Maritime Southeast Asia
Not Just a Crossroads

By Jennifer L. Gaynor
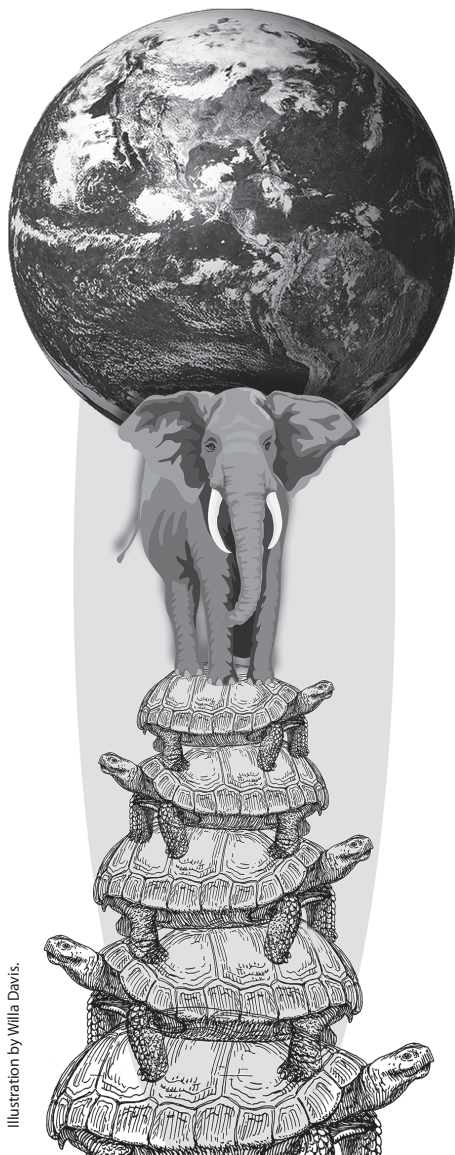
Crossroads and Inroads

Southeast Asia's reputation as a crossroads is anchored in histories of trade and empire, which, of course, also includes piracy. While these play important roles in the study of the region's maritime history, advances in recent decades include other themes and approaches as well. Southeast Asian source material remains vital to countering scholars who neglect or underutilize such sources and portray the region as dominated by the actions of outsiders. In addition, two broad shifts in scholarly trends have impacted the study of maritime Southeast Asia's history: a turn from nation-bound frameworks to studies of networks and a move from viewing cultures on the model of a patchwork toward analyses of practice and meaning among interpretive communities or "publics." In this essay, I hope to assist history teachers in understanding why the region's portrayal as a crossroads can be a double-edged sword, demonstrate the importance of the two shifts in scholarship, and offer constructive suggestions for how to show students what is "maritime" in the history of maritime Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia is widely known as a crossroads for good reasons, yet its maritime history involves more than just being a stopover or destination for the journeys and aims of people coming from elsewhere—whether between India and China for the early period or later imperial powers' procurement of resources and labor extraction. Its histories of trade, migration, literature, and religion underscore the tremendous extent to which things, ideas, and people have transited the region. Famed as the locale of "the spice islands," traders shipped nutmeg, cloves, and later pepper across the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and the Mediterranean long before such products drew Europeans to the region in the early sixteenth century. The trade with China for maritime goods such as *trepang* (sea cucumbers) and forest products such as aromatic woods and resins have a similarly long history. The image of Southeast Asia as a crossroads thus provides a useful metaphor for illustrating how the region has been linked into wider economic systems.

Less often but with equal import, the crossroads image also serves to underscore the vibrancy of other forms of interaction and exchange beyond the economic. For instance, along with a persistent demand for textiles, Southeast Asians adopted and adapted many foreign ideas, practices, and belief systems. Foreign art forms, technology, and all the world's major religions were taken up and "made local," or sometimes remade locally again to fit with a wider world of shared visions. The people who brought these objects, ideas, and practices included Southeast Asians, as well as people from elsewhere who resided in Southeast Asia temporarily or long enough to become Southeast Asians themselves. As the prominent historian O.W. Wolters recognized, these historical processes were mediated by the seas. The idea of localization, associated with him, can at times foster the erroneous impression that in localizing extraregional goods and ideas, Southeast Asians were merely recipients or adapters of what came their way. Yet such remaking and reinterpretation was always an active, if sometimes an unconscious, process. Moreover, different but related instances of localization may be tied together to illustrate larger historical processes that extended across the waters.

