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# Introduction to the Issue



## Revisiting and Reconstructing Southeast Asian Characteristics



Victor T. King\*

The five papers included in this special issue emerged in revised form from the International Conference organized and hosted by the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Busan University of Foreign Studies (BUFS), last May 27, 2016. Often, one does not anticipate that papers will come together in a coherent presentation which says something about the theme of the conference. Contributors come with their own views, preoccupations and interests, and the result is often a disparate assemblage. However, in this collection, I have detected an immediate coherence. I was tasked with making some sense of what has been contributed, and, though it is my own comprehension of the papers and their interrelationships, I think there are synergies which contribute to the overall theme of the conference.

The central question and issue posed was: “What makes Southeast Asia?” In more academic terms, “Can we determine the characteristics, established and reconstructed, which can contribute to the definition of Southeast Asia as a region in its own right and provide a rationale for the multidisciplinary enterprise of Southeast

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Asian Studies as a field of practice established in the post-war period?" The reader might anticipate that the answer to the question is complex and equivocal. But this issue of *Suvannabhumi* might help to provide a set of views on the region from scholars who come from a variety of backgrounds, interests and commitments.

The major theme for this issue examines a range of perspectives on Southeast Asia as a region and its defining characteristics. But we also have to address the diverse backgrounds and interests of those who are contributing to this issue and to investigate further the claims for an insider view of Southeast Asia, as against one which argues, in the terms of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and in post-structuralism, against perspectives from outside the region. My view remains that this is a false distinction, but it is one which we continue to use and which surfaces in this issue of *Suvannabhumi*. In examining the insider-outsider opposition, let us look at the contributors and their diverse credentials and experiences, and thereby assist in the evaluation of their perspectives on Southeast Asia. We also need to examine how Southeast Asia as a region has been constructed from within and without, and why researchers adopt particular positions and approaches.

The journal issue comprises contributions from Victor T. King, Rommel A. Curaming, Frank Dhont, Ioannis Gaitanidis, and Stephen Keck.

King, a senior researcher who identifies himself as a Western-trained outsider with a career primarily in the UK, and who regularly visits and works in Southeast Asia, has been involved in the study of Southeast Asia for over forty years, particularly focused on Malaysia and Indonesia. He still holds to the principle of a universal social science, one might say "a traditionalist" view of Southeast Asia, while recognizing the problem of academic hegemony, and the necessity for the modification and contextualization of this in terms of local experiences, interests and perspectives. What he argues are the following: that the distinction between insider and outsider views of the region needs to be questioned; that the two opposed categories are internally complex and differentiated; and



that they overlap. In other words, the opposition is not meaningful or conceptually useful. The issue is that this opposition has been posed by those who want to argue for “a Southeast Asia” which is locally produced and is mindful of local interests, agendas, and priorities. But the locally generated Southeast Asia is also highly problematic. It establishes territorial boundaries, as in the works of Syed Hussein Alatas and Syed Farid Alatas, in order to justify locally-generated knowledge production, alternative discourses, and the indigenization of concepts, methods and priorities; this in turn raises the highly contentious matter of what can be defined as “local” and “non-local”.

What is argued is that the opposition between insiders and outsiders, which is what post-colonialists and post-structuralists have debated, might be resolved by the development of concepts of culture and identity which capture the fluidity, diversity, movement, cross-cultural encounters, hybridization, and hierarchies generated in a culturally complex region. In other words, it is not an issue of opposition but one of self-reflection and engagement, and one which recognizes partnerships and collaboration. It also builds on the work of John Clammer in locating the movement of culture in a political-economic context and Adrian Vickers, in his concepts of “representations”, “civilisational forms” and “material manifestations”. The major issue is to address the problem of identifying Southeast Asia extra-regionally (beyond ASEAN), regionally, nationally, and sub-nationally. The concepts of identity and culture attempt to engage with shifting identities and the crossing of artificially-created boundaries. Robert Winzeler’s reference to the long-established distinctions between majorities/minorities, upland/lowland, local/immigrant, mainland/island, and world/local religions needs to be re-conceptualized in terms of the more flexible concepts of culture and identity. And Anthony Reid’s recent distinction between Southeast Asia on the one hand and China and India on the other also needs to be recast in terms of a concept of identity which moves beyond the nation-state borders of ASEAN to embrace populations culturally and historically related to those within and beyond what is now referred to as Southeast Asia.

Curaming, a Filipino scholar working in Brunei, has been

trained in the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia. He is widely connected among indigenous scholars in Southeast Asia, and has championed, in post-structuralist mode, the need for the indigenization and the decolonization of research on Southeast Asia, responding to the dependence of local research on Western social science (the “coloniality” of knowledge), and his criticism of the claims of Western social science to universal relevance, objectivity, generic utility, and neutrality.

His paper provides an interesting and apposite counterpoint from the perspective of a local scholar and against Victor King, as an outsider. He argues, on the basis of two case studies taken from the Kaupapa Maori Research programme in New Zealand and the Sikolohiyang Pilipino indigenous psychology approach in the Philippines, that an indigenous methodology is possible. It appears to have been more robust and sustainable in New Zealand than in the Philippines, and overall, it is still marginal in terms of mainstream social science. However, he makes the interesting point that indigenization has been especially prominent in the Philippines, and that a multidisciplinary, context-sensitive area studies approach has many similarities with indigenous perspectives on Southeast Asian society and culture. However, I would still question whether the process of indigenization is sufficiently distinctive to warrant that it is moving towards an alternative set of paradigms, methodologies, and epistemology, based on local interests, priorities, and welfare, in that they draw on (though they are not exclusively dependent on) certain Western-generated critical theories in feminism, “decoloniality”, and post-structuralism. But I accept that this is a possible way forward in developing local identities, consciousness, and self-determination, and in establishing a locally relevant and useful social science. It also, of course, depends on institutional and government support and the energies of local activists.

Dhont is another Westerner and outsider, a historian of Indonesia. His current post in Brunei led to a research interest in the Malay world, particularly Borneo. He is fluent in the Indonesian language, and submitted a Master’s thesis to Gadjah Mada University. He was also trained in Sweden and in the USA.

He presents the interesting, though still to be developed thesis that the Japanese, the colonial power of Southeast Asia between 1942 to 1945, needs to be brought into our frame of reference in considering the development and construction of a Southeast Asian identity. As he demonstrates, appreciation of the Japanese position clearly led to decolonization, but in that process was the realization of shared experiences; cultural Japanization did not achieve much in the brief period of imperial administration in the region, but, despite displacing earlier colonialisms and the exploitation of resources (oil, rubber, minerals, timber, rice, and labour), it did provide a sense of local identities, and of the possibility of self-determination. Locals were trained, and brought into administration and the military. The Japanese, unlike the Western colonial powers, in their conception of a “Southern Resources Area” ripe for Japanese intervention and exploitation within the concept of a “Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere”, did have a sense of the unity of Southeast Asia, which the Western colonial powers, at that time, did not entertain.

Gaitanidis, a Greek scholar trained in the UK, is fluent in Japanese and currently teaches in Chiba University in Tokyo. He has recently extended his research interests to the images, perspectives, and engagements of Japan in its construction of Southeast Asia.

He argues that the Japanese, in rather different mode from Frank Dhont’s examination of Japan’s intervention in Southeast Asia, with its concentration on political-military domination and resource exploitation during the Pacific War and the Japanese concept of the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” (though as always, with an attempt to incorporate the local populations into a dominant culture through education and language training), have reinvented Southeast Asia. Current Japanese perceptions of the region have been replaced, in the era of globalization, “liquid modernity”, and the movement away from non-institutional religions, by a “culturalized” image of the regions to the South. In the context of the emergence of personalized, “New Age” spiritualism in Japan, Southeast Asia has become a spiritually traditional, exotic, “untouched” region where the Japanese are able to re-energize themselves, and visit “power spots” (especially in Thailand and Bali, Indonesia when it comes to healing, therapy, and alternative meditative lifestyles, all-important

in this process of rediscovering “Asian-ness”). Interestingly, the Japanese construction of Southeast Asia is different from the West, although, in its classification, it reifies the East-West divide, with Japan as an ambiguous, yet possible bridge between East and West. Gaitanidis, using Stephen Tanaka’s concept, refers to Japan as an “outlier”, a place economically advanced yet “Asian”. Japanese spiritual tourists utilize the discourse and image of an outlier to realize their spirituality, and their “spiritual destination” in Southeast Asia. Of course, as tourists, the Japanese have other touristic pursuits in Southeast Asia, but there appears to be a trend showing their search for an Asian “otherness”, of a lost Asian spiritual identity which they seek to recover in Thai massage, spiritual tours, and development-oriented enterprise such as the one in Cambodia to translate “spiritual therapy” into practice.

This speaks volumes about Japanese identity as it does about Southeast Asian identity, and it demonstrates a selective appropriation of elements of Southeast Asian religions to both characterize Southeast Asia and enable the Japanese to address their past, and their former relations with the dominated, colonized, yet culturally unrealized region to the South of Japan. What this paper does is question the construction of a region from outside and the ways in which “authenticity” in religious/cultural terms is constructed and negotiated, and that which is “fake” and “real”. But it poses the question of how identities are constructed in interaction with a region. And does Japanese identity (in part at least) depend on its historical, cultural, and perceptual relationship with Southeast Asia? The papers of Dhont and Gaitanidis alert us about our neglect of the Japanese dimension in the construction and definition of Southeast Asia.

