




## **Between Orientalism and Ornamentalism: Colonial Perceptions of Southeast Asian Rulers: 1850-1914**



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[ *Abstract* ]

Finding distinguishing characteristics of Southeast Asia has proven to be a significant challenge: by focusing on the encounters which primarily colonial British writers had with the region's state rulers, it becomes possible to recover the early conceptualizations of regional governance. The writings of Henry Yule, Anna Leonowens, Sir George Scott, and Hugh Clifford all document the "orientalist" features of Western discourses because these writers at once were affected by it as they contributed to it. The discourse about royalty and rulers was central to many of the tropes associated with orientalism, but also with 'ornamentalism'. David Cannadine has shown that ornamentalism (in which British conceptualized many imperial practices in relation to their own hierarchical conceptions of society) was as critical a feature of imperial outlook as was orientalism. The need to understand ruling elites was at the heart of the imperialist project.

Tracing the ways in which colonizing powers represented the region's ruling elite offers a new avenue for recognizing the affinities of the regional experience. Beyond orientalism, the paper explores questions about the representation and

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presentation of authority. Understanding the conceptualizations of rulers is connected to the comprehension of social organization—including representations of “traditional society.”

**Keywords:** Royalty, Malay, Burma, Siam, Orientalism, Ornamentalism

## I . Introduction

British authors—missionaries, civil servants, educators, intellectuals, and others—might be said to have underestimated Southeast Asian leaders. This discussion was developed to pursue a line of enquiry concerning Furnivall which was recently published in *Swannabhumi* because it underscored the nearly paradoxical contours of the origin of Southeast Asian Studies as an academic discipline (Keck 2016). To put this clearly, John Furnivall is remembered as a decisive or at least very influential figure in the emergence of the academic exploration of Southeast Asia. Yet, even a cursory examination of his works reveals a striking inability or unwillingness to understand the region’s many types of nationalism. With that, he was also seemingly incapable of comprehending the skill and abilities exhibited by many of the region’s emerging leaders. Furnivall, an open minded student of the region, badly underestimated the appeal and potency of the nationalisms (and nationalist leaders) that flourished around him, but he was hardly alone because he was part of a genealogy of British writing about the region which did much the same. In fact, some of the early British publications about the region were written by diplomats (often remembered as travel writers) who were essentially writing memoirs about their missions to royal courts. It might be added here that they were unwittingly cultural diplomats in two ways: first in connecting British culture (and power) to their destinations and, second, communicating with and representing the people and places they encountered for their metropolitan audiences.

This discussion, which reflect a new path of research possibilities, begins by focusing on the seeming paradox that British (and other Western writers) wrote extensively about royalty and its

many manifestations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, yet, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were almost indifferent to the new forms of regional leadership which were increasingly obvious. That said, a second consideration shapes this enquiry: namely that discussions of leadership are also discourses about social organization and political capacity. The extraordinary work of Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules For Now*, relies on the idea that social organization is one of global history's most significant determinants (2010). If this is correct, the exploration of how the phenomena appears across cultures becomes even more significant.

For our purposes here, the paper also seeks to connect these issues to the broader questions about definitions of Southeast Asia. Elsewhere I have argued that the articulation of the region depended very much on historical realities which become salient in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars have searched for unifying features of the region's history and culture. They have often done so (both internally and externally) from a perspective which heralded new modern nations, that might be based upon popular sovereignty and progressive in their outlook and aspirations. Accordingly, it is possible that the importance of monarchy (understood broadly) may have been underestimated as an important regional characteristic.

Of course, students of Southeast Asia (SEA) are familiar with the many studies of monarchies which have defined accounts of national development. At the same time, it might be useful to raise the possibility that these polities might be worth studying in light of their capacity to serve as defining features of Southeast Asia. It should be admitted at the very outset that parts of the region should not be identified with monarchy or kingship. Nor should it be assumed that this type of government would necessarily cast a shadow over subsequent historical developments (even if that is what might be feared by some). That is to say, the duration of monarchy in Southeast Asia should not assumed to have predictive power.

Of course the idea that Asia—let alone Southeast Asia—was the natural home of all powerful, but corrupt, vengeful, greedy, and incompetent monarchs itself has a long history. We need not repeat

that Herodotus might have been the first (even before the “West” might have been thought to exist) to connected the “orient” with despotism (the relatively recent film version—300’s portrayal of Xerxes reminds us that this prejudice is alive and well in the new century). “Oriental Despotism” became a standard motif in evaluating monarchs who reigned over Asian dominions. Not only would early modern and modern thinkers associate despotism with misrule, but they would actively seek to end it where they could in the Western world. The link between despotism and orientalism, then, was from the very outset a frame of reference which might denigrate both Asia’s rulers and those ruled. Obviously, there is an alternative genealogy of historical interpretation which arose from D.G.E. Hall and O.W Wolters which did concentrate on monarchs. By extension, James Scott’s anarchist interpretation of mainland SEA is also predicated on the critical importance of strong central state structures (2010). All of that said, it might be the case that students of the region have followed the priorities articulated by Benedict Anderson, for whom the story of the nation state can be told without much attention to the earlier monarchies and sultanates.

It might be added that in addressing regional characteristics, it is useful to check anti-imperialist baggage at the door. Whether one situates 1945 or 1997 as the new Year Zero (for a new world without empires) as the beginning of a different era, it is critical to recognize that monumental nature of this change. A world without empires now may appear both obvious and part of the natural order of things. One of the driving themes of modern SEA (and very important for those who study it under the banner of SEA Studies) is nationalism and nation building. Yet, even a brief review of global trends indicates that these developments are closer to being exceptional rather than normative. For our purposes, the fact that SEA develops amidst two entities (India and China) which were either identified as empires or were sharing many affinities with empires means that its particular monarchies were at once somewhat unique and possibly containing key characteristics for what was an undefined region.

