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Book Reviews

Traditionalism and the ascendancy of the Malay ruling class in colonial Malaya. By Donna J. Amoroso. Singapore: NUS Press and SIRD, 2014, pp. 276, ISBN: 978-967-0630-16-8.

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Students of British Malaya know that among the significant Malay cultural institutions that survived the colonial period is the royal institution. One important issue that remains unanswered is how essential the preservation of the Malay tradition was to maintaining British political hegemony. It is along this line of inquiry that Donna Amoroso developed her study of traditionalism and the Malay ruling class in British Malaya. Originally a Ph.D. dissertation submitted to Cornell University, her study was recently published by NUS (the National University of Singapore) Press and SIRD (Strategic Information and Research Development Centre). Amoroso herself, sadly, did not have the opportunity to witness the reception of her work, as she passed away in 2011. Titled *Traditionalism and the Ascendancy of the Malay Ruling Class in Colonial Malaya,* this work argues that the British colonial government utilised and reinvented the tradition of the Malay ruling class to secure its immediate political and economic needs. From the outset, Amoroso reminds her readers that for them to appreciate her argument they need to distinguish between tradition and traditionalism.

For her as well as for many others, tradition is a body of customary practices and rituals inherited from past generations. Traditionalism, however, refers to the conscious and formal use of tradition in order to bolster one's political and economic positions. Prior to the colonial period, Amoroso maintains that traditional practices were more immediately and unconsciously experienced as something that people lived through. With British colonialism, however, tradition was subjected

to selective and conscious preservation and redefinition which marks the rise of traditionalism. For Amoroso, only by conceiving the continuity of tradition in terms of traditionalism will we be able to explain the central contradiction in the history of colonial Malaya between British economic and administrative modernisation and their preservation of tradition. This study does not simply distinguish tradition and traditionalism, its methodological assumption gives ontological priority to the latter. This is reflected in its implicit adherence to a relational theory of meaning, which suggests that the meaning of a thing or practice changes if its relation with other things changes. This can be seen in Amoroso's general assertion that despite British traditionalism, Malay customary practices and rituals could no longer hold the same meaning as they did in the pre-colonial period, since they now inhabited a world shaped by radically different political and economic forces. It means that what is important here is not really the fact that the Malays saw their traditional practices as a continuation from the past. Instead, what is important is the significance of the practices in the context of immediate political needs.

This study begins in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when the British were expanding their influence in the peninsula. The early years of the British indirect rule in the Malay states witnessed the introduction of new political idioms which undermined traditional Malay politics and economy. One of these idioms was the discourse of good government. For Amoroso, 'good government' was a culturally specific idiom which the rulers had to learn in order to survive the colonial world. By 'good government' Amoroso seems to have in mind a set of impersonal bureaucratic and legal relationships and practices that developed in the Malay states as a result of British intervention. This is reflected in her interpretation of a number of bureaucratic and legal issues. One of these issues was an appeal made by Sultan Abdullah of Perak to the Governor in Singapore, Andrew Clarke, to help resolve the tension between him and the British Resident in the state, J.W.W. Birch. In Amoroso's view, the Sultan's tendency to attribute "power personally to Clarke rather than to the office of governor" (p. 37) is a sign of his failure to understand the new political idiom. In contrast, a Malay aristocrat is said to have mastered "the British idiom and discourse" (p. 36) when he hired a lawyer from Singapore to bring his case against the British intervention to London.

The discourse of good government undermined and reshaped the traditional power relations characterised by the feudal tension between

Malay rulers and Malay chiefs/aristocrats. Many policies introduced by the British curtailed the chiefs' ancient privileges such as the right to collect taxes, thus redefining their position in society. The British knew that even if they could tame the rulers, this would not have guaranteed British control over the powerful and rebellious chiefs. As a compensation for what the chiefs had lost, the British gave them a monthly allowance. Amoroso interprets the significance of this measure in light of her wider argument, "The circulation of gifts and economic resources had become thoroughly detached from Malay meaning and control. Their meaning was now commanded by the British and accessed by Malay accommodation of British justice and good government" (p. 43). The internalisation of new political idioms was further reinforced by the formation of the Federated Malay States in 1896. Bureaucratic standardisation that transcended state boundaries generated a new sense of togetherness among Malay rulers. This new experience was further enriched by the creation of an official platform for rulers known as the conference of rulers (*Durbar*), where they could meet and discuss matters of shared interest.

