



On the Historiography
of Southeast Asia and the Philippines:
The “Golden Age” of Southeast Asian Studies –
Experiences and Reflections

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I.

The 1960s and early 70s were the height of the Vietnam war and opposition to it. They also witnessed a kind of golden age in Southeast Asian studies at Cornell University. Cold war politics coupled with modernization theory meant the backing of the US State department and private foundations for the development of the idea of “Southeast Asia,” of unities of experience among its components, despite the thin and often contradictory evidence. With the withdrawal and defeat of the US in Vietnam, state and foundation funding began to dry up and American students began to turn their backs on this once–dynamic field. The previous decade came to resemble a golden age, a Lost Eden.

Laurie Sears has summed up the glorious sixties in the following passages, which I can do no better than quote verbatim:

The Vietnam war years filled the classes of those few American historians and political scientists of Southeast Asia, whether notorious as hawks or doves, because they were the only scholars who knew anything at all about this small former French colony that had dealt such a stunning military blow to the French at Dien Bien Phu. Political scientists and historians from Cornell like Ben Anderson, Dan Lev, and John Smail . . . led teach–ins and antiwar rallies arising from political commitments forged during the days of their doctoral

research when Indonesia's charismatic president Soekarno was head of the nonaligned nations of Asia and Africa. The Cornell scholars had been nurtured by their own mentor George Kahin, whose work on both Indonesia and Vietnam has been a model for a kind of committed yet rigorous area studies scholarship. These men—along with Ruth McVey—set the example for a liberal belief in the power of area studies—the rigorous learning of local languages and an analysis of “culture” by objective scholars that could explain political alliances if not actually politics itself. This model of area studies challenged the older more conservative Orientalist paradigm of the colonial scholars. (SSRC 1999, 7)

It should also be noted, however, that the triumphant sixties also witnessed a challenge, in the field of historical writing, to a newer but also considered flawed paradigm stemming from the “other” of the colonial scholars. This was variously called “Asia-centric” or “nationalist” historiography, a response to the Eurocentrism and Orientalism of late colonial historiography. From 1955 to around 1958, Harry Benda, John Smail and other students of Indonesian history at Cornell wrote seminar papers that explored the pitfalls of nationalist historiography and suggested ways of breaking out of the closed or limited universe exemplified by this mode of historical writing. Benedict Anderson has acknowledged how his focus on the *pemuda*, the youth who spearheaded the Indonesian nationalist movement at the local level, for his PhD thesis (submitted in 1967) was inspired by Smail's seminar papers in 1958. One of Smail's graduate essays was eventually published in 1961 under the title “On the possibility of an autonomous history of modern Southeast Asia.” A year later (1962), Benda published a companion piece titled, “The structure of Southeast Asian history: Some preliminary observations.”

Smail's essay, and to a lesser extent Benda's, became rallying points for students in the 60s and early 70s seeking a “third way” out of the apparent dead-end reached by the clash between Euro-centric and Asia-centric historical writing. “Autonomous history” was seen as an “opening up,” a progressive development, towards a more objective and universal history of

Southeast Asia. I shall revisit some of Smail's arguments later in this paper, for his approach and Benda's were among the possibilities offered to me as soon as I entered the field of Southeast Asian history and historiography in 1967. As a fairly apolitical student from the Philippines, circumstances in the late 60s made me confront and come to terms with the "coarse nationalism" that seemed to be the target of my predecessors, Smail and Benda. By the end of my stint at Cornell in 1973, certain features of what might be termed "postmodernist historiography" had helped me negotiate the dilemmas posed by Smail's critique and the "nationalist" politics I found myself immersed in.

II.

As I was about to complete my Bachelor of Arts degree at the Ateneo de Manila in 1967, it somehow entered my mind that I ought to travel overseas and do a postgraduate degree "somewhere." A two-week trip to Japan with my grandmother in the summer of 1965, and the resulting enchantment with Japanese culture and technological prowess, had already shaken up my priorities. In early 1966 I abandoned pre-Engineering in favor of a broad Liberal Arts degree in the Humanities. For a year and a half I was free to choose my subjects from among the offerings in Philosophy, History, Literature, Politics, Painting, Music, and so forth. AB Humanities was probably the most "fun" degree one could undertake at the Ateneo, but a real problem in the end was what sort of career and livelihood this would all lead up to.

At that time "Southeast Asia" was beginning to be much talked about because ASEAN had just been founded, the Vietnam war was at its height, and we Filipinos were being taught in school that our roots were really in Southeast Asia and not America. During the early 60s, President Diosdado Macapagal (Gloria M. Arroyo's father) established a close relationship with brother President Sukarno of Indonesia and attempted to form a coalition of "Malayan" states called Maphilindo. Southeast Asian studies seemed to be the wave of the future, and it seemed to have some "practical application," so I went for it. I applied to various institutions, among them Cornell, considered the Mecca of Southeast Asian Studies. To my surprise came an offer of a PhD scholarship from the Cornell Southeast Asia Program. Thankfully, a British

historian there named Oliver Wolters had somehow decided that my background in mathematics and enthusiasm for philosophy would make me a decent historian despite my lack of undergraduate training in the discipline. The legendary Jesuit historian Horacio de la Costa had never taught me the craft.

