

Introductory Comments on the Chapter on Premodern Warfare in the Region

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[Note: keep to 6 minutes]

I was very happy to be included in the new Cambridge History of Southeast Asia edited by the Barbara and Leonard Andaya. Scholarship on warfare in the Southeast Asian region is really taking off and where studies are not overtly warfare many are warfare related. The challenges of doing this chapter were the same questions that have faced us for a long time. We roughly agree on what the region is but how do we represent it. There are three levels to do so —

(1) There is the trans-local, structural history that is ‘regional’ in its presence and shaped by forces that impact the entire region or much of it (whether emergent within or outside the region), such as big politics, big economy, or big culture. By the latter I mean the scholars like Leonard Andaya and Anthony Reid who were trying to emphasize SEA-wide cultural elements that shaped warfare from the inside. I also mainly focused on this kind of warfare in my 2004 survey of warfare in the region (Brill).

(2) Since nationalism and independence, we cannot escape the demand for “national” history of war, although this kind of history is interested in a longer duree of states and state formation and the interrelationship of warfare with their experience and evolution. This has been more the approach of Jon Fernquest, Sun Laichen, Victor Lieberman, Pamaree Surakiat, Gerrit Knaap, and Tassapa Umavijani. Others, Sunait Chutintaranond, Jiri Jakl, Vu Luc Diem, and Antonio J. Guerreiro, for example, have looked at warfare as elements of national culture, Thailand, Java, Vietnam, and the Philippines respectively.

(3) Then there is the local level with so much diversity in continuity and in adaptation that we cannot speak of a region or country at all. This has been more anthropological. It requires a lot of reading between the lines of sources, theory, and nonconventional methodologies, because it gets hidden by the state and the sources it leaves. I would include here A.C. Lopez and James Warren on the Sulu Archipelago, Hans Hagerdahl on Bali, Kathryn Wellen on South Sulawesi, and Jennifer Gaynor on eastern Indonesia, Tristan Mostert on the local experiences of otherwise global forces, in this case the VOC, as well as others working on other peripheral areas.

In the volume, Kathy Wellen and I co-edited (published by NIAS in 2018) we wanted a general look at the region through different eyes and wound up with chapters that approached premodern warfare through all three approaches, a composite view of premodern warfare

across the region from different vantage points. We called this the “composite cultural approach” from Kwasi Konadu, allowing different case studies to stand on their one with the region in relief, kind of like a camera getting its focus through juxtaposing clarity at 7 different points. The region gets represented by various ‘deep-dives’ but regionality remains a kind of *bokeh*.

How can we hope to balance all three levels at the chapter level? I do not believe we can, not with equal weight. In the current chapter, designed to understand history through a regional lens, I emphasize the regional aspects with a nod here and there to diversity. It would be different if the volume were entitled, instead, *Everything you wanted to know about everything within the region*.

I have also tried to move beyond the dogma of emphasizing indigenous sources over external sources, which may sound odd at a time of decolonizing academics. At one time, the age of autonomous historiography was a necessary corrective to only relying on European sources, which meant relying much more on what in indigenous state sources say. There is a problem with that, because these court sources are shaped by one kind of imaginary that presents the landscape of warfare in ways important for the court and informed by the majoritarian culture of the region, but is not very informative and often misleading about warfare as it was actually fought on the ground. Europeans, South Asians, and Chinese awkwardly stumbling around the region, misunderstanding what they saw, have left us with sources that combine poor interpretation with rich details on warfare as it was actually fought at the ground level by local people, at the local level, with local objectives. And when we look at the big battles, we see they are a mixture of some central elements (cannon, small standing armies) and local elements (the combat culture and weapons of everyday warriors who formed the bulk of the levies), the latter’s place getting screened out of the court sources.

Southeast Asia, sadly, is a region so rich and diverse that it will be doomed to chapter-level coverage that will mean a growing divergence between the detailed work of the field and the need to emphasize a big picture, no matter how the latter is concocted. Or, perhaps, this is an experience faced by everyone working on warfare in every region who also face the challenge of writing chapters that have to achieve the impossible, to be all things for all readers.