

THE WORK OF GEORGE CÆDÈS: VIEWS OF A YOUNG MAN

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Abstract

George Cœdès (1886–1969) was probably the greatest figure in the world of Southeast Asian epigraphy and history. Gifted with an encyclopaedic knowledge of culture and a curiosity that would bring him to learn many Asian languages in the course of his research, George Cœdès devoted his entire life to highlighting the history of Southeast Asia from its origins until the beginning of the sixteenth century. His work of synthesis, *The Making of Southeast Asia*, takes us to the very heart of the theses held by this immensely important scholar.

Introduction

George Cœdès, who died thirty years ago, is a name that impresses not only Western, but Asian scholars. Since his death, in 1969, his work has been universally acclaimed and heavily relied on by all later scholars. What is his *aura* in the scientific community in 1999? How is he perceived by the new generation at the dawn of the third millennium?

Knowledge of languages

From the beginning, Cœdès's erudition was based on an extraordinary knowledge of the languages of the region, particularly Khmer, Thai, Pali and Sanskrit. This linguistic knowledge has a number of implications for his research and his work. For instance, in Cambodia or Thailand, in the field of epigraphy, researchers are confronted with older variations of the languages, such as Old Khmer, Middle Khmer, Old Thai, Middle Thai, Northern languages, polluted Pali, unpolluted Pali, polluted and unpolluted Sanskrit among others. And this being so, it is plain that a deep study of languages is the secret to the achievement of successful epigraphical work in Southeast Asia.

His prodigious knowledge of the languages of the region brought him to discover in 1918 the ancient empire of Srivijaya. Talking of this, Paul Wheatley declared that this discovery was 'possibly the most significant contribution ever made to the progress of Southeast Asian history' (Cœdès 1968: VII). Secondly, Cœdès also translated into French (with an important critical apparatus) the steles of Cambodia. These translations are published in eight volumes as *Inscriptions du Cambodge* (Cœdès 1937–66). Thirdly, George Cœdès also decided, at approximately the same time, to devote his time to the translation of some Siamese inscriptions (Cœdès 1924), in particular the steles of Sukhothai—the first historical kingdom of Thailand—published in two volumes (in 1924) while Cœdès was curator of the National Library in Bangkok.

More than this, George Cœdès was not satisfied with translation alone. He interpreted the meaning of these materials, published in approximately one hundred articles¹. Moreover, we should not forget that in his period (1900–50) the translation and the interpretation of these inscriptions provided a challenge to orientalists.

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In fact, the work of Cœdès appears extraordinarily trailblazing.

More generally, this achievement shows that it is very important to understand languages of the investigated country if we want to understand a large part of the philology, history, art, thought, cultural background, etc. of the geographic area that we study. Thus, if we want to understand a region, we should start by learning the languages of this region. That is the tool inhabitants of Southeast Asia themselves 'use to give meaning to their surroundings and their actions. We are able to understand their culture, as this is constructed in it' (Arps 1995: 35).

In Cœdès's view, for a researcher in the Khmero-Thai world (and later, in Southeast Asia), it is very important to study as many linguistic aspects of this region as possible. Talking of this, Cœdès recommended his students begin by learning the languages. He himself emphasized that the discovery of these primary sources provided the basis for his works of synthesis which were published later.

The first work of synthesis

After this period, George Cœdès helped to provide an understanding of the history of Southeast Asia, to dissipate darkness and to cast light on historiography of this region. This *tour de force* appears at first in *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie* (Cœdès 1948). In this study, for the first time a scholar proposed a global vision of Southeast Asian history from the origins until the beginning of the sixteenth century—with the taking of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511. This empirical work rests on immense erudition. Using primary sources in Khmer, Thai, Burmese, Chinese, Pali and Sanskrit Cœdès succeeds in drawing a new 'map' of the region. In the words of the British historian D.G.E. Hall, this book of synthesis is one 'to which the highest tribute must be paid' (Cœdès 1968: cover).

Moreover, in this book Cœdès tries to clarify the nature of peoples of Indochina and Indonesia with the two great Asian civilizations—the Indian and the Chinese. Cœdès's central theory is the acculturation of the Southeast Asia region to the great civilization of India.

In the same way, Cœdès proposed in 1943 (five years before the publication of *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*) another work of synthesis, this time concerning Angkor: *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* (Cœdès 1943). As is his custom, Cœdès used many disciplines, such as epigraphy, archaeology, architecture and philology, and much primary data and materials such as inscriptions, ceramics and sculptures like the numerous colours on the palette of a painter. More generally, the author provided us with access to a veritable voyage through the multifaceted problems concerning Angkor.