Wolters was then a virtual unknown in the field. He had moved to Cornell in 1964 from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. His first book, *Early Indonesian Commerce and the Origins of Srivijaya*, was published in 1967, the year I joined him. Wolters was a latecomer to the academe because he had served in the Malayan Civil Service for 19 years until his retirement in 1957. Only then, at the age of 42, did he commence a doctorate in history under the guidance of DGE Hall, the recognized “father” of Southeast Asian history based at the University of London. It was Hall himself who recommended Wolters’ move to Cornell University “to complement the team of Lauriston Sharp, Frank Golay, Knight Biggerstaff and George Kahin.”

My first meeting with the stern-faced Wolters in late August 1967 was one of the most terrifying moments of my life. In no uncertain terms was I made to understand that undertaking the PhD in Southeast Asian history would be no picnic. The first phase in the formation or “disciplining” of a student in this field was the learning of French, the language of much of the pioneering work on early Southeast Asia. Wolters had instructed me even before I came that I was expected to have read George Coedes’ *Les états hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie* before I could enroll in his classes. If I couldn't read French yet, then I had to pick it up in one semester. And if I wanted to study Indonesia, as I had indicated, I would have to learn Dutch and Bahasa Indonesia as well. Languages were a crucial component of Southeast Asian studies. Wolters then handed to me his thick reading list consisting of the texts that one had to read, the academic lineage and intellectual issues one had to be familiar with, in order to be inducted into Southeast Asian historiography.

Wolters then took me to the Olin library, a section of which was called

the Wason collection of Asian materials, within which would be formed the Echols collection on Southeast Asia. Wolters wanted me to meet two of his advanced students who had just returned from fieldwork: Leonard Andaya and Craig Reynolds. As stern-faced and professional as the master himself, they proceeded to show me their carrels filled with books and papers and tell me stories about the archival work they had done and the theses they were writing. I wondered how I would ever manage all that! But they were the sergeants and I was the frightened recruit. I think Wolters had worked it out so that what I was experiencing then, during my first day at the Southeast Asia program, amounted to some kind of an initiation ritual. I should have known then that in Wolters's prior career in the Malayan Civil Service, he had risen to the position of Director of Psychological Warfare in 1955 during the anticommunist "Emergency" campaigns. Looking back at those days, I think Wolters was really psyching me out, making sure that through the "shock" of that initial encounter with the Guru and his advanced students I would gain a proper awe and respect for this field of study I was getting into.

My experience as a neophyte from the Philippines getting plugged into the Southeast Asian studies circuit in the West is probably commonplace, except for a gesture of Wolters', which even at that time I found a bit odd. Seated behind his desk, he reached back and pulled out of the bookcase behind him a book titled *A Short History of the Filipino People*, authored by a certain Teodoro Agoncillo. Agoncillo was at that time one of the Philippines' most prominent historians, based in the University of the Philippines' History Department. Born in 1912, he was just three years older than Wolters. I didn't know much about this Filipino historian in 1967, because I had attended the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila, a rival of the University of the Philippines that set other textbooks. I was unaware of the history wars that raged in some university campuses in Manila from the late 50s on. I couldn't grasp the full implications, then, of Wolters' warning about this Agoncillo textbook: *Mr Ileta, you are not going to write history like this!*

III.

Only much later did I realize that Agoncillo's *A Short History of the Filipino People* typified for Wolters the genre called “nationalist history.” There were two kinds of “bad” Southeast Asian history at that time, at opposite poles to each other. The earlier type was Eurocentric history, which bred its antithesis, Asia-centric history, usually conflated with nationalist history. Both were regarded as two sides of the same coin. Wolters was avowedly critical of Eurocentric history. His teacher DGE Hall—nearly 25 years his senior—was in fact the first to castigate Eurocentrism in his 1955 general history of Southeast Asia. Both Hall and Wolters, however, were equally critical of some of the forms that the indigenous response to Eurocentric history took—particularly the one labeled “nationalist.” For the theoretical working out of a solution, they deferred to the essay by the younger scholar Smail.

As I mentioned earlier, John Smail put forward his “autonomous history” paradigm in 1961 as a response to the challenge of nationalist historiography. This “problem” arose when historians who had rejected “pure colonial history” began “with varying degrees of enthusiasm and conviction” to espouse the ideal of an Asia-centric history of Southeast Asia. This change in point of view, says Smail, was “a painful and confusing business and has barely begun. The crisis is very much with us.” What brought about his crisis? The immediate “great changes” in Smail’s time consisted of “the rise of new and sovereign states where before there were colonies.” Historiography was bound to reflect these changes: colonial historiography was fast being displaced by Asia-centric and nationalist historiography. Smail paraphrases the famous Italian historian Benedetto Croce: “the only true history is contemporary history. It follows from this that when there occur great changes in the contemporary scene, there must also be great changes in historiography, that the vision not merely of the present but also of the past must change.”

Smail’s ultimate point is that the shifts in historiography had not yet run their course—thus his comment that “the crisis is very much with us.” Nationalist historiography was only a partial solution, in itself not commensurate with the “great changes” in the world that included the

breaking down of particularisms, the “increasingly firm establishment of a single world culture, or civilization, within which there is a single universal physical science (already virtually achieved), a single universal history and so forth.” Nationalist historiography, like its binary opposite colonial historiography, was for Smail a “closed system” that inevitably would become irrelevant as a single universal history was developed.

This is not the place to discuss Smail’s legacy; Laurie Sears has edited an excellent collection of essays on this subject. I have dwelt on Smail somewhat because my arrival at Cornell coincided with the casual implementation of his “third way” in the Southeast Asian studies curriculum. Wolters, Anderson (who had started lecturing the year I arrived), and, later, David Wyatt, were fairly committed to Smail’s recommendations. These were, in brief, that it is possible to write an autonomous history of Southeast Asia if we focus on the social history of the region; that, to avoid being Europe-centric or Asia-centric, one must look beyond the colonial relationship, shake off the preoccupation with the nationalist or anticolonial encounter, examine the underlying social structure, and detail the social changes of the people, other than the domestic elite, who make up the bulk of the population.