Scholars now know that people of the region created connections and engaged in exchanges through their own intraregional, as well as interregional, mobility. For example, before the seventeenth century, Southeast Asians in very large ships were participants in Indian Ocean trade networks. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) removed and relocated Southeast Asians to the Cape of Good Hope for the slave trade, penal transportation, and as political banishment. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Southeast Asians closely linked to communities in the Arabian Peninsula and Cairo brought new ideas about Islam and nationhood to the region.[1] These examples illustrate the movement of Southeast Asians across major bodies of water in particular economic, political, and social networks that stretched well beyond the region itself, practically inverting the image of it as a crossroads.
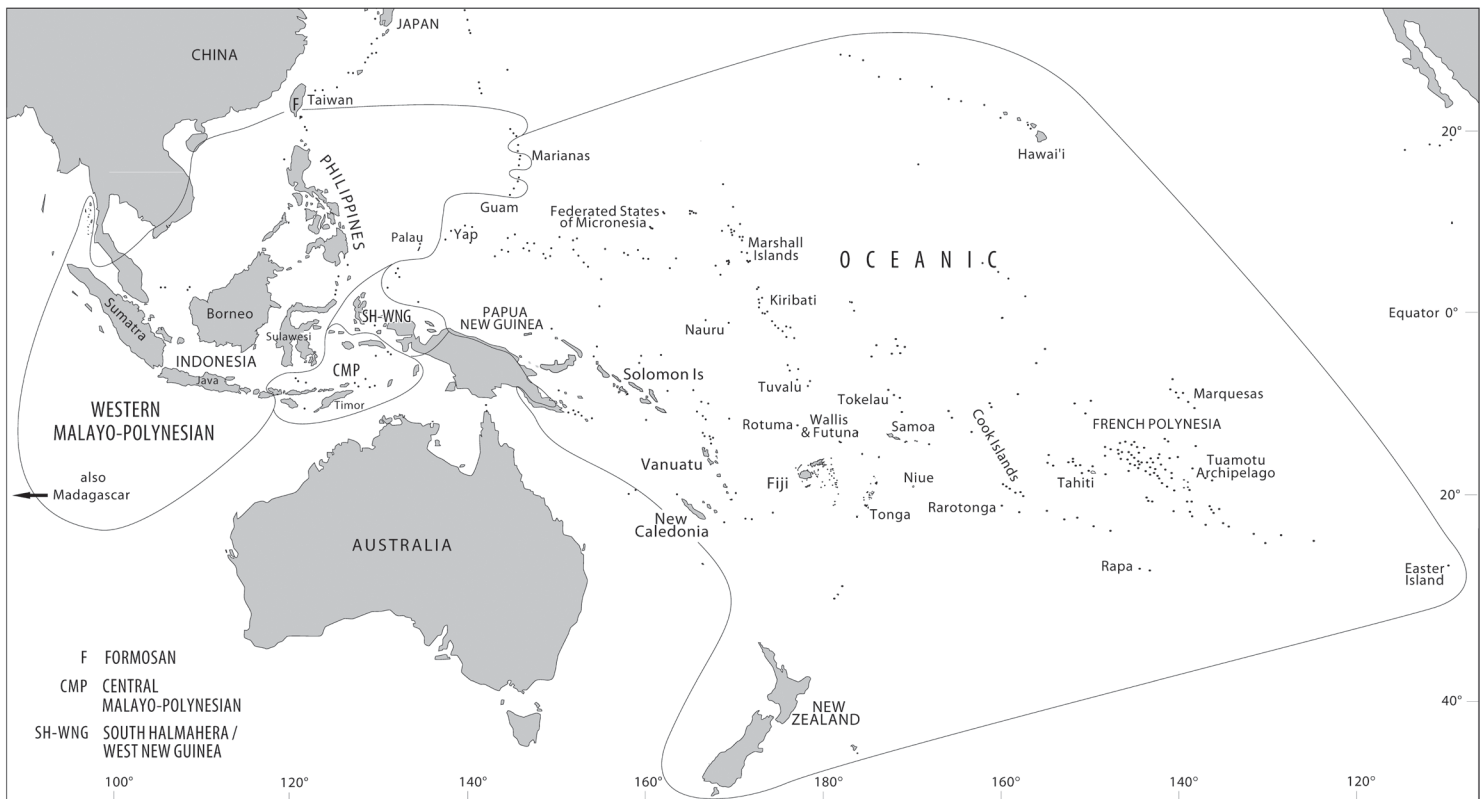
Maritime All the Way Down