The subject of this paper is also “ornamentalism,” an idea developed by historian David Cannadine, identifying an early

tendency of presupposition and practice among the British rulers to view non-Western societies through hierarchies (2001). He explained that “Britons generally conceived of themselves as belonging to an unequal society characterized by a seamless web of layered gradations, which were hallowed by time and precedent,” and that might be extended in a “great chain of being from the monarch at the top to the humblest subject at the bottom” (Cannadine 2001: 4). Furthermore, these hierarchies formed the basis of their thinking about the empire which meant that their overseas realms were “at least as much about sameness as they were about difference” (Cannadine 2001: 4). Just as important, in *Ornamentalism: How the British Understood Their Empire* (2001), he highlighted what is a truism for historians of the British empire: namely, that the imperial policy makers were keen to cultivate local rulers (many of them with royal lineages) in order to develop them as intermediary rulers. That is, the history of the empire abounds with examples where the British were happy to foster greater respect for local rulers, who in turn would help them to govern areas, which they probably could not otherwise. To cite a few examples, in Malaya, the British signed successive treaty with Sultans, following the pattern in India of upholding the sovereignty of the local rulers, who were obliged to accept a British resident who would guide them in all matters, excluding religion and custom. (Cannadine 2001: 59) This pattern was repeated elsewhere: Cannadine cites the British agreement with King Cakobau in Fiji and reliance upon local rulers in West Africa. In Kenya, local government through the chiefs was established in 1901 and 1912 (2001: 59-60). For our purposes, ornamentalism refers to the fact that the British (and other colonial powers) understood the non-Western world through its elites, particularly its forms of royalty. With respect to SEA, the British relationship with the region was defined at least in part by how they engaged royal families and sultans in the Malay world. More important, perhaps, the British (and possibly other colonizers) engaged much of the region from the corresponding point of view.

This paper will show through three representative figures—Yule/Phayre in Burma, Anna Leonowens (1831-1915) in Siam, and Hugh Clifford (1866-1941) in Malaya to see how these relatively

influential and well-known authors described and represented monarchies (including sultanates). These figures all bore the stamp of 19<sup>th</sup> century British culture, which was diffuse and complex, but which nonetheless, consistently valued empirical rigor. This meant that when these authors wrote, they were addressing audiences who expected great attention to description and detail. This paper will show that these figures brought a kind of ornamentalist discourse to the SEA. Their characterizations of the monarchies were based on direct experiences, but they went much further, connecting these discussions to expectations about modernization, the status of women, domestication, and the rule of law. This article subsequently examines the development of a British imperial discourse on the leadership of Southeast Asia and then considers its possible impact on the conceptualization of the region. Last, the discussion will return to Furnivall and the underestimation of Southeast Asian leadership.

## **II . Phayre and Yule in Burma: Describing the Remote Monarchy**

*Mission to the Court of Ava in 1855* records in exacting detail a diplomatic visit which was of both great value to the Burmans and the British. The account, compiled by Henry Yule, of mission to the court of Ava following the Second Anglo-Burman War (and with the Crimean War in the background), remains a fascinating document because it recorded the appearance of the monarchy, the presuppositions of the British, the protocol practices to enable suitable communication, their different body habits, modes of interactions, and hints as to how they may have misunderstood one another. More poignant, perhaps, the mission reveals a complex world, which would completely disappear in a generation.

The picture of the monarchy which emerges from *Mission to the Court of Ava in 1855* is detailed, but not particularly flattering. The British authors recorded their visit in great detail, noting court rituals, describing the appearances (often in terms of clothing) of functionaries and commenting on the disposition of their hosts. Given the narrative that Yule compiled, it might be regarded as a

model for a type of “cultural diplomacy”, but, in fact, it had more traditional goals. The mission was carried out with significant hopes on both sides: the British sought a treaty to legitimate their seizure of Pegu, while the Burmese almost certainly began with the idea that the land (or least large parts of it) which had been lost might be regained.

The narrative indicates that the visit was taken seriously by the Burmese and the British: students of diplomatic history will note the attention that the authors placed on protocol on both sides. Clearly the Burmese monarchy sought to impress the British with both their power and hospitality. The British brought significant gifts (including an early photographic instrument and a toy train, both of which apparently fascinated the Burmese) and followed the instructions of their hosts.

Predictably, the Burmese insisted that the British remove their shoes upon entering the palace and, less predictably, the British obeyed.

Both the removal of the shoes at the gate, and the prostrations in advancing to the Palace, are part of the regular system of endeavor to throw dust in the eyes of foreigners. It is never done I believe, excepting on the occasion of introducing Envoys from other state, and doubtless is intended to impress on them the almost divine nature of their sovereign, as well as to induce them to perform some act which shall mark them as suppliants at the golden feet...For here, at the foot of the staircase, we left our shoes, and mounting the steps, which were dirty and unswept, we passed along the colonnade to the centre of the front, and there entering, advanced a few paces and took our seats upon the carpet, doubling our legs behind us as well as we could (Yule 1968: 83).

Removing their shoes provided the British with the opportunity to complain about the places which were dirty. More interesting, perhaps, the Burmese were sensitive to the ways in which the British could not sit as they might have.

The authors also regarded a tense conversation (they actually threatened to break off talks) in which the British refused to

acknowledge the supremacy of the Burmese monarchy. The mission also noted that the king and other members of the court ate almost incessantly. Furthermore, Phayre believed that the Burmese lied to him about their ability to produce canons.