In retrospect, my being admitted at Cornell had an agenda behind it. Taufik Abdullah (who had commenced his PhD in 1965), Charvut Kasetsiri, and myself were Wolters’ first three PhD students from different parts of Southeast Asia. I’m pretty certain that the hope was that we would return to Southeast Asia to sow the seeds of autonomous history there and hopefully neutralize the evils of nationalist historiography. This is why Wolters told me in no uncertain terms, during our first meeting, not to write a book like Agoncillo’s.

I must say, though, that even if Smail’s proposal did point to exciting new areas of investigation (such as Anderson’s *pemuda* and Benda’s *ulama* in the Indonesian revolution), I remained unconvinced even at that time that “nationalist historiography” was simply a developmental stage that would be superseded by a more objective “third way.” Smail, after all, was making

generalizations based on his familiarity with Indonesian nationalist historiography, which even then he tended to treat superficially. When he waxed lyrical about the autonomy of Indonesian domestic history only lightly affected by Dutch rule, I wondered whether this applied to the Philippines with its 350 years of direct Spanish rule and 50 years (some say ongoing) of American colonialism. Could the preoccupation with the colonial relationship really be brushed aside in the Philippines of the 1950s and 60s, or even today?

Furthermore, Smail's depiction of nationalist historiography as a "closed system" seems to have meant more than "particularistic" and "local" as opposed to the universal and global he celebrates. It also signifies a space of historical writing, controlled by the formerly colonized peoples, to which the so-called universal historian is denied access. At times, Smail laments, this space is marked by the "thoughtless hatred" and moralizing of anticolonial scholars. Was Smail's "third way," I wonder, a reflection of postcolonial anxiety? Framed in universalist language, his discussion of a "third way" seems to reflect a fear that "level-headed" and "scientific" scholars, who once dominated scholarship during the old days of empire, would be displaced by these combative nationalists.

IV.

After the "shock" of my initial meeting with Oliver Wolters in the fall of 1967, the next phase of my formation as a historian began. Since Wolters was about to go on sabbatical leave, he had invited someone else to teach his course and look after his students. This man was no other than his former mentor at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the University of London, DGE Hall.

In contrast to the relatively unknown Wolters, Hall by the 60s had already been christened the father of Southeast Asian studies, to a great extent due to the wide acceptance of his monumental history of Southeast Asia. John Legge describes this 1955 text as "a massive achievement, basing itself on the detailed work of other scholars and reflecting a knowledge of the critical issues of debate amongst them." It was the first general text to

proclaim the death of Eurocentric history. John Smail recalls his “excitement” upon reading Hall’s 1955 call “to present South–East Asia historically as an area worthy of consideration in its own right, and not merely when brought into contact with China, India or the West . . . [for] its history cannot be safely viewed from any other perspective until seen from its own.” Since its initial publication in 1955, concludes Legge, “the suitability of the region as a whole as an object of study has been more readily accepted.”

Born in 1891, Hall was already 76 when I went to see him at Wolters' office. My reaction upon meeting him was almost the opposite of my earlier encounter with Wolters. Hall did not start by dumping a cartload of requirements on me – e.g., learn French, read Coedes, read two books a week, and so forth. He wanted to know where I was coming from, what my problems were especially in adjusting to my new environment. His expectations were extremely reasonable, based on what I thought I could accomplish. But obviously he related to me as someone who held the key to the door of Southeast Asian Studies. He was one of the founding fathers of this house. He knew just about everyone in the field, specially the French, British and Dutch colonial scholars who were the pioneers of that field of study.

For Hall himself had been a colonial scholar–official in Burma. He was born three years after the destruction of the Konbaung dynasty by British forces. The British Empire was his world, and since he was a gifted singer, he expressed his affection for the empire by learning and singing, even in the classroom, the songs that accompanied its rise and consolidation. The real heroes in his life were not the rajahs and sultans of Southeast Asia that he wrote about – usually with a positive attitude, of course -- in his textbook. They were the Englishmen who visited the Burmese Kingdom and paved the way for the eventual takeover of Burma, the Malay Peninsula and other strategic points in the region we now call Southeast Asia. His archival research focused not on Southeast Asian actors, but on topics such as “Early English intercourse with Burma, the journals of Sir Arthur Phayre.”

Hall was formally trained in history. He saw it as a rigorous discipline

whose goal was objectivity, to tell a story as it really happened. To be objective in his view meant sifting through mainly written, archival documents. Is it any wonder, then, that Hall recommended to me for emulation Horacio de la Costa's Harvard-published book, *The Jesuits in the Philippines?* De la Costa was a Filipino Jesuit scholar whose meticulously-documented narrative of Jesuit relations with the Muslim Magindanao in the 17th century was brought up by Hall as a topic worthy of being followed up, which led me to formulate my M.A. thesis on Datu Uto of Magindanao. Hall had a problem, though, in that the much-vaunted primary documents he used to write about Burma were largely penned by non-Burmese (i.e. the English). This was exactly the problem that led Agoncillo to declare in 1960 that an authentic Filipino history before 1872 could not be written, because most of the sources were in Spanish. For Hall, the problem was non-existent. We can see why upon a brief examination of his career.

