The Specter of a State Without Archives

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Letters, Secrecy, and the Information Age:
The Trajectory of Historiography in Southeast Asia

Cornell’s Southeast Asia Program’s lectures in memory of Frank Golay have always been intended to reach over the walls between disciplines, area studies, and the larger campus community. Needless to say, this is a difficult task. But I decided to speak to you about the Life and Death of different Archives, in honor of Cornell’s most important institution—its Libraries and those who make it so.

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Professor Benedict Anderson delivered the 9th Frank H. Golay Lecture on October 25, 2012 at Cornell University. A full recording of the lecture, including an introduction by outgoing SEAP Director Tamara Loos, can be found at CornellCast: http://www.cornell.edu/video/?videoID=2434.
The foreign reader will find the allegorical novel’s mix of magical and social realism riveting, but she or he needs to be reminded that the Somalis never had monarchies of their own, and fell into the clutches of Italian and British imperialism in the later 19th century until just after WW II, when defeated Italy lost its empire, and the United Kingdom, working under a UN mandate, ruled all of Somalia till 1960. The independent new nation-state was extremely poor and the literacy rate was very low. There was no standard Somali orthography till the early 1970s, soon after Barre’s coup. The autocrat in fact created hundreds of new primary and secondary schools to enforce national literacy. This program obviously had its beneficial aspects, but as in many other post-WW II new states, it had a long-run, hidden agenda. This can be described as linguistic sequestering of colonial archives to make them illegible: easy for Italian, much harder for English in the time of Anglo-American global linguistic hegemony. But in his novels Farah always uses the Italian name of the capital, Mogadicio, rather than Mogadishu.

The Death by Linguistic Sequestration

Let me turn to two contrasting cases in Southeast Asia. Spain ruled most of today’s Philippines for about 350 years, during which vast Spanish archives accumulated both in the colony and in the metropole. Unlike in Spanish America, which was heavily Hispanicized, in the Philippines only a tiny percentage of the population ever learned to speak and read the Master’s language, and only when Spain’s authority was in final steep decline. The Protestant American conquerors of the archipelago at the beginning of the 20th century, contemptuous of “feudal” Catholic Spaniards, worked hard to install a state-controlled secular educational system down to the village level, with the aim of making “democratic” American English the language of state as well as the colony’s lingua franca. More and more, Spanish was consciously marginalized. However, since many members of the native upper class (including most politicians) were Spanish mestizos, there was still residual serious teaching of the Spanish language (after World War II, this was partly subsidized from Madrid by the Generalissimo Francisco Franco). With Franco’s death in 1976, the program more or less collapsed, so that today there are only a very few Filipinos who are capable of accessing the vast Hispanic archive. The post-independence decision to make Tagalog the national language has not been easy, and has been unsuccessful in replacing American English. The irony is that if the Americans had recognized the short-lived Republic of the Philippines in 1898, the chances are great that the Spanish-speaking political elite would have decided to use Filipino Spanish as the language of the state and even schooling. Then the strangulation of this beautiful language would not have happened.

In the case of Indonesia, sequestering occurred for different reasons. As you may know, large parts of today’s Indonesia were ruled for almost all of the 17th and 18th century by the United East Indies Company, which was by far the largest and richest corporation in the world until London’s East India Company came on the scene. The company had neither the interest nor the financial capacity to set up any serious kind of Dutch-language education. Dutch was primarily used for the company’s confidential reports to the Board of Directors in Holland and for internal communication. The company was lucky enough to discover that various forms of the Malay language had long been used as a spoken and written lingua franca both on the Malay Peninsula and along the many trading ports throughout the vast archipelago. This was a godsend, since “market Malay” was easy to learn and readable by merchants and various local monarchies. Roman lettering gradually marginalized the Arabic orthography and its various local, ethnic competitors. In 1815, after the fall of Napoleon, London imposed a monarchy in Holland, which had been a Republic ever since it had freed itself from Spanish rule two centuries earlier. Control of “Indonesia” was for half a century a secretive royal monopoly. The Dutch were aware that their country was small, and its language had no European cachet. So it was only in the early 20th century, and only for 40 years before the Japanese conquered the colony, that Dutch language schools were hesitatingly created and only on a very small scale. The heritage of the United East Indies Company remained strong, and with the rise of print-capitalism, market Malay was indispensable; already at the end of the 1920s, Indonesian nationalists agreed that this lan-
guage would be the national language with the advantage of not being the first language of any of the larger ethnic groups. When Indonesia won its independence after a bitter war from 1945 to 1949, Dutch simply disappeared, except as the private language of elites educated in the colonial period. Subsequent efforts in the 70s and 80s to train young Indonesia academics to access the huge colonial archives were not very successful. Bahasa Indonesia, a standardized form of market Malay, became the national language without any opposition.

The cases are by no means peculiar. When armed resistance to colonial regimes is successful, it is possible and likely that the archive is sequestered by a basic change in the language of state and of the citizenry. At the same time, the defeated metropoles have no reason not to open the archives at least after a decent interval. It is only then that the secret files on imperial massacres, tortures, and corruption can come to light. The complete defeat of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy had the same effect of liberating the devastating documents in open archives. The fall of the USSR also, for a while, opened archives of great value. Provided one could read Russian.

