Traversing the Malay–Indonesian World

An Interview with Leonard Andaya



BY KATHRYN ANDERSON WELLEN AND ARIEL C. LOPEZ

In the summer of 2013, Leonard Y. Andaya, Professor of History at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa visited The Netherlands as a fellow at KITLV. Just before one of his visits to the National Archives, Kathryn Anderson Wellen and Ariel C. Lopez took the opportunity to interview him on his life, work, and experience in studying Southeast Asian history.

Could you tell us something about your childhood and how it influenced your career choice?

I grew up on Maui in Hawai'i. My parents were Filipino immigrants who spoke Ilocano. Because of my early involvement in Filipino events—Rizal Day celebrations for instance—I became very interested in Southeast Asia.[1] In high school I belonged to a national organisation called the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council in which they discussed foreign affairs in Asia and Pacific. But my serious engagement with the region only started when I went to Yale for my undergraduate degree and took courses under Professor Harry Benda. I had initially thought of studying foreign affairs and working in the diplomatic corps. In Washington, I had worked in the office of the first senator from Hawai'i, Oren E. Long. But when I visited the State Department, it looked awfully boring. I decided I really didn't want to be in foreign affairs. Back in Yale, Professor Benda was so inspiring that I decided to focus on Southeast Asia.

What were Professor Harry Benda's classes about?

I took his general history of Southeast Asia. Professor Benda was a dynamic lecturer. That was in the middle of the Vietnam War, and he had huge classes of around 150. He allowed two of the undergraduates to take his graduate course on the subject of elites in Southeast Asia: one was Victor Lieberman and the other was me. So

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by the time I was ready to go on to graduate school, Benda said "You have done everything that I have to offer, why don't you go to Cornell?" That is how it actually went. In between my Yale and Cornell studies, I came to Holland on a Fulbright. I studied with Professor W. Ph. Coolhaas at Utrecht and improved my Dutch. My Dutch language teacher at Yale suggested that I live in the house of a couple who had stayed in Sulawesi during the colonial period. The wife was an Indo and he was Dutch, a former *ambtenaar* with the *Binnenlandsch Bestuur*. So I got a combination of very good information about the Netherlands East Indies from him and about the Indo community, which was really different from the Indonesian one, from her. They lived in Utrecht, which was perfect because of my intention of studying with Professor Coolhaas at the University of Utrecht. One of my warmest memories of Utrecht was singing with the University of Utrecht Bach Choir and Orchestra and travelling as far as one of those little towns in Bavaria to sing the *Magnificat.* I used to go around with my Dutch student friends and learned to speak Dutch, which I have subsequently forgotten a lot since I don't use it very much anymore. Great experience, I love Holland.

How did you pick Indonesia and what were the other choices you had at that time?
It was through Professor Benda. He had been in Indonesia and was incarcerated by the Japanese. His interest was so strong that he encouraged me to study Indonesian. I could have studied anything, because Yale had—next to Cornell—the best Southeast Asia program before the end of the Vietnam War resulted in the closing of many programs. Yale had a lot of good people in the Southeast Asia Program at that time, including Paul Mus.

How was your first experience in the Dutch archives?
My PhD supervisor, Professor O. W. Wolters, encouraged me to do research in the archives. In the first month, I really thought I couldn't do my research because I couldn't read it very well. But after a while my eyes became accustomed [to the script] and I learned to read it easily. At the time, I was young and I would go to the archives six days a week and stay there from the time it opened until it closed. Aside from the Dutch-language archives, I also consulted numerous Malay manuscripts from the Leiden University Library which were not yet transcribed and were still written in *jawi*.[2] After a year I collected a large amount of material to write a history from the indigenous perspective. That was a time when archives were principally used by scholars to write histories that focused primarily on European activities.

How did you pick Johor as your PhD thesis?
It was by accident. Professor Wolters said, "Just go to the archives and see what you can find." When I started looking, Johor was the obvious important polity in the period I was researching. Barbara and I were recently married and she came over to Holland with me. That was when she found a lot of interesting material on Perak and decided to work on the history of that kingdom. It was all accidental, just like everything else. You have good plans but something happens and you just follow whatever direction it takes you.