When Hall arrived in Rangoon in 1921 to head the university's history department, he was disturbed to find that the history syllabus had already been set by a professor from an Indian university. Not that there was anything seriously wrong with this syllabus, but there seemed to be a heavy concentration on classical Greece and Rome, than on modern British and European history. Hall was perturbed by the fact that Asian history was almost non-existent in the syllabus. Even more disturbing to him was that whatever Asian history there was, concerned India. Not surprising, though, since it was a professor from India (probably an Englishman as well, though) who set the syllabus.

Hall's aim in redesigning the syllabus was to make history more relevant to his Burmese clientele. So instead of a focus on Greece and Rome for the intermediate examination, there was a broader investigation of world history, which included the civilizations of the ancient Near and Middle East, India, and China. And in the final examination, the thrust was on modern Western history, Indian history, East Asian history, and Burmese history.

What's the significance of all this? Hall had been tasked with intellectually forming a new generation of Burmese elites, giving them an

English education that would prepare them for running the country in the future. These students were not unaware of the British conquests and the continuing influence of anticolonial monks over the youth. There was, in fact, quite a bit of student unrest on campus when Hall arrived. His new history syllabus, however, certainly did not contain an apology for the British take-over and presence. What it did was to locate “Burma” within that broad narrative of the spread of Reason and Progress. That is why it was important to teach Asian history with Burma in it. The incorporation of Asian history into the Big Story of the march of Progress, of course, made the British conquest almost a necessity. Those who resist the march of History are pictured as ignorant, narrow-minded or deluded. Those who appear to see the light and attempt to modernize themselves, such as the Burmese King Mindon, are given a more positive slant in this history. And if Hall did not condemn British violence it was because he genuinely seemed to believe that it was the fault of those despotic, narrow-minded or even insane Burmese kings that their people got drawn into wars against the level-headed agents of modernity, namely the British.

Hall's treatment of me—the nervous, young Filipino who was sitting at the feet of the Master—was as if I was the latest, or even the last, of his Burmese students. Personally speaking, this was a blessing in disguise, for I cannot imagine myself—a timid, inarticulate and “undisciplined” Filipino—surviving my first year under a taskmaster like Wolters. But the other dimension of this two-year apprenticeship under Hall was that by writing history according to the rules and standards of Cornell and, specially, the University of London, I would be assimilated into an elite brotherhood of Southeast Asian historians. I would then return to my country to propagate the right kind of history, and even push forward the incorporation of Philippine history into the universal story of the modern world.

In his lectures, Hall would often read aloud from a manuscript of a new edition in the making of his textbook. He was constantly incorporating new research, most having to do with pre-colonial history. He generally followed the trend of seeing Southeast Asian societies as dynamic agents in history. He wholeheartedly accepted Wolters' views on localization, for

example. He certainly refused to go along with the pattern of Southeast Asian history laid down in Brian Harrison's textbook, a pattern that suggests that Southeast Asia was just a passive arena for alien influences to work their way. In holding up Wolters as a model, and criticizing the likes of Harrison, Hall was in fact a spokesman for non-Eurocentric history—but only up to a point. He never revised his Eurocentric chapters on the late 19th century British and French occupation of huge chunks of Southeast Asia.

V.

Professor Hall often told us about life in Burma and at the University of Rangoon during the days of empire. He reminded us that some of the politicians of now-independent Burma were once his students. We sensed in some of Hall's lectures, however, that not all was smooth-sailing in his career, that there were enemies or rivals lurking in the background and taking the occasional potshots at him. As I have said, Hall was extremely critical of nationalist scholarship. For him the epitome of the bad historian was a Burmese named Maung Htin Aung who was writing about the Anglo-Burmese wars and British occupation from what was claimed to be a Burmese point of view. Htin Aung saw himself as writing against Hall's Eurocentric or Anglocentric accounts of Anglo-Burmese interactions.

Maung Htin Aung's first book was *The Stricken Peacock – Anglo-Burmese Relations, 1752 – 1948*, published in 1965. Hall's review of it concludes: "it seems highly doubtful whether a work of adequate critical standards can be produced by a Burmese scholar." Barely two years later, Maung Htin Aung published *A History of Burma*. Hall's published comment on it was that it "displays great literary skills ... [Maung Htin Aung] is not attempting to write sober history: rather it is an essay in national apologetics ... directed mainly to the reader ignorant of its subject . . ." I don't remember the details of what Hall said in class about Htin Aung, but he certainly didn't mince words. What I think disturbed him most about Htin Aung's writings was the fact that this "unruly" Burmese scholar had been a student of his at the University of Rangoon from 1924–28. Hall was haunted by his Burmese past. Perhaps Htin Aung had been groomed to succeed Hall, for he was appointed

lecturer in 1933 before Hall left for England. He then rose to become the Rector of the university from 1946–1958. After he retired from the academe, he was appointed to the Burmese diplomatic service.

Maung Htin Aung had learned the rules of the history “discipline” from Hall himself. His *History of Burma* was published by Columbia, with footnote citations, bibliography, and all the requirements for international recognition. By using Burmese sources or at least reading British sources with skepticism, Maung Htin Aung attempted to retrieve what Hall had suppressed. But because he set himself in direct opposition to the gigantic Hall, and also submitted to the excesses of nationalist historiography by uncritically glorifying the ancient past, the guardians of the field of study labeled his books “bad history.”