"Maritime all the way down" is a kind of shorthand to express the question of maritime origins and the logical problem of infinite regress that it raises. Eminent anthropologist and Southeast Asianist Clifford Geertz offered an anecdote to illustrate the nature of the problem:

> There is an Indian story—at least I heard it as an Indian story—about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? "Ah Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down."[2]

When did the maritime "begin" to impact Southeast Asia's history and prehistory? It is safe to assume that the human past in the region is maritime all the way down.

Like others, I often begin teaching about the region's maritime history with some basic background on the dispersion of people who spoke Austronesian languages, which commenced about 4,000 BCE from Taiwan and the South China coasts. This introduction lays a groundwork for students to grasp the deep impact of maritime geography on regional culture and history. Visuals are imper-

ative; display a map that covers the east coast of Africa to the west coast of the Americas and explain that speakers of Austronesian languages extend from Madagascar to Easter Island. This graphic will help accentuate the point that such a development could only have taken place over the waters. One can also zoom in on a satellite image to demonstrate that "empty" watery expanses actually contain chains of small islands, for instance in the Java and Flores seas, and trailing from Kyūshū to Taiwan and on to Luzon. This will both show students small archipelagoes that aren't visible on maps and open their historical imaginations as to how such island chains would have facilitated maritime crossings. Instructors might also want to explain that in the period before Europeans came to Southeast Asia, the region's mariners used the basic nautical skill of sailing down a latitude to head due west from the Sunda Straits and into the Indian Ocean in their large *jongs*—a Malay term from which "junk" derives. Mariners who reached the Maldives presumably procured cowry shells, widely utilized as a medium of exchange. As the archaeologist and historian Pierre-Yves Manguin has argued, following this archipelago northward would have brought them into northern Indian Ocean exchange circuits.

These illustrations help students reorient their inherited geographies, open their minds toward more specifically maritime spatial networks, and scale up the temporal frameworks they bring to the study of maritime history. The vivid example of jade in very early maritime exchange networks helps drive home this maritime spatial and temporal reorientation, without reintroducing external actors—such as Europeans or other Asians—as the motors of trade and historical change. Using chemical analysis, archaeologists traced the distribution of worked jade artifacts, along with unworked or roughly hewn "blanks," around the South China Sea. They then linked this distribution back to the locations where the jade was originally mined in eastern Taiwan. A stunning image and map, downloadable as PowerPoint slides (http://tinyurl.com/n3bpjwy), accompany a concise 2007 article, "Ancient Jades Map 3,000 Years of Prehistoric Exchange in Southeast Asia" by Hsiao-Chun Hung et al. They explain an early distribution of some jade artifacts throughout Taiwan and from there to the Philippines, while others—two forms of ear pendants—reveal an extensive sea-based trade network between 500 BCE and 500 CE. This sea-based trade network corresponds closely with important far-flung early Austronesian-speaking populations around parts of the South China Sea basin. Despite the unidirectional overtones of the phrase "Austronesian expansion," such work shows the temporal depth of maritime circuits of interaction, exemplifying how Southeast Asia is indeed "maritime all the way down."

The impact of the region's maritime geography also goes beyond how it facilitated connections and exchange circuits to the very warp and weft of ways of life. For instance, the famous Chinese interpreter Ma Huan, who accompanied three of Admiral Zheng He's fifteenth-century voyages, remarked how many of the men in southern Sumatra trained to fight on the water, and that while chiefs lived in houses up on the dry riverbanks, the people lived in houses on rafts tied to posts. This kept

The impact of the region's maritime geography also goes beyond how it facilitated connections and exchange circuits to the very warp and weft of ways of life.

