

PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN COLONIAL SOUTHEAST ASIA*

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HISTORY—RECORDED HISTORY, THAT IS—HAS NOT BEEN KIND TO the peasantry, and for obvious reasons. Peasants may affect history, but as a rule they do not make it; if anything, it is made for—with or against—them. More important still for purposes of the historian's craft, not only do peasants hardly ever record their fate, their betters have rarely bothered to do it for them; if they have remembered to mention the peasantry at all, they have as often as not relegated it to the role of supporting cast for their own pageantry.

Southeast Asian history has been no exception to this rule: Europe-centric no less than indigenous historiography has almost exclusively dwelt on the heroes of the Great Tradition. If court chroniclers devoted their energies to the legitimation of dynasties and the recording of their sponsors' glorious deeds, colonial historians spent theirs on the exploits of empire builders, "pacifiers," and governors-general. It is true that historians of modern Southeast Asia have occasionally, not to say grudgingly, referred to the peasantry, but then usually in order to score a point in a widening debate. "Colonial" historians, confronted with the upsurge of modern nationalist movements, have tended to imply that the Southeast Asian peasantry was basically "loyal" to the alien regime, untouched—unspoiled perhaps—by the noisy agitation of urban politicians. Nationalist writers as well as pro-nationalist authors abroad, by contrast, claimed unity of "national" purpose between urban intelligentsias and peasantry. If the peasants were in commotion, the former could brush it off as the exception to the rule of rural placidity; the latter would annex it, so to speak, to the mainstream of rising anticolonialism and nationalism. But

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these interpretations are only variations on a dichotomous theme which transposes one historian's rebel into another's hero, without necessarily coming to grips with the specific nature and problems of the peasantry.

The agrarian history of modern Southeast Asia need not be, as Karl Marx posited with regard to European medieval history, the region's "secret," truer history; but it is at least a very important part thereof which fully deserves closest attention. Both the sources and the tools for its study admittedly leave a great deal to be desired. But we are not entirely without documentary evidence, thanks largely to the labors of colonial administrators charged with missions of inquiry into peasant conditions, especially at times of agrarian unrest. As for tools, though as yet underdeveloped, they do exist. To begin with, we have some recent and highly suggestive studies of peasant movements in medieval and modern Europe.¹ Though of course not "transferable," they can and do suggest significant modes of approach and techniques. Second, let us not overlook the fact that some outstanding sociologists and anthropologists have for decades been gathering ample materials and gained valuable insights into peasant life and peasant movements in many parts of the world.² With deliberate selectivity, the social historian can and should learn from them; he may regret that so much of their attention has been focused on small,

¹ See e.g. Norman Cohn, *In Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (London, 1962); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959); and Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults*, tr. by Liza Sergio (New York, 1963); Cf. also Sylvia L. Thrupp (ed), *Millennial Dreams in Action: Essays in Comparative Study* (The Hague, 1962). For a recent contribution concerning Indonesia, see Sartono Kartodirdjo, *Tjataan tentang segi-segi messianistis dalam sedjarah Indonesia* (Jogjakarta, 1959).

² Here the literature is truly overwhelming and only a few titles shall shall therefore be cited. One of the anthropological classics is, of course, Robert Redfield's "Peasant Society and Culture," reprinted in *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago, 1960). Of more specific interest for this essay are such works as Georges Balandier, "Messianismes et nationalismes en Afrique Noir," *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* XIV (1953), 41-65; A. J. F. Kobben, "Profetische bewegingen als uiting van sociaal protest," *Sociologisch Jaarboek XIII* (1959, 5-72; E. Michael Mendelson, "A Messianic Buddhist Association in Upper Burma," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* XXIV (1961), 560-80; Justus M. van der Kroef, "Javanese Messianic Expectations: Their Origin and Cultural Context," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* I (1959), 299-323; "The Messiah in Indonesia and Melanesia," *Scientific Monthly* LXXV (1952), 161-65; and "Messianic Movements in the Celebes, Sumatra, and Borneo" in Thrupp, *op. cit.*, 80-121; Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia* (London, 1957).

isolated, often indeed preliterate, societies rather than on major ethnic groups that are part of highly developed cultures; he may object that in their endeavors to comprehend the morphology and social mechanics of contemporary peasant life, anthropologists have paid scant attention to its historical development. But these and other reservations should come after, not before, the historian has tried to enrich his skill in dealing with the peasantry, the overwhelming, and hitherto virtually history-less, majority of South-east Asians.