Keck is an American historian of the British Empire who works on the intellectual history of Southeast Asia and who spent a substantial part of his career in the National University of Singapore. He is now in the United Arab Emirates.

His paper, which is enormously important, reminds us of the ways in which an area of knowledge production is constructed and confirmed. In my view, there is no scholar who can compete with

the comparative analyses of J.S. Furnivall, whose work Keck examines in detail. Aside from Charles Fisher, D.G.E. Hall, George Coedès, and Robert Baron von Heine-Geldern who, in my view, were the prime-movers in creating Southeast Asia as a defined and delimited area of scholarly contemplation and focus, Furnivall recognized common experiences under colonialism which brought these disparate territories together, in his comparison of British Burma (Myanmar) and the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia). Though he is, in Curaming's terms, a colonialist and immersed in a colonial mode of thinking, Furnivall's bold comparative work on Burma and Indonesia, in particular on the political economy of two different colonies in the region, captured and helped construct Southeast Asia.


I leave you with a final thought. Given the diverse backgrounds of the contributors to this volume that demonstrates in ample detail the processes of globalization in higher education, as well as the difficulty of assigning scholars to particular categories of academic endeavour which cannot be sorted into those of insider-outsider, what do the several papers in this issue convey? In my view, the debate about local, indigenized scholarship should be rethought. I agree that it has its merits and that local perspectives should be supported by local institutions and by interested political constituencies. My considered view is that this is probably not going to happen and Western hegemony in social science will pervade, however critical we are of its dominance. I hope I am proved wrong, but I also hope that this journal's issue exposes us to the diversity of perspectives on what Southeast Asia is and what it might become.




# Articles







## **Southeast Asian Studies: Insiders and Outsiders, or is Culture and Identity a Way Forward?**



Victor T. King\*

[ *Abstract* ]

Debates continue to multiply on the definition and rationale of Southeast Asia as a region and on the utility of the multidisciplinary field of area studies. However, we have now entered a post-colonialist, post-Orientalist, post-structuralist stage of reflection and re-orientation in the era of globalization, and a strong tendency on the part of insiders to pose these issues in terms of an insider-outsider dichotomy. On the one hand, the study of Southeast Asia for researchers from outside the region has become fragmented. This is for very obvious reasons: the strengthening and re-energizing of academic disciplines, the increasing popularity of other non-regional multidisciplinary studies, and the entry of globalization studies into our field of vision. On the other hand, how has the local Southeast Asian academy addressed these major issues of change in conceptualizing the region from an insider perspective? In filling in and giving substance to an outsider, primarily Euro-American-Australian-centric definition and vision of Southeast Asia, some local academics have recently been inclined to

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construct Southeast Asia in terms of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): a nation-state-based, institutional definition of what a region comprises. Others continue to operate at a localized level exploring small-scale communities and territories, while a modest number focus on sub-regional issues (the Malay-Indonesian world or the Mekong sub-region are examples). However, further reflections suggest that the Euro-American-Australian hegemony is a thing of the past and the ground has shifted to a much greater emphasis on academic activity within the region. Southeast Asia-based academics are also finding it much more important to network within the region and to capture, understand, and analyze what Chinese, Japanese, and Korean scholars are saying about Southeast Asia, its present circumstances and trajectories, and their increasingly close involvement with the region within a greater Asia-Pacific rim. The paper argues that the insider-outsider dichotomy requires considerable qualification. It is a neat way of dramatizing the aftermath of colonialism and Orientalism and of reasserting local priorities, agendas, and interests. But there might be a way forward in resolving at least some of these apparently opposed positions with recourse to the concepts of culture and identity in order to address Southeast Asian diversities, movements, encounters, hybridization, and hierarchies.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asian Studies, region, insider, outsider, culture, identity

## I . Introduction

Debates about the rationale of Southeast Asia as a region and the multidisciplinary field of studies which the dominant Euro-American-Australian academy in the immediate post-war years chose to refer to as “Southeast Asian Studies” continue to be one of our major preoccupations. But we have now entered an interesting stage of reflection and rethinking in the era of globalization, with an inclination to pose the issues in terms of an insider-outsider dichotomy.

Though in the initial consideration of these issues, I use these categories of local/locally-based/insider and outsider/Euro- American-Australian for convenience, I will subsequently question their validity. On the one hand, the study of Southeast Asia for researchers from outside the region has become fragmented. This is for very obvious reasons: the strengthening and re-energizing of academic disciplines; the emphasis on concepts, theory, methodology, and training in the social sciences and humanities; the increasing popularity of other non-regional multidisciplinary studies (captured in the promotional activities to recruit students to new, exciting, and enlivening fields of study labelled as: development, gender, policy, international, strategic, tourism, heritage, film, media, museum, business, management, environmental studies), and the entry (which is highly problematical) of globalization studies into the academic arena.

On the other hand, how has the local Southeast Asian academy addressed these major issues of change in conceptualizing the region? Some simply retreat into the local; they have no desire to conceptualize a wider region and find it satisfying to focus on a population or locality within their own nation-state; the studies are useful and usually focused on policy and practice (Ooi 2009); others are somewhat bolder and address issues at the level of the nation-state (for example Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam become units of analysis and they do so because these are institutionalized, manageable, and straightforwardly defined entities). A few, somewhat bolder academics attempt to command a sub-region: the Malay-Indonesian world, the Greater Mekong Sub-region, the major islands of Borneo and Sumatra, and so on.

But what is happening at the regional level among the locally-based academy? In filling in and giving shape and content to the region, I would argue, that increasingly local academics envision Southeast Asia in terms of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); a formal, nation-state-based, institutional definition of what a region comprises. Indeed, there is an increasing tendency to talk in terms of ASEAN Studies. This approach is a consequence of the pressures of globalization and the need to handle global politics and to speak with a regional voice.

Further reflections suggest that the Euro-American-Australian hegemony is a thing of the past and the ground has shifted to a much greater emphasis on academic activity within the region (Burgess 2004). Moreover local, Southeast Asian-based academics are finding it more important to network within the region and to capture, understand and analyze what Chinese, Japanese, and Korean scholars are saying about Southeast Asia, its present circumstances, trajectories, and their increasingly close involvement with the region within a greater Asia-Pacific region.

However, the insider-outsider dichotomy also requires considerable qualification. It is a neat way of dramatizing the aftermath of colonialism and Orientalism, and of reasserting local priorities, agendas, and interests. But in this paper, written by someone who is undoubtedly categorized as a Western outsider, I propose that there might be a way forward in resolving at least some of these issues (and one on which we might be able to reach a measure of agreement) with recourse to the concepts of culture and identity in order to address Southeast Asian diversities, movements, encounters, hybridization, and hierarchies.

## II. Insider-Outsider

In a previous publication in the journal *Suvannabhumi*, I raised the issue of the position taken by several prominent Southeast Asian academics that what was needed in the study of Southeast Asia was to “decentre” and “diversify” studies of the region in the interest of addressing “local dimensions”, “local priorities” and “local”, “native”, or “indigenous voices” (Goh 2011a: 1, 20011b). This harks back to Ariel Heryanto’s trenchant criticism of research on Southeast Asia in that, in his view, it displays “an exogenous character” (2002: 3; and 2007). He posed the question, “Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?” (ibid). He drew attention, as he saw it then, to the “subordinate or inferior position (of Southeast Asians) within the production and consumption of this enterprise”. And in a very colorful and locally appropriate metaphor, he then proposed that “Southeast Asians are not simply fictional figures authored by

outsiders, or submissive puppets in the masterful hands of Western puppeteers” (ibid: 4-5; and see King 2006: 28-29).

But the perspective which Heryanto presented so passionately had been enunciated a long time ago. It has been conceptualized in global terms by Syed Farid Alatas who has consistently argued for the development of “alternative discourses” (2006). Over twenty years ago, he stated, in very bald terms that “(t)he institutional and theoretical dependence of Third World scholars on Western social science has resulted in what has been referred to as the captive mind.” He continued: “(t)he captive mind is uncritical and imitative in its approach to ideas and concepts from the West” (1993: 307). Going even further back in the insider-outsider debate, he takes this concept of the “captive mind” from that of Syed Hussein Alatas (see, for example, Syed Hussein Alatas, 1974) and the critical engagement with colonial perspectives on the character of local populations (Syed Hussein Alatas 1977).

Syed Farid Alatas isolated several issues in the problematical engagement of local scholarship with Western academic hegemony and he relates this even further back to Indian criticism of colonialism from the late eighteenth century, but then concentrates on debates which emerged in the 1970’s when the concept of “indigenization” began to be consolidated, particularly in anthropology, psychology, and sociology (2005: 227). The problems he identifies arising from this academic hegemony are phrased in terms of: a lack of creativity; mimesis; essentialism; absence of subaltern voices; and an alignment with the state (ibid: 229; 2001: 50). The call for alternative discourses is rooted in the recognition of an “academic dependency” which if redressed demands “the critique of the Eurocentric, imitative, elitist and irrelevant social science” imposed from the West (ibid: 230; 2003: 599-613). This position builds on the position that Syed Hussein Alatas adopted and developed from 1956, in which he targeted, as the major problem for social science in Southeast Asia, “the wholesale importation of ideas from the Western world to eastern societies” and the overall problem of “academic imperialism” (1956: 52). He then pressed home his case strongly (1977, 1979, 2000). Much of this debate was also given global recognition in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and the ways

in which the West had constructed Asia, although as Vickers suggested, “identifying ‘Orientalism’ as a single discourse about ‘the East’ is extremely questionable” (2009: 64).