Map of Southeast Asia.
Source: Bill Nelson (billnelsonmaps.esva.net) and Jennifer L. Gaynor.

them from being submerged and also enabled people to pick up and relocate at a moment's notice. Such a social and environmental setting leads to fundamentally different arrangements than is the case with settled agriculture: this populace does not become tied to the land, and relations of debt and dependency are not about land ownership, rents, and inheritance. Economic ties and politics, therefore, took other shapes. Some people were *already* maritime then, while others adapted to shifting and settled agriculture and in some cases adapted *to* maritime ways of life as a result of raiding and capture, as well as flight.

Relatively mobile maritime-oriented people may also have had some unique leeway to use distance and connection strategically. They took advantage of proximity to centers of trade, exploiting political relationships that endorsed their participation in the markets of particular ports. Yet they also set up periodic markets or fairs outside of such centers. A measured distance that had to be crossed by boat arguably enabled them to remain less "under the thumb" than people in the immediate hinterlands of developing urban locales. Recognizing the depth of the region's maritime past enhances our grasp of the sea's historical importance both as an avenue for trade, raiding, war, and diplomacy, as well as—for those with the know-how— a means to evade forms of coercion.

From Nations to Networks

"Maritime Southeast Asia" has not always referred to the region's maritime history but rather to the history of those countries that were not a part of mainland Southeast Asia. What students in courses on "maritime Southeast Asia" used to learn—and in many places still do—is the history of the individual nations that comprise the peninsular and insular (or island) regions of Southeast Asia: the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, and, most recently, East Timor. Yet general approaches to the region's history have been changing. Rather than a collection of national histories—those on the mainland and those that sit in the soup—research and teaching about the region have refocused on comparisons and interconnections in order to explain and illustrate social,

economic, and political transformations. One highly regarded undergraduate text on the region, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia* (University of Hawai`i), edited by Norman G. Owen, reflects these changes in its organization with both general thematic chapters and chapters on specific countries.

Although "maritime Southeast Asia" still bears this sense of a cluster of countries, the phrase is used increasingly to refer to maritime aspects of the region's history—a development associated with broader attention to transnational connections and to the sea itself as a part of history. Yet the de-emphasis of nation-bound frameworks, the scrutiny of networks, and the increased interest in the maritime has not only meant more attention to maritime features of island and peninsular history, it has also resulted in long overdue attention to the maritime history of countries on the mainland. The flowering of Cham studies—concerning the Austronesian-speaking people and polities once arrayed along the central Việt Nam coast—is notable in this regard, as well as research on the complex history of other Việtnamese coasts, in particular their connections with China. The immense subfield of Chinese political, trade,

Naval battle on a bas-relief at Bayon, Angkor, showing Cham soldiers in the boat and dead Khmer fighters in the water. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at http://tinyurl.com/nz6pfut.

and residential relations with Southeast Asia must also be mentioned as it pertains in varying degrees to maritime history and the study of networks.[3] In a somewhat different vein, work on forced migration at the hands of the VOC, part of the new imperial history, has similarly been framed by an explicit concern with networks. However, the concern with networks is not simply an effect of trends shared with the wider discipline. It also reflects a long-standing concern in the study of Southeast Asia, particularly of its maritime history, to explore the links between trade, towns, and kin.[4]

An important early point in the study of Southeast Asia's maritime history came with the decision of the unconventional Dutch scholar J.C. van Leur to look to actors within the region, rather than to the European presence in it, to explain economic developments. While his scholarship did not reach an English language readership until after World War II, this push to theorize historical dynamics in more sociological ways stressed Southeast Asians as subjects and agents of their own histories. This diminished the explanatory power of European expansionist approaches and found powerful echoes in a well-known piece from 1961 by historian John R.W. Smail on the possibility of autonomous history in Southeast Asia.

Smail's influence still reverberates in the scholarship of the region's most distinguished historians. Yet attention to Southeast Asians in their own histories has certainly not kept researchers, especially in recent years, from also considering the region's connections with other parts of Asia and the world. The kinds of problems Smail grappled with nonetheless still crop up. For instance, not long ago, the well-known historian of early Southeast Asia, Kenneth Hall, critiqued some recent work by scholars of South Asia and China on historical interconnections between those regions—through Southeast Asia—by asserting that disregard of the Southeast Asian sources results in misrepresentation of the region, its people, and their roles in these maritime links.[5] Unmuddied by questions related to European expansion, Hall's interest in an earlier period brings into focus a specific methodological point: namely, the problematic picture of Southeast Asia one is bound to get when relying predominantly on sources from outside the region.

