

Taking Expedience Seriously: Reinterpreting Furnivall's Southeast Asia

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Abstrak

Defining key characteristics of Southeast Asia requires historical interpretation. Southeast Asia is a diverse and complicated region, but some of modern history's "grand narratives" serve to unify its historical experience. At a minimum, the modern history of the region involves decisive encounters with universal religions, the rise of Western colonialism, the experience of world wars, decolonization, and the end of the "cycle of violence". The ability of the region's peoples to adapt to these many challenges and successfully build new nations is a defining feature of Southeast Asia's place in the global stage. This paper will begin with a question: is it possible to develop a hermeneutic of "expedience" as a way to interpret the region's history? That is, rather than regard the region from a purely Western, nationalist, "internalist" point of view, it would be useful to identify a new series of interpretative contexts from which to begin scholarly analysis. In order to contextualize this discussion, the paper will draw upon the writings of figures who explored the region before knowledge about it was shaped by purely colonist or nationalist enterprises. To this end, particular attention will be devoted to exploring some of John Furnivall's ways of conceptualizing Southeast Asia. Investigating Furnivall, a critic of colonialism, will be done in relation to his historical situation. Because Furnivall's ideas have played a pivotal role in the interpretation of Southeast Asia, the paper will highlight the intellectual history of the region in order to ascertain the value of these concepts for subsequent historical interpretation. Ultimately, the task of interpreting the region's history requires a framework which will move beyond the essentializing orientalist categories produced by colonial scholarship and the reactionary nation-building narratives which followed. Instead, by beginning with a mode of historical interpretation that focuses on the many realities of expedience which have been necessary for the region's peoples, it may be possible to write a history which highlights the extraordinarily adaptive quality of Southeast Asia's populations, cultures, and nations. To tell this story, which would at once highlight key characteristics of the region while showing how they developed through historical encounters, would go a long way to capturing Southeast Asia's contribution's to global development.