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**35** Theme: Indigenous peoples' movements



# NEWSLETTER

## What is the use of area studies?

How do we conceptualise 'area studies'? What sort of knowledge do area specialists produce? Are area studies necessary or even useful? Are native scholars better prepared to study their native areas than their non-native counterparts? The following article is an abridged version of a keynote speech delivered at the Seventh International Conference on Philippine Studies in Leiden, the Netherlands on 18 June 2004.

by C. J-H Macdonald

The present conference is without question a typical example of area studies. Major academic institutions, foundations, and research centres in the world are labelled by the areas they study. Area studies thus have great institutional value. Not only that, area studies seem to have gained a status on par with traditionally defined disciplinary fields, like sociology, history, or linguistics.

### Defining area studies

In anthropology the idea of area studies goes back to the idea of cultural areas or *Kulturkreis* popularized by German anthropologists like Frobenius, Ratzel, Shurz and Graebner. American anthropologists like Wissler and Kroeber (Kroeber 1947) applied the concept to North America and subdivided it according to ecological zones matching cultural and social traits. Attempts were made to delineate similar zones in Asia (see Rambo 2004).

Today most of us adopt a general subdivision of Asia into East, Southeast, South and Central without referring to any *Kulturkreis* theory or to the work of earlier American anthropologists. How this partition gained acceptance is a long story, but as far as East and South Asia are concerned, the role of the Chinese state and the Hindu religion are paramount, bringing a measure of unity to each zone. When it comes to Southeast Asia things become more controversial. We know that until recently a broad subdivision prevailed, at least in some

European institutions. Indonesia and the Philippines were either part of the 'Malay world' or Oceania, whereas Cambodia or Vietnam were considered to belong to a different zone altogether.

The coming together of insular and continental Southeast Asia owes a lot to factors that are not cultural but strategic in the military and political sense, beginning with the Southeast Asia command of Lord Mountbatten during WW II (1943) followed by international treaties like the ASEAN (1967). These factors have made Southeast Asia a reality and we don't question its existence as some sort of a separate entity having its own political and possibly cultural identity. Nobody will question the fact that the Philippines belong to Southeast Asia, rather than the South Pacific, although we still discuss its degree of 'Asian-ness'. But we know that under the label of Southeast Asia, there is an enormous diversity of peoples, languages, environments, social structures, world views and cultures, and we still have to agree on how to classify them and how to define their common traits, if any.

But what applies for a larger area like Southeast Asia applies also to a smaller section of the same zone. Let's look at the Philippines. As a nation state the country has a clear geographical and political identity. But from a cultural point of view this unity and/or separateness is far from clear. Therefore when we speak of Philippine studies, we talk about studies dealing with things and peoples located within the geo-

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graphical boundaries of the Philippine nation but not of realities that are necessarily of an exclusively 'Philippine' or 'Filipino' nature.

### Area studies versus disciplinary fields?

If area studies are not always clearly defined by the concept of area, then what of the nature of the knowledge that is encapsulated in area studies? Some would say that area studies can challenge disciplinary fields inasmuch as a study of a specific area can produce the kind of knowledge that will change the very concepts used by the disciplines. Area studies in other words will produce a type of knowledge that is of a different and higher order than just, let us say, anthropology or history. In the words of another scholar it is an experiment conducive to 'reconstruct the edifices of disciplinary theory from the bottom up' (Tachimoto 1995).

I do not fully agree with this proposition, and can explain why. In the course of my investigations, I had to deal with a number of specific and local issues like suicide, naming practices, kin terms and ritual practices. In each, I had to find concepts and guidelines that helped me better understand the phenomenon. In other words, I had to build a theory of the phenomenon, whether suicide or naming practices, and construct a hypothesis, or model. In order to do that I had to resort to ideas and concepts that are part of my intellectual toolkit which I borrowed from disciplinary fields.