This book was later republished in Paris in 1947 and then translated into English by Emily Floyd Gardiner in 1963. In fact, the English version differs somewhat from the original text published in Hanoi in 1943 and also from the revised second edition published in Paris in 1947 (Cœdès 1963: IV). Indeed, in this English edition, Cœdès takes into consideration new discoveries concerning Angkor made by himself and other scholars.

After these publications, the accumulation of honours had no effect on the serenity of this man of learning and discretion, of silence and refinement; a man who vigorously avoided ostentation and verbosity. Indeed, in the long run, Cœdès's demonstrated scrupulous honesty, a willingness to adjust and rethink the results of his research, and to corroborate or disprove his theories. This attitude is evident in the third edition of *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, published in 1963. In a note in the third edition, Cœdès himself remarked what probably represents the real and ultimate objective of his approach:

This third edition will in its turn be made obsolete by the progress made by an increasing number of scholars attracted to the study of Indianized states . . .' (Cœdès 1968: V).

Finally, to the very last, the accumulated results of these and other studies culminated in *The Making of Southeast Asia* (Cœdès 1966). In this book Cœdès tries to clarify some obscurities and attempts to constitute a coherent view of Southeast Asian history. More generally, this study suggests the need for a much closer

examination of the complex historical relations in Southeast Asia.

Critical views

There can be no doubt whatever that George Cœdès's suggestive investigations are a monumental contribution to the study of Southeast Asian history, that they have brought to light, and in many cases solved, a considerable number of important problems. But, without contesting the value of Cœdès's writings, there are some aspects of his formulations, propositions or hypotheses that invite the reader's attention.

The first point criticized by some scholars concerns the concept of *pays hindouisés* (1948). Indeed, some authors consider that the term 'Hinduized States' result from a stylistic tendency. What matters is that Cœdès himself recognizes this, and has himself set the model by which some of this re-examination will, it is hoped, be carried out. Besides, in the last English version of his work of synthesis on Southeast Asian history, *The Making of Southeast Asia*, George Cœdès changed his terminology and refined this concept of *pays hindouisés*.

The second point that is sometimes debated concerns Cœdès's historic and philosophical approach. He used an empirical conception combining epigraphical, philological, archeological and historic analysis to perfect methods for interpreting the past, discovering its great events and understanding the region. First of all, he uses the 'event' in historiography. In fact, he conceives history from the angle of the *histoire événementielle*. A large part of his writings on history consists of a 'history of events'. In *The Making of Southeast Asia*, paraphrasing Godefroy Demombynes, Cœdès explains briefly his conception of history:

General histories consisting of a chronicle of events seasoned with a certain amount of critical comment and arranged in some sort of logical order (Cœdès 1966: VIII).

Moreover, in terms of stylistics, this conception is also evidenced in his writing. One has only to read his work to understand his rejection of jargon, neologism, formalism, or

theory, and to appreciate his command of the language, the purity of a style full of restraint, as exemplified in *The Making of Southeast Asia*.

It is precisely by adopting this *événementielle* approach and this 'old way' that George Cœdès sometimes caused an upheaval in the new generation of historians. Indeed, this approach, characterised by meticulous and passionate scientific observation *à l'ancienne*, does not take into account space, economics, sociological factors or other variables. In his work, he does not care to consider the concept of total history which has attempted to view history as a complex system. Talking of this, in 1966, Cœdès himself partly revealed his rationale:

We do not, in my opinion, have enough documentation yet to warrant an attempt to describe in full all the various aspects of each of the civilizations . . . (Cœdès 1966: X)

The third kind of criticism concerns some data that are now very problematical or obsolete, such as the controversy about the 'Stele of Ramkhamhaeng' (false or not?), the debate about the real political role of Srivijaya, and the controversy about Thai origins, whether from China, Thailand or even from part of present-day Vietnam. Moreover, some archaeologists, epigraphists or architects, even if they salute Cœdès as the uncontested master, disagree with some of his interpretations. This is not the place to engage in debate over details; nor, I hope, is it necessary to expound upon this subject.

The last point, often discussed, is that Cœdès did not introduce new theoretical or methodological perspectives in his work. His observations did not establish formal models that could be applied around Asia or the world. Certainly, in this respect Cœdès does not rank alongside other great contemporary French scholars such as Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) or Georges Dumézil (1898–1986).

Conclusion

To close this article, we can observe that notwithstanding the above criticisms—which are meant to be constructive—Cœdès's enormous corpus constituted an attempt to shift the historian's focus in Southeast Asia. To

paraphrase a sentence of Walter F. Vella, Cœdès is nowadays 'revered by other scholars in the field as the unchallenged dean of Southeast Asian classical scholarship' (Cœdès 1968: VII). At the dawn of the third millennium, George Cœdès remains clearly the best example and a model for the younger generation.

Note

¹ Altogether, G. Cœdès published about 300 articles, books and conference papers.

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