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?’ in 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 interrelated 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 followed 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, pursuits ‘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 Borneo, 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 politics, instituting 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 labourers who came to the Malay world. It also signifies the introduction of knowledge, social constructs, vocabulary, ideas and institutions hitherto unknown to the indigenous population, such as maps, census, musu and ethnic categories, the introduction of a capitaistic market-oriented economy, and systematized and ‘difference’ and the introduction of large-scale migrant communities. The latter signifies both ‘coercion’ and ‘difference’ and the introduction of large-scale migrant communities originating from various civilizations, including Chinese and Indian migrant labourers who came to the Malay world. It also signifies the introduction of knowledge, social constructs, vocabulary, ideas and institutions hitherto unknown to the indigenous population, such as maps, census, musu and ethnic categories, the introduction of a capitaistic market-oriented economy, and systematized and ‘difference’ and the introduction of large-scale migrant communities.

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 Tamang 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 construct, 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.

Shamsul A.B.

Director, Institute of the Malay World & Civilization / Institute of Occidental Studies
The National University of Malaysia

Cultural diversity and exchange within and globalisation

Cultural diversity has become one of the most common tropes for discussion at international meetings. A variety of perspectives on anthropological method and theory now occupy the space of what used to be central tenets of social sciences. The concept of ‘equality’ has been broadened to mean the ability to act. In the Middle East, for example, the concept of hierarchy is still a crucial element of everyday life, yet it is as legitimate as any other social division. The concept of ‘division’ has become a way of life, with boundaries of all types, from ‘race’ to ‘culture’ to ‘nationality’, used to define and divide our world.

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, 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 Tamang 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 construct, 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.