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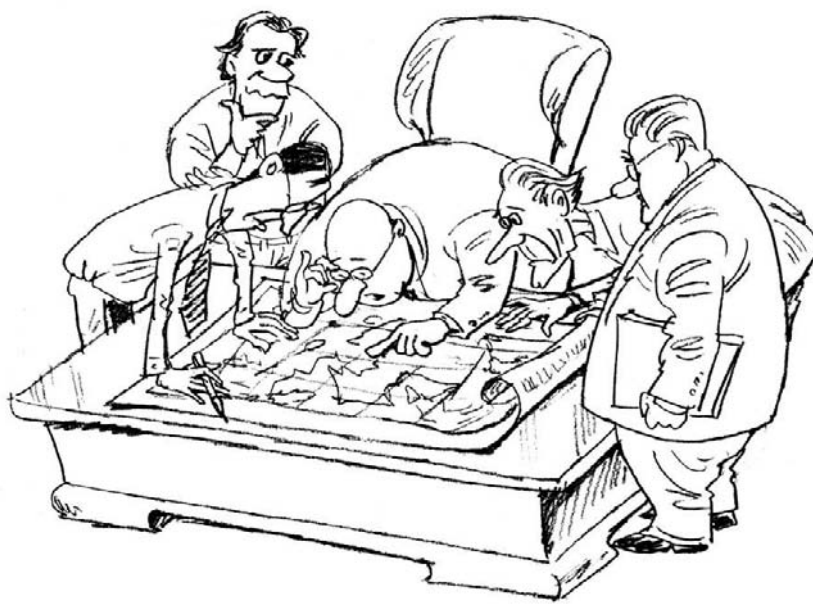
Facts do not lend themselves to explanation. One has to build it. A hypothesis or model is an organised set of concepts that leads to an explanation of a local phenomenon; the concepts are in themselves not local but are derived from anthropology, logic, cognitive studies, sociology, psychology, linguistics and other fields of study. Therefore it is wrong to say that there could be a science of area studies. The uniqueness of a group of human societies cannot be the foundation of a science because there is no science but of the general. Models and hypotheses can help you define the uniqueness of the societies you are dealing with, based on data provided by these societies, not on principles or concepts that only apply to them. A science of culture or, if you prefer, a rational and systematic investigation of cultures, is not a product of the cultures themselves.

We know that kinship systems and naming practices, to name two examples, are based on universal principles but have unique and specific applications. Or, to take the study of languages, there is no Philippine or Southeast Asian linguistics distinct from, let's say, Chinese or European linguistics; there is just one specialized field called linguistics (which has not one theory but several, while possessing principles and concepts that have universal validity). This disciplinary field once applied to Southeast Asian languages makes one able to see how each language is unique, to regroup languages in families and sub-families. Of course it is quite possible that idiosyncrasies and unique traits characteristic to a region challenge existing theories and become conducive to redefining the models or to inventing new concepts.

*to define area specialization as a scientific field may indeed conceal other motives than scientific ones*

In other words, area studies are the result of two processes. It is first the result of an accumulation of data, not a principled theory or a scientific investigation but an encyclopaedic kind of knowledge, drawing from various fields applied to concrete societies and situations. It is at worst a hodgepodge of bits and pieces borrowed from various disciplinary fields, at best a synthesis of conclusions and major results gained from these fields. Second, it is a by-product of an academic structure (a way the history of knowledge has proceeded) and of history in general. Area studies cannot therefore be regarded as a scientific field of study like anthropology (inasmuch as we see anthropology as a scientific field) or linguistics with their methods, queries, techniques, concepts, and so forth.

This picture is not as clear-cut as I wish it to be. One reason is that a large body of social science writing is no different



By Fan Jianping

from the stuff area studies are made of. For instance, almost any anthropological study or ethnographic description of a particular group will include some physical geography, demography, and history; and it will also try to fit the group under study into a regional perspective. Another reason is that a degree of uncertainty, lack of objectivity and confusion characterizes the conceptual framework of the social sciences and humanities. However, in spite of all their shortcomings, disciplinary fields do contain principles, perspectives and guidelines that are lacking in area studies. Disciplinary fields thus provide the ground on which area studies can be built – not the other way around.