The study of peasant movements does not necessarily shed much light on the peasantry under "normal" conditions. Almost by definition, peasants who revolt have moved out of, or have attempted to move out of, "normal" conditions, and even the most careful *ex post facto* inquiry into the causes underlying peasant unrest may distort the preexisting order of things. In other words, we have no ways of reconstructing rural "normalcy," certainly not in premodern times. This state of affairs has its dangers which we must guard against: One is the assume *ex hypothesi* a rural Arcady in an *aetas aurea*; the other, to assume, on equally flimsy grounds, that peasant movements are primarily, if not exclusively, a modern phenomenon, a conditioned reflex to the impact of colonial rule.

As we well know from European history, peasant movements are part and parcel of premodern societies. To assign the peasantry a static role, though an (often implied) commonplace among writers on Southeast Asia, is on modest reflection a fallacy. Surely the courts and dynasties that fill the pages of the area's history lived off the peasants, fought their wars with peasant levies, and, as ruling classes everywhere, imposed hardships on those unable to escape the burdens of organized social and political life? Let us equally avoid the pitfalls of "Oriental Despotism" and of retrospective romanticism as starting points for historical analysis.³ It is not at all unlikely that were reliable, written records of the past available, they would reveal peasants "moving against their overlords, or—and perhaps more frequently, given the abundance of space—literally moving away from their reach. Unfortunately,

³ A mere listing of such writings would be as long as it would make somber reading. But to limit ourselves to one brilliant and pivotal writer whose labors have secured him our lasting gratitude, it must be said that John S. Furnivall was often guilty of this kind of retrospective romanticism concerning the peasantry in precolonial Southeast Asia. Cf. my article, "The Structure of Southeast Asian History: Some Preliminary Observations," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* III (1962), esp. 133-34.

such records only exist, and even then sporadically and often in none too reliable form, for the modern colonial period. We may thus have to be satisfied with the meager glimpses which the available materials may provide for a relatively very short span of the history of some of the countries of Southeast Asia. The record is far from complete, let alone always reliable; by the same token, much of it still awaits analysis. In any case, the fact that no such materials have (as yet) been found concerning peasant movements in Thailand does not necessarily mean that none occurred, but rather that no one saw fit to report them, or to make such reports as do exist available to the public. Indeed, it is not at all unlikely that with the demise of the colonial bureaucrats—our major sources of information of the recent past—an official conspiracy of silence may come to shield the peasantry from the historian's (and field worker's) curiosity. This would be a most regrettable by-product of national independence, at the very time when progressive politicization of the Southeast Asian peasantry is doubtless accelerating the pace (if nothing else) of rural life.

The second interpretive danger, that of seeing peasant unrest primarily or even exclusively as a response to Western colonial rule, is closely connected to the problem so far discussed; once again, current nationalist historiography may continue and deepen it.⁴ The tendency to equate peasant movements with nationalist movements is as prevalent as it is easily explained: those writing national history will clutch at any sign of antigovernmental protest in colonial times to establish the case for the rising tide of Southeast Asian nationalism. But it may be suggested that the equation of the two categories of protest rests on very slender roots. That the peasantry revolted against colonial governments is, of course, true; but it must be repeated that peasant rebellions against authority are an age-old "normal" aspect of strained relations between the Great and the Little Traditions. This is not to deny that revolts against foreign overlords were frequently cast in anti-foreign ideological—especially religious-ideological—molds or that, equally important, Western economic penetration and political control had all too often brought with them more or less profound changes which, in turn, effected social dislocation among the

⁴ This is certainly true of the only book that has up to now endeavored to analyze peasant movements in all of Southeast Asia, viz. Erich Jacoby's *Agrarian Unrest in Southeast Asia* (New York, 1949).

peasantry and hence became an important causal factor in "agrarian unrest" in colonial Southeast Asia.

