CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Structures, Cycles, Scratches on Rocks

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The purpose of this book is to celebrate the work of Peter Boomgaard, recently retired from the University of Amsterdam and the Royal Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden. Boomgaard is among the leading historians of Southeast Asia in the *longue durée* — that is, over very long periods of time. He single-handedly pioneered the field of Indonesian environmental history, and is the author of the only comprehensive book to date on the environmental history of Southeast Asia as a whole (Boomgaard 2007b). He has written the standard work on the population history of Java (Boomgaard 1989a), and the only book to date on the history of the relationship between tigers and people anywhere in the world (Boomgaard 2001a). Besides his own books he has edited or co-edited 15 collective volumes, written more than 70 chapters in edited volumes, and published more than 40 journal articles, most of them dealing with environmental history or with other aspects of the *longue durée* in Southeast Asia. His fascination with the long term is illustrated by such characteristic Boomgaard titles as ‘Land Rights and the Environment in the Indonesian Archipelago, 800–1950’ (Boomgaard 2011), ‘Economic Growth in Indonesia, 500–1900’ (Boomgaard 1993), and even ‘Early Globalization: Cowries as Currency, 1600 BCE–1900’ (Boomgaard 2008c).

Boomgaard’s eye for the broad scheme of things has led him to some unexpected and trail-blazing conclusions. He showed, for instance, that Java deurbanized under colonial rule, the proportion of its population living in towns falling in the course of the nineteenth century, whereas the opposite had usually been assumed (Boomgaard 1989a:110–116). He definitively disproved the once popular theory that Javanese villages were colonial inventions or creations (Breman 1980; Boomgaard 1991). He pointed out that tigers, in Southeast Asia, were not creatures of the natural forest, but thrived where human action created open landscapes rich in large prey animals like deer and pigs, so that tiger numbers rose rather than declined as the human population of the region increased (Boomgaard 2001a:22–24). He was among the first to understand the importance of traditional fertility control methods to the demographic history of
Indonesia (Boomgaard 1989a:192–196), and later showed how traditional social institutions such as bridewealth and slavery created incentives for women to practice birth control (Boomgaard 2003a, 2003b). His ongoing work on the histories of medicine and forestry in Southeast Asia may be expected to yield comparably radical and productive insights.

For all his fascination with the ‘big picture’, Boomgaard has seldom been tempted into abstract or theoretical speculation. On the contrary, a look at his publication list (reproduced at the end of this volume) reveals a trademark interest in the worldly, the earthly, even the seamy and sinister side of Southeast Asian history: roots and tubers, leprosy and syphilis, cockfighting and tiger-baiting, bestiality and incest. Above all, Boomgaard is a richly empirical scholar whose publications are mines of information that others, if they wish, can use to generate and test hypotheses quite different from those which he himself advances in relation to them. We believe that the contributions included in the present volume are written in this same empirical spirit, with attention to detail as well as to the broad sweep of history.

In order to honour Peter’s contribution to Southeast Asian history, in 2011 we invited some of his closest colleagues to address the question of what new insights a long-term historical perspective adds to our understanding of Southeast Asia. This book is the end result. The time span covered is from about 800 to 2000 CE: that is, from the time of Borobodur to the present. While few chapters cover the whole of this period, all deal with a time span of at least two centuries, and all are concerned with the historiographic big picture: the identification of processes and events that have shaped and changed the region in lasting ways. The immediate methodological advantage of such a long-term perspective is that it forces us to overcome the compartmentalization imposed by conventional historical periodization, by which each era tends to be portrayed in terms of a different set of analytical concepts coined by a different group of historians claiming expertise in that particular era.

Among Boomgaard’s most important sources of intellectual inspiration over the years has been the great French historian Fernand Braudel, by whose work he has described himself as ‘deeply influenced’ (Noordegraaf 2006:50). It was Braudel and his ‘Annales School’ who made the term *longue durée* common currency among historians everywhere, and who inspired a grand debate about the causes of historical change which still continues today. Before going on to discuss the historiography of Southeast Asia in the *longue durée* and to preview the contents of this volume, some words are in order about Braudel and the origins of the *longue durée* as a historiographic concept.