How to show students perspectives *from* Southeast Asia on its complex interlocal and international connections remains one of the biggest challenges in teaching those new to the study of the region. Beyond the early beginnings sketched above, what resources may one draw on to make maritime history tangible in recognizably Southeast Asian ways? Below I touch on a few ways to teach how Southeast Asians expressed and put into practice relationships in the maritime world. Coming at it this way, from perspectives and events in Southeast Asia, gives students a more balanced, and in some ways more accurate, view than the implicit message they often get by starting a semester or a unit on Southeast Asia with the arrival of ideas or people from India, China, or Europe.

Early coastal polities had an amorphous structure, which we know about in part from portrayals in inscriptions on monuments and early literary-historical sources. Leaders held the title of *datu*. However, this title did not only apply to leaders at the top of competing polities, but also to those within hierarchically connected ones. Geographic terms expressed how regional coastal centers were linked with subordinate polities in a hub-and-spoke spatial structure. For instance, coastal
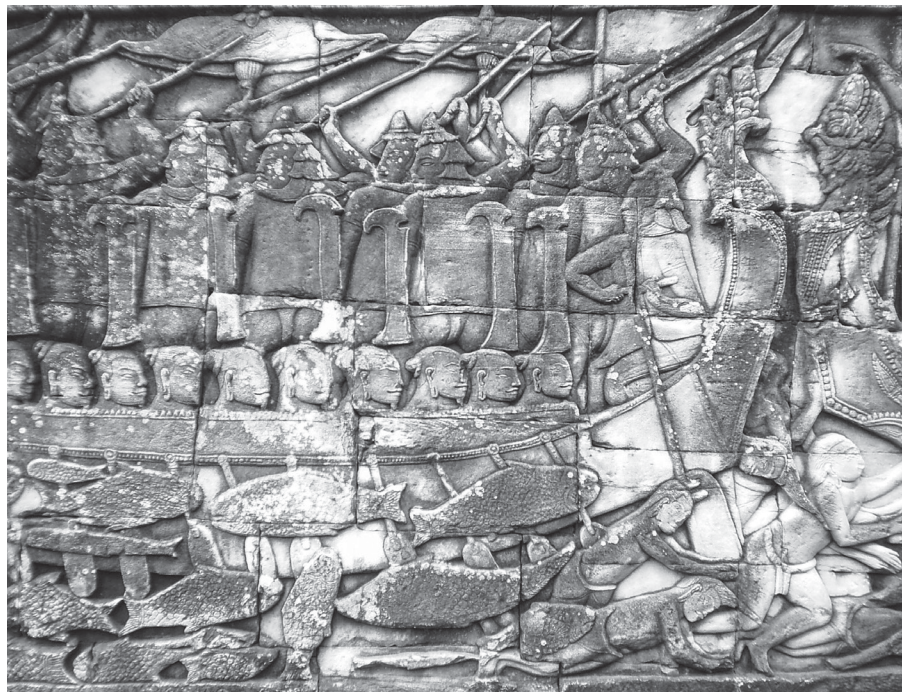
How to show students perspectives from Southeast Asia on its complex interlocal and international connections remains one of the biggest challenges in teaching those new to the study of the region.

Boats before the fort of Sombaopu in 1665, prior to its fall in the Makassar War. Source: From The National Archives of The Netherlands, Map 4.VELH/619.97.

centers referred to subordinate polities with the phrase *teluk rantau*, the "bends and reaches" of river systems.[6] Yet teluk rantau refers as easily to the "bays of a shoreline," either those farther along a shared coast or on opposing shores. In either case, maintaining connections with teluk rantau meant getting into a boat.