We may posit two major criteria that generically distinguish peasant movements from nationalist movements. First, they usually differ as to locale. Whereas Southeast Asian nationalist movements belong to the political culture of modern cities—more accurately perhaps of the administrative centers of colonial governments—peasant movements occur in the agrarian hinterland. Many cases of recorded unrest in modern times actually occurred in areas that had not experienced Western economic penetration, but in districts which seem to have been traditionally prone to peasant rebellions, their records in this respect usually antedating colonial rule. Although nationalist leaders were at times quick to claim *ex post facto* parentage over peasant movements, they had not organized them; indeed, as a rule urban leaders were ignorant of their imminence and as surprised as European administrators by their actual occurrence.⁵

This spatial distance reflects the far more important social, ideological and organizational distance separating the modernized, often westernized Great Tradition of the intellectual of the colonial capital city from the still predominantly traditional, in many cases religious, leader living amidst the Little Tradition of rural Southeast Asia. The dichotomy is, of course, not limited to Southeast Asia. Intellectuals in most cultures stand aloof from the peasantry, and colonial Westernization if anything strengthens that aloofness, since the native intelligentsia derives much of its intellectual and political frame of reference from an alien culture. The point to be stressed is not the oft-repeated and over-stressed "rootlessness" and "alienation" of the non-Western intellectual from his own culture,⁶ but rather that in colonial times he had learned to express his political program in an essentially Western frame of reference and that the logic of the colonial superstructure forced him to cast his political organizations likewise in essentially modern, Western molds.⁷ For sure, the dichotomy between intellectual and peasantry can be exaggerated. The individual intellectual could bridge the gap if he so desired, and occasionally (most notably in

⁵ A good case in point is the Saya San rebellion in colonial Burma, further discussed in the text below.

⁶ Cf. Edward Shils, "The Culture of the Indian Intellectual," *The Sewanee Review* 1959, 1-46, where this problem is most perceptively dealt with.

⁷ See my article, "Decolonization in Indonesia: The Problem of Continuity and Change," *The American Historical Review* LXX (1965), 1058-73.

the case of India's Gandhi) did; but it happened but rarely in colonial Southeast Asia, and in the few cases when it threatened to occur (as e.g. with Soekarno), colonial governments took precautions against the very closing of the gap.

In their most pronounced and typical forms, then, nationalist movements differed from those that arose among the peasantry in that the former were urban-centered, rationally organized, and equipped with what we may call a specific, "ameliorative" program of action, while the latter were rural-centered, more or less spontaneous and using non-specific or "holistic" programs of action. Southeast Asian nationalism was intrinsically forward-looking; anticolonialism was only one aspect of its ideology whose most important constructive tenet was the creation of a modern nation state carved in the image of the modern colonial state. That its spokesmen often used traditional ideological appeals and elements in their nationalism,⁸ and that for that matter nationalism often draws on powerful traditional—cultural and ethnic—identifications, are for our present purposes less significant factors than that the goal of nationalism is specific and modern. By contrast, most peasant movements were reactions to social *malaise*, as often as not backward-looking, and whose goal usually was the recreation of an imaginary state of primordial past tranquillity, of social *stasis*.⁹ That oftentimes peasant movements started with a quasi-ameliorative appeal, ie., with demands for the alleviation of specific grievances, is less important here than the fact that they usually bypassed such a stage to grow into all but anarchical, "nativistic" movements not infrequently appearing in millennial garb. Similarly we may regard the fact that they were directed against alien rulers, and were to that extent also anticolonial, as less significant than that their "holistic" platforms called for the destruction of the *status quo*, for the abolition of all burdens of civil life, and for the creation of paradise on earth.

Like all "ideal types," this dichotomy must not be carried too far: even the most rationally organized urban movement in colonial times may have contained a goodly admixture of "holistic"

⁸ On the importance of traditional concepts in Indonesian nationalism, see Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messtanzismus des Orients: Sendungsbewusstsein und politischer Chiasmus des Ostens*, (Tübingen, 1955). 297-307.