Yet Syed Farid Alatas holds back to some extent. His position does not require a total rejection of Western social science because it is important to acknowledge “social science as a universal discourse” (2005: 240, 234; and 2004: 69). What he requires with regard to Western social science is the “selective adaptation of it to local needs” (2005: 240). He is recommending additions, adaptations, and local contextualization. To my mind, however, this is not an alternative discourse. It is a modified, qualified, conditional discourse.

The same can be said of Goh Beng Lan’s position (2011a, 2011b, 2014). She argues for the importance of Southeast Asia in global terms, for the vitality of scholarship within the region and for the contribution of local scholars to understanding their own region. She also emphasizes the importance of situating knowledge production in a Southeast Asian context, but then addresses the distinctions and mutually enriching interactions between locally generated (insider) and Euro-American-Australian-derived (outsider) interests, perspectives, and approaches.

She says, and this is indisputable, that the “compiled narratives of regional humanities and social science practices...show an undeniable influence of Western disciplinary and epistemology-cum-methodology traditions”. But in the same vein as Syed Farid Alatas, she adds that “despite the operations of generic Western human science, there are distinct dimensions to human sciences within the region” (2014: 29). She asserts that in “as much as newer critical norms are warranted in reforming Euro-American models of area studies, it would be a mistake to presume their universal relevance to other formulations outside the West” (2014: 29; 2011a: 8-9). Yet it has to be said that these “practices” are rarely spelled out in detail and they certainly do not, insofar as I have been able to discern them, constitute a major paradigm shift in the social sciences and humanities. We are therefore addressing adjustments, additions, and qualifications, and not a substantial shift in the way in which Southeast Asia has been envisaged since the late 1940’s,

even by Western observers.

### III. Insider-Outsider: A Reconsideration

In any case, the distinction between those who are inside and those outside is highly problematical in the era of globalization. Can we sensibly and profitably distinguish local scholarship from scholarship outside the region? In my view, this distinction, while possibly workable in the 1960's and early 1970's is no longer tenable particularly since the development of locally-based scholarship from the 1970's with the ASEAN declaration of 1967 to promote the study of Southeast Asia within the region and then, for example, the subsequent foundation of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore in 1968, the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Hanoi in 1973, and the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at Universiti Malaya in the mid-1970's. Now, Southeast Asian or Asian Studies programs are found across the region. Charnvit Kasetsiri says of Thailand: "By 2000, we came to witness the phenomenon of a proliferation of Southeast Asian or ASEAN Studies in Thailand" (2000: 17). There are now some 15 institutions in the region which provide programs on Southeast Asia, or contextualize it within the wider Asian region; universities in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Brunei and the Philippines are the major academic providers (see, for example, Ooi 2009). These programs also recruit scholars from outside the region and encourage interaction with them in partnership and on equal terms, *contra* Heryanto's position (2002, 2007).

Let us address the issues which complicate this simple insider-outsider distinction: (1) a non-Southeast Asian national who has lived, worked, and undertaken research in Southeast Asia over an extended period of time and is fluent in a local language—local or non-local?; (2) a local researcher who has been trained in the West and who has returned to research in Southeast Asia—local or non-local?; (3) Southeast Asian nationals who now work in institutions outside Southeast Asia—local or non-local?; (4) a non-local who has participated in collaborative research projects

involving local researchers and published joint papers/books—local or non-local?; (5) non-local nationals from neighbouring regions of Asia who have conducted research in Southeast Asia and who have strong historical, cultural, and current connections with Southeast Asia (from Japan, Korea, China, India)—local or non-local?; (6) researchers from outside the region who conduct research on their own communities residing in Southeast Asia (for example, a Japanese researcher examining the retired Japanese community in Chiang Mai)—local or non-local?

There is also a much more significant issue. In my view, knowledge production cannot be regionalized and territorialized; it is global, universal; it does not matter where that knowledge is generated and how it is generated, though I recognize the problematical issue of academic hegemony. We cannot establish territorial boundaries and argue that a certain body of knowledge is necessarily problematical because it has been produced by someone, who, according to certain criteria, is judged to be “Western”, “non-Asian/non-Southeast Asian”, or “an outsider”, and perhaps engaged on a hegemonic mission. This was one of the major reasons which made me counter Ariel Heryanto’s position when I said that he “tends to operate with too broad a contrast between non-Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian scholars and provision.... He does not take sufficient account of the variations both within and across national boundaries with regard to Southeast Asian studies and other related programmes, nor the most recent changes in the pattern of provision, nor the full range of consequences for Southeast Asian scholars of the decline in area studies programmes in the West” (King 2006: 36). There is a more serious criticism of the arguments of Heryanto, Goh, and Syed Farid Alatas; they do not give us a clear and unequivocal view of what a locally-generated, alternative perspective might look like and how it differs significantly from a Western-generated view. Having said this, I wholeheartedly agree with the position that the future of the study of Southeast Asia “must be in the region itself” and not in Western research centers. I stated many years ago that “those of us who have had a long-standing commitment to the study of the Southeast Asian region readily acknowledge the influence and contribution of local



scholars. And....it is in their hands that the fate or fortune of Southeast Asian studies resides” (King 2006: 39).

#### **IV. The Insider-Outsider Impasse: Is there a Way Forward?**

Let us suppose that there is an insider-outsider distinction, which I think is not a viable or sustainable dichotomy. What could we as insiders and outsiders agree on? In a Southeast Asian context, we could agree that a major concern for many researchers is the conceptualization of culture and identity and their interrelationships in a Southeast Asian context. When I was engaged in the writing of *The Sociology of Southeast Asia: Transformations in a Developing Region* (King, 2008 [2011]), primarily an exercise in historical, structural, political-economic, and comparative analysis within a regional context, it became clear that there is a substantial literature in what can be referred to as “the sociology [and anthropology] of culture”, including the complex interrelationships between culture and identity, which could not be included in that volume. It seemed difficult to accommodate it within the particular tradition in which the book was located at that time, which had been inspired by the Dutch school of Non-Western Sociology founded and developed by W.F. Wertheim and Otto van den Muijzenberg (see, for example, Wertheim 1964, 1967, 1974, 1993; van den Muijzenberg 1988).

The cultural turn in sociology had emerged especially from the 1980’s with the increasing interest in “posts”: post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-Orientalism, and the multidisciplinary enterprise of cultural studies, preoccupied with the expanding impact of the global media, and communication and information technology on developing societies. A major inspiration for these intellectual developments comprised the Foucault-Derrida-Lacan-derived relationship between power and knowledge, the all-consuming passion among an increasing number of people for consumption in late capitalism, the emergence of cultural politics, and an engagement with the enormous opportunities for cross-cultural encounters in diasporas, international labor migration, business travel and tourism (Jenks 1993: 136-158; and see Clammer

2002: 9-12; Goh 2002: 21-28; Kahn 1992, 1995, 1998a, 1998b; and Turner 1990). In my perspective on culture and identity, I think I am not far removed from Adrian Vickers's view about the importance of defining and understanding Southeast Asia in terms of "representations", "civilisational forms", and "cultural and material manifestations" (2009).

Although I am not an enthusiastic supporter of these post-modern perspectives (and see, for example, Jackson 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005), the importance for social scientists of addressing the concept of culture has to be acknowledged. In Southeast Asia, these cultural interests have flourished in the concern among social scientists with what is often referred to as "ethnicity" (King and Wilder 1982: and see Brown 1994; and for Asia see Mackerras 2003; Mackerras, Maidment and Schak 1998), and with what has come to be called in a much more expanded and all-encompassing cultural studies sense as "identity" or "cultural identity" (see, for example, Kahn 1998a). Although there is a chapter in my book *The Sociology of Southeast Asia* on "Ethnicity and Society" and another on the "Asian values" debate, as well as references to identities in the context of changing class, gender, and urban relations, I paid insufficient attention to a comparative study of the development and transformation of complex and shifting identities across Southeast Asia. There was a failure to embark on any sustained sociological consideration of the large literature on the effects of and responses to globalization, consumerism, the media, migrations, and tourist encounters. With regard to this failure, I have to accept the persuasive case which has been made in a Southeast Asian and wider Asian context for the integration of perspectives from cultural studies with political economy analyses in understanding the region (Clammer 2002: 11; and see Ollier and Winter 2006; Reynolds 2006). Furthermore, the concern to locate cultural studies, following Stuart Hall, within the histories and legacies of colonialism in the post-1945 developing world should also be addressed (see Morley and Chen 1996: 10-13).

