analysed within the polities’ realm of influence without underestimating their inner dynamics. The authors of the essays resort to a wide array of historical sources which are used with care. In relation to the sources, a major distinction appears between the mainland and insular areas: in the former region the courts and official sources would not report on hundred of local conflicts, while in the later, Portuguese, Spanish, VOC and Dutch Colonial Government accounts’ would be available, including on the places they did not directly ruled (as pointed by Charvey, pp. 157-158).

To conclude by word about the editing. The book reads easily with footnotes providing the actual historical sources, these are recapitulated in an exhaustive bibliography, and a useful index, listing besides place names, personal names, and firearms, different types of weapons, e.g. from blowpipes to swords. Maps and figures in the text are informative and well placed, at the exception of Du’s essay which lacks a map of Vietnam coastal areas, pointing the numerous toponyms mentioned in the text—especially for the readers who are not familiar with the country’s coastline. In short, the volume forms a handy reference work for both Southeast Asianists and historians of Asia, by reconsidering the discussion about warfare and the military impact of Western presence in the region against a renewed historiographical framework.

Notes

1. About ten years later Georges Coedès published his major work on Indianisation in Southeast Asia based on the epigraphy of Mainland and Insular areas. It covers the period from the origins to the early 16th century. Coedès describes aspects of state building linked to military actions and expansion according to the local polities’ perspective expressed in the inscriptions. The royalty’s (ksatriya) fascination with warfare appearing in the popular Indian epics in Southeast Asia, the Mâhâbharata and the Râmâyana, is a recurring feature in the Indianised states.
In his essay on Burma Charvey mentions this feature in connection to processions, ritualised activities and mural paintings depicting royal armies (pp. 160-162).

2. There are differences in comparison to Brunei war fleets’ actions as based on early European and Chinese sources, see Brown (Donald E. [1970], Carrie C. [1972]), Maxwell (1996), Nicoll (1975).

3. I noticed only one major omission, Donald F. Lach (1968).

References


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Anthropologist and museographer.


Par Sarah Coulouma *

Comme le titre de son ouvrage l’indique très clairement, Jean-Pierre Digard soutient que l’animalisme, entendu comme un « cou rant idéologique et activiste réclamant pour les animaux, au nom de l’anti-espécisme, un statut et des droits analogues à ceux des humains » (p. 103), est un anti-humanisme. Dans ce plaidoyer, l’auteur formule une démonstration critique à l’encontre des thèses et des principes animalistes que chaque chapitre s’attache à invalider, le dernier d’entre eux allant jusqu’à indiquer des « attitudes qu’il convient d’adopter pour y faire face » (p. 8). Cet ouvrage est organisé en quatre chapitres complétés d’une introduction, d’une conclusion, d’un glossaire et d’une bibliographie récapitulative. Les matériaux d’enquête sur lesquels se fonde l’auteur sont principalement des travaux académiques, des articles de journaux ou d’autres supports médiatiques, des textes de loi, des sondages, des communiqués d’as-