Letters & comment

# Some thoughts on how knowledge on Southeast Asia came to be

As teachers and researchers in the humanities and social sciences, we often refer to the corpus of empirical knowledge labeled 'Southeast Asian studies' but seldom reflect closely on the nature of this knowledge. As pointed out by Charles Macdonald in 'What is the use of area studies?', IIAS Newsletter 35, the utility of this knowledge is not only academic in nature, but also professional and political. In response to his important and timely comments, I wish to offer some of my own thoughts on the matter.

I propose that social scientific knowledge on Southeast Asia has a clear knowledge baseline, a continuous and inter-related intellectual-cum-conceptual basis, which emerged from its own history and has, in turn, inspired the construction, organization and consumption of this knowledge. Two concepts in particular - 'plurality' and 'plural society' - have frequently been used to characterize Southeast Asia. Both are social scientific constructs that emerged from empirical studies conducted in the region.

It is not difficult to show that the production of social scientific knowledge on Southeast Asia has moved along this 'plurality-plural society' continuum. When scholars research and write on pre-European Southeast Asia they are compelled to respond to the reality of Southeast Asian plurality during that period, when the region was a meeting place of world civilizations and cultures, where winds and currents converged bringing together people from all over the world pursuing 'God, gold and glory', and where groups of indigenes moved in various regional circuits seeking their fortunes. As a result, we have had, in Java, a Hindu king with an Arabic name entertaining European traders. In Champa, we had a Malay raja ruling a predominantly Buddhist populace trading with India, China and the Malay Archipelago. Even shunning orientalism, we cannot avoid writing about that period within a plurality framework, thus emphasizing the region's rich diversity and colourful traditions. In other words, the social reality of the region to a large extent dictates our analytical framework.

'Plurality' characterizes Southeast Asia before Europeans came and dismantled its flexible traditional polities, installing their systems of governance and dividing the region into a community of 'plural societies'. The latter signifies both 'coercion' and 'difference' and the introduction of large-scale migrant communities originating from various civilizations, including Chinese and Indian migrant laborers who came to the Malay world. It also signifies the introduction of knowledge, social constructs, vocabulary, idioms and institutions hitherto unknown to the indigenous population, such as maps, census, museums and ethnic categories, the introduction of a capitalistic market-oriented economy, and systematized and hegemonic bureaucratic politics.

Once colonial rule was established and the plural society installed in the region, followed later by the formation of nation-states, the analytical frame, too, changed. Analysts now had to address the reality of the plural society, and also subsequent developments generated by the existence of a community of plural societies in the region. We began to narrow our analytical frame to nation-state, ethnic group,
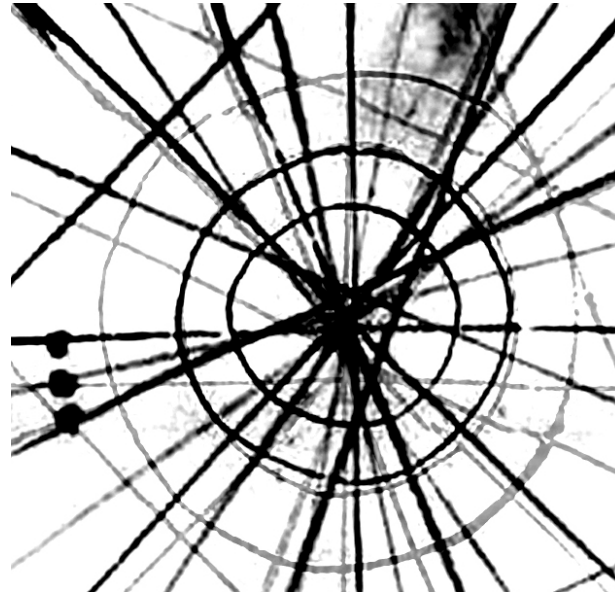
Map of East Asia compass detail, drawn by Shou Karota, approx. 16th century
Kano Collection, Tohoku University Library
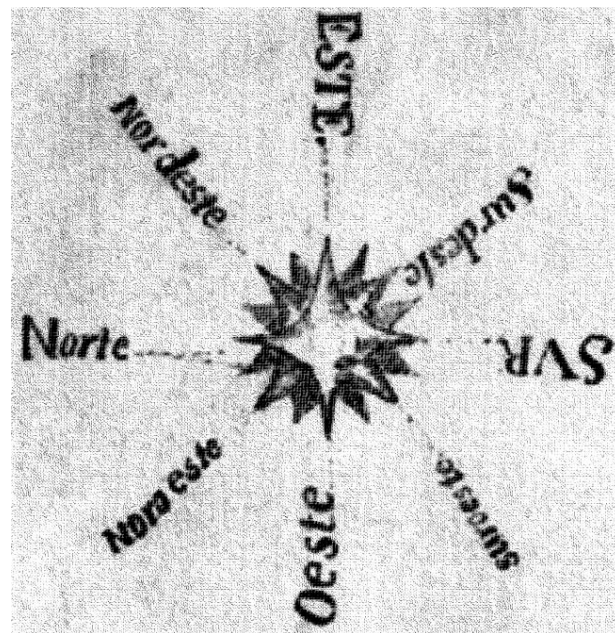
Mapa y Plan Orisontal que manifiesta la Villa de León con sus Barrios, Pueblos calles y cuadras
Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin

inter-nation-state relations, intra-nation-state problems, nationalism and so on. This gave rise to what could be called 'methodological nationalism', a way of constructing and using knowledge based mainly on the 'territoriality' of the nation-state and not on the notion that social life is a universal and borderless phenomenon - hence the creation of 'Indonesian studies', 'Philippines Studies', 'Malaysian Studies', 'Thai Studies' and so on.