My current commitment to promote the study of "identities in motion" or "culture on the move" in a regional context is designed to rescue my earlier excursions into the sociology of Southeast Asia and to try to comprehend the dynamic, shifting, fluid, open-ended,

and contingent character of cultural identity. Regional analysis necessarily involves a comparative approach, but in my view it requires a more loosely formulated notion of comparison or “apt illustration”, or “inter-referencing”, “resonance”, “imitations”, “resemblances”, and “affinities” in order to reveal the social and cultural characteristics of Southeast Asia and the social and cultural processes at work there (see, for example, Chua 2014; Béteille 1990). Recognizing the problematic nature of comparison in the social sciences, I think that we are on safer ground by confining ourselves to “restricted comparisons” rather than indulging in such bold exercises in comparison across Asia as that of Aat Vervoorn (2002).

## **V. The Definition of Southeast Asia and the Problem of Areas**

Attempts to define Southeast Asia as a region in its own right, and the related multidisciplinary field of Southeast Asian Studies intensified from the early 2000’s, but they go back further in time (Emmerson, 1984; Fifield 1976, 1983; Reid 1999; and see Evans 2002; Sutherland 2005). Sometimes debates and discussions have been confined to Southeast Asia, and at other times, the region has been located in broader discussions of Asia and Asia-Pacific (see King 2014; Goh 2011a, 2011b, 2014; Ooi 2009). The intensification of these concerns appears to be generated by five main concerns (and see Kuijper 2008; Ludden 2000; Miyoshi and Harootunian 2000; Morris-Suzuki 2000; Schafer 2010; Szanton 2004; Waters 2000). These comprise: (1) the relative decline in interest in regional studies in the West, and specifically with regard to such regions as Southeast Asia, as a result of increasing scepticism of the ability or need to demarcate regions in the era of globalization, and indeed the sheer difficulty of finding commonalities within a geographically or territorially demarcated slice of the earth’s surface; (2) in pedagogical and financial terms, the decline in student interest in the value of regional studies and learning other languages, and the decrease in government funding for area studies in the West; (3) raising questions about the theoretical and methodological contribution and robustness of area studies approaches, where area studies is seen to have no distinctive theories and no methodology

other than what is taken from related academic disciplines (see King 2014); (4) criticisms of Euro-American-Australian-centric perspectives in area studies, particularly with regard to Asia, the colonial and Orientalist roots of the study and demarcation of regions, and the continuation of Western academic hegemony, especially from the 1950's and 1960's (see, van Leur 1955; Smail 1961); (5) the continuing problematical relationships between social science disciplines, as the acclaimed generators of "universalizing" theories and appropriate methodologies, and the localizing, grounded concerns of area specialists (Huotari 2014; Huotari, Rüländ and Schlehe 2014).

These debates and trends should be qualified in that the so-called "crisis" in area studies is not a general one; there has been decline in some countries and institutions and expansion in others; even in Western academic institutions where there has been a noticeable decrease in the attention to such regions as Southeast Asia and South Asia, there is an increasing interest in such regions as East Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe/Russia. Finally, there are and will continue to be strong advocates of a context-specific, grounded area studies approach and its scholarly value (see King 2015: 30-32).

On the other hand, as we have seen already, there have been some prominent Southeast Asian scholars who have proposed taking a different route from the attempt to essentialize Southeast Asia and to replace the "old" Euro-American-dominated Southeast Asian Studies with something "new", based on local scholarship, interests, and priorities, and on "alternative", Asian-constructed discourses (Goh, 2011a, 2011b; Heryanto, 2002, 2007; and see Sears, 2007).

Then there have been those who contend that there have been significant theoretical innovations generated in the study of Southeast Asia, and that the region should be seen as an "epicentre" for scholarly development within the context of the "centrality" of Asia (Chou and Houben 2006a, 2006b; and see Edmond, Johnson and Leckie 2011a, 2011b); in this vein some anthropologists have also argued that the study of Southeast Asia has come to be defined by a certain dominant scholarly style and preoccupation (Bowen

1995, 2000; and see Steedly 1999).

Another proposition has been that, despite the decline of interest in Southeast Asia in some countries, particularly in Europe and North America, there is vibrancy in the study of the region in other parts of the world (Reid 2003a, 2003b; Park and King, 2013; Saw Swee-Hock and John Wong 2007). Other scholars have pointed to the opportunities and possibilities provided by methodological developments in the practices and approaches embodied in Southeast Asian Studies (Huotari 2014; Huotari, Rüländ and Schlehe 2014), and have attempted to establish the importance of locally sensitive and contextualized research. There are also those who have emphasized recent developments in the teaching and learning environment of area studies and innovations in the way in which knowledge of an area is conveyed (Wesley-Smith and Goss 2010).

However, in accepting some elements of what has been argued for Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies, my overall position up to now has been a sceptical one. Although I have written and edited general books on Southeast Asia (see, for example, King 1999; King and Wilder 2003 [2006], King 2008 [2011]), I continue to hold to the conceptualization of the Southeast Asian region as a “contingent device”, following Sutherland (2005; and see McVey 2005: 308-319, and 1995), and the edited book by Kratoska, Raben, and Nordholt (2005a, 2005b). It is an obvious observation that those who have specialized in the study of Southeast Asia, and particularly those scholars located in Southeast Asian Studies centers, institutes, and programs, have frequently been engaged in debates about what defines their region and what is distinctive about it; and they quite naturally desire to give it some kind of form, substance, and rationale. Furthermore, these concerns have been much more prominent in those academic disciplines which have a greater preoccupation with location, contextualization, concreteness, and the need for grounded and detailed understanding. History, archaeology and pre-history, geography, anthropology, and linguistics immediately come to mind; whereas regional definition is not such a preoccupation for such universalizing academic disciplines as economics, political science, international relations, and sociology.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be another path that we might take in our concern to delimit a region. In this regard, I accept that Southeast Asia now has a clear political identity and a global voice through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It has become a reality after being constructed by external powers in the context of the Pacific War, decolonization, and the Cold War (see Ooi 2009). That reality continues to be expressed in academic centers, institutes, departments, posts, programs, publications, conferences, and media engagement within the region and beyond. But there is always the desire to give substance to an artificially created political entity: to anchor it in social, cultural, historical, and geographical terms. Although I retain some scepticism, my current view is that an exploration of the concept of culture and its relationship to identity can at least provide a partial solution to the dilemma of regional definition.

## **VI. The Concept of Culture**

What should be emphasized here, as John Clammer has already done eloquently (2002), is that Southeast Asia is characterized by cultural diversity and openness; it has a long history of cultural connections with other parts of the world; it demonstrates the importance of physical migrations and cultural flows into, across, and out of the region, which have generated cross-cultural encounters and social and economic intercourse (Vickers 2009). These interactions have in turn resulted in cultural hybridization, synthesis, and mixed communities, the phenomenon of pluralism and multiculturalism within national boundaries, and the obvious defining characteristic of the region expressed in the co-existence of culturally different majority and minority populations (Clammer 2002: 9-11; and see Forshee 1999: 1-5).

These historical processes can be framed in terms of the twin concepts of differentiation and convergence. Using this straightforward perspective, we need not exercise ourselves about whether or not Western theories on culture, particularly post-colonialist, post-Orientalist, and post-structuralist ones, are appropriate in analyzing and

understanding other cultures (see Jackson, 2004, and Morris, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2002). The processes of cultural differentiation and interaction nevertheless have rendered Southeast Asia one of the most culturally complex regions in the world. Indeed, there are those who have proposed that it is “the ubiquity of publicly displayed cultural forms” (Bowen 1995: 1047-1048) and the fact that Southeast Asia is “arguably the best place to look for culture” which have served to define it as a region (Steedly 1999: 432-433). The centrality of culture has in turn prompted social scientists of a particular theoretical persuasion, to pursue these cultural expressions and develop a particular way of perceiving and examining culture in the region (Bowen 2000; and see King 2001, 2005, 2006). On this last point, Steedly has argued that it is the work of American cultural anthropologists, pre-eminent among them Clifford Geertz (1973), which has “thoroughly associated this part of the world, and Indonesia in particular, with a meaning-based, interpretive concept of culture” (1999: 432; and see Goh, 2002).

Yet the situation in Southeast Asia has become infinitely more complex since Geertz’s field research. More recently, processes of cultural change in the region have become intertwined with and are generated by modern forms of globalization, the expansion of consumer culture under late capitalism, and the rapidly growing influence of the global media and trans-national communication systems. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, has pointed to a shift from the importance of political economy to the centrality of culture in post-modern society so that power, influence, and control operate in more subtle ways through advertising, public relations, and the creation of needs and longings by those who generate and control flows of information and knowledge (1987, 1998). Bauman refers to this latest stage in modernization (where we become increasingly consumers and not producers of goods and where identities are much less fixed and firm and the choices open to us are much wider) as “liquid modernity” as against the previous stage of “solid modernity”. Our anchors and certainties, the solid institutions which we could rely on, have gradually been removed or undermined and we face a much more fluid, fast-changing, uncertain world. This for me has a paradoxical effect; on the one hand, some of us search for

the security of solid identities, while others move between identities in experimental and open-ended ways. The comparative, region-wide study of culture, though qualified in such terms as apt illustration, resonance, resemblance, and so on, is therefore central to our enterprise and within that the importance of understanding identity and its construction and transformation.

In engaging with Bauman's observations, regional specialists of Southeast Asia need to address and understand the character of cultural change and encounters in the region and the responses of local people to this complex range of forces, pressures, interactions, and influences. The comparative, region-wide study of culture is therefore central to this endeavour and within this the importance of understanding identity and its construction and transformation. However, *contra* Bowen and Steedly, I would argue that rather than seeing culture as "publicly displayed", "interpretive", and "meaning-based", which of course it is, it should be brought into relationship with the concept of "identity".

