

Recensioner

Kathryn Anderson Wellen, *The open door: Early modern Wajorese statecraft and diaspora*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. 217 pages.

It is a somewhat worn-out truism that our knowledge of the dynamics of Asian historical societies has grown exponentially in the last 40-50 years. New methods to scrutinize the sources for Indian and Chinese history have made for bold reinterpretations by scholars like Kenneth Pommeranz and Robert Marks who have questioned the age-old paradigms of European uniqueness in relation to Asian historical civilizations. The study of Southeast Asia as a cultural-historical category has likewise gained much ground in the last decades through new ways of interpreting the data, with groundbreaking works by Anthony Reid, Victor Lieberman, and Leonard Andaya, among others. There are nevertheless a number of Western historical notions whose application on Asian societies may not have been sufficiently questioned. To these belongs the notion of the state. There has been a lively debate about the nature of the pre-colonial states in Southeast Asia for some time, where the consensus seems to be that these states differed structurally from European ones. While European states are commonly thought of as bureaucratized (at least from the early modern period) and emphasizing fixed borders, the states of Southeast Asia have been characterized as “galactic polities”, “segmentary states” or “mandala states” where power radiated from a dynastic centre and encompassed areas in the periphery according to its strength at a given time.

All these models seem to presuppose a state that departs from the centre. However, as shown by Kathryn Wellen’s book, this is insufficient in order to understand some forms of statecraft that flourished in maritime Southeast Asia before the onset of European colonialism. In fact it was not uncommon that a state consisted of a centre linked to outlying communities which could be very distant in relation to the metropolitan area. To these belong the spice sultanates Ternate and Tidore which were originally based on small particular islands but evolved into comprehensive realms in eastern Indonesia, driven by the access to spices and other natural products. Wellen studies another polity which has been known in Western literature for a long time but never received comprehensive treatment. This is Wajoq (also spelt Wajo’) in South Sulawesi with a core area somewhat smaller than Luxembourg. The Wajorese belong to the Bugis ethnic group and may be known to Western readership through their appearance in Joseph Conrad’s novel *The Rescue*. In fact their activities stretched over a wide area, from Aceh in northern Sumatra to the Bird’s Head on New Guinea, more or less the distance from Spain to Inner Russia. The significance of Wajoq is therefore in no proportion to its modest core land.

Kathryn Wellen describes and analyses the trajectories of this remarkable seaborne group in the early modern period, especially from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth century. The keyword is diaspora: the Wajorese settled in a wide array of places yet managed to maintain a distinct identity and ties to their original land in Sulawesi over the centuries. As she explains, the origin of the diaspora lies in a series of dramatic events in the 1660s and 1670s in which both local political factions and the early-colonial Dutch East India Company (VOC) were implicated. The Bugis leader Arung Palakka allied with the VOC to attack Makassar, a comprehensive and belligerent island realm which combined a Muslim proselytizing drive with the domination of trade routes. With the fall of Makassar in 1667 and 1669, its vassal Wajoq fell into hard times, which motivated an exodus of parts of the population. In fact migration was passively encouraged by the leaders of Wajoq, who likened their community to an “open door”; people were free to go, but also to return. Among the more important new settlements were those in East Borneo and West Sumatra. While the Wajorese were mainly traders, they also interfered in politics in the areas where they settled. Itinerant Wajorese noblemen would marry local princesses and on at least one occasion, in Pasir in East Borneo, the host court was overthrown by a Wajorese adventurer who made himself sultan of the region.

However, the more peaceful and constructive part of Wajorese activities calls for attention. On the basis of the Dutch colonial archives and indigenous writings, Wellen is able to puzzle together a fascinating picture of advanced trading practices that seem to parallel European trading capitalism (although Wellen does not detail the parallels). As she notes, “formal frameworks for establishing and regulating business relationships were a key element in Wajorese success. The Wajorese established various systems both in Wajoq and elsewhere to promote and regulate trade” (p. 71). Particular laws were codified around 1700 by a chief who settled in the entrepôt Makassar where a special Wajorese quarter emerged. Such a commercial law is highly unusual in a Southeast Asian context and points to the commercial skills developed by this small ethnic group.

Another characteristic of the Wajorese diaspora is the maintenance of a distinct identity. In early Southeast Asia it was comparatively easy to slip from one ethnic identity to another, and the Wajorese could thus easily pose as Malays or something else. An intricate network of family relations tied prominent Wajorese to princes and lords all over the archipelago. But the ties to Wajoq itself were always there, maintained through ritual practices, the production of texts, and symbols of belonging such as flags. This is illustrated by the tumultuous career of La Madukellang (c. 1700-1765) who is the subject of one of the last chapters in Wellen’s book. An adventurer of noble stock, he fled Wajoq due to a serious transgression and began a seaborne odyssey that took him to faraway places like Sumbawa and Borneo. He eventually ventured back to Sulawesi, was excused for his former misdeeds and soon elected arungmatoa, that is, elective ruler of Wajoq. As such he colluded with dissatisfied nobles of South Sulawesi with the grandiose aim of expelling the Dutch from this part of Indonesia. His ambitious plans

were eventually defeated, but he kept his little principality in a perennial state of warfare until the Wajorese grew tired and deposed him in 1754. In modern Indonesia his uncompromising stance against the “infidel” Dutch has rendered him the status of an official national hero (pahlawan nasional).

Kathryn Wellen’s book is an important contribution to the study of early Indonesian history, and is likely to catch the interest even of people not specialized in the field. It disproves old ideas of Southeast Asian states as relatively closed or unchanging which, although increasingly abandoned by serious scholarship, still persist in many contexts. It is based on a variety of sources and shows how history can be enriched by anthropological perspectives. Although Wellen makes no claim of being “postcolonial” in perspective, some of the issues are similar to recent postcolonial research: a will to use concurrent categories of sources to trace historical processes and challenge dominant central narratives. Her work shows how a society which in the usual Western conceptualization would be termed “traditional” could be open as well as commerce-friendly, and largely defy conventional ideas of a “state”.

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