Maung Htin Aung was not a real problem as far as Hall was concerned. He was more like a pesky fly that kept on buzzing Hall but couldn't do much harm. The more sinister enemy, for Hall as well as for Wolters, was an Armenian–Jewish, Russian– and German– speaking scholar named Emmanuel Sarkisyanz. Sarkisyanz held his own credentials as a scholar, but they were not from the Anglo–American university circuits in which Hall and Wolters operated. Sarkisyanz's *Peacocks, Pagodas and Professor Hall* illustrates how Hall's rise to fame, to being christened the father of Southeast Asian Studies, was not without resistance from some quarters, and not just Burmese at that.

Paul van der Veur of the Center for International Studies at Ohio University states in the Preface that Sarkisyanz' monograph

is a frontal attack on certain scholarly works of Professor DGE Hall concerning British colonial policy in Burma. The fact that the author...had felt compelled to question the contribution of a well-known and respected historian of Southeast Asia stems from his deep conviction that Professor Hall's writings are steeped in the British imperial tradition and therefore do not properly present the Burmese side of the story. (i, xi)

Anyone reading Sarkisyanz's essay who is not already committed to the British imperial enterprise, will find the arguments quite convincing, although the phraseology might be condemned as being "emotional" and "moralistic." It is an elementary essay on the handling of sources by the historian. Hall would never admit it, but we his students all knew that the Burmese side of the story had been ignored or deleted in his account, and that the British in Burma were almost always given the benefit of the doubt. Our skepticism of Hall was reinforced by the times: This all happened, after all, in 1967–68, when the antiwar movement was spreading fast, and the point of view—the mentality—of the "enemy" (in this case the Vietnamese, but there was also great interest in Mao's China and the cultural revolution) was a subject of much interest and research.

It is not that Sarkisyanz was a critic who did not offer an alternative. His book *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* should be read in order to gain a proper appreciation of Sarkisyanz as a scholar. Here the relative absence of Burmese sources is made up for by an exploration of Burmese religious texts and the mentality that informed them. For example, Hall would likely just go along with a British report that their forces took out a bunch of fanatics led by a Buddhist *pongyi*. Thus violence was justified by the observation that the enemy was not "rational" or did not fight according to the proper rules of war. Sarkisyanz, however, probed deeper into what this alleged "fanaticism" was all about, and located it within the framework of popular Buddhist thought. Sarkisyanz even showed how Burmese socialism of later decades was rooted in popular conceptions of an earthly nirvana. In other words, Sarkisyanz provided an intellectual framework whereby even tidbits of information in British sources could be read against the grain, or could be read within a Burmese frame of meaning.

Sarkisyanz was, in effect, a more sophisticated historian than Hall. One might even say that he was as creative as Wolters, who was just eight years his senior. Sarkisyanz, however, never became a famous scholar of the order of Hall and Wolters. For one thing, he belonged to a different academic circuit—continental European rather than Anglo–American. He eventually based himself in the University of Heidelberg. Being an Armenian Jew only

highlighted his alienation from the Hall–Wolters world of scholarship. As Van de Veur states in his Preface to *Peacocks, Pagodas*, the author “feels that British and American scholarship has consciously ignored his writings.” This was true.

There is another angle to this: institutional rivalry. The International Studies Center of Ohio University was home to a rival of Hall's: John Cady. Cady, a liberal American somewhat critical of US policy in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, authored *A History of Modern Burma* (1958) as well as a general history of Southeast Asia that for a while gave Hall's textbook a run for its money. Ohio's publication of Sarkisyanz's attack on Hall cannot be merely coincidental. By the mid-60s Sarkisyanz himself had managed to gain a temporary foothold in the US as lecturer in the History Department of the University of Hawaii. This was a position literally in the margins of the mandala “center” in Ithaca, but its disturbing presence was registered in Hall's lectures to us.

When I joined the Hall–Wolters fold in the fall of 1967, there were three other newcomers. They were not frightened neophytes like me, however. Carl Trocki, an American, was brought up in the academic culture of the US. Charnvit Kasetsiri, the Thai scholar I mentioned earlier, had obtained the MA from the Occidental College in California and was being groomed for the Thai diplomatic service. The third, Australian Barbara Watson, came with an MA in history from the University of Hawaii. Watson's training was seemed somewhat problematic, however, for she had been mentored by no other than Emmanuel Sarkisyanz. Hall and Wolters no doubt welcomed Watson as a qualified scholar and also a refugee from another mandala. But what if she were a Trojan horse sent by Sarkisyanz into the Hall–Wolters camp? Watson, of course, while being faithful to her new teachers, gave us the other, positive, side of the Sarkisyanz story. Needless to say, my PhD thesis on popular movements in the Philippines would display an affinity with Sarkisyanz's book on Buddhism and the Burmese revolution. Wolters, to give him his due, did not resist the incorporation of Sarkisyanz into my work.

Looking back at the career of my teacher DGE Hall, clearly there was

much I could and did learn from his pioneering work. At the same time, however, his “universal” Southeast Asian scholarship was modulated by a pronounced British-ness. Hall, after all, hero-worshipped the early British visitors to the Burmese court. His student Wolters, in a similar vein, regarded the ideal “man of prowess” to be, not the Sultan of Kelantan (with whom he was acquainted), but his boss Brigadier Gerald Templar, the overseer of the Malayan Emergency. There was, furthermore, a discernible politics of scholarship dominated by the Anglo-American world that underpinned their rise to prominence while obscuring the likes of Sarkisyanz.