⁹ On this point, see also Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States," in Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York and London, 1963), 105-57.

elements: the excessive expectations so often placed on the longed-for independence, or the adumbration of revolution for the sake of revolution¹⁰ are examples of just such elements. Similarly, even the most obscure peasant movement would occasionally carry overtones of a reformist, "ameliorative" tinge. More important still, though the social historian of modern colonial Southeast Asia must be aware of the basic polarity between urban intelligentsia and rural peasantry, he cannot chart the two in terms of total isolation in the twentieth century. The two spheres did by and large remain separate, but here and there their tangents would meet. These meetings were as often as not accidental rather than organizationally planned, the odd urban charismatic leader casting his image—often, *malgré lui*, a traditional image—over the rural population.¹¹ What mattered even more than such accidents was the fact that every now and then in the twentieth century local leadership of peasant movements passed from traditional to more modern elements, with or without organizational ties to urban centers proper. It is within the framework of such a changing continuum, then, that a few selected peasant movements in modern colonial Southeast Asia shall now be examined.

Our first example is the so-called Samin Movement, centered in the Blora district of Central Java.¹² Its beginnings go back to the 1880's, but it continued to preoccupy the Dutch authorities well into the first two decades of the twentieth century. Saminism

¹⁰ The "romanticism of the uncompleted revolution" has become one of contemporary Indonesia's major ideological themes. Cf. Herbert Feith, "Indonesia's Political Symbols and Their Wielders," *World Politics* XVI (1963), 79-97.

¹¹ One of the clearest early examples is R.U.S. Tjokroaminoto, co-founder of the *Sarekat Islam* in Indonesia. He is carefully discussed by Robert Van Niel, *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite* (The Hague and Bandung, 1960), 92-93 and 105-07. For a brilliant discussion of Soekarno, see the doctoral dissertation by Bernhard Dahm, "Sukarnos Kampf um indonesische Unabhängigkeit" (Kiel, 1964), scheduled for early publication.

¹² I am completing a separate article on the Samin movement based i.e. on archival materials which I had the opportunity to consult in The Netherlands in 1961-62. The movement is more or less briefly mentioned in most standard histories of modern Indonesia, but no modern monograph specifically devoted to it has yet appeared. The most important printed sources are: *Ver slag betreffende het onderzoek in zake de Saminbeweging, ingesteld ingevolge het Gouvernements Besluit van 1 Januari 1917, No. 20* (Batavia, 1918); Tjipto Mangoenkoesomo, *Het Saminisme. Rapport uitgebracht aan de Vereeniging "Insulinde"* (Semarang, 1918); J. Bijlevelt, "De Saminbeweging," *Koloniaal Tijdschrift* XII (1923), 10-24. The annual colonial reports (*Koloniale Verslagen*) published by the Netherlands Indies government often contain relevant information, especially those for the years 1907-1909. Cf. also van der Kroef, "Javanese Messianic Expectations..." 317-18.

constituted a classic case of what we might call a "pure" peasant movement, confined not only spatially but also ideologically to rural Central Java, and at no time embracing more than some 3,000 followers. Samin himself was an illiterate peasant preaching what appeared to be a most obscure doctrine of social *stasis*; he enjoined his followers to purify themselves by withdrawing from material longings and from the social order. That social order, curiously enough, included not only the colonial government as represented by the Indonesian bureaucratic hierarchy but also Islam, even its most heterodox and syncretic variety. Non-payment of taxes and refusal of services to the one, ignoring the Muslim prayer and marriage ceremonial of the other apparently constituted the two major "anti's" of Saminism. It had no organization proper, a few individual disciples spreading the word—occasionally even in adjacent regions. Although colonial investigators tried hard to read a specific millennial program into the movement, to all intents and purposes it had none. Samin and his immediate (equally illiterate) followers were exiled from Java in 1907 and 1908, never to return home; but, contrary to expectation based on experiences with more or less Islamically tinged, messianic *Ratu-Adil* movements, Saminism did not die out. It flared up, briefly, between 1914 and 1917, and, again, several ringleaders were banished outside the island; thereafter it sporadically reappeared in the early 1920's. In his reminiscences, a Dutch official sarcastically reflected that Saminism had in fact never constituted a real threat to society, and that bureaucratic panicking had led to severe precaution rather than to just retribution.¹³