**Leakage**

I don’t mean Wikileaks! In 1962, when I first came to miserably poor Indonesia, which was heading fast for hyperinflation, I discovered that in Jakarta’s flea-markets one could find and perhaps buy very cheaply not only a huge number of Dutch language books and magazines from the colonial era, but also old books, texts and journals in regional languages including Chinese, publications of the Japanese Occupation regime and fragile copies of journals and books from the time of the Revolution. Private libraries, built by educated grandparents or parents, were being sold by descendants, who could not read them, or who were sinking into poverty. But no letters. The most startling things on sale were neatly bundled 5- or 10-kilogram packages containing post-independence state documents. The vendors regarded these packets simply as paper to be used for lighting stoves, anti-mold insulation in homes, packaging, etc., rather than as sources for historical study. They would freely comment that civil servants, whose meager salaries lost value day by day, tried to make a little money by stealing and then flea-selling documents in their reach. It was also said that many ministries did not have the money to house their records, nor the trained and committed archivists necessary to safeguard and catalogue them. When today I look back on my Ph.D. thesis on the latter half of the Japanese Occupation and the early years of the Republic, I realize that my written sources came either from flea markets in Jakarta or from the archives in the Netherlands, including interrogations of Japanese officers for war crimes. (The Occupation regime burned most of its files just in time.) The rest came from interviews with retired politicians and veterans of the Revolution. None from the Indonesian state. In those days, my fellow students and I were gently instructed by John Echols, the self-sacrificing founder of Kroch Library’s magnificent Echols Collection on Southeast Asia, to seek and buy for Cornell as many disappearing and valuable documents, books and journals as we could manage.

**Autocracy and Paranoia**

The rise of autocratic regimes, military or communist, during the height of the Cold War in Asia made for much more state secrecy than hitherto. But there were other conditions that played an important part in increasing inaccessibility of research materials. The most important was deep distrust of any national archive among politicians, intellectuals, military officers, senior bureaucrats, and so on. Handed over to the state, private letters, memoranda and diaries, if not lost, destroyed, or quietly sold off in flea markets, could be used to damage their political and moral reputations. Typically such documents, if they survive, are kept in the family, but the level of care usually declines—children and grandchildren move to new premises, quarrel over legacies, and have no real interest in the documents except as unread testimonies for the depth and honor of the lineage. My experience of research is that interviews are quite easy to get, and are best when the subject rejects tape recording, but family “treasures,” if they still exist, are very difficult to access. Oral memory is fascinating but generally unreliable. You might call this the Farah effect. Distrust of universities and their libraries is a function of their politicization, even if nominally private, as well as lack of financial, technological and professional capacities to collect, safeguard, and organize the documents—to say nothing of reliability over promised time releases.

Of course, there are admirable exceptions. The long-lived literary critic H.B. Jassin, who knew well almost every Indonesian writer of his generation, and regularly corresponded with them, created an extraordinary archive on modern Indonesian literature, and opened it to any writer or researcher. The uniqueness of the archive is that it is full of personal letters. Jassin was probably lucky that the political elite, especially the generals, were philistines with no interest in literature. Meticulously catalogued, and funded over decades by Jassin himself and his friends, the archive is still there, but it is stagnant.

One outcome of these conditions is the heavy imbalance between biographies and autobiographies. Serious biographies are quite rare, and most are done by foreign scholars or journalists, who depend on foreign or domestic newspapers and magazines, fragmented state archives in the ex-colonies and in the West, and as many interviews as possible. The risks are always there if the object of the biography is still in power. After years of careful research, the American journalist Paul Handley wrote a thoughtful biography of the King of Thailand, titled *The King Never Smiles*. The Thai King had the nerve to try intimidating Yale University Press into stopping any publication. He failed, but in Thailand itself, this calm text is still banned, like its author.
Local biographers run greater risks. Yet one can find substantial volumes composed by the sons or daughters from well-known families, anxious to defend the honor of their deceased fathers. Naturally, they tend toward hagiography, but the works are still important because they use the family archive of letters and diaries.

The great exception for Southeast Asia is the case of the Philippines’ martyred hero, José Rizal, executed by the Spanish colonial state at the age of 35. There are endless good and bad biographies of this great novelist, social critic, and leader of late 19th century Filipino nationalism. The crucial factor is certainly the 20 or so thick volumes of his letters to friends and enemies, family members, foreign scholars, political colleagues, as well some arresting short-term diaries. If one asks how this miracle came about, there are two good reasons. One is that Spanish rule collapsed after his death, and Americans took over the country two years later. The new colonialists were happy to help what became a cult of the great man. Filipino intellectuals and politicians in the calm of the late American colonial era created a Historical Commission that worked hard to locate Rizal’s letters in private hands, obtained the cooperation of Rizal’s family, and started publication. Ironically, if the infant republic of 1897-1898 had not been destroyed by Washington, internal political strife would not so easily have carried out this monumental project. The second reason this exception came about is that this enormously gifted letter writer was recently dead. If he had lived to be 80 (in the turmoil of WW II), one can’t be sure what would have happened to his archive.