I am also struck by the fact that Hall and Wolters were haunted not just by their fond memories of Southeast Asia as a place, but also by the specter of a kind of scholarship from the region associated with lack, underdevelopment, and anticolonial assertiveness. Perhaps it is time to revisit this issue of “bad” scholarship from the region, previously dismissed by Smail, Benda, and of course Hall and Wolters. They are part of a genre of historical writing from Southeast Asia—which would include the works of Maung Htin Aung and Agoncillo—that were written against and subtly marginalized as “good” Southeast Asian history became institutionalized in the late 60s. I suspect that in the light of postcolonial textual strategies these obscured works may reveal features of utmost relevance to us today.

VI.

Wolters and Agoncillo were born only three years apart. Yet, clearly, Wolters was a child of the British Empire, while Agoncillo’s heritage in anticolonial struggles is equally clear. An exploration of their starkly contrasting backgrounds helps to explain much of the historiographical tensions I observed and experienced in the late 1960s.

Wolters was born in Reading, England, somewhat destined to become an academic for his father was a professor and later Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Reading. Wolters took out a first class honors degree in history at Lincoln College, Oxford, in 1937. The tropics beckoned, however, and so he joined the Malayan Civil Service at the urging of a friend.

He received a further year of education at Oxford to equip him with the skills for colonial administration, including the learning of Malay language and history under Sir Richard Winstedt. Then he was off to Malaya in 1938.

Agoncillo, in contrast, was born to a clan in Lemery, a town in Batangas province south of Manila that had been deeply involved in the revolution of 1898. While Wolters' England was the nerve-center of a vast collection of colonies, Agoncillo's Batangas was once the nerve center of a vast guerrilla movement against the US Army, and therefore bore the brunt of counter-guerrilla operations in 1901 and 1902. At the age of six, Agoncillo was sent off to Manila to be educated. He liked to retell the story of how he was first "politicized," so to speak, by a demonstration in his Manila high school sparked by an American teacher's comment that her Filipino students were like monkeys. In 1935, Agoncillo completed an MA thesis at the University of the Philippines on the topic of "The Japanese occupation of Manchuria." He then found employment as technical assistant in the Division of Research and Translation of the Institute of National Language.

The two men experienced Japanese occupation very differently. When Singapore surrendered to the Japanese, Wolters, like all the other Britishers who once ruled the roost, became a civilian internee for three and a half years at Changi prison. There he studied Buddhism, which was to serve him well in his later work on Indian influences in Southeast Asia. Agoncillo, meanwhile, was neither a combatant nor a prisoner. He stayed home most of the time, financially supported by his wife, a medical doctor. He faithfully kept a diary that would be a key source for his two-volume history of the Japanese occupation published in 1965. Agoncillo's generation of scholars was profoundly affected by the Japanese policy of encouraging Filipino nationalism, while attempting to eradicate American cultural influences. This is reflected in a study Agoncillo undertook on "The American influence on the Tagalog language and literature," a draft of which was presented to the Philippine Normal College in 1944.

Wolters and Agoncillo took off in entirely different paths during the turbulent postwar decade. Wolters' became involved in settling labor strikes

organized by the Malayan Communist Party among Chinese workers in Selangor. When the MCP mounted a rebellion, in what was termed the “Malayan Emergency,” Wolters became deeply involved in campaigns against what he himself termed the Communist terrorists. His role was mainly to alienate the rebels from the Chinese squatter population, and to facilitate the resettlement and rehabilitation of captured “Communist terrorists” or “CT’s.” In December 1951, Wolters published an article about the situation of the rural Chinese, how the “Communist problem” originated among them, and how this could be dealt with effectively. Virginia Hooker has noted how, in this short piece, Wolters already reveals some of the trademarks of his future scholarship. Wolters saw the connection between the traditional Chinese cult of the outlaw and the appeal of the MCP to young people. He believed that the Communist problem would be permanently solved if, through strategies like the Taiping Rehabilitation Camp, these young people could be won over to the notion of a Malayan “community.”

The Philippine equivalent of the Malayan Emergency was the Huk rebellion led by the Communist Party of the Philippines. Agoncillo was not directly involved in this rebellion, but he certainly sympathized with it and would have been critical of the label “terrorist” indiscriminately applied to the rebels. When wartime President Laurel returned to political life in 1947, Agoncillo became a supporter in the intellectual front of this feisty anticolonial nationalist who, in the elections of 1949, enjoyed the support of the Communist Party. Agoncillo’s first major work was written at the height of the Huk rebellion. Titled *The Revolt of the Masses: the Story of Bonifacio and the Katipunan*, it won first prize in a book competition sponsored by the government. The manuscript’s publication had to wait eight years, however. The problem, basically, was that Agoncillo used the notion of “class” to organize his narrative about the revolt of the masses’ betrayal by the “middle class,” and this caught the attention of the shadowy Congressional Committee on Un-Filipino Activities. Defense Secretary, and later President, Ramon Magsaysay actively prevented its publication until 1956. During the mass arrests of suspected communists in Manila in October 1951, CPP Secretary Jose Lava took refuge in Agoncillo’s house before turning himself in. Agoncillo himself came close to being arrested at this point. At about this time,

by the way, Wolters, who was on the hit list of the MCP, was ambushed twice in Pahang and survived with only a few cuts and bruises. For his bravery he was awarded the Order of the British Empire.

Wolters decided to retire from the Malayan Civil Service in 1956. The following year, he embarked upon a second career as a historian. He took up a position as lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He also embarked upon his doctoral studies under the supervision of DGE Hall. For reasons, which should be obvious by now, Wolters chose not to focus on the colonial period or to draw directly from his own Malayan experience for his research. Instead he used his knowledge of Chinese to reconstruct the history of trade and the rise of the early kingdom of Srivijaya. His thesis was completed in 1962 and published in 1967.