As Goh Beng-Lan has argued in her valuable study of cultural processes, cultural politics, power, resistance, and identities in contemporary urban Penang—and specifically the struggles in which the Portuguese-Eurasians of Kampung Serani engaged against the redevelopment of their long-established community—our current notions of modernity in late capitalism are preoccupied with "the issue of cultural identity and difference" and, in the construction of what we call "the modern". Moreover, when local agency, context, interests, and priorities are acknowledged, then we can begin to understand how "modern forms and ideas are produced, imbued with local meanings, and contested in modern Southeast Asia" (2002: 28), which operates within the context of identity construction, maintenance, and negotiation.

## VII. Culture

The concept of culture is one of the most crucial, overworked, complex, controversial, and divergent concepts in the social sciences. It has been the subject of the most intense debates and



disagreements. It does not help that it is a term used in a multitude of different ways in popular discourse and it occurs with alarming and confusing regularity in discussions within and across a range of disciplines. One such attempt to address the complexities of culture is that by Chris Jenks (1993). He presents us with a health warning when he says that “(t)he idea of culture embraces a range of topics, processes, differences and even paradoxes such that only a confident and wise person would begin to pontificate about it and perhaps only a fool would attempt to write a book about it” (ibid: 1).

Of course, culture is a concept; it is, as Kahn proposes, an “intellectual construct” (1992: 161; and see King 2016). Nevertheless, there are several issues in contemplating the character of culture. Culture is taught, learned, shared, and transmitted as a part of collective life; in Tylor’s terms it is a “complex whole” (1871). It comprises the conceptual, conscious dimension of human life and the ideas, accumulated skills and expertise embodied in material objects (art and artefacts), and carried and given expression most vitally in language. It encompasses the symbolic, meaningful, evaluative, interpretative, motivated, cognitive, and classificatory dimensions of humanity (Geertz, 1973). It refers in its more popular connotations to “ways of life” and “ways of behaving”, and although there are cultural regularities and continuities, there are also contestations and transformations. It is also patterned and has a certain systematic quality so that someone who has not been socialized into a particular culture can still make sense of it, especially when this individual has discovered its ethical judgements, values, standards, beliefs, and world-view, the connections which it makes between cause and effect, and the explanations which it provides for the place and function of humans within the natural world, and for their bases of interaction, organization and behavior.

Alternatively, having contemplated what culture comprises, we should also address what culture “is not”. It is not firmly bound, closed, and delineated; it is open-ended and constantly in process. In this connection, social science analyses need to adopt comparative perspectives, examine several sites, and move across disciplines and time. Moreover, culture is not homogeneous, integrated, and agreed;

it is contested and is part of systems of power and privilege, as well as being generated, sustained, and transformed in strategies, discourses, and practices; these contests and struggles operate at different levels and in different arenas. But although those who have power and control economic resources can more easily impose their cultural visions, values and behaviors on others, this imposition, or in Gramsci's terms "cultural hegemony", is never complete (Gramsci 1990: 47-54; 1978; and see Hall 1996: 411-440; Wertheim, 1974).

### **VIII. Culture and Identity**

Culture is also very closely implicated in the concept of identity or ethnicity. Some social scientists have indeed talked of "ethnicity" and "cultural identity" in the same breath because their shared elements are cultural ones: they comprise values, beliefs, and behavior and the meanings which are given or attached to these, as well as differences and similarities in language and material culture.

However, ethnicity has increasingly come to be seen as a special kind of identity attached to particular groups, communities, majorities, or minorities, which command allegiance and loyalty. In its specifically ethnic dimension, identity is what distinguishes a particular category and/or group of individuals from others. Ethnicity is frequently expressed as unifying and differentiating people at varying levels of contrast, and with the process of separating or distinguishing some from others by deploying certain cultural criteria (Hitchcock and King 1997). In many cases, that which unifies and defines people is considered to be what makes them human; in other words it is their culture which marks them off and gives them identity and which logically encourages them to classify others as less human, or as sub-human (Leach 1982). This is especially the case when majority or dominant populations in nation-states classify and talk about the minorities which they control and wish to incorporate into a modern, national project as "marginal", "undeveloped", and "unsophisticated". And these are not small matters; they are a central part of much of what we are as human beings as we constantly think about and engage with

similarity and difference. We identify and define those who we classify as “like us” and “different from us”. We do this in different areas of our everyday lives and we can also operate with several identities, usually ranging from the more localized to the more general, and adopt different identities according to the context or circumstances (even though these may not necessarily matter if they are all considered together to define a person).

## **IX. Classifications as Folk-models**

Classifications of people and the bases on which categories are formulated can also be quite arbitrary and comprise what we might term “folk models” or “stereotypes” (PuruShotam 2000). Identities might be relatively “contingent, fragile and incomplete” (Du Gay, Evans and Redman, 2000b: 2; and 2000a), though we must recognize that we can get carried away with notions of contingency and fragility, and that some identities are more viable and enduring than others. Folk models of identity are cultural short-hands to facilitate navigation through one’s daily life. However, we have to acknowledge that things are not as simple and that processes of cultural exchange, intermarriage, physical resettlement, and absorption generate hybrid communities. These processes may also bridge boundaries and partake of elements from more than one category or group. They may also generate multiple identities which co-exist, but which may be invoked according to circumstances. In these connections, it is important to examine the ways in which these mixed communities establish and express their identities and how political elites define and address them in policy and administrative terms for purposes of nation-building (Chua 1995: 1-3). A particular issue in Malaysia, for example, has been whether or not to include certain hybrid communities, some of which claim Malay antecedents, in the constitutionally important category of “indigenes” (*bumiputera*: lit. sons of the soil) and the ways in which national identity is thus constructed (Goh 2002).

## **X. Nations and Identities**

National identities are constructed and presented by those in power in independent, politically, and territorially defined units which we refer to as “states” or “nation-states”. Political elites engage in nation-building to promote collective solidarity, unity, and cohesion and to maintain political stability and in so doing keep themselves in power; with political stability (most of them at least) attempt to promote economic and social development. Political leaders are usually assisted in this enterprise to “make” citizens and “construct” a national community by senior bureaucrats and by intellectuals (which include historians, novelists, poets, painters, and musicians) (Barr and Skrbiš 2008). Indeed, as a sense of national identity becomes embedded, it is frequently “intellectuals”, “artists” of various kinds, and more generally, “cultural intermediaries”, who continuously contest, re-produce and re-negotiate national culture and convert cultural products into forms which can be disseminated and consumed by the citizens of the state (Zawawi Ibrahim 2009). Therefore, in spite of the forces and pressures of globalization, states are still vitally important units in the organization of people and space, and for nationalist historians like Renato Constantino, in his reflections on Philippine history, nationalism provides “the only defense” against the globalizing and homogenizing pressures emanating from the West, and particularly America (1998). Territories, though in some sense constructed, are also real; lines drawn on maps and what is contained within those lines usually matter and have consequences for those who are considered, on the one hand, belonging to a particular state (they are “citizens” or recognized “legal residents”) and on the other, those who do not and who have to secure permission to reside or work there for a period (Clammer 2002; Vervoorn 2002).

However difficult it might be in a mobile, globalized world, governments attempt to police and monitor their borders, allowing some people in under certain conditions and excluding or deporting others. The vision of political leaders in what defines a state is backed by “agents of law enforcement” (PuruShotam 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2000). The building of a state and a nation also requires the

development of physical infrastructure—housing, schools, industrial estates, and a communication network along with national monuments and public buildings— which serves to underpin the process of constructing a sense of national identity and belongingness among the citizenry (Barr and Skrbiš, 2008). Interestingly in addition to the realities imposed by territorial boundaries, some observers have noted a “realness” even in the “imagined” realms of national identity. In the late 1990’s, Joel Kahn for example, although he suggested that the relationship between state and nation (or the “blood-territory equation of classical nationalist... movements”) was at that time, and in his view, becoming attenuated, indeed “breaking down” under the impact of globalization among other things, he nevertheless, recognized “the very real power” of the beliefs which underpin nationalism (1998b; and see 1998a). What is patently clear is that sharing an identity, however constructed, can provide a powerful means to mobilize people to take a particular course of action (King 2008).

In this connection, one of the major concerns of political scientists working on Southeast Asia has been processes of nation-building and the associated tensions and conflicts between political elites wanting to unify and homogenize, as well as the responses of the constituent communities of the state which often wish to retain separate or at least semi-autonomous, viable, and valued local identities. Boundary definition and maintenance is also rendered much more problematical in situations of “cultural hybridization and syncretism” (Chua 1995:1); yet our attention to boundaries is crucial in any study of identity maintenance and transformation (Barth 1969). Probably nowhere in Southeast Asia has the focus on identities and boundaries been as intense as in Malaysia (where these issues are often referred to by using the popular term “race”).

