

ASHLEY SOUTH:

Mon nationalism and civil war in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake.
xxii, 419 pp. New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. xxii, 419 pp. £55.

This is one of the few serious English-language studies of the Mon in the independence period. While colonial era scholars found the Mon highly interesting (and the numerous articles on them in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society* is one major indication of this), the Mon were almost forgotten by post-independence scholars. South, a former postgraduate student at the School of Oriental and African Studies, spent over six years on the Thai-Burmese border from about 1990 and spent a significant amount of time in rebel-controlled zones along that border. Thus he brings to his study substantial personal experience and insights that continually enliven his discussion. The book consists of twenty chapters structured in six parts, the first part providing ethnographic information on the Mon, the second part covering Mon history in the precolonial and colonial periods, and the remainder the post-independence period.

The Mon continue to face, as South explains, a long-term process of Burmanization, seen in a more politicized context as Myanmafication by some, in which they and their culture are being absorbed by the main 'national' ethnic group (the Burmans) and denied an individual identity. Citing the work of Victor Lieberman, Michael Aung-Thwin, Robert Taylor, Michael Gravers and Gustaaf Houtman, South discusses the problematics of understanding ethnic identity in Burma, both in the past and today. However much the Mon began to self-define themselves in the colonial and postcolonial periods, the different political forces that have emerged among them indicate that ethnic identity has not meant political unity. Much of the remainder of the book examines the interplay of different political groups which, for Burma, necessarily means a narrative embodying a flurry of seemingly endless acronyms. At the centre of all of this is Mon resistance to the military government, refugee issues peculiar to the Mons, humanitarian issues that the Mon share with other Burmese, and the question of how to resolve the current human rights impasse in Burma. South asks questions about possible conflicts between different agendas bent on dealing with these issues and suggests that a new generation may be able to bring together the pursuit of ethnic rights and democracy (pp. 340–41).

South presents much hard data which should be useful for other researchers in the field. His discussion is clear and although he tends to let a linear narrative of events guide his discussion, he does raise significant points about the Mon situation. Of course, the major concern since 1962 has been the stand-off between Mon political groups and the military regime, which, for its part, sees the Mon as an absorbed and not as a separate people (with their own interests not necessarily shared by the state). Another challenge has been how to participate in contemporary Burmese politics in the context of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy without sacrificing their peculiar ethnic interests or identity.

There are, as with any study, both oversights and problems. One oversight involves the author's discussion of ethnonyms and exonyms. While he places the terms Mon, Talaing and Peguan into context, South does not discuss 'Abbassi' (there are several spellings for this). It is debatable whether we

can view this apparently precolonial term as an ethnonym or an exonym, for the sources are ambiguous. Some discussion of the term should have been attempted, however, because it was used to differentiate some Mon from others and may question the existence of a sense of unified group identity. We might speak, for example, not of the Mon as a group, but of a number of different, competing Mon ethnic identities. Another important drawback of the book is that South appears to make scant use of indigenous language materials, though he does explain that he has consulted several (see bibliography, p. 404). But 'lowland' Burmese texts should have been used, certainly in the case of the initial two sections of the book, not to mention the relevance of Burmese-language documents for the post-independence period. Furthermore, his discussions of some sub-topics such as Arakanese history and the Rohingya would have benefited from a more thorough survey of the secondary literature, many key analyses having been missed. These problems aside, South has made use of substantial amounts of previously unused material, not only published in hard-copy, but also on the Internet.

This book is a valuable addition to the secondary literature on Burmese politics, especially since it focuses on the Mon. It is accessible to students and yet provides enough solid research to warrant serious attention from established scholars. South's book is thus highly recommended for both researchers and as a text in postgraduate courses.

MICHAEL W. CHARNEY

HUUB DE JONGE and NICO KAPTEIN (ed.):

Transcending borders: Arabs, politics, trade and Islam in Southeast Asia.

viii, 246 pp. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002. €27.50.

This volume results from a conference held at Leiden University in December 1997. Proceedings of conferences can often lack coherence, but this has been avoided through the inclusion of a helpful overview chapter at the beginning and a selection of revised conference papers that cross-fertilize in multiple ways.

In the introductory chapter, the editors point out that much previous scholarly attention has been devoted to specific minorities in South-East Asia: Chinese, Indians and Europeans especially. Comparatively little, however, has been given to Arab minorities. This is long overdue, argue the editors, given their 'great influence on economic, political, social, and religious developments in the region for centuries'. (p. 1). Engseng Ho begins the substantial papers with a challenge: 'The study of Arabs—or dimensions of "Arabness"—in maritime Southeast Asia is beset by a number of conceptual problems' (p. 11). Colonial history has created a scholarly dependence on boundaries in both time and space which do not necessarily reflect South-East Asian realities in earlier periods. Ho addresses this challenge by focusing on four eighteenth-century Arab immigrants to South-East Asia who achieved particular prominence in different regions: Trengganu, the Bugis area, Minangkabau, and Aceh. He demonstrates the mobility of the Arab immigrants across the South-East Asian region, making the most of political boundaries which were relatively undefined at the time.

Three papers address a range of issues pertaining to the British colonies in Malaya and Singapore. Mohammad Redzuan Othman focuses on British