Autobiographies abound in the Philippines and in Indonesia, mostly in the form of “memoirs” by retired generals and politicians. Almost always vanity publications, often without footnotes, full of lies, ugly prose and strategic silences, they nonetheless can be very readable and give the scholar a pretty good idea about the authors’ obsessions, enmities, social skills, political aspirations, even the typical attraction to mythography. Curious as it may seem, the late colonial era produced a number of really interesting childhood and adolescence autobiographies. The most remarkable is the long memoir (finished in 1931) of a young man called Sutjipto about whom almost nothing is known. A series of ghastly domestic experiences is chillingly described, as well as the misery of total poverty as he roamed eastern Java after running away from his brutal stepfather when he was only 15. The most astounding feature of the first part of the memoir is the powerful and tender account of his first love affair (at age 13) with a slightly older boy. The typescript, written when was in his late 20s, somehow came into the hands of the colonial state’s archives, and still survives there. During the Suharto period, a well-meaning Chinese man discovered it, and published a very bad and heavily cut first edition, which was promptly banned by the regime for obscenity. It has yet to be republished and honestly edited. This kind of typescript would never have entered the archives once the Japanese military occupied the country, the Revolution broke out, and so on. Sutjipto’s sad, funny, honest, and angry memoir is the exact opposite of almost all autobiographies in Indonesia today.

The Twilight of Letters

It must have about 1990, when my mother died, that I stopped getting letters. She had faithfully written to me every ten or so days since I left for America in 1958. I took them for granted and almost always answered in the same time frame, while every letter between us had to have delicious stamps for which we had to pay. Walter Benjamin famously said that one feels the beauty of things at the moment they are vanishing. After she died, I looked again at all her letters and was astounded to see that in her ink-pen writing she never crossed anything out. She had time to reflect on what she wanted to convey to me. Later I saw the same thing in my father’s diaries and grandfather’s letters—elegant personal style and no deletes. Some of my letters to my mother were hand-written, if I was doing fieldwork, but most were typed, and massively crossed out for typos, lousy grammar, and missing words. The machine encouraged me to go fast, but at least the clumsy traces of this speed were very visible. There was always an innocent kind of signaling between us. If there were tuna sandwich traces on a letter of mine, she would know I was hard at work. In turn, I would know from the angle of her writing whether she was happy or annoyed. We wrote to each other, not to anyone else. She only kept some of my letters which she thought important, whereas I kept a steady archive of hers maybe instinctively foreseeing the future. Sending any letter simultaneously to a couple of hundred people, known or unknown, was not remotely imagined. If I wanted to destroy them, they would be gone forever. This is why reading real letters in archives necessarily has something perverse about it—snooping, peeping Tom—with no risk of being snooped upon, at least till we are dead.

People who bought the early computers regarded them mainly as superfast electric typewriters, which allowed one to correct letters, get rid of indiscretions, and edit all kinds of written documents. Of course, unconscious errors and follies did not disappear. Still, one printed out the final draft of a letter, paid for the stamps, and sent it off in an airmail envelope letter as a first-hand document. Then came, very fast, the era of the internet. I remember giving a talk in those days at the University of Indiana. Foolishly, I included some Luddite comments about computers and the World-Wide Web. At the end of the lecture a furious young woman in the audience stood up and shouted that I was an arrogant ignoramus. The best sex I ever had, she yelled, occurred in cyberspace as her lover lived in South Africa. I was stunned and could not think of anything to say. To my further astonishment, the young-sters in the audience cheered her on in a completely supportive way. I could easily imagine writing erotic cyberletters,
athletes past and present, as well as those of forgotten TV personalities. The easiest way to solve the puzzles is by clicking on to Google. Fourth is the technique of almost instant multiplication of any number of receivers. Finally, there is the question of longevity. Our great libraries have in their Rare Book sections letters dating back for half a millennium at least, but the life span of today’s “messages” is pretty short. Print-outs decay quite rapidly, and incessant technological change makes the readable life of message-filled discs quite brief for most of us, who have neither the time, the skill, nor the money for resurrection work. The most melancholy of the computer’s commands is Save, which really means “Temporary Reprieve.”

Finally, a word on research engines. Recently I read an interesting article by a well-known historian on the sway of Google and the reach of digitization. The author pointed out that the digitization of an archive can only be done when the site of its documents is known and its contents already catalogued. Interestingly enough, he concluded that preserved private letters are, over all, the most immune to digitization and Googlization precisely because they are widely scattered in unexpected places and difficult languages. Under these conditions, the research engine has to give way to the slow, dogged, tactful detective work, by diligent, often polyglot individuals. Finding and accessing unknown files is one of the greatest pleasures of scholarship, not least because they never come “free” if they come at all. One might even go so far to say that these unknown collections are more secret than the secrets of states, to say nothing of the Vatican.