A relatively neglected field of research in Southeast Asia has been the ways in which media and communications technology have been deployed in the construction of national identities and the effects of the globalized media and other cultural flows on both national and local identities (see, for example, Postill 2006; Barlocco 2014 in the Malaysian context). It is interesting that this subject has

not received the attention it deserves given the legacy of one of the most prominent social scientists of Southeast Asia, Benedict Anderson and his examination of the ways in which the nation is constructed and “imagined” through various devices, including such media agencies as newsprint (1991). However, it is important to emphasize that identity, phrased in terms of ethnicity and nation, embraces other categorical and group markers such as class, gender, and age or generation (Du Gay, Evans and Redman 2000a, 2000b); and we need to focus on the major processes which have been involved in identity formation and transformation: nation-building, media, tourism, physical movement, and globalization.

## **XI. The Way Forward**

While recognizing the contingency of Southeast Asia as a concept and as the focus of attention within the multidisciplinary field of Southeast Asian Studies which has shifting boundaries depending on the criteria deployed and the research interests pursued, I propose that there is no contradiction between adopting a fluid conceptual approach and one which defines Southeast Asia more concretely and explicitly in terms of the regional identity embodied in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, what is required is to bring this dual conceptualization of a region into a framework of culture and identity, though keeping in mind the importance of addressing the political-economic environment within which culture operates (Clammer 2002).

Our understanding of Southeast Asia as a region acknowledges that the politically defined Southeast Asia which comprises territorially demarcated nation-states does not map on to a culturally and ethnically defined Southeast Asia. But in deploying concepts of culture and identity, we can then understand Southeast Asia by using various shifting frames of reference. This approach which focuses on the construction and expression of identity can embrace populations beyond the ASEAN-defined region which are culturally related to those within the region, as well as giving us the capacity to examine ASEAN as a segment of the global system defined in

terms of culture and identity. In this connection, we have to emphasize that the politically defined ASEAN is not merely political; the Association has also been engaged in translating a political-strategic community into one which expresses a cultural and regional identity in the “ASEAN way”.

In recognizing that Southeast Asia is not a unitary and fixed region, we can then move on to disaggregate the populations and territories of our variegated Southeast Asia. We can do this by addressing the constituent nation-states of ASEAN as entities obviously defined by political criteria but also demarcated and expressed by a constructed cultural identity, and as units continuously engaged in the process of imagining and creating those identities. Then, at the sub-national level, we have to engage with constituent ethnic groups, some of which are contained within nation-state boundaries, and others crossing boundaries. In addressing the issue of boundary-crossing and the fact that ethnic groups are distributed across territorially demarcated states within and beyond the ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia, the interrelated concepts of culture and identity can comfortably handle these circumstances, specifically by incorporating the capacity to engage with units of analysis at various levels and scales (extra-regional, regional, and sub-regional).

Two recently published books on Southeast Asia point to certain socio-cultural, historical and geographical characteristics which enable us to differentiate Southeast Asia from other parts of Asia and demonstrate an ongoing engagement with the definition of Southeast Asia. Anthony Reid, a distinguished historian of the region, and who has been a strong advocate for a Southeast Asian regional identity, continues to present a strong case for its integrity (and see Osborne, 2013; Vickers 2009). In his recent book, however, I detect a subtle shift of ground. In his general history of Southeast Asia, we find the region as an entity constructed and envisioned by what it is not; in other words it is “(n)ot China, not India” (2015: 26-29). This too presents problems, if we are operating with a nation-state-based approach in defining Southeast Asia. I would argue that in terms of the concepts of culture and identity, it is possible to accommodate what we conceptualize as Southeast Asian culture spilling over, intruding into, and interacting and engaging

with areas and populations which are now defined as “Indian” and “Chinese”. In other words, we should not counter-pose Southeast Asia with entities which we refer to as “India” and “China”. We need to implicate or incorporate them within the process of defining Southeast Asia.

Secondly, in Robert Winzeler’s *tour de force* that focuses on ethnography, ethnology, and change among the peoples of Southeast Asia, he too makes the point that the definition and delimitation of Southeast Asia as a region is problematical. For him, Southeast Asia was “a creation of European colonialism, rather than a reflection of natural, geographical, cultural, or linguistic boundaries” (2011:1). As Winzeler demonstrates, the political map of nation-states does not sit neatly on the messy distribution of ethnic groups. But Winzeler’s book is an excellent illustration of what I am proposing here, with regard to the importance of comparative studies of ethnic groups in the region and the importance of addressing culture and identity (ibid: 20).

Winzeler suggests that the character of Southeast Asia can be captured in a series of contrasts, which in turn acknowledges that the region is complex, diverse, and constantly open to outside influences (ibid: 6). Interestingly some of the contrasts he identifies have been around for a long time and were explored early on in anthropology (see for example, Burling 1965; Kirsch 1973; Leach 1954). He draws attention to the differentiation between upland/highland and lowland populations, majorities and minorities, the local and the immigrant (overseas minority) communities, mainland and island cultures and linguistic groups, and world religions and local religions. However, in my view, he does not provide a sufficient conceptualization of these crucial regional markers.

## XII. Conclusion

In surveying the intense preoccupation in the scholarly literature over the last 15 years with the problem of defining Southeast Asia, I propose that we engage more thoroughly and deeply with the twin concepts of culture and identity. They do not provide perfect and



all-encompassing solutions to the problem of regional definition. But in the Southeast Asian case, the adoption of a concept of cultural identity which enables us to address different scales, levels and kinds of identity, and the shifting and fluid nature of how local communities identify themselves and how they are identified by others, might provide a pathway out of the impasse with which the field of multidisciplinary area studies is now grappling.

What are the lessons which we can take from this excursion into culture and identity? It will remain a major subject of future research in Southeast Asia; no national planning can ignore the importance of national identity, the unity of the nation and its constituent ethnic majorities and minorities, and their interrelationships. We must be bold; let us look at Southeast Asia as a region in a comparative way, though in a more subtly, disaggregated way; if we value it as a defined region through ASEAN, then we must explore what holds it together and what the similarities and differences among the ten constituent nation-states are. We need to recognize what the colonial legacy has bequeathed the now independent nation-states of Southeast Asia and to understand how they have been constructed. We have to recognize the importance of culture in a transnational context; it is a flexible concept, but one which enables us to understand the diversity of Southeast Asia which also defines it. I admire what Southeast Asia has achieved; 40 to 50 years ago, the region was in political turmoil and was facing considerable economic difficulties, even though the foundation of ASEAN in 1967 had provided some room for optimism, which has since been realized. The constituent nation-states have come a long way since 1967 and have come together in a cultural sense. But we have to understand the different paths and routes which the ASEAN member-states have taken in achieving their national objectives and engaging with diverse cultures and identities both within and beyond the ASEAN-defined region. In the endeavor to capture the present and the future of Southeast Asia we should return to the important interrelated concepts of culture and identity.

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## On the Viability of Indigenous Methodologies: Implications for Southeast Asian Studies



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[ *Abstract* ]

In this paper, I offer a reflection on two cases to assess in preliminary manner the viability of an indigenous methodology for Southeast Asian Studies. The first is Kaupapa Maori Research (hereafter KM) as spelt out in the much talked about book by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (Smith 1999). The second case is *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino Psychology, SP), which began to take shape in the late 1960's and 1970's in the Philippines. Arguably these are among the most developed efforts at decolonization or indigenization of methodology. I intend to use these cases to explore the factors that made possible the flourishing and stagnating of indigenous methodologies. I shall argue that the broader context of knowledge consumption, not epistemological and methodological concerns, poses the most formidable challenge to the viability of indigenization efforts.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, methodology, Southeast Asian Studies, area studies, Kaupapa Maori, Sikolohiyang Pilipino

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## **I . Introduction**

Modern scholarship is deeply rooted in Euro-American intellectual traditions and has been profoundly involved in the West's imperial project (Said 1978). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a well-known Maori scholar put it rather bluntly, "scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism" and it "remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized people" (Smith 1999: 1). This situation has elicited at least two contradictory reactions. First was to ignore or take it for granted as historically given and analytically unproblematic, for scholarship is seen from this viewpoint as above political fray. The other was to historicize the situation, emphasize the specificity of the contexts of knowledge production, and assert one's power or volition to change things. Much of scholarship in the social sciences, particularly those that subscribe to positivist approaches, are under the first category. Critical approaches, on the other hand, that draw from the critique of "Enlightenment reason" such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and the Latin American decoloniality movement belong to the second group. Under this latter group, a still small but growing segment consists of those who push the logic of the critique of the coloniality of knowledge to its conclusion. They aspire to develop indigenous methodologies, which refer to a set of procedures for laying claim to knowledge believed to be sensitive to the cultural characteristics of the people being studied, justified by and reflective of the worldview of those people and is responsive to their needs (Smith 1999).

Area studies such as Southeast Asian Studies have long justified their *raison d'être* on their supposed sensitivity to the contexts of the phenomenon, and by logical extension also of knowledge production (Bates 1997; Szanton 2004) . It is precisely such groundedness that affords them a convenient standpoint to see the hollowness of the claims to universality or calibrated generality presupposed or posited in many theoretical formulations in the social sciences. Critics have observed these theories were based mainly on American and/or European experience (H. Alatas 1972; H. Alatas 1977; S. F. Alatas 2001; Goh Beng Lan 2011). It was also from



the area studies-like academic platforms such as ethnic or countries studies (e.g. Maori studies, or Philippine Studies), where indigenous methodologies have proven to be the most fairly developed. However, the interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary nature of Southeast Asian Studies has made it open to a very wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches. This is particularly the case after exemplary centers of area studies in the US and Europe that could have commanded following—such as Cornell University for Southeast Asian Studies—have seen their days. Their leadership role were diminished partly by budget cuts and shift in geopolitical interests, as well as the rise of other notable centers in, say, Southeast Asia, Japan, China, Korea, and Australia. Apparently the only thing that binds an area studies together now is the focus on the same area (country or region or any other entities). Devoid of any form of “methodological disciplining”, it thus remains widely open to question what implications indigenization or knowledge decolonization have on area studies like Southeast Asian Studies, if there is any at all.