Interestingly enough, Saminism continued to draw adherents even when *Sarekat Islam* activities penetrated its territory; but though one might expect cleavages between the vaguely anti-Islamic Samins and the often militantly Muslim local *S. I.* leaders, no such confrontation appears in the pages of official reports in spite of redoubled Dutch vigilance of that period.¹⁴ One might similarly have expected Saminism to lose out when confronted by a regionally-organized, far more modern, movement. But it apparently managed to hold its own, and remained what it had been from the very outset: A low-temperature, almost gentle anarchism reaching back to a premodern—pre-Dutch, pre-Islamic—Java. Indeed, the Java to which it seemingly harked back was unconnected to the

¹³ G. L. Gonggrijp, *Brieven van Opheffer aan de redactie van het Bataviaasch Handelsblad* (Maastricht, n.d.), Letter #89, esp. 334-36.

¹⁴ On the *Sarekat Islam*, see Van Niel, *op. cit.*, 90-159 *passim*.

island's Hindu-Buddhist Great Tradition; rather, it revolved in a typical peasant *milieu*, in the realm of a peculiar variant of the *abangan* tradition of rural Java.¹⁵ Its efforts were directed towards regenerative reintegration of the primordial village society, without ever looking beyond that society.

The Saya San Rebellion, our next example, occurred in the rural Tharawaddy district of Lower Burma, a region with a fairly sustained reputation for peasant unrest even in pre-British days, in December 1930.¹⁶ It, too, was quite limited in size, its following perhaps not totalling more than 3,000; and, though adjacent areas were to some extent affected, the rebellion itself remained fairly localized. Unlike the slow smouldering discontent of Saminism, the Burmese rebellion exploded in a violent, brief climax, only to collapse after Saya San's capture by the British; he was subsequently tried and executed in 1931. There were other, more important, differences. For one thing, Saya San himself was by no means the obscure rural illiterate of his Javanese predecessor. He had indeed, been connected with the Rangoon-centered General Council of Buddhist Associations, for which he carried out propaganda activities in the mid-1920's. Yet he chose to withdraw from the city's religious-political organization, disappeared and clandestinely organized his rebellion, not along modern, but along traditional lines. Saya San did attack the foreign ruler, but it was not so to speak a frontal attack waged on alien soil; it was, rather, a turning away, a bypassing of that alien soil, a cosmological attempt to exorcise the foreigner by recreating the traditional Burmese monarchy in a jungle clearing, complete with the magico-religious paraphernalia of old Burma. Where Samin had abjured Islam, Saya San personified the "political monk" of Buddhist Burma; but it was popular, not scriptural, Buddhism that provided the ideology of the rebellion, a folk religion in which, in fact, the *nat* rather than the Buddha occupied the central place, and which preached a religious crusade against the unbeliever quite at odds with the Buddhist Great Tradition. Even then, Saya San's gospel could be the more easily disseminated precisely because it fell

¹⁵ Cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, 1960), Part I.

¹⁶ For a brief treatment of the Saya San Rebellion, see John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, 1958), 309-21 and literature cited there. An interesting nationalist rebuttal of the government's explanation of the causes of the revolt, written in the 1930's but only published after independence, is Ma Ma Lay's "The Real Origin and Causes of the Burma Rebellion," printed in English in the Burmese volume *Thu lou lu*. (Rangoon, 1953), 371-91.

within traditional folk religion, but also because *pongyis* could and did serve as missionaries-lieutenants.¹⁷ In contrast to the Samin's passive resistance, Saya San's royal jungle army killed the lone European in its rural midst. Both, however, hoped for salvation in social—in Saya San's case also political—*stasis*: a return to the past, a prevalent theme in the Little Traditions of Indianized Southeast Asia.