With the advent of the Cold War and modernization theory, analysts further narrowed their frames of reference. They began to talk of poverty and basic needs in the rural areas of a particular nation, focusing on resistance and warfare, slums in urban areas, and economic growth of smallholder farmers. The interests of particular disciplines, such as anthropology, became narrower still when it focused on particular communities in remote areas, a particular battle in a mountain area, a failed irrigation project in a delta, or gender identity of an ethnic minority in a market town. Hence social scientific knowledge on Southeast Asia became, to borrow a Javanese term, *kratonized*, or compartmentalized.

Inevitably a substantial amount of social scientific knowledge on Southeast Asia has been generated, produced and contextualized within the plural society framework, because 'nation-state' as an analytical category matters more than, say, the plurality perception of the Penan of Central Borneo, who, like their ancestors centuries ago, move freely between Indonesia and Malaysia to eke out a living along with other tribal group and outside traders, ignoring the existence of the political boundaries. In fact, anthropologists seem to have found it convenient, for analytical, scientific and academic expedience, to separate the Indonesian Penan from those of Malaysia when, in reality, they are one and the same people.

The 'plurality-plural society continuum' is thus not only a 'knowledge baseline' but also a real-life social construct endowed with a set of ideas, vocabulary and idioms, within which people exist day-to-day in Southeast Asia. As teachers and researchers in the humanities and social sciences our primary task is to separate the reality from the social constructs, thus separating, even momentarily, 'the analytical' from 'the real'. It is not an easy task but try we must. Perhaps then we will be in a better position to understand how 'Southeast Asian studies as a form of knowledge' has been utilized beyond academia. ‹

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Cultural diversity and exchange within globalisation?

Culture has become one of the most common topics for discussion at international meetings. Formerly the preserve of anthropologists, it has come out of its exotic corner to mount the global stage. Even political scientists and economists have discovered culture: the former generally see it as a form of power, while the latter view it as a commodity. Literary scholars have meanwhile taken culture from its aesthetic pedestal down into the grittiest details of life. It seems that nothing now can escape the grip of culture while organizations are awakening to its significance. Culture is of course all this and much more.

Globalisation is an important factor pushing the agenda for culture: in 2004, the International Labour Organisation placed culture at the centre of its quest for participatory democracy. The World Summit on Information Society is increasingly concerned with issues of communication and the role of culture in ensuring its success. The 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity initiated discussions on how cultural diversity should be preserved, encouraged and shared while the ASEM ministerial meeting held in Beijing in December 2003 recommended the promotion of cultural diversity and exchange to reduce global conflict. ASEM also promotes the preservation of traditional and contemporary arts and encourages cultural exchange between Asia and Europe.

As an anthropologist, I remain skeptical of such approaches to cultural diversity and exchange. The notion of culture as an aspect of every day life disappears under the weight of creative achievements or civilizational orientations. Culture becomes too obvious and artifactual, whereas its real power lies in its ability to disguise its effects as part of natural or traditional behaviour. Culture is neither hegemonic nor consensual. It assigns subject positions often against the interests of the subjects concerned. Women and homosexuals are invariably assigned negative values in a patriarchal culture; in return they try as best as they can to subvert these cultural values. Hence, cultures are invariably in conflict and in transformation.

A few weeks before attending the 'Asia-Europe Seminar on Cultural Diversity and Cultural Exchange in the Framework of Globalization' conference in Hanoi (September 2004), I was at a conference in Warwick on globalization (another much abused concept). Here, culture barely rated a mention, apart from an almost ritualistic abeyance. Instead, the focus was on the political and economic aspects of globalization. When I raised objections, the reply was that culture was an integral part of globalization. Culture was whatever politics or economics could not explain; a remnant of social life after its most rational aspects had been removed.

While culture was under-rated at the Warwick conference, I felt that in Hanoi culture was over-rated. In both cases culture was unproblematized. At the Warwick conference, culture disappeared under the weight of politics and economics, while at Hanoi only its more obvious and exemplary expressions were recognized. When cultural assumptions are shared as in Warwick, culture is invisible, but when confronted with difference as in Hanoi, culture is overwhelming. The paradox of culture is that while some of its expressions are only too obvious, others disappear in the routines of everyday life. The taken-for-granted elements of culture are mostly invisible to their practitioners. It is this aspect of culture that the Warwick and Hanoi conferences overlooked.

One of the ironies of disciplinary practice is that while the world has begun to take culture seriously, anthropologists have discarded it as a serious analytical category. The difficulties associated with its growing uses are a major reason why anthropologists are hesitant to employ the concept of culture for explaining contemporary social life. Others have now claimed culture, and in this overcrowded market place, non-anthropologists are often the most persuasive peddlers. ‹

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