Before such a question may even be posed, however, a more fundamental issue needs to be addressed. Can methodology be truly indigenous and decolonized? Postcolonial scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) are among those who registered doubt, declaring for instance that provincializing Europe may be an impossible task for historians as it entails abrogating historical scholarship as we know it. His misgivings sprang from the fact that historical methodology and its philosophical underpinnings are deeply rooted in European traditions. Given that other social science disciplines rely on logic and methods that, like History, were European in origin or orientation, similar doubt seems to apply to the social sciences more broadly. Apparently, the fundamental challenge here lies in the extent to which indigenous aspirations can prevail given the utterly foreign frame that underpins conventional scholarship. Perhaps what is needed is a radical departure from the kind of scholarship we have long been accustomed to. But scholars are wont to avoid such a radical break. Farid Alatas (1992; 1999; 2006), for instance, has forcefully argued for a kind of indigenization that leads to or converged with a universal social science.

Indigenist scholarship in the Philippines such as Zeus Salazar's *Pantayong Pananaw* and Virgilio Enriquez's *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* firmly believe that not only is indigenous methodology possible but it is also doable. To note, among countries in Southeast Asia, it was in the Philippines that saw perhaps the earliest, sustained engagement with the indigenization project in the social sciences (S. F. Alatas 2001; Mendoza 2007). "(O)f the countries in Asia", according to Sinha (Sinha 1997: 153), "the trend to indigenize psychology is strongest and most articulate in the Philippines". Such kind of scholarship developed in parallel with the kindred decoloniality or decolonizing intellectual movement in Latin America (Mignolo 2009; 2011), New Zealand (Smith 1999), Canada (Alfred 1999), US (Mihesuah 1996; Mihesuah 1998), and elsewhere. Since the 1960's, a worldwide movement has gradually developed, upholding the viability of indigenous worldviews and methodology. In the past decades, this effort has increasingly made their presence felt in various parts of the world as a banner of critical scholarship (Mihesuah and Wilson 2004; Semali and Kincheloe 1999). One can say, however, that this kind of scholarship remains marginal vis-a-vis the rest of the scholarly world, where what may be considered as "Western indigenous scholarship" is taken for granted as a universally acceptable kind of scholarship (Smith 1999, p. 189). Despite that, the contradictory impact of globalization—homogenizing but at the same time stimulating assertive identities and strengthening the call for diversity—keeps the platform open for a wide range of methodologies like indigenous ones.

This paper seeks to reflect on two cases to assess in preliminary manner the viability of an indigenous methodology. The first is what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls Kaupapa Maori Research (hereafter KM) as spelt out in the much talked about book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (Smith 1999). To note, Maoris share with most people in Southeast the Polynesian or Austronesian characteristics. In journals devoted to Southeast Asia such as *Suvannabhumi*, therefore, one can say they may not be totally out of place. The second case is *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino Psychology, SP), which began to take shape in the 1960's and 1970's in the Philippines. Arguably, these are among the most

explicitly developed efforts at decolonization or indigenization of methodology. I intend to use these cases as springboard for exploring the factors that made possible the flourishing, as well the stagnating of indigenous methodologies. I shall argue that broader context of knowledge consumption, not epistemology or methodology, poses the most formidable challenge to the viability of indigenization efforts.

## II . Kaupapa Maori research (KM)

Kaupapa Maori (KM) research is a research methodology developed by Maori scholars in New Zealand, as part of their effort to decolonize their mental world. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori who became a professor of Education at the University of Waikato in New Zealand, published in 1999 a book called *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. A revised edition came out in 2012. It is truly remarkable for offering a comprehensive and penetrating account of the context where KM developed, as well as the principles and procedures involved in it. It is also striking for its no-holds barred critique of research in Western tradition, which regards “research as an objective, value free and scientific process for observing and making sense of human realities” (Smith 1999: 164). It also spells out clear justifications and guidelines for undertaking an indigenous methodology. In strong terms, Smith deplores the pretense to objectivity and apoliticality of scientific research. She vehemently argued that research is a deeply and inherently political undertaking, one that feeds into and is driven by the interests of the researchers and the group to which they belong, often at the expense of the researched. She declared that given its pernicious role in exploiting and subjugating indigenous people like Maoris in New Zealand, research was a one of the “dirtiest words” in many indigenous people’s vocabulary (Smith, 1999: 1). The book has been translated into several languages and has generated much discussion and debates.

Cognizant of the profound distrust her people had of research, Smith nevertheless insists that it ought not be abandoned or

avoided. It was far too important to be left to non-Maori researchers. She has underscored the politically transformative impact of research and urged fellow indigenous people to undertake it, the indigenous way. She argued that “(w)hen Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms” (Smith, 1999: 193). By foregrounding the question of for whom or for what purpose is research done, Smith explodes the myth of neutrality or generic utility that often cloaks research activity. She is categorical in claiming that indigenous research is done by indigenous researchers for internal consumption as well as for the benefit of the indigenous community, just like scientific research is carried out for the use of the community that gave rise to and sustains it.

By methodology, it encompasses more than methods or technique of doing research. It refers to the whole set of procedures of laying claim to knowledge and, more importantly, their underlying logic and scholarly and political justifications. As an indigenous methodology, KM is rooted in the worldview or cultural lifeworld of Maoris. The specific techniques employed for data gathering as well as analysis are in line with what a particular Maori “community of interest” regards as ethical, relevant, and useful. It may be characterized as rigorous but “culturally safe” and is done by Maori researchers under the guidance of community elders (Smith 1999: 184). The privileging of Maori researchers over non-Maori counterparts results in the need for a “suitable” analytic standpoint. The supervision of elders served as a preventive measure against misuse and lack of accountability by the researchers to the researched (Bishop and Glynn 1992). What is being prioritized here is the welfare of the community over research technique. It does not mean however that rigor and being systematic are not important (Smith 1999; 187). While it sounds restrictive or controlling, and thus raises questions on the possible distorting effects on the outcome of the research, the deliberative procedures employed and collective responsibility within each interested community serve, so it is hoped, as mechanisms for the checks and balances necessary to

maintain rigor.

KM is conscious of the need to see the world from an internalist standpoint. Long used to the hegemonic knowledge imposed upon Maoris by colonizers, KM seeks to unshackle Maoris of its pernicious effects. Efforts have been expended to reinterpret concepts using the Maori worldview as a starting point. Some Maori scholars assert that KM is underpinned by epistemology and metaphysics different from those in the West. As noted by Smith, “(w)e have a different epistemological tradition which frames the way we see the world, the way we organize ourselves in it, the questions we ask and the solutions which we seek” (1999: 187-188).

As a critical and anti-colonial scholarly project (Mahuika 2015), KM draws for theoretical support from a range of critical traditions such as feminism, the decoloniality movement, and poststructuralism. In short, unlike other indigenous approaches wary of anything that comes from the Western intellectual tradition, such as, say, *Pantayong Pananaw* [For Us Perspective, see Navarro, Rodriguez-Tatel, and Villan (1997) and Salazar 2000], KM has been receptive to some Western critical theories that support or are compatible with its cause.

Key principles observed in KM research include the following. First, research is a collective and collaborative, and not an individual undertaking. Even if there is only one researcher who undertakes a particular project, she needs to tap into a network within a community to carry out research. This is clear in the concept *kaupapa* which refers to collectivist philosophy that permeate many of Maori activities, including research (Pihama et al. 2004). Second, research is undertaken for the benefit of the community; it is not done for other groups’ interests, or for knowledge’s own sake. Third, it is for equality and trusting relationship between the researcher and the researched. An example of this is the method called collaborative storytelling, which may be defined as an exchange of stories to create “knowledge among the participants of a research group which includes a researcher and those being researched...so that all members have the opportunity to be active in the research” [McPhillips 1992: 18 as cited in Tiakiwai (2015: 80)].

Fourth, sensitivity to the feelings and welfare of the researched takes precedence over precision or consistency of techniques. Fifth, ethics in research goes beyond the consent of the informant. Culturally defined behaviors are expected of the researcher and these include respect, face-to-face interaction, taking time to know the research participants by observing and listening not just speaking, by being generous and reciprocal in relations, avoiding impulsiveness, sharing information with the community, and humility (Smith 1999: 120). Finally, KM research is interdisciplinary. It is applicable to researches that concern Maori regardless of the fields of study.