The spread of the discourse of good government, however, reached its limit in the late nineteenth century. For Amoroso, this was due to the growing feeling among British officials that Malays would never wholeheartedly embrace the spirit of progress and civilisation. This was not really a problem for the British, since they already had firm control over the Malay states. Hence, in order to keep things moving and minimise troubles, the British knew that they had to define Malay politics in ancient terms. For Amoroso, this led to a tension between the growing traditionalism and the existing discourse of good government. The dynamic of this tension between preservation and progress was reflected in a newly emerging contradiction within the Malay ruling class. The early twentieth century witnessed the extensive bureaucratisation of the Malay elites. The sons of the Malay chiefs were given English education and then recruited as civil servants. As they immersed themselves in modern bureaucratic life, the aristocrats now represented the legacy of British good government, while the royalty, on the other hand, represented the force of tradition.

Although rulers could no longer exercise some of their traditional rights, their status and prestige were guaranteed by the British. Royal public ceremonies now acquired the grandeur usually associated with European royalty. New elements such as gun salutes heightened the

formal ambience of royal functions. Despite the introduction of new features, sufficient ancient elements were retained to ensure that the ceremonies looked familiar. This enabled them to work effectively as an ideological tool. As Amoroso claims, "glamorised and visible Malay rulers helped disguise the highly interventionist nature of indirect rule, offering proof that British Malaya still consisted of sovereign Malayo-Muslim Sultanates" (p. 66). Unlike their forefathers, the rulers were now more visible. Modern forms of transportation enabled them to reach their subjects in remote areas. Other than public ceremonies and visits, the invention of those new rulers can also be seen in the royal lifestyle. The way they dressed and furnished their palaces show that the rulers, "implicitly accepted British notions of what was impressive" (p. 77).

The rise of a Malay urban intelligentsia in the 1920s and 30s, however, provided an early challenge to traditionalism. Their literary productions such as those by a group of religious reformers known as *Kaum Muda*, were critical of the lifestyle and status of the Malay rulers. Amoroso argues that the weakness of such a group lies in their self-definition as a literary and cultural movement; thus, it was not bold enough to cross into politics. It was only during the Japanese occupation (1941-1945) that the Malays started to break this self-image. The Japanese, unlike the British, significantly curtailed traditionalism; they did not accord special place to the Malay rulers. Instead, they privileged the bureaucratic elites who could efficiently run their administrative machinery. This era also witnessed the rise of mass politics as exemplified by the ascendancy of radical nationalist movements such as the Pan-Malay organisation, *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM). When the British returned to Malaya, they could no longer reverse this political dynamism. Post-war Malay politics was dominated by the competition between the Malay elites and the radicals. The immediate post-war development, however, was unfavourable to the rulers. Malaya was under the direct control of the the British Military Administration, which suspended the pre-war status of royal sovereignty. Amoroso contends that it was during this moment that the Malay elites began to appropriate tradition for their own political advantage. By presenting themselves as the defender of the now powerless Malay royal institutions, the elites were in a better position to win the support of the Malays, and dismiss the radicals as traitors. The foundation of Malayan Union in 1946, which saw the attempt to abolish the sovereignty of individual Malay States and their rulers, provided an unprecedented opportunity for the Malay elites to project this image.

Under the charismatic leadership of Dato' Onn Ja'afar, the Malays demonstrated against the Union and were successful in securing their demands. The Malay elites stressed to the masses the importance of the royal institutions for the survival of the Malay, while also reminding the rulers of the need to respect the will of the people. By doing this, they significantly redefined the traditional meaning of loyalty. Hence, since the post-war era, the effective agent of traditionalism was no longer the British, but the Malay elites.

For the historiography of colonial Malaya, the contribution of this study lies in its formulation of traditionalism as a distinctive subject for historical inquiry. It provides a basic conceptual framework for future researchers who are interested in the politics of tradition and its historical evolution. Most of the historical phenomenon that Amoroso discusses while developing her narrative, such as the Malayan Union and *Kaum Muda*, have been thoroughly discussed by earlier studies. It is therefore unsurprising that in advancing her thesis Amoroso relies quite heavily on secondary literature. It needs to be pointed out, however, that some major claims that she makes are not substantiated by sufficient evidence. For instance, the central claim that there was a significant shift in British attitudes towards the Malays in the late nineteenth century is supported by merely one primary source and one secondary reference. Such thin evidence is certainly inadequate, given her claim that it was a collective shift, not a personal one. If the main argument of the work is original, however, it is more because of the interpretive categories that determined the ways Amoroso read her sources, rather than due to the type or range of primary materials that she consulted. The consistent reliance on the binary opposite of preservation and change in interpreting texts enables her to produce a uniquely coherent picture where major events in Malayan history acquired new significance. However, one issue with her dependence on these categories is that they seem too rigid and clear-cut, thus leaving little possibility for alternative readings. For instance, she assumes that there is a sharp contradiction between tradition and progress to the extent that she would dismiss as paradoxical statements made by British officials that celebrated both. The question is did the historical actors themselves see a contradiction? Maybe it was already entrenched in their assumption that both could co-exist harmoniously? At least we can be sure that there is a major strand in British political thought that affirms the compatibility between tradition and (gradual) change.

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