Political relations extended between the bends and reaches of—in Bennet Bronson's now-classic formulation—upstream areas and downstream coastal centers, yet also, in a similarly noncontiguous way, along and across coastal sites. In Sumatra, at the upstream (*hulu*) end, people created paths that linked the fertile valleys along the lengthy spine of its mountains, so that a given upstream area was not necessarily dependent on a particular downstream (*hilir*) port. The upstream-downstream dynamics also linked up at the river mouths with the political and cultural geography of the littoral, or tidal zone, which included cities but was by no means restricted to them. Hence, while island and peninsular Southeast Asia was "maritime all the way down," not everything was oriented to the sea. Rather, upstream-downstream riverine dynamics interfaced (in Sumatra and elsewhere) with highland networks at one end and at the downstream end with those of the maritime world.[7]

The case of Banten near the west end of Java, around the turn of the sixteenth century, offers rich insights on interlocal and international politics. Banten developed as a prominent port partly due to the expansionist efforts of Demak, a Javanese kingdom based further east. By taking up a strategic position on the northwest end of the island, Banten's rulers aimed to entice trade to come through the Sunda Straits, thereby limiting Portuguese Malacca's influence on trade coming through the Malacca Straits. Their success in this endeavor prevented other powers, indigenous and foreign—at least for a time—from reaping the benefits of this advantageous spot.[8]

The Dutch capture of the *Santa Catarina*, a large Portuguese merchant ship in the early seventeenth century, reveals much about transplanted European rivalries, the necessity of adapting to the Southeast Asian political scene, and the opulence of the catured prize's cargo. Its treasures fired the imagination of Europeans of the time, for the likes of it—intended for Asian markets—had never before been seen in Europe. Asking students about parts of the cargo, such as a "royal throne" inlaid with precious stones, and viewed as a "wonder," opens discussion of this point, leading them to grasp that not only were Europeans newcomers, they had in fact stumbled across already well-developed circuits of exchange.[9]

A biographical piece about Muhammad Saleh, an ethnically Minangkabau man from Sumatra in the nineteenth century, illustrates not just the life of one person intimately involved with the sea, but also offers insights into how he grew and adapted to changes in politics and the economy under intensifying Dutch influence. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Saleh went from working his way up to *nakoda* (ship captain) to becoming a land-based merchant and later an *anemar*—a contractor to the colonial Dutch—in what was then the very international town of Pariaman.[10] These glimpses into Southeast Asia's maritime history illustrate the complex interlocal and international connections of the region looking from Southeast Asia.

From Culture as Patchwork to Interpretive Communities

The move from nations to networks has been one major analytical shift. Paralleling it has been another: from viewing culture on the metaphor of property as a thing that "belongs" to a group, to an emphasis on communicative practice in interpretive communities. Rather than resulting in a patchwork of differences, this empirical, practice-based approach leads to careful consideration of the "publics" that such practices address and which they, in part, create. The approach works well either for analyzing change over time in a particular place or for looking at practices in networks of communication that cross space—frequently maritime space. For those interested in networks, a practice-focused approach allows one to do more than just point out that disparate places were connected. It fosters examination of how objects, ideas, practices themselves, or even people crossed social boundaries and were remade in new contexts. At the same time, it enables one to trace the emergence of new inclusions and exclusions (in other words, the creation of new social boundaries) or to examine the reproduction of old ones through new means.

For instance, Ronit Ricci's 2011 *Islam Translated* follows the *Book of One Thousand Questions* from its Arabic beginnings to Tamil, Malay, and Javanese adaptations. This work is "maritime" in the same way that much work on the Atlantic world is, or is not, explicitly maritime, involving changes that took place across major social divides and over impressive distances. Building on South Asianist Sheldon Pollock's notion of a Sanskrit cosmopolis, she argues for a later Arabic cosmopolis in places already touched by the *Qur'an*. Each new place to which the *Book* traveled altered it, in O.W. Wolters' terms "localized" it, creating new readings, or, as the author says, "tellings." However, more than just

specific texts were localized, since Arabic itself was similarly impacted, "vernacularized," and made more local rather than imposed.

The point here is less the fact of links between disparate locales than the process of remaking and how it inflects with questions of power and difference. As the prominent historian Daud Ali has pointed out, Arabic, like Sanskrit, may have been a language of power, but it still matters "how we conceive of this power in relation to local contexts and political practice."[11] Even as Islam made new connections across cultures from the sixteenth through twentieth centuries, how people vernacularized Arabic varied. Similarly, evidence shows that Sanskrit was not imposed seamlessly in seventh-century Sumatra, effacing preexisting forms of expression and politics. Rather, it seems to have stimulated the local. In their journeys across social landscapes, expressive registers, literary formations, and ideologies articulated with different social realities in myriad ways. A given language, it turns out, carries with its use no "inevitable set of implications for how people think or relate to social structures."[12]