Agoncillo, meanwhile, also experienced a career shift around the same time as Wolters did. In 1958, he left the Institute of National Language to take up a lectureship in the Department of History of the University of the Philippines. Two years later, he published another influential book, *Malolos: The Crisis of the Republic*, which detailed the fortunes of Emilio Aguinaldo and his fledgling government, and the war of resistance against the United States. In 1960, Agoncillo and his colleague Oscar Alfonso published in mimeographed form the textbook *A Short History of the Filipino People*, which Wolters warned me not to model my writing on.

In my first serious analysis (1988) of the Agoncillo textbook, I underlined its adherence to a fairly typical metanarrative of Progress: a golden age of indigenous civilization is followed by a dark age of colonialism from which the country is painfully rescued by the burgeoning nationalist movement from 1872 on, leading to a revolution and the formation, of course, of a modern nation–state. What my formal critique of “nationalist discourse” and grand narratives overlooked was that Agoncillo’s text was by no means an imposition of the state on its citizens, that it was meant to engage with other texts that preceded or coexisted with it, and that it would have generated meanings beyond its author’s intentions.

We can justifiably query why “nation–building” had to be the textbook’s preoccupation, but an equally salient fact is that it was an experiment in putting history into action, or making the past matter to, and even change, the present. “The textbook has no pretensions to completeness,” say its authors.

The instructor [who uses the textbook], in his capacity as guide of his class, is not expected to ‘toe the line.’ On the contrary, he is free to express himself in opposition to the authors’ obiter dicta. All judgments by historians are tentative; there cannot be any finality in their opinions. But the historian and, for that matter, the instructor, can make history a living and lively thing that it really is if they have the imagination to re–live the past and so make of it a contemporary event.” The important thing to remember is to arouse the interest and curiosity of the students and to make them think for themselves.

In other words, the instructor is supposed to “complete” the book in his interaction with his students, while the latter are encouraged to see the past in the present and presumably act on the present—a very Crocean view of history, for Agoncillo, like Smal, believed in this Italian historian’s dictum that “all history is contemporary history.” The audience is encouraged to participate in another way, by calling attention to errors: “In a book of this range and scope, the possibility of errors and inaccuracies is great.” Agoncillo invited corrections and criticisms that, he promised, would be reflected, with proper acknowledgement, in subsequent editions.

The textbook of 1960 “spoke” to the present in many ways, some of them extremely controversial and practically inviting retribution by the Philippine state and its American sponsor. Even if, as the truism goes, nationalist historiography is a handmaiden of the modern nation–state, we often forget that it also has provoked actions against the state, and that movements promoting a variety of other causes have appropriated nationalist texts for their own ends. The 1960 textbook, for example, reproduced for wider consumption Agoncillo’s findings in his controversial *The Revolt of the Masses*, published at about the time Smal and Benda at Cornell were working

out their critiques of, and alternatives to, nationalist historiography.

The fears of Magsaysay, the CUFA, the CIA and the Military Intelligence Service were probably well-founded, for the effects of Agoncillo's historical studies reverberated throughout the sixties in the organized left, various student organizations, and labor as well as peasant movements. And even though Agoncillo was denounced by the Catholic Church hierarchy for his restatement of anti-friar criticism and chronicling of the struggle of the native clergy against the Spanish and American religious orders, certain members of the clergy used Agoncillo for their own ends. For example, disgruntled priests Ruben Manaligod of the Society of the Divine Word, and the Jesuit Fr. Hilario Lim, drew on Agoncillo (as well as Horacio de la Costa and Cesar Majul) in rendering historical legitimacy to their protests against the (still) foreign-dominated religious orders from 1957 through the 60s.

"Agoncillo," then, cannot be reduced to essentialist and developmentalist formulations of what nationalist historiography was all about. Furthermore, his writings from 1957 on should not be read apart from the ensemble of texts, whether labeled nationalist or not, which spoke to each other and to the people-audience in subtle ways. The Jesuit historian Horacio de la Costa, for example, is often pictured as a Catholic alternative to Agoncillo's aggressive nationalism. Yet a perusal of De la Costa's essays from 1955 to 1971 reveals a nationalist engagement with, rather than Catholic opposition to, Agoncillo. They were both, after all, active members of the National Historical Institute. There was also Cesar Majul, the third Filipino historian in the ensemble which provided ammunition for the cause of the defrocked priests Manaligod and Lim. Majul's landmark work, *The Political and Constitutional Ideas of the Philippine Revolution*, was published alongside Agoncillo's *Revolt of the Masses*. Though primarily an intellectual history, Majul's book probed into the controversial and emotion-laden origins of the colonial relationship with America, namely, the war of 1899-1902. It highlighted the ideas of the revolutionary intellectual Apolinario Mabini who was now deployed alongside Agoncillo's Bonifacio and De la Costa's Rizal, as sources and reference points for presentist thinking and action.

The domestic scene pictured above could not but grab my attention even as I was busy as a graduate student in the US. In these events, the books and lectures of the historian Agoncillo played a major role. Could I, then, as a “concerned Filipino” simply submit to the dictates of the “third way” labeled autonomous history? My eventual response to Wolters’ early admonition not to write history like Agoncillo was to understand where this “bad” Filipino historian was coming from, then to critique and build on him.

VII.