The descriptions of Amarapoora did not promote the legitimacy of the monarchy by signifying its longevity: the “present seat of the Burmese monarchy has no pretensions to antiquity” (Yule 1968: 130). A more pointed remark concerned the “White Elephant” of the palace, which was described in some detail:

In the area which stretches before the Hall of Audience are several detached buildings. A little to the north is the ‘Palace’ or state apartment of the Lord White Elephant, with his highness’s humbler every-day residence in the rear....The present white elephant has occupied his post for at least fifty years. I have no doubt he is the same which Padre Sangermano mentions as having been caught in 1806, to the great joy of the King, who had just lost the preceding incumbent, a female which died after a year’s captivity. He is a very large elephant, close upon ten feet high, with as noble a head and pair of tusks as I have ever seen. But he is long-bodied and lanky, and not otherwise well made as an elephant. He is sickly and out of condition, and in fact distempered during five months of the year, from April to August....His colour is almost uniform all over; nearly the ground-tint of the mottled or freckled part of the trunk and the ears of common elephants, perhaps a little darker. He also has pale freckles in the same parts. On the whole he is well entitled to his appellation of white....The Burmese who attended us removed their shoes before entering his ‘Palace’....There are frequent reports of the capture of white elephants, which cause excitement at the Court; but almost invariably they turn out to be pretenders to the character, perhaps a little paler than usual (Yule 1968: 133-134).

The commitment to accuracy in description can hardly mask the contempt which the British appear to have had for the White Elephant and what it represented. One additional point might be made: the description of a hairfaced woman, who appeared as “an absolute realization in the flesh of the dog-headed Anubis” (Yule 1968: 93). The recording of this encounter connected monstrosity with the Burmese. This figure (whom the British had met on an



earlier mission) was treated with compassion, but was an essential part of their narrative (based upon Phayre's diary—it followed the initial visit to the palace). That is, Burma might be understood as a place which was backward and exotic and thereby easily recognized as “oriental.”

Most important, the mission was not successful in getting the Burmese to sign a treaty which would have confirmed the borders shaped by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Anglo-Burmese War. The leaders of the mission indicated that treaties (something the King said that the Burmese do not sign) reflected the values of their civilization. The choice for the Kingdom of Ava was to embrace British power (and with it the confirmation of the loss of Pegu) and, in essence, join civilized nations.

With the inability to gain the Burmese as signatories to a treaty, it probably should not be surprising that the British regarded court and its practices as barbaric. That is, the dirt, the presence of slaves, the outright dishonesty, the lack of manners all confirmed to the British that the Burmese were both different and inferior. Even though the British developed a positive impression of Mindon Min, he was understood as the exception which proved the rule about monarchical corruption, which might have easily fulfilled the pre-existing stereotype of the “Oriental despot.” Further confirmation of this assessment could be found in the negative views which the British held of a number of personages associated with the court. It might be added that the ruins of Pagan (another subject of the narrative) could support this narrative by providing evidence that Burma (and other places in SEA) once had large scale states and possibly empires, but were now governed by low level despots.

### III. Anna Leonowens: the Intimate look at the Mongkut's Court

Anna Leonowens' experience in Siam remains among the most iconic expressions of orientalist discourses associated with Western encounters with SEA. Most notably, *The King and I* remains a well-known and nearly celebrated representation of East meeting West in SEA. In fact, a study could be usefully made of the ways in

which Leonowens' narrative—with its detailed attention to the Siam court—became the basis for both the perpetuation of orientalist tropes and stereotypes and their deliberate commercial exploitation—by both Western and SEA actors. For our purposes, here, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* records the encounters between SEA and mid-Victorian British culture, which in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century carried as much global weight as any of its counterparts. The very title points to a collision between two very powerful realities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—domesticity as an ideal and set of social practices, and established monarchy, with all of its trappings. Like the account of Yule and Phayre, Leonowens wrote with a detailed knowledge of the royal court; in fact, she might be said to have penetrated it much more substantially than did those who were part of the mission to Ava in 1855.

Leonowens' actual narrative is not particularly surprising: she highlighted what she perceived to be the inferior quality of Siamese court life. She tended to write without regard or comprehension for Siam's immediate historical setting. Leonowens seems to have little understood the challenges which faced Mongkut as a ruler or that it was only the Bowring Treaty, signed a decade earlier which enabled her to come to Bangkok and engage Siamese society. Nonetheless, in examining Mongkut's court she was also probing Siamese culture and governance, both of which she found lacking. Leonowens was hardly a detached observer, but in the 1860s it made perfect sense to connect the habits of the court with an evaluation not only of the King and his ministers, but with the nation that he ruled. Consequently, Leonowens's work—later remembered for its appearances on stage and on screen—amounted to much more than a tale of two strong personalities, but instead to a memoir and critique of a whole country.

Most famously, Leonowens identified the monarchy with the harem, which ran counter to the many Victorian assumptions about propriety and decency. Leonowens narrated her experiences by highlighting the ways in which Bangkok (and more generally, Siam) was physically deficient. For instance, her story about the difficulties of finding a place to live were punctuated by the actual condition of the private residence which was first provided for her:

We alighted at the king's pavilion facing the river, and were led by a long circuitous, and unpleasant road, through two tall gates, into a street which, from the offensive odors that assailed us, I took to be a fish market....we were parching and suffocating, when our guide stopped at the end of this most execrable lane, and signed to us to follow him up three broken steps of brick...two small rooms, without a window in either, without a leaf to shade, without bath-closet or kitchen. And this was the residence sumptuously appointed for the English governess to the royal family of Siam! (Leonowens 1870: 68-69)

In making fun of what was provided, she revealed her own expectations for a satisfactory domestic situation:

And furnished! And garnished! In one room, on a remnant of filthy matting, stood the wreck of a table, superannuated, and maimed of a leg, but propped by two chairs that with broken arms sympathized with each other. In the other, a cheap excess of a Chinese bestead, that took the whole room to itself; and a mattress!—a mutilated epitome of a Lazarine hospital (Leonowens 1870: 69).

