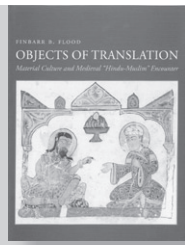


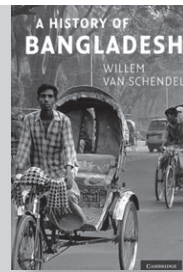
Bookmarked



Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter.
Finbarr B. Flood
Princeton University Press. 2009
ISBN 978 0 69112594 7

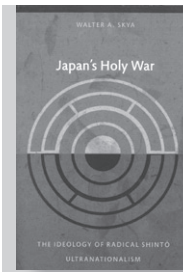
OBJECTS OF TRANSLATION offers a nuanced approach to the entanglements of medieval elites in the regions that today comprise Afghanistan, Pakistan and north India. The book – which ranges in time from the early 8th to the early 13th centuries – challenges existing narratives that cast the period as one of enduring hostility between monolithic 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' cultures. These narratives of conflict have generally depended upon premodern texts for their understanding of the past. By contrast, this book considers the role of material culture and highlights how objects such as coins, dress, monuments, paintings and sculptures mediated diverse modes of encounter during a critical but neglected period in South Asian history.

The book explores modes of circulation – among them looting, gifting and trade – through which artisans and artefacts travelled, remapping cultural boundaries usually imagined as stable and static. It analyses the relationship between mobility and practices of cultural translation, and the role of both in the emergence of complex transcultural identities. Among the subjects discussed are the rendering of Arabic sacred texts in Sanskrit on Indian coins, the adoption of Turko-Persian dress by Buddhist rulers, the work of Indian stone masons in Afghanistan, and the incorporation of carvings from Hindu and Jain temples in early Indian mosques. Objects of Translation draws up contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism and globalization to argue for radically new approaches to the cultural geography of premodern South Asia and the Islamic world.



A History of Bangladesh
Willem van Schendel
Cambridge University Press. 2009
ISBN 978 0 521 67974 9

BANGLADESH IS A NEW NAME for an old land whose history is little known to the wider world. A country chiefly known in the West through media images of poverty, underdevelopment and natural disasters, Bangladesh did not exist as an independent state until 1971. Willem van Schendel's history reveals the country's vibrant, colourful past and its diverse culture as it navigates the extraordinary twists and turns that have created modern Bangladesh. The story begins with the early geological history of the delta which has decisively shaped Bangladesh society. The narrative then moves chronologically through the era of colonial rule, the partition of Bengal, the war with Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh as an independent state. In so doing, it reveals the forces that have made Bangladesh what it is today. This is an eloquent introduction to a fascinating country and its resilient and inventive people.



Japan's Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shinto Ultrationalism
Walter A. Skya
Duke University Press. 2009
ISBN 978 0 822 34423 0

Japan's Holy War reveals how a radical religious ideology drove the Japanese to imperial expansion and global war. Bringing to light a wealth of new information, Walter A. Skya demonstrates that whatever other motives the Japanese had for waging war in Asia and the Pacific, for many the war was the fulfillment of a religious mandate. In the early 20th century, a fervent nationalism developed within State Shintō. This ultrationalism gained widespread military and public support and led to rampant terrorism; between 1921 and 1936 three serving and two former prime ministers were assassinated. Shintō ultrationalist societies fomented a discourse calling for the abolition of parliamentary government and for unlimited Japanese expansion.

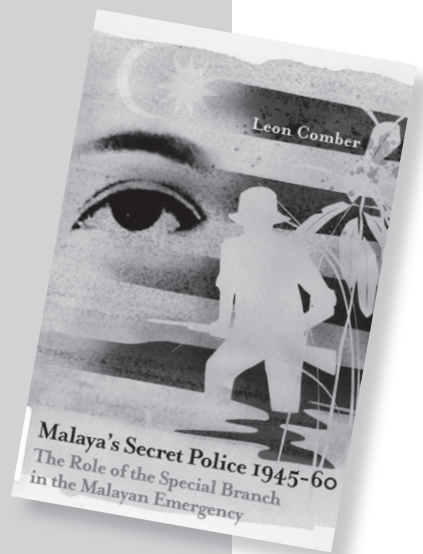
Skya documents a transformation in the ideology of State Shintō in the late 19th century and the early 20th. He shows that within the religion, support for the German-inspired theory of constitutional monarchy that had underpinned the Meiji Constitution gave way in the late 1890s to a theory of absolute monarchy. That theory was superseded by an emperor-centred totalitarian ideology in the 1910s and 1920s. Skya suggests that the creeping democracy and secularisation of Japan's early 20th century political order were the principal causes of the terrorism of the 1930s, which ultimately led to a holy war against Western civilisation.