The Vietnamese uprisings which form our third example took place in the province of Nghe An in North Annam—it also extended to Ha Tinh, south of Nghe An—at about the same time as the Saya San revolt, but in locale, size, organization and leadership they differ quite markedly from the two movements we have so far discussed.¹⁸ Nghe An, a rugged, densely populated rural region, had for centuries been a center of elite resistance to both Chinese and French rule. The main area of the revolt, the Song Ca river valley, lay adjacent to the provincial capital of Vinh and the town of Benthuy, both of which had some French-owned industries; their labor force (some 3,000 men) was largely recruited from among the near-by-peasantry. Thus the spatial and social distance between old and new was considerably narrower in this case. Organizational efforts from mid-1929 onward were first of all directed at the industrial workers, and it was a strike in a match factory in March, 1929 that inaugurated joint waves of unrest which culminated in massive peasant protests, demonstrations and riots embracing some 50,000 people (i.e., just under 10% of the population) between September and December.

It is the organizational apparatus that most clearly distinguishes the turbulent events in Vietnam from their previously dis-

¹⁷ Sarkisyanz, *op. cit.*, 339-68 is indispensable for a good understanding of these aspects of the Rebellion and of the political significance of Burmese Buddhism in general.

¹⁸ In collaboration with Mrs. Joan L. Shapiro, I am preparing an article on the "Soviets" of Nghe An. They are briefly referred to in several standard works on modern Vietnamese history, but have so far not received detailed attention by scholars other than the ranking Marxist Vietnamese historian, Tran Huy Lieu whose monograph has appeared in a French translation, *Les Soviets du Nghe-Tinh de 1930-1931 au Vietnam* (Hanoi, [1960]). Several important contemporary official speeches and reports were published. See esp. Gouvernement-Général de l'Indochine. Direction des Affaires Politiques et de la Surété, *Générale Contributions a l'histoire des mouvements politiques de l'Indochine française*. Documents, Vol. B, "La terreur rouge en Annam (1930-1931)." Among the many contemporary works some of them of a journalistic rather than scholarly nature, may be cited: Do Duc Ho, *Soviets d'Annam et désarroi des dieux blancs* (Paris, 1938), and Pierre Varet, *Au pays d'Annams: Les dieux qui meurent* (Paris, 1932). For a brief treatment in English, see I. Milton Sacks, "Marxism in Viet Nam," in Frank N. Trager (ed.), *Marxism in Southeast Asia* (Stanford, 1959), esp. 124-27.

cussed counterparts. For here—to an even higher degree than in the Banten and Minangkabau uprisings of 1926-27 in Indonesia¹⁹—local peasant unrest was welded together, perhaps it was even originally set in motion, by young professional revolutionaries of the Indo-Chinese (originally, the Vietnam) Communist Party which counted a sizeable membership (estimated at between 1100 and 1700) in the two provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. The leadership of these peasant uprisings, then, was not in the hands of a traditional peasant elite—nor for that matter in those of a religious elite which had played such a prominent supporting role in the Indonesian events of the 1920's—but in the hands of a predominantly French-educated intelligentsia, by class origin largely mandarinal, gentry and bourgeois; but, though some of them had been trained abroad (notably at the Whampoa Academy), most of them were in fact natives of Nghe An, as was of course Ho Chi Minh who had taken the leading role in creating a united communist party and who himself had trained many of the cadres operating in Vietnam in the early 1930's. This may account for the selection of the district as a major target of Communist organizational effort, and it explains to some extent why Communist leaders found such ready access to, and acceptance by, workers and peasantry. It is very probable that the Communists had by no means planned a frontal attack on the colonial regime at that time, or that they even had envisaged the disintegration of Annamese civil authority and the temporary French disability to master the situation. When these happened, they hastily decreed the creation of village soviets which were established in seventeen (out of some 600 to 700) villages in the two provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh.