Leonowens fled the house until being “stopped by the crowd of men, women, and children, half naked, who gathered around me, wonderin.” (1870: 69). Leonowens related that she left the “suburb of disgust” and her guide “grinned at us fiendishly, whether in token of apology or ridicule I knew not” (Leonowens 1870: 69).

These experiences contrasted with the Victorian emphasis on domesticity: Siam was dirty, both physically and morally. Corruption was rampant—if not the norm for decision-making.

The descriptions of the harem lay at the very heart of Leonowens critique of Siam. She invited her readers into the “saloons of the palace, where we shall this intellectual sensualist in the moral relaxation of his harem, with his latest pets and playthings about him” (Leonowens 1870: 43).

The king was the disk of light and life round which these strange flies swarmed. Most of the women who composed his harem were of gentle blood,—the fairest of the daughters of Siamese nobles and of princess of the adjacent tributary states; the late queen consort

was his own half-sister. Beside many choice Chinese and Indian girls, purchased annually for the royal harem by agents stationed at Peking, Fou-chou, and different points in Bengal, enormous sums were offered year after year, through "solicitors" at Bangkok and Singapore, for an English woman of beauty and good parentage to crown the sensational collection; but when I took leave of Bangkok, in 1868, the coveted specimen had not yet appeared in the market. The cunning commissionnaires contrived to keep their places and make a living by sending his Majesty, now and then, a piquant photograph of some British Nourmahal of the period, freshly shipped, in good order for the harem; the goods never arrived (Leonowens 1870: 94-95).

Leonowens was actually following a well-known path of writing about the harem in order to depict much larger social trends. To cite one obvious comparison, Harriet Martineau traveled to the Middle East and wrote critically in *Eastern Life, Past and Present* (1848) not only about harems, but the way she believed they signified corruption and backward political conditions. In other words, Leonowens, like Martineau, exploited the private realities of the harem to critique the larger public life of Siamese society.

Here light and darkness are monstrously mixed, and the result is a glaring gloom that is neither of the day nor of the night, nor of life nor of death, nor of earth nor of—yes, hell!...And O, the forlornness of it all!...And yet have I known more than one among them who accepted her fate with a repose of manner and a sweetness of smile that told how dead must be the heart under that still exterior....I had never beheld misery till I found it here; I had never looked upon the sickening hideousness of slavery till I encountered its features here;...The misery which checks the pulse and thrills the heart with pity in one's common walks about the great cities of Europe is hardly so saddening as the nameless, mocking wretchedness of these women, to poverty were a luxury, and houselessness as a draught of pure, free air (Leonowens 1870: 103-104).

Even worse, perhaps, were the social hierarchies, which included slavery (beyond the harem). Perhaps nothing could offend mid-Victorian sensibilities than the fact that slavery was a fact of life in 19<sup>th</sup> century Siam. The young women in Mongkut's harem were

in much better positions than in those who were both poor and enslaved.

Leonowens served Mongkut and her assessment of the King was based on her encounters with Bangkok, the harem, and slavery.

He was a more capacious devourer of books and news, than perhaps any man of equal rank in our day. But much learning had made him morally mad; his extensive reading had engendered in his mind an extreme skepticism concerning all existing religious systems. In inborn integrity and steadfast principle he had no faith whatever. He sincerely believed that every man strove to compass his own ends ....He was a provoking *mélange* of antiquarian attainments and modern skepticism. When, sometimes, I ventured to disabuse his mind of his darling scorn for motive and responsibility, I had the mortification to discover that I had but helped him to an argument against myself: it was simply "my peculiar interest to do so." Money, money, money! that could procure anything...In many grave considerations he displayed soundness of understanding and clearness of judgment,—a genuine nobility of mind, established upon universal ethics and philosophic reason,—where his passions were not dominant; but when these broke in between the man and the majesty, they effectually barred his advance in the direction of true greatness; beyond them he could not, or would not, make way....if this man could but have cast off the cramping yoke of his intellectual egotism, and been loyal to the free government of his own true hear, what a demi-god might he not have been among the lower animals of Asiatic royalty" (Leonowens 1870: 98).

Leonowens explained that the position of the monarchy was unique to Siamese society because the monarch was "enshrined" rather than "enthroned" (1870:99). In practice, this meant that the monarchy—through a 'secret council'—had increasingly autocratic powers, making the government appear to be insidious and secretive. She noted that anyone who spoke out against the "royal judges" risked unexpected punishments, which might include kidnapping and torture, with threats made against his/her family.

The citizen who would enjoy, safe from legal plunder, his private income, must be careful to find a patron and protector in the king, the prime minister, or some other formidable friend at court. Spies...

penetrate into every family of wealth and influence. Every citizen suspects and fears always his neighbor, sometimes his wife (1870: 100).

At the same time, Leonowens regarded the monarchy as greedy, claiming that the institution is very wealthy:

It is known that the riches of the Siamese monarch are immense, and that a magnificent share of the legal plunder drawn into the royal treasury is sunk there, and never returns into circulation again. The hoarding of money seems to be the cherished practice of all Oriental rulers, and even a maxim of state policy; and the general diffusion of property among his subjects offers the only safe assurances of prosperity for himself and stability for his throne in the last precept of prudence an Asian monarch ever learns (1870: 295-296).