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So you met your wife Barbara during graduate school?
Yes, in Cornell. We met in Professor Ruth McVey's summer class. Barbara claimed that I was very arrogant. Before Ruth McVey came to class, I used to read the *New York Times* without speaking to the other students (so she claimed). Barbara said she wrote a note to her friend, "That boy looks like a Malay." The reason why Barbara and I got acquainted was because both of us got A's on an essay where we had taken completely opposite positions. McVey said, "You should compare your essays," and so we did. So, that's how we met.

What does Professor Ruth McVey think of her match-making after all these years?
Talking to her of this after many years, I think she said: "Well I'm glad I did something right!"

How is it like to work with Barbara?[3]
It is very easy, maybe because we had the same training under Professor Wolters. Our approaches are very similar, though now our interests have slightly diverged. In the beginning, we were both looking at indigenous developments and using archival materials in order to reconstruct the history of an area. There were some problems when our kids were growing up because we couldn't take them to the field. One summer Barbara would do research by herself and I would watch the kids and then the next summer we would exchange roles. That was the only way we could do the research. But when the kids grew up, we were able to do research together again. We still work on the same areas but focus on different themes. For example, when I was working on the early modern history of eastern Indonesia, she was interested in the localisation of Christianity. The eastern archipelago is a logical region for her research because of its largely Christian population. She could do her research while I was doing mine. People ask, "Is it hard?" One of the beauties of having an academic as a spouse is that you can work anytime of the day even on weekends. It does not bother your partner because she is working as well. We continue asking each other questions and discuss problems especially while jointly writing the *Cambridge History of Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Living in the same house does have advantages. No, having an academic spouse in the same field makes it much easier.

Could you tell us about your experience of writing the Cambridge History of Early Modern Southeast Asia *together?*
Well, it's been a very difficult book to write because of its sheer geographic scope. You need to decide which topics to include. What Barbara and I tried to do—which has not always been done in the past—is to be fair to areas outside the large political centres. It's not focused simply on the major kingdoms but also on the small polities. We looked at the sea, mountain, and forest peoples and identified common features that characterised early modern Southeast Asia. We engaged the term "early modern" by attempting to understand its character in world as well as in Southeast Asian history. We've not only tried to identify major features of different periods, but also to illustrate what's happening in more detail in various "zones" of the same period. If you are a scholar of seventeenth-century Thailand, for example, you could read about the general features of that century in the entire region and

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then focus on the details on Thailand in the section on the "Central Mainland" zone. We've also tried to give voice to historical actors through quotes from contemporary sources. We begin each chapter with a discussion of global events that had an impact on Southeast Asia. This is to provide a perspective for understanding events in Southeast Asia. Sounds exhausting, doesn't it? But I hope that it will be rewarding especially for students.

What inspired you to specialise on the early modern period in the first place?
When I did my thesis on Johor, there was very little written about the early modern. Practically everything I wrote was new even though there had been works written by British scholar-officials such as R. O. Winstedt.[4] I became interested in the history of Sulawesi while working on my thesis because the Bugis—who were originally from south Sulawesi—were so important in the Malay world. Then when I started working on Sulawesi I found strong links with Ternate and Tidore.[5] One couldn't fully understand what was happening in Makassar without knowing the situation in Maluku. That led to another book.[6] Then I moved back to the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca mainly because I was interested in ethnicity and identity.[7] But now I'm returning to eastern Indonesia to examine the notion of polities. What does one mean by a "polity" in the early modern period in eastern Indonesia? Does a political creation need to have a raja or certain political institutions? In researching this highly diverse area, I am attempting to learn how the various communities functioned as a unit without any overarching political institution. What is important, it appears, is the various interlocking networks of exchange—ritual, economic, subsistence—that provide the major reasons for their longevity. I spent my last leave collecting material in eastern Indonesia as well as documents at the *Nationaal Archief*, principally from the VOC Timor and Ambon *comptoirs* or posts.