### Are area studies useful?

This negative conclusion, you will say, is unnecessarily provocative because area studies are necessary and useful. Well are they? I believe so. I believe that they are necessary because they are useful. Why? By being an 'area specialist', I broadened my interests and became more able to understand the whole area within which I was working. I became able to draw comparative views on the peoples living in different parts of the Philippines and Southeast Asia. I came to appreciate

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better some of their history and culture. My ethnography gained depth and accuracy through cross-cultural examination of traits shared or rejected by other societies in the area. Also I came to write about several aspects of Southeast Asia for which my anthropological studies did not prepare me. In all these instances I gained a little more knowledge and understanding of an infinitely complex object which is the Philippines, its peoples, its history, etc.

Listening to your presentations in this conference adds to my knowledge of what I presumed to know already. An historian studying one part of the country with which I am not very familiar might explain what so puzzles me in the area where I conduct my own investigations. A political scientist studying national institutions or an urban sociologist studying street gangs in Manila might explain why certain things are the way they are in the remote frontier area where I, a social anthropologist, am doing fieldwork. All scholars investigating the same area, broadly or narrowly defined, will have important things to say to each other and a gathering like ours today is of great interest to all of us. So, although area studies are not a very well defined field of study it is clearly a common ground for mutual information and an area of utmost interest for those involved.

### Native and non-native scholars

There is another aspect to the question of area studies and to their status as a field of scientific inquiry. To define area specialization as a scientific field may indeed conceal other motives than scientific ones. Some scholars working on their own native culture disclaim the possibility, even the right, for aliens to speak about it.

Proponents of the view that natives of an area or country are always in a better position than foreigners to understand any

section of this area or country are actually saying two things. One, that all cultures in the country have in common certain important traits or possess the same cultural core. Second, they are saying that to really understand it one has to be inside this cultural core. An outsider will not be able to grasp the fine points of this culture, way of life, or style of behaviour, because he is not equipped with the appropriate mental tools, tools that only a native acquires throughout his life. On the one hand they adhere to 'cultural fundamentalism'. On the other hand they adhere to extreme cultural relativism. Without delving into epistemology, I will just say that both positions contradict each other to a degree, and that each separately meets important empirical, logical and philosophical objections. Besides, ethnocentrism, as it is called, spares no one. Is a Kinh observer in a better position to observe non-Kinh ethnic behaviour in Vietnam, a Tagalog observer in a better position to observe the Palawan way of life than a European or Japanese? Not necessarily so, in my opinion.

There is finally another reason why one would claim better or even sole access to the meaning of things based on one's status as an indigenous member of the country/area being studied, and this, I am afraid, belongs to a purely nationalistic discourse. One of its aspects is to claim ownership of facts based on the idea that these facts, and the interpretations they lead to, are part of the nation and belong to nationals, not to foreigners. Facts or data, it could be said, are a valuable heirloom property, and are part of a national heritage. Data coming from the Philippines belong to Filipino people first and Filipino scholars should have some pre-emptive rights over them.

Nationalism however is a moral and political stance, not an objective approach to the facts. To confuse a moral and ideological stance with a rational view of the facts is something that alas has been encouraged in recent writings. Scholarly nationalism is understandable given the unfair and unequal treatment inflicted on nations seen as quarry from which the precious ore of data is extracted, for the sole benefit of foreign scholars who impose their own interpretations on the facts. But the intellectual implications of this nationalistic position are difficult to justify.

Let me conclude with a few short statements. Area studies are useful but their importance should not be overstated. While local scholars keep an edge over their foreign colleagues, nobody can be said to have an exclusive access to the truth, nor even to the facts themselves. Multiple personality disorder is incurable. I may regard myself primarily as a social anthropologist but my heart belongs to area studies. Anthropology is my office, but Philippine studies is my home. <

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