John Smail’s clarion call for the writing of autonomous Southeast Asian history found a Philippine response from other quarters. Smail migrated to the University of Wisconsin, while his comrade, Harry Benda, took up a professorship at Yale. In these academic centers of power they were able to inspire a generation of younger scholars to work out their visions about a historiographic “third way.” In 1982, Edilberto de Jesus and Alfred McCoy, two of Benda’s best students, published *Philippine Social History*, a compilation that claimed to represent the best of post-1970 Philippine historical writing.

The year 1970, to paraphrase principal editor McCoy, represents the dividing line between the old and the new historical scholarship. Before 1970, historical studies “concentrated on national political history” and was preoccupied with “particularistic problems that were of little import to those outside the field.” The new regional social histories, however, “address themselves to questions of social change that have for some years concerned students of Europe, the Americas and other parts of Asia.” McCoy viewed Philippine historical scholarship as playing a catch-up game with world scholarship, finally moving on from what Smail would term a “closed system” to one of universal value and relevance.

The gulf between McCoy and historians like Agoncillo and De la Costa is clearly evidence in McCoy’s query: “Having broken the Philippines apart into regional blocs, is it, in fact, our aim to reassemble a national historical edifice, or are we social scientists using these regions as evidence

for the resolution of more universal questions about the nature of social change?” One need not look elsewhere, though, for a Filipino response to this question. Of the fifteen contributors to *Philippine Social History*, only two were Filipinos. One of them, Milagros Guerrero, was in fact Agoncillo’s protégé who had by that time assumed co-authorship of Agoncillo’s textbook history. Guerrero’s contribution to the McCoy & De Jesus volume was not, strictly speaking, a regional history but a history of provincial and municipal elites of Luzon during the revolution of 1898. Clearly her work is an elaboration of Agoncillo’s *Malolos: The Crisis of the Republic*, which blamed the failure of the Revolution on the wealthy elite that subverted the aims of the revolutionary government and eventually collaborated with the Americans. Guerrero, through the medium of a University of Michigan dissertation, clearly was latching on to debates in the Philippines about where the new revolution of the 1970s might be heading, how the past informs the present, and vice versa.

Edilberto de Jesus’s chapter on the 19th century tobacco monopoly in Cagayan hews much more closely to the spirit of Smail and Benda. He was, after all, a protégé of Fr de la Costa, who had always insisted that the Revolution would be better understood if the century preceding it, and the regions beyond the revolutionary center, were thoroughly investigated. We can easily overlook, however, the very different stance that De Jesus takes in the essay he wrote to conclude the *Philippine Social History* volume: Yes, he says, the essays in the collection do dwell for the most part on the local and the regional. The relationship between the local and the national is clearly of secondary interest, if at all. But, he further asks, isn’t there a danger of lapsing into antiquarianism here? He then proceeds to distance himself from his co-editor McCoy’s solution to the problem: “the option [McCoy] offers is, in effect, to by-pass the local/national axis altogether and to focus on the linkages between sub-national units and centers of political and commercial power beyond the Philippines.” Fine and good, says De Jesus, but ultimately “our Western colleagues, it seems to me, are better positioned to continue exploring the ramifications of this theme.”

While accepting the intellectual rationale for a “third” way along the axis of universal history, De Jesus nevertheless stands firm in his conviction

that Filipino historical writing is driven by its own concerns, “nationalist” though this may be labeled. If, he argues, “the reality of the nation is indeed rooted in the ideas shared by the people from whom it claims allegiance, Filipinos ought to continue the search for the beliefs that give substance to Philippine nationalism. The local / national axis remains a most promising point of departure for this search.” The studies in the collection he and McCoy have edited do matter. From them can be drawn “a more rounded, more finely shaded picture of Philippine society.” But, De Jesus concludes, the editors hope “that the wide range of questions they raise will suggest not only new areas for research but also *new perspectives for action.*” (my italics)

“1970” was a watershed in Philippine historical writing in more ways than one. While it may have signified for McCoy a break from the particularistic, nationalist historiography of the Agoncillo generation, for Guerrero, De Jesus, and most other Filipino historians including myself, “1970” marked the “First Quarter Storm,” the beginning of a political movement whose contours would be shaped by the past which we were tasked to write about for a new, post-1970, audience in a martial law environment. Thus my “archival fieldwork” in 1971–72 was conducted as much in the streets of Manila and the peasant communities in southern Luzon, as it was in the national archives.

I was back in Ithaca to write up my thesis when Marcos declared martial law in September 1972. My gut response was to involve myself in the political movements of the time, which I did for a couple of months. But one evening, as I was discussing with Cesar Majul (who had just arrived as a visiting professor at Cornell) my intention of postponing my doctoral work for the sake of politics, he reacted most vigorously: “Rey,” he said, “you have no choice but to finish your dissertation, for that’s the most effective contribution you can make to the movement.” Wolters back in 1967 had warned me not to write history like Agoncillo, while Majul in early 1973 prodded me to be another Agoncillo suitably modified to write in the space between “coarse nationalism” and global trends in the writing of history. This did not mean taking up the challenge of Smail and Benda’s “autonomous history,” which unlike others I did not see as some inevitable stage towards a more objective and universal historical methodology. It was a historiography as ideologically

driven as its competitors, inflected by academic rivalries, and subtly contested. There were other ways, as shown by scholars like James Siegel, Ben Anderson and, ironically perhaps, Wolters himself, through which as a student of theirs in the US, I could accommodate to the demands of so-called cutting edge and global scholarship while remaining committed to the aims of the political movement “back home.” I expect that this will have been the experience of many other local scholars in Southeast Asia whose minds, if not bodies, have traveled elsewhere.

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