In other words, the mere fact of shared language cannot explain how social structures came into being or were changed. This holds as much for Sanskrit and later Arabic in Southeast Asia as it does for specifically *maritime* Southeast Asians, including "pirates." In his analysis of the history of hierarchy among Muslims in the southern Philippines and Southwest Mindanao's Zamboanga Peninsula, the well-known anthropologist Charles O. Frake basically agrees. Plying linguistic and archival sources, he extracts a picture of the history of social differences, one in which their significance is anchored not "outside" but rather within the social fields of the Sulu Archipelago's people. He looks closely at how systems of naming practices and social difference within the Sulu Archipelago map onto distinctions of rank. While titles derived from Austronesian, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic appear in the lexicons of all the area's ethnic groups, over and above such distinctions in *individual* rank, he draws attention to the logics of ranking between groups—most of which, in this area, were oriented to the sea. Frake shows that language matters immensely, yet acknowledges that what shaped hierarchical forms was not language per se, but rather changing social, political, and ecological circumstances—in other words, "history."[13] This dynamic picture of social complexity complements the externally driven picture of "ethnogenesis" presented in historian James Warren's compelling work on the Sulu Zone. Frake reminds us that networks of cross-cultural exchange and communication were not only a matter for "transnational" and interregional dynamics. Within Southeast Asia itself there remain for students and researchers alike expanses of maritime history to explore and rewarding depths to plumb. ∎

NOTES

1. Pierre-Yves Manguin, "The Vanishing *Jong*: Insular Southeast Asian Fleets in Trade and War," *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 197–213; Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 28–29.

3. See especially Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang, eds., *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast* Asia (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

4. See the volume dedicated to Heather Sutherland: *Linking Destinies: Trade, Towns and Kin in Asian History*, eds. P. Boomgaard, D. Kooiman, and H. Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2008). The approach has also been important in work by, *inter alia*, Barbara Watson Andaya and Jean Gelman Taylor. Also see Denys Lombard, "Networks and Synchronisms in Southeast Asian History," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 26, no. 1 (1995): 10–16.

5. Kenneth R. Hall, "Local and International Trade and Traders in the Straits of Melaka Region: 600–1500," *JESHO* 47, no. 2 (2004): 213–260.

6. Pierre-Yves Manguin, "The Amorphous Shape of Coastal Polities in Insular Southeast Asia: Restricted Centres, Extended Peripheries," *Mousson* 5 (2002): 73–99.

7. Manguin, "Amorphous Shape"; Barbara Watson Andaya, "Upstreams and Downstreams in Early Modern Sumatra," *The Historian* 57, no. 3 (1995): 537–552; Bennet Bronson, "Exchange at the Upstream and Downstream Ends," *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia*, ed. K. L. Hutterer (Ann Arbor: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1977), 39–52.

8. Christopher Wake, "Banten Around the Turn of the Sixteenth Century: Trade and Society in an Indonesian Port City," *Gateways of Asia: Port Cities of Asia in the 13th–20th Centuries* (London: Kegan Paul, 1997), 66–108.

9. P. Borschberg, "The Seizure of the *Santa Catarina* Revisited: The Portuguese Empire in Asia, VOC Politics and the Origins of the Dutch-Johor Alliance, 1602–c.1616," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2002): 31–62.

10. Tsuyoshi Kato, "Rantau Pariaman: The World of Minangkabau Coastal Merchants in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 4 (1980): 729–752.

11. Daud Ali, "The Early Inscriptions of Indonesia and the Problem of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis," eds. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade, *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-cultural Exchange* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 284.

12. Daud Ali, "The Early Inscriptions," 290-291.

13. Charles O. Frake, "The Cultural Construction of Rank, Identity and Ethnic Origins in the Sulu Archipelago," *Origins, Ancestry and Alliance*, eds. James J. Fox and Clifford Sather (Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1996), 316–326.

JENNIFER L. GAYNOR teaches at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York and received her PhD in History and Anthropology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her book on Indonesian Sama sea people exposes a nonurban maritime hub once renowned as a "nasty pirates' nest" and reevaluates the coastal capture of women in the politics of social class. She has published in *Radical History Review,* the *Journal of World History and Anthropological Quarterly*.