If you would like to review one of the titles featured in New For Review or Bookmarked, email: iiasnews@ias.nl

Shedding light on Malaysia's Special Branch

When Malaysians think of the work carried out by the Special Branch of the police, they tend to think of infiltration and spying on opposition parties and non-governmental organisations. During elections, the observant can spot them at political rallies, often obvious in their conspicuous attempt to appear inconspicuous.

Julian C. H. Lee



Comber, Leon. 2008.
Malaya's Secret Police, 1945-1960: The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency.
Singapore: ISEAS/MAI.
324 pages. 978 981 230 815 3

While the general Malaysian public may fear the power of these agents and their informers, seasoned activists and politicians are not, generally, terribly troubled by them. Indeed, the *Options* supplement to *The Edge* newspaper, published on the polling day of Malaysia's 2008 general elections, featured a photograph showing members of the civil society organisation, the Women's Candidacy Initiative, giving one unfortunate SB (as Special Branch officers are known) agent a hard time. The photographer has captured

the relentless but good-hearted ridicule to which this poor man was subjected when he asked the women for information about who they were.

Drawing on personal experience
Of course, the Special Branch was not established to harass opposition party politicians or to be harassed by women's groups. Its roots lie in the Malayan Emergency which came into effect as the result of the Communist Insurgency. Given the significant role that the Special Branch play today both in the political sphere as well as in the minds of the public, it is important to understand its beginnings. Leon Comber's book, *Malaya's Secret Police 1945-60*, which due to its popularity has been given another printing this year, provides this in unrivalled fashion. As an SB during the Emergency, Comber is unusually well placed to draw on both personal experience and contacts to provide the reader with insights into the formation and *raison d'être* of the Special Branch.

The book is divided into twelve chapters. These describe the political context of the Emergency and Malaya's transition to independence from Britain. They also describe the demise of the under-resourced and underperforming Malayan Security Service, and the subsequent birth of the Special Branch. Two of the chapters are case studies illustrating Special Branch operations. One examines the role of the double-agent Lee Meng and how the Special Branch dealt with the communists' communications mechanisms, and the other case study examines the Special Branch's handling

of problems along the Thai border. Other chapters focus on the roles of significant figures in Special Branch history, including Sir William Jenkin, General Templer, Colonel Young, and Sir Henry Gurney who was killed, practically by accident, in a communist ambush in Fraser's Hill.

'Principles of intelligence collection'
Those interested in the modus operandi of today's Special Branch may find, as I did, Chapter Four the most rewarding. In it, Comber describes 'the principles of intelligence collection' which included the planting of moles, the 'turning' of communists into double agents, 'strong-arm measures', 'truth-drugs' and mass relocations of civilians. Interestingly, however, he notes that a former head of the Special Branch later came to the conclusion that many of these tactics were counter-productive and alienated the people they sought to win over.

The book is clearly written and often engaging and it is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of the Special Branch in Malaysia, the operations of which remain shrouded in so much mystery and about which there is much apprehension amongst ordinary Malaysian citizens.

Julian C. H. Lee
ESRC Research Fellow
Department of Anthropology,
University of Kent.
jchl@kent.ac.uk

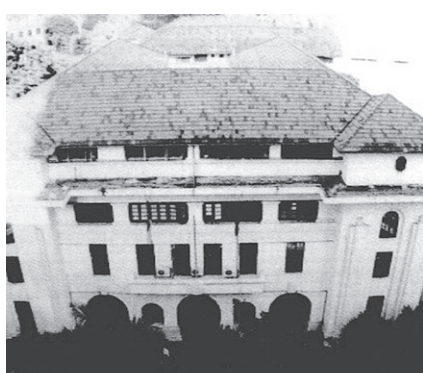


Fig. 1 (left)
The headquarters of Malaysia's Special Branch on Robinson Road, Kuala Lumpur