KM has flourished in New Zealand and has had a significant impact on the research landscape, particularly on the development of theory (Pihama 2015), research training (Fabish n.d) and ethics of research (Hudson and Russell 2009). Interestingly, Tolich has noted the “emergence and dominance of the Māori-centred research paradigm (which) is leaving Pakeha (settler) researchers out in the cold” (2002: n.p.). KM is probably unique for attaining such a level of development, given the enormous constraints imposed by political institutions and modern, Western-oriented scholarship, in practically every facet of life, in every nook and cranny of the world. Many other indigenous methodologies the world over are underdeveloped and marginalized (Allwood and Berry 2006). How did this happen owed much to the situation in New Zealand where the notable advances in the recognition of indigenous rights were made possible by dominant groups’ respect for the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975. It reinstated the legal authority of the original treaty signed in 1840 and established the Waitangi Tribunal. It looked into claims of breach of the treaty, particularly on the question of protection that the Crown was supposed to provide the Maoris, as well as the recognition of their right to self-determination. Through the Tribunal, the government has acceded to various claims and provided reparations, ample funding, and other forms of support to the Maori communities (Belgrave et al. 2005).

Another was the proactive measures undertaken by Maori communities to recover, revitalize, and promote Maori culture, as they undertake capacity-building projects and develop a strong ethnic identity. Efforts include the preservation and promotion of

Maori language, education using Kaupapa Maori pedagogies, and research training on KM research methodology (Pihama et al. 2004). As assertion of their identity and desire for self-determination, more and more Maoris were trained to carry out various tasks for the smooth functioning of daily community affairs, including research and teaching.

Demography also helped. Maoris are a significant minority in New Zealand, comprising of about 15% of the country's almost 5 million population. Unlike other indigenous groups in other countries that are often proportionately smaller, number appears to matter here. The government support proved crucial in developing and promoting Maori-centric initiatives, like KM research. Through government funding, centers for Maori studies have been established in a number of cities all throughout the country. In other words, the broader political, demographic, and academic contexts in New Zealand appeared conducive to the flourishing of an indigenous methodology. This is something that can hardly be said of indigenous approaches in many other parts of the world, like the Philippines. In the next section, an indigenous approach to psychology called *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, shall be examined to see the importance of the broader contexts in enhancing or limiting the viability of an indigenous methodology.

### III. Sikolohiyang Pilipino (SP)

*Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (SP) or Filipino Psychology is a school of thought and methodology that developed in the Philippines since the 1970's under the leadership of Virgilio Enriquez. Enriquez started his career as lecturer at the University of the Philippines at Diliman (UP-D) in the 1960's. He did postgraduate studies in social psychology at the Northwestern University in Illinois. Upon completion, he returned to the country in 1971 and set off what proved to be an illustrious academic career developing indigenous psychology until his premature death due to an illness in 1994. The main features of this school have been clearly and comprehensively expounded and debated elsewhere (Church and Katigbak 2002;

Enriquez 1989; Enriquez 1992; Mendoza 2007; Pe-Pua 1982; Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino 2000; Sta Maria 2000), so I shall not devote a lengthy description of it here. It suffices to limit coverage to the key features which are relevant to the points I wish to develop in this essay.

Rogelio Pe-Pua and Elizabeth Protacio-Marcelino, two of the prime movers of SP, describe it succinctly in the following words:

Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino psychology) refers to the psychology born out of the experience, thought and orientation of the Filipinos, based on the full use of Filipino culture and language. The approach is one of "indigenization from within" whereby the theoretical framework and methodology emerge from the experiences of the people from the indigenous culture. It is based on assessing historical and socio-cultural realities, understanding the local language, unraveling Filipino characteristics, and explaining them through the eyes of the native Filipino. Among the outcomes are: a body of knowledge including indigenous concepts, development of indigenous research methods and indigenous personality testing, new directions in teaching psychology, and an active participation in organisations among Filipino psychologists and social scientists, both in the Philippines and overseas (Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino 2000: 1).

Just like KM, SP explicitly aspires for a methodology and practice of psychology that asserts identity, consciousness, and self-determination for communities or the whole nation. It adopts a slightly emic approach wherein "accounts, descriptions, and analyses (are) expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied" (Lett 1990: 130). Also like KM, SP explicitly re-orientes the purpose of research to what is useful or relevant to the community, the actual common people, rather than what is important to the elites or the scholarly class. It thus seeks to avoid what Bourdieu regards as "scholastic fallacy", a tendency to believe that the academic or scholarly viewpoint yields an authoritative representation or understanding of practice, or what actual people really think or do on the ground (Bourdieu 1990).



In terms of methods, SP is also similar to KM in adopting cross-indigenous methods, multi-language, and any other appropriate technique that prove suitable to the contexts of research. It does not totally reject the common techniques suggested in standard research methods textbooks such as interview, focus group, participant observation, etc. but strongly emphasize the need to be self-reflexive in using them and to modify these techniques to suit the specific local contexts. Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino (2000) list an array of techniques deemed sensitive and responsive to the character of Filipinos which SP proponents have developed: *pagtatanong-tanong* (improvised informal, unstructured interview), *pakikipagkuwentuhan* (story telling or informal conversations), *ginabayang talakayan* (guided discussion), *nakikiugaling pagmamaside* (participant observation), *pakikisama* (getting along with), *pagdalaw-dalaw* (visiting), and *panunuluyan* (homestay or joining a household).

Many of these are not fundamentally dissimilar to standard techniques but were often adjusted significantly to accommodate local contexts and characteristics common or appropriate to Filipinos. One noteworthy approach, for its impact on the community of Filipino psychologists in the 1970's was "*pakapa-kapa*". It refers to "an approach characterized by groping, searching and probing into an unsystematized mass of social and cultural data to obtain order, meaning and directions for research" (Torres, 1982: 171 as quoted in Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino, 2000: 59).

In application, rather than emphasizing, say, industrial or clinical psychology, SP seeks to develop livelihood psychology, health psychology, and rural psychology, which arguably were more suitable and useful for a greater number of "real" people. Rather than dismissing folk healing or folk medicine as unscientific, SP wishes to promote understanding of health-related concerns among common Filipinos, many of whom are in the rural areas. In short, anything that will help Filipinos understand themselves better, and promote their sense of identity and psychological well-being was within the domain of SP (Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino, 2000: 52-53).

SP also emphasizes conceptualization as a fundamental starting

point of analysis. The supposed key Filipino values such as *hiya*, *kapwa*, *loob*, etc. were re-conceptualized to reflect a supposedly more accurate interpretation based on the contexts in the Philippines and the prevailing culture among people.

In many fundamental and procedural matters, SP and KM are largely similar. They may be easily mistaken as two adjacent branches of the same tree. One area where they differ, probably in degree more than in kind, is in the attitude towards the idea of universal social science. Despite the foundational role of cultural particularity in the two approaches, SP is more emphatic in subscribing to the idea of universal social science. SP is not regarded as incommensurable to Western psychology, but complementary to it. From this viewpoint, all psychologies, including Western psychology, are indigenous to their ordinary places and are meant to serve as a piece in a huge jigsaw puzzle (F. Alatas 2006). They are all essential to the long-term goal of establishing a universal social science. For its part, KM appears unconcerned about being part or being accepted by “universal” social science. Being very clear about what KM research was for—that is, for the welfare of the Maori community—and having started off with a suspicious attitude towards research or scholarship in general, proponents of KM do not seem to aspire as much as those in SP for acceptance in the “universal” community of scholars, whatever that means.

The contextual differences in the development of the two schools may have to do with this situation. SP was a project driven more by scholars who happened to have activist aspirations. KM was dominated by activists who happened to be scholars. It must be noted that the demarcation line between scholars and activists cannot be exaggerated as many situations force the blurring of such a line. But here, such distinction serves a heuristic purpose: to underscore the importance of the difference in aspiration among scholars. There are other possible interpretations, but I hazard a guess that scholarly training, values, and interests of SP proponents seem to have made it difficult for them to abandon the need for acceptance by peers in the psychology scholarly community. Unlike KM scholars, they did not have a favorable broader political or institutional support on their side. As for advocates of KM, what

seems to prevail was community interests. Academic recognition was by no means ignored as unimportant, but mainly as part of the whole repertoire of tools or opportunities that contribute to the Maori community's struggle for self-determination.

The longer development trajectory of SP appears to diverge as well from KM. Whereas KM continues to be on the ascendance, SP appears to have stagnated and to be on the decline, which follows the trajectory of other attempts at indigenizing Psychology (Jahoda 2016). After the death of Enriquez in 1994, the movement lost a key prime mover and main source of intellectual inspiration. Critics came out and new projects dwindled. It was also overtaken by other culturally-sensitive approaches to psychology such as cross-cultural psychology and cultural psychology [Jahoda (2006; Sta Maria 2000)]. KM, on the hand, continues to expand to other areas of scholarly endeavor including social theory, history, agriculture, health, and genetics. The institutional support made possible by favorable majority-minority relations in New Zealand helped ensure the continuing vitality of KM. The absence of such support in the Philippines put SP in a precarious foundation. When the founder passed on, the movement reeled. Also, the profound roots of KM in political activism—the fight for equality and self-determination—lent the movement a deeper and larger reservoir of motivation. On the other hand, as a mainly scholarly undertaking, SP proved vulnerable to the faddish impulses within the academia. As newer and perhaps more interesting approaches emerged, scholars pulled away from the older ones, such as SP.

#### **IV. Points to Ponder**

KM and SP are among the most developed efforts to indigenize the social sciences. Given the paramount dominance of Western