Samin's and Saya San's attempted return to the primordial order were seemingly absent in Nghe An—in part, perhaps, because of an entirely different Vietnamese Little Tradition.²⁰ During the first stages of the revolt, in particular, peasant (as well as urban) protest was directed against specific grievances, notably

¹⁹ On these Indonesian uprisings, see Harry J. Benda, "The Communist Rebellions in 1926-1927 in Indonesia," *The Pacific Historical Review* XXIV (1955), 139-52; Harry J. Benda and Ruth T. McVey (eds.), *The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents* (Ithaca, 1960); B. Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies: Selected Writings, Part One* (The Hague and Bandung, 1955), 85-166. Cf. also Justus M. van der Kroef, *The Communist Party of Indonesia: Its History, Program and Tactics* (Vancouver, 1965), 14-20.

²⁰ This aspect requires additional inquiry. Cf. Emanuel Sarkisyanz, "Marxism and Asian Cultural Traditions," *Survey* Nr. 43 (1962), 55-64, and Paul Mus, *Viet-Nam: Sociologie d'une guerre* (Paris, 1952), 248-56.

tax burdens. But before long, the peasantry moved far beyond such specific economic demands, mounted armed attacks against civil authorities and the odd individual *nouveau riche* Vietnamese landowner in their midst. It was only when Communist cadres started to disintegrate in the wake of brutal military repression that a *jacquerie* developed in which a more holistic destruction of the *status quo* appeared as the true goal. But both the French and the Vietnamese Communist records unfortunately tell us far more about the channels into which the revolutionary leaders sought to steer peasant unrest than about the things that the peasants of Nghe An were actually fighting for; it is most unlikely that it was the Soviet as such. All we can say is that whatever the momentum and original direction of the peasant revolt, it could be and was manipulated with striking, though of course abortively short-lived, success by a modern elite group.

The divergence, and overlapping, of peasantry and modern leadership appears more distinctly in our last example, the so-called Sakdal rebellion of May, 1935 in Central Luzon.²¹ The spatial and social distance between old and new was even more striking in this case, for the area of the uprising, involving some 65,000 armed peasants, was the rural environs of the Philippine capital city, Manila. The revolt itself only lasted for two days and was easily subdued; but it had been several months if not years in the making. Unlike Vietnamese Communism, Sakdalism had in fact led a legitimate party existence in the framework of Philippine public politics since 1933, and had at one time scored surprising electoral successes in parts of rural Luzon. The leader of Sakdalism, Benigno Ramos, was urban-educated, had been a school teacher and thereafter made his career in journalism and politics; until 1930, he was one of the lesser lights in the dominant *Nacionalista* party. It was only after his forced withdrawal from that party—and benefiting from a temporary split in the ranks of its leadership—that Ramos started to build his own party following.

Organizationally and to a large extent also ideologically, Sakdalism was city-oriented, and participated in the politics of the

²¹ No monographic study on the Sakdal movement has so far appeared in print. The best treatment is contained in two as yet unpublished doctoral dissertations, Roy M. Stubbs, "Philippine Radicalism: The Central Luzon Uprisings, 1925-35" (Berkeley, 1951), and David R. Sturtevant, "Philippine Social Structure and its Relation to Agrarian Unrest" (Stanford, 1958). Sturtevant has summarized his findings in "Sakdalism and Philippine Radicalism," *Journal of Asian Studies* XXI (1962), 199-215.

metropolis. But it went beyond its limits, and, in Southeast Asia's only colony with universal suffrage, started to address itself to the peasantry on Luzon. Sakdalism thus seemed to bridge the two realms to a remarkable degree: it took part in the debate concerning the islands' political future, by trying to sabotage the plebiscite in which Filipinos were to vote on the Commonwealth proffered by the United States; but at the same time it managed to translate its battle cry for immediate independence into terms that gave that independence a specific, social and economic, meaning at the village level. Thwarted in its efforts to play urban politics after the reunification of the *Nacionalista* leadership, Ramos—at that time actually in Japan—chose to incite open rebellion in the countryside. Thus, with a far less tightly-trained organization than Vietnamese Communism, some Filipino leaders had likewise succeeded in temporarily harnessing a peasant revolt. Whatever freedom may have meant to Ramos and to other urban politicians, to the *tao* who had taken up arms against the powers-that-were it meant an end to taxes, *cedula*, a sudden, holistic redress of a social order he had good reason to resent.