Why focus on eastern Indonesia in particular?
Eastern Indonesia has always been an understudied area, and yet it is this area that supplied the major products that brought the foreign traders to Southeast Asia. I was therefore interested in how these products reached the markets and what the impact was on the producing or collecting communities. The western part of the archipelago is relatively well studied, so is the central part—Java and Bali—but as soon as you go eastward from Lombok, there is very little research done. I have worked on southwest Sulawesi and on northern Maluku, but never on the Nusa Tenggara area. For this current project, I am focusing on an area from Sumbawa all the way to Tanimbar, Aru, and Kei islands, and Papua. I wanted to see how eastern Indonesia functions as a unit through their many and complex networks.

Your work has traversed much of the Malay—Indonesian world unbridled by the conventions of national boundaries.
To a certain extent, though I've never studied Java. In the *Leaves of the Same Tree,* I incorporated also the history of the Minangkabau, Batak and the Jambi-Palembang (which Barbara has written about extensively) areas. Research topics are often constrained by national boundaries but also by the records. The southern Philippines, even parts of the Visayas and Luzon for instance, was very much part of the international trading networks until the Spanish took control. But people have

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not really done that enough because the focus of Filipinists of the early modern period is mainly on Spanish rule over the central and northern Philippines. Moreover, examining the links between the southern Philippines and the Indonesian areas would entail research both in the Dutch and Spanish archival materials.

How did you learn Spanish and Portuguese?
I studied Spanish in high school and college and reached a stage where I could read Spanish literature quite comfortably. With my Spanish, it was easy for me to move into Portuguese. I studied Portuguese grammar on my own and then began reading Portuguese documents with a dictionary. Reading these two languages is not a problem. Reynaldo Ileto (a well-respected historian of the Philippines) used to say, "*Your Spanish is better than mine!*" though I doubt this very much.

How has public opinion in the United States towards Southeast Asian studies changed?
You know it hasn't. In the U.S., what is really striking is how people still don't know much about Southeast Asia. During the Vietnam War, there was a lot of attention because they were afraid of communism spreading through Southeast Asia, the Domino Theory. Funding was being poured into the universities by the government to support these programs. But once the Vietnam War was over, the government withdrew funding for the Southeast Asia programs in the country, and it has never been restored. If you look at the focus of the government's National Resource Centers, only about seven or eight universities are given funding for a Southeast Asia National Research Center. By contrast there is far more attention given to areas such as China, Japan, India, and the Middle East. Southeast Asia is still a poor cousin to all the other Asian areas. Even though we know that there are six hundred million Southeast Asians with substantial economic power, Southeast Asia does not seem to have attracted the attention of Americans and the U.S. government. Maybe what is needed is something like K-Pop or K-Drama! [Laughs] Seriously, a lot of people are studying Korean now. Why? They want to understand the K-Pop music, right? The point is there is not really much interest in Southeast Asia. When I retire from the University of Hawai'i, are they going to replace me? It is not a given anymore. They could very well say, "Well, we might give it to some other field."

Finally, what do you think the future holds for young scholars especially interested in pursuing a career in Southeast Asia?
It just depends. There aren't that many jobs in the U.S. for those with a specialisation in Southeast Asia. The only places that are expanding that I can see are Singapore, Malaysia, and increasingly South Korea. While these institutions will hire those without the native language, there is still a language barrier, which can be frustrating for an English-functioning academic. Singapore is different because it offers courses in English, and it is a dynamic area where the study of Southeast Asia is thriving. Because young academics find difficulty in obtaining jobs in the Southeast Asian field, some have had to seek positions outside of academia. This is a shame since it takes a while to develop a true expertise in the region. Some good scholars have been lost, including in The Netherlands, because of the lack of employment. Let's hope this situation will improve in the near future. Southeast

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Asia will become increasingly important in the future, and we should be doing more to enable young scholars to maintain their expertise and inspire other young people to undertake the study of this very important region of the world.

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Notes

1 One of the first national heroes of the Philippines, José Rizal (1861–1896) was a Filipino poet, doctor and martyr.
2 *Jawi* is an Arabic alphabet used for Malay and a number of other Southeast Asian languages.
3 They have co-authored Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*.
4 See, for instance, Winstedt, "A History of Johor, 1365–1895."
5 Andaya, *The Heritage of Arung Palakka: A History of South Sulawesi (Celebes) in the Seventeenth Century*.
6 Andaya, *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period*.
7 Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka*.

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