More interesting here, Leonowens conceded that Mongkut was not without his achievements as monarch. She noted commercial development, modernization, and improved civic life as things which might be associated with his reign. However, she could not bring herself to move away from making the king's private life (as manifested by the harem, concubines, second queens, etc.) the basis for evaluating him as a monarch. Students of Thai history, of course, regard Mongkut as a successful and progressive monarch. Historians such as David K. Wyatt have, in fact, regarded Mongkut as a reforming monarch, who had faced an uphill battle with political reform and so had to move cautiously. (Wyatt1991: 188) Mongkut sought to modernize Siamese society by keeping his subjects better informed, publishing a government gazette, and allowing the laws of the kingdom to be printed. (Wyatt 1991: 188) Furthermore, while he did not abolish slavery (an end which Leonowens might have expected) he sought to lessen its oppressive character. (Wyatt 1991: 1988) More recently, Maurizio Peleggi has made the case that Mongkut instituted practices of direct government, including the ability to petition the throne (Peleggi 2007: 93). In the case of Leonowens, a foreigner with a rare and inside view of the palace, her critical "gaze" could not overcome her own signifiers of value. That is, her assessment of Mongkut (and with it, Siam) disregarded

his many achievements because of the realities of the harem—with which she was deeply acquainted. For our purposes, she also represents a kind of classic instance of the kind of colonial discourse directed against SEA monarchies.

If Yule might be regarded as an early “cultural diplomat,” then Leonowens serves as an example of someone who brings a privileged gaze to an important subject—in this case a royal court. Leonowens’ narrative amounted to a repudiation of the court and with it Siamese society and conventions. Her memoir amounted to a kind of cultural production—one which drew upon first-hand experience to help situate a particular kind of world. Regarding the memoir as a work of cultural production has a number of advantages because it exposes not only the author’s biases, but hints at well-known postcolonial issues regarding the production of knowledge and hierarchies. As the creator of this kind of cultural product, Leonowens was hardly a detached observer, but instead someone who situated the values of her world into one which was now intimate, foreign, and adjudged to be inferior. Her work should not be confused with picture of the “orient” which might be said to emerge from the pages of Pierre Loti’s novels, but instead reflects the moral outrage of an insider, who never compromised her own moral standards, who never considered reflecting on the nature of her own prejudices. That is, unlike Alfred Russel Wallace, who reflected on his experiences in the Malay archipelago to call into question many of the easy assumptions of his contemporaries, Leonowens sought instead to tell her story of working in a place which she believed reconfirmed her own standards of moral superiority.

The significance of, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* however, lies in the fact that the work is part of a much larger set of Western and colonizing discourses which belittled SEA’s leadership. Readers of Leonowens’ work (as well as those who came to know about it through subsequent dramatic productions) might well be impressed by her fortitude in dealing with the court, but they could just as easily understand it as an account of systematic misgovernment. These shortcomings were both in terms of character (see the comment about the king), but significantly could be readily

connected to social and political organization. It might be added that living in the court may well have inhibited Leonowens from seeing the more adaptive and expedient forms of Thai social life—even if it functioned all around her. The interactions with the Western world (of which she was a part) served to reinforce the perception that Siamese leadership was backward and ineffectual. In other words, Leonowens was able to witness the deliberate acts of occidental presentation, well chronicled in Maurizio Peleggi's *Lords of Things* (2007) which is an engaging study of the Thai monarchy. These choices which fashioned the monarchy image in the 19<sup>th</sup> century further confirmed for her the superiority of Western culture and values.

#### IV. Hugh Clifford: Fictionalizing Monarchical Narratives

Cannadine regarded Hugh Clifford as “one of the greatest colonial governors” (2001: 66) but a better case might be made that he was one of Britain’s most determined “cultural diplomats” in SEA. If Leonowens retained her prejudices, Clifford found the Malay world—which was rapidly becoming affected by British and Dutch colonialism—to be fascinating and strangely attractive. Clifford, who was born while Leonowens was teaching in the palace, served as a Resident in Pahang (1896-1900 and 1901-1905) and Governor of North Borneo (1900-1901) and Governor of the Straits Settlements between 1927-1930. In the decades in between he served as the governor of Ceylon, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria. In all of these roles he might be expected to serve British interests as a civil administrator. Clifford was an author with a considerable range of work, but for our purposes it is useful to highlight a few key texts. *In Court and Kampung* (1896) he presented a fictionalized account of life in British Malaya. Some readers may also know *At the court of Pelesu and other Malayan stories*, which was published later, but followed many of themes *In Court and Kampung*. Clifford also wrote nonfiction works such as *Farther India*, which focused on European colonial encounters (especially “discoveries”) with SEA. His interest in Malay culture and history (and letters more generally) made him into an early cultural diplomat. However, the expectation is that



cultural diplomacy exists to serve the interest of a nation-state or empire by making its own culture and practices attractive, Clifford was actually opposite: he was concerned to illuminate the many positive features he could find in Malay culture.

Unlike Leonowens, Clifford wrote widely about subjects involving the Malay world and he produced both prose and works of fiction. His contemporaries looked to him as an authority on many aspects of Malay life and practices. For example, John Gimlette, who served as the Residency Surgeon of Kelantan for 10 years, drew upon Clifford's knowledge in a treatise entitled *Malay Poisons and Charm Cures* (Gimlette 1915: 11, 37-38). Again, Walter William Skeat noted in his massive *Malay Magic: Being An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula* that Clifford, along with Sir Frank Swettenham, did much to "popularize the knowledge of things Malay amongst the general reading public." He added that this was based on their "careful and accurate observation" (Skeat 1900: xv).

As Clifford explained, while writing in Gold Coast, West Africa, his role as a diplomat and resident allowed him to obtain a detailed understanding of Malay society:

Fate and a rather courageous Colonial Governor ordained that I should be sent on a special mission to the Sultan of Pahang...before I was quite one and twenty years of age....My object was to obtain from the Sultan the promise of a treaty surrendering the management of his foreign relations to the British Government, and accepting the appointment of a Political Agent at his court?. This I obtained and bore in triumph to Singapore, when I immediately returned to negotiate the details of the treaty, and subsequently to reside at the Sultan's court as the Agent in question. (1922: viii-ix).