A few concluding remarks may be in order concerning the generic significance of these four examples of peasants on the move in colonial Southeast Asia. They have, it is true, been dealt with far too sketchily, out of their cultural contexts, social and economic conditions, and with quite inadequate attention to their respective colonial settings. They were chosen more or less arbitrarily to demonstrate different types of locale, ideological orientation, leadership and organization. Each one of them could be multiplied many times over, and indeed there are some extremely complex movements—such as e.g. the *Sarekat-Islam*—that must await careful future analysis.

No attempt has, moreover, been made to describe and analyze the causes that underlay each of these movements; they were often complex and interconnected, but at times difficult to pinpoint in detail. No simple economic explanation was found to account for Saminism; furthermore, it started almost two decades before the Dutch Ethical Policy, with its many-faceted interference in village life, was introduced. Both the Burmese and the Vietnamese uprisings took place before the full impact of the world depression hit the Southeast Asian export economy. Overpopulation may have been a causative factor in Nghe An, perhaps to some extent in Luzon, but not in the other two examples. European plantation

enterprise must likewise be ruled out as a major social irritant: it only existed on a large scale in Nghe An, but in fact was there restricted to the upland regions, with a predominantly Thai labor force that remained totally unaffected by the rebellions in the valley.

The demands of modern governments, usually subsumable under the heading of increased taxes collected with increasing efficiency, the withholding of waste lands from village access, the imposition of government monopolies (such as the hated salt and alcohol monopolies in Vietnam)—these were some of the specific and burdensome innovations against which peasants apparently struck out. To these generic grievances we may sometimes add the overtones of class struggle, wherever there appeared local beneficiaries of the new colonial order, such as the *nouveaux riches* in Nghe An and perhaps also the more rapacious *caciques* in Luzon. Though the specific causes of unrest are by no means always clear, basically the peasantry seemed to rebel against changes introduced from the outside. What nowadays is so often glibly called the revolution of rising expectations may thus more accurately be termed a revolution of rising irritations—an age-old protest against outside interference, now recast in a new, colonial—and hence often foreign—setting.

But this, as was posited earlier in this paper, means that the direction of these rural movements and uprisings was essentially distinct from that of the great politics of the city. For one thing, because the peasants ultimately wanted to restore, or recreate, social balance, for another, because they did so in a local context. This is quite clear in the case of the Samin and Saya San, but it requires some brief comment in the Vietnamese and Philippine examples which are such interesting, and complex, incidents where outsiders had assumed leadership over the peasantry, and where the struggle was apparently fought under the aegis of modern, urban-derived ideologies. Unfortunately, our information on both the Vietnamese and the Philippine events is not adequate to show us how these ideologies were translated into terms meaningful to the rebelling peasants. The major question here is not necessarily how Communists e.g. manipulated their Marxism to make it compatible with indigenous beliefs stemming from both Great and Little Traditions.²² We may in addition want to ask what specific

²² On this intricate question Sarkisyanz, *Rusland und der Messianismus* ...provides a great wealth of information and insight.

aspects of the new doctrines the Vietnamese peasantry may have usurped, so to speak, for its own purposes. It seems very likely that it still fought for its own, local interests, rather than for a brave, new Communist world. In the Philippine case, at least, we know from interrogations of surrendered peasants that "independence" to them meant the peasants' perennial paradise—the abolition of taxes, of the *cedula*, of indebtedness, in short, deliverance from the burdens of existence. A similar borrowing—if that be the right term for it—from Lutheranism seems to have occurred in the German Peasant War of the early 16th century, and other examples could be adduced from a wide variety of cultures at different periods.

It is, then possible to suggest that peasant movements deserve to be studied as a special category in Southeast Asian social history. Even with modern leadership and organization, they do not necessarily lose their identity, let alone being necessarily coterminous with anti-colonial, nationalist politics. The two streams could, and did, occasionally meet and coalesce, but they could as easily diverge again. For the attainment of independent nationhood could programmatically satisfy the urban nationalist without necessarily mitigating—indeed as often as not acerbating—the peasantry's revolution of rising irritations.