Clifford added a description of his life which might have made those researchers who have a passion for field research envious. He was

privileged to live for nearly two years in complete isolation among the Malays in a native state which was annually cut off from the outside world from October to March by the fury of the northeast

monsoon; that this befell me at perhaps the most impressionable period of my life; that having already acquired considerable familiarity with the people, their ideas and their language, I was afforded an unusual opportunity of completing and perfecting my knowledge; and that the circumstances compelled me to live in a native hut, on native food, and in native fashion, in the company of a couple of dozen Malays—friends of mine, from the western side of the Peninsula, who had elected to follow my fortunes. Rarely seeing a white face or speaking a word of my own tongue, it thus fell to my lot to be admitted to the coulisses of life in a native state, as it was before the influence of Europeans had tampered with its eccentricities. (Clifford 1922: x-xi)

However, proximity did not lead Clifford to romanticize Malay life or its modes of government. He concluded that the “rule of their rajas and chiefs was one of the most absolute and cynical autocracies that the man of man has conceived (Clifford 1922: xi). Nonetheless, it is clear that he had much more curiosity than did Leonowens and probably the most who accompanied Phayre and Yule. Clifford noted that

At a preposterously early age I was the principal instrument in adding 15,000 square miles of territory to the British dependencies in the East;...I, who write, have with my own eyes seen the Malayan prison; have lived at a Malayan court; have shared the life of the people of all ranks and classes in their towns and villages, in their rice-fields, on their rivers, and in the magnificent forests which cover the face of their country. I have travelled with them on foot, by boats, and raft. I have fought with and against them. I have camped with the downtrodden aboriginal tribes of jungle-dwelling Sakai and Semang, and have heard from their own lips the tales of their miseries. I have watched at close quarters, and in intolerable impotency to aid or save, the lives which all these people lived before the white men came to defend their weaknesses against the oppression and the wrong wrought to them by tyrants of their own race; and I have seen them gradually emerge from the dark shadow in which their days were passed, into the daylight of a personal freedom such as white men prize above most mundane things. (1922: x)

It might not be surprising that, unlike the author of *The English*

*Governess at the Siamese Court*, Clifford remains something of a forgotten figure, but remains relatively well-known to students of Malay history. As we will see, Clifford's writing suggests a view of a SEA court which might be regarded as hindrance to social development.

To cite a well known example, from the story "At the Court of the Pelesu," Clifford tells the story of a brave British civil servant, who must confront the many faces of royal corruption. These events take place in the 1860s in "Pelesu," a fictionalized independent Malay state facing the rise of British power emanating from the Straits Settlements. Much of what Leonowens said about defects of Siam could be easily applied to Pelesu. The ruler, a "Malayan king of the old school," is greedy for both material gain and sensual experiences and he is feared by his subjects, who have been conditioned to obey his commands without question. Lacking any of the achievements or the intellect which Leonowens acknowledged in Mongkut, the fictionalized monarch serves to restrict the development and modernization of Pelesu. The condition of Pelesu would have also resonated to advocates of domestication and the rule of law:

The capital city of the Sultan of Pelesu was a somewhat squalid place. It mainly consisted of one long, irregular lane running parallel to the river-bank, the houses on the one side having a double frontage, abutting respectively on the shore and on the water, while the occupants of those facing them could obtain access to the river by means of a few narrow landing-places, which was almost edged out of existence by encroachments of the hovels on either hand. The street was unmetalled; but the red and dusty earth had been beaten smooth and hard by the passage of innumerable unshod feet, save where the escaping rain-water had worn for itself deep channels in the course of its rush riverward (Clifford 1993: 41).

Clifford narrates that the king had put up a now neglected European style bungalow to complement his palace. Again, with echoes of Leonowens' account of the palace, a virtual society had arisen around the monarch's harem:

Both the bungalow and the old palace were inhabited by wives of

the King and by their numerous retinues of parasitic hangers-on. The rank of these ladies was such that the King had not thought it politic to divorce them, but their faded charms had long ago ceased to hold his fickle affection....he led a peripatetic existence, dividing his time, as the passing fancy dictated, between the houses occupied by his numerous concubines (Clifford 1993: 42-43).

Clifford's work was fictional, but based on his own observations in Pahang. The narrator of "At the Court of Pelesu" might well have summarized colonizing discourses regarding the monarchy. Having defined the various types of corruption and substandard living conditions (signified by terms such as "squalid" and made vivid by images of poverty), the narrator set forth a near-definitive statement, noting first the typical "Oriental ruler of the good old days" might:

ordinarily be persuaded to spare from his more intimate pleasures, so long as his harem and his opium-pipe continued to be sufficiently well stocked....it came to pass that in some parts of the East...a quite unspeakable state of things endured decade after decade...all in authority being apparently convinced that the prevailing conditions would last forever. Then, upon a certain day, the deluge would precipitate itself, as though the sea had been upset, and evil-mannered native kings and hopelessly rotten social and political institutions would suddenly be found jostling one another on the surface of the flood (Clifford 1993: 43-44).

This narrative and judgement amounts to kind of signature statement for the tradition or genealogy of British writing about royal courts in SEA. Like so many British authors, Clifford began with the assumption that the sultans were both corrupt and vengeful. Yet, much of his energy was devoted to portraying the Malay peoples as humane and wise. His critique of the Asian rulers reflected a deep bond which he felt he shared with the peoples and culture of British Malaya.

It could be added that Clifford also serves as a touchstone for the issues posed by the significance of monarchy for SEA. While "At the Court of the Pelesu" was situated in the 1860s, Clifford lived through the diplomatic and political challenges of securing the

border of Siam/Malaya. This subject was only partly about the external relations of both: it also had much to do with the status of monarchy (and the ambitions associated with it) in the two entities.

Amrita Malhi has argued that the tensions which arose with the negotiations about the future border of the Malaya and Siam proved to be of greater significance than has been previously realized. She has demonstrated that the race, religion, and royalty triangle, which featured prominently in Malay politics since 1957 had deep colonial roots. Notably, around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it would be Malay rulers who sought to escape the inclusion of their domains into the growing state of Siam. The prospect that Siam would desacralize Muslim rulers in Patani (and aim for as much in Kelantan, Sai, and Terengganu) in order to control the state's territorial expansion was an existential threat to the Malay sultans in these areas. Consequently, the British became the colonizer of choice, because they made no such demands. Instead, the British followed what Cannadine might have called the "ornamentalist" playbook in which the Sultans would rule in such a way as to preserve their traditional roles, while legitimating colonial governance. Malhi describes this the emergence of a colonial geo-state in this manner:

This mode of colonization, namely the collaborative production of a hybrid royal colonial bureaucracy, allowed Malay Muslim rulers in Britain's Malay States to retain an operational, if delimited, capacity to administer an exclusive domain. This domain would consist of Malay "religion", namely Islam and all its markers of belief and practice, including the behavior of believers if the ruler wished. It also included Malay "custom", namely an additional, overlapping field of behavioral markers demonstrating Malay identity. Further, this domain was a sacralized sphere because it was the sultan's sphere, and these rulers would be able to project themselves as occupants and guardians within it. As a result, even while the colonial bureaucracy appropriated all other bases for royal power, in this crucial respect they did not resemble the bureaucracy Siam was then establishing in Patani, and which it had briefly attempted to establish in Kedah (2015:482).

Put another way, the British predilection for ornamentalist

politics made them an attractive partner in a situation in which Malay royal authority was under siege. Indeed, as Malhi puts it: “Royal elites structured their approaches to Britain in a manner which reflected Britain’s own framing of the sacral royal domain, in which religion and custom formed an exclusive, monarchic sphere of action (2015: 485).”

Clifford was active in these border politics and it would have been consistent to demarcate the legal requirements of governance (which would go to Britain), while permitting and even encouraging the perpetuation of royal authority in the name of religion and custom (or as the 3Rs). In addition, this kind of arrangement could well allow the British to treat the sultans through an ornamentalist lens, while retaining their orientalist stereotypes about corruption, sloth and backward social organization.

## **V. From Orientalism to Ornamentalism?**

Did it make any difference if a monarchy was conceptualized as “oriental” or “ornamental”? If monarchy is a distinguishing concept for SEA, then it must be added that the experience of both monarchs and the peoples who lived under them decidedly varied. The Burmese monarchy, which we have seen, was at the very outset described in terms recognizable as “orientalist.” Despite their ability to rework with Mindon Min (who they respected), the British disregarded the Konbaung dynasty, which they terminated at the end of the Third Anglo-Burmese War. With the conclusion of the conflict, the British annexed “Upper Burma,” giving them complete control over the country and linking the end of the monarchy to the imposition of colonial rule over all of Burma. Yet, the decision to expel the Konbaung rulers deviated from the frequent imperial practice of finding a suitable royal to govern in their stead—as the politics of the Malay peninsula aptly illustrate. The British use of intermediary rulers was actually one of the hallmarks of the empire, but in the case with Burma it was discarded from the outset. There were ample numbers of Burmese royals who might have served, but the British contempt for the Konbaung rulers seems to have meant

that they preferred the far more expensive task of direct rule.

The case of Siam is vastly different, where the monarchy would itself become one of the primary actors in the expansion of the modern Thai state. Indeed, not only would the monarchy pursue policies aimed at territorial expansion, but it would embark upon a very aggressive attempt to Westernize many features of the country. In this sense, Siam represented the most complete embodiment of orientalist discourses in 19<sup>th</sup> century SEA. It would be the Siamese leadership which acted upon the assumption that many orientalist ideas were correct, as it sought to empower itself at the expense of more traditional forms of Siamese life. Furthermore, as we have seen in the case of Clifford, it would be in the drive for territorial expansion that Siam would bump up against the realities of the British Malay world.

Finally, Dutch efforts to engage and ultimately control the archipelago, which eventually became Indonesia were unthinkable without reference to local royalties. In fact, it seems possible that while Cannadine's argument focuses on the British empire, in SEA it certainly applies to the Dutch methods of colonization and governance. Unlike the British involvement in Burma and Malaya, the Dutch experience in the Malay archipelago (especially in Java) was rooted in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Indeed, eventual Dutch dominance was the result of working with monarchs—some of whom gained legitimacy by the backing of the VOC. In other words, the Dutch used these local rulers to govern Java and many of the outer islands which they came to control. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch had successfully co-opted the royal families (along with leading aristocrats) who had vested stakes in colonial governance. Tellingly, perhaps, many engaged in what might be regarded as heritage pursuits, where they worked to recover and preserve Javanese culture. As M.C. Ricklefs observed "With little room for political manoeuvre, the royal elite turned much of its energy towards cultural affairs (2008: 152)." To cite a few examples, Pakubuwana V ordered the compilation of *Serat Centhini* (which explored Javanese mystical knowledge by recounting the story of a wandering student of religion). Raden Ngabei Ronggowarsita enjoyed royal patronage while he authored both prose and poetry in

Javanese. Last, the royal elite of Yogyakarta were patrons of literature and Pakualam II and Pakualam III were authors in their own right. (Ricklefs 2008: 152-153) However, culture may be one of the biggest beacons of “soft power,” but in this case it was without hard power to change or challenge colonial modes of governance. Instead, the Dutch increasingly relied upon the *priyayi*, a new administrative class given titles to clearly situate their place in indigenous Javanese societies (Ricklefs 2008: 156). It would be these officials who worked closely with the Dutch who carried on. However, their status actually came from their skill and capacity, rather than from privilege or royal blood (Ricklefs 2008: 156).

All told, while much more work needs to be done on the ways in which the West engaged SEA leadership, it seems clear that there was a strong ornamentalist bias. These encounters ranged from Burma to the Malay archipelago and might be said to have been significant for the French Indochina as well. Given the proximity of much larger empires, it follows that scholars who are seeking to understand the region’s defining characteristics could do much worse than study its monarchs, sultanates, and their courts. One more observation: that in virtually every case, royal courts have been an important vehicle for the articulation of local cultures (even as they have also sought to pursue modernization) and the leading advocates for the preservation of it as heritage. To access the history of SEA in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century means following some of the markers left by those who had the power and influence to do so. Obviously, monarchy (and the preservation of heritage) is not unique to SEA, but it is striking how central the fate of royalty was (and remains) to the emergence of new nations.

## VI. Conclusion

These three figures, who wrote in quite different circumstances, might be said to have written between orientalism and ornamentalism in their treatment of the monarchs and sultans that they encountered. All brought many of the standard “orientalist” biases to bear upon their subjects, but they also fastened upon the



character and role of local elites (in these cases sultans, monarchs, and their key subordinates) in ways which would have been consistent with “ornamentalist” presuppositions. Collectively, they illustrate the tendency (which grows throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century) to negatively represent SEA leadership. What might be surprising is that even though they began with a focus on monarchies, they extended the critique to the larger societies, which they engaged. Consequently, they concluded that Burma, Siam, and the Malay world were backward and politically underdeveloped. The experience of the “white rajahs” of Sarawak would have only supported such a set of assumptions. This conclusion is not startling, but it might help us to better understand how a figure such as Furnivall, who played a pivotal role in the development of Southeast Asian Studies, could profoundly underestimate SEA nationalism, and seemingly with it, the region’s ability to develop indigenous leadership.

Furnivall, whose impact on the development of Southeast Asian Studies is well documented, would look even more out of date as the 20<sup>th</sup> century closed with the emergence of the “Asian Values” debate. This conversation reflected a different type of postcolonial situation—namely the rapid and dramatic rise of East and Southeast Asia after the 1970s. At the heart of the debate, of course, was a discussion not only about modernization, but leadership capacity and style. Advocates of Asian Values regarded regional economic development as a new model for modernization—one which would be Asian and possibly more effective than its Western counterparts. The debate about “Asian Values” also pointed to the kind of conclusion that Ian Morris would reach in *Why the West Rules For Now*, namely that by the early 22<sup>nd</sup> century (if not sooner) East Asia would overtake the West (2010). Much of Morris’ analysis was based on social organization, but it now stands in contrast with these earlier discourses about Asian leadership. The Asian Values debate also amounted to a kind of reply to the kind of Western discourse exhibited in this paper—which may well have framed Furnivall’s thinking as well. As I have argued elsewhere, Furnivall badly underestimated the rise of nationalism in SEA. The same might be said for Taw Sein Ko, a public intellectual and colonial civil servant, who could not foresee the significance of Burmese nationalism, even

as it rapidly grew around him. Instead, these figures almost certainly regarded the region's leadership through the experiences of its monarchs, which virtually had to mean underestimating other areas of political leadership. If the cases of Yule/Phayre, Leonowens, and Clifford were in any way representative, then, the rule (and usually misrule) of monarchs might be seen to guarantee that political leadership had never and might not exist in many of places ruled by colonial empires. One of the things which this discussion has exhibited was that the critique of monarchies was based on much more than the appearance or behavior of a given king. Instead, it led to a kind of examination of each society. The connections between a powerful monarch, corruption, exploitation of vulnerable women, dirt, and squalor came as a complete package. Furthermore, the historical record clearly shows that the British, in particular, were usually happy to co-opt and work with elites. The British empire could not have endured without the successful support of elites—many of whom the British helped to create or nourish. Thinkers such as Furnivall, then, might be forgiven for not understanding how much of the colonial political architecture would change with the emergence of new nations. He certainly did not grasp how fragile colonial rule had been or understood why it stood so little chance of surviving a strong nationalist challenge.

This discourse was predicated on the idea that Asian leadership—especially that which might be found in royal courts—was inherently flawed and corrupt. The history of SEA it followed might be described as a narrative of ineffective to disastrous monarchs, until the arrival of European colonization. The long developed habit of underestimating Asian leadership (and with it, social organization and economic productivity) may well explain the shock experienced by Western opinion makers when finally challenged from East Asia. However, it is worth noting that one SEA writer reflected that Asian economic growth would be easy, but retooling “the social, political and philosophical dimensions of their societies will be a tougher challenge” (Mahbubani 1997: 9). Yet, the basic priority of narrating SEA has always involved nation-building. The position here is that the nations which emerged from the shadows of imperialism and global conflict were probably much

more changed than Furnivall and others may have realized; yet it might be well to remember that even as they developed their distinctive identities, they still (to varying degrees) carried with them the DNA of early monarchical states. After all, the geographer John Agnew (1987) reminds us of the importance of place for politics and, with that, political development. Those who then study the region or look to find its essential features could do worse than to recover the perspectives which might be gleaned from the early, if flawed attempts to make of sense of monarchy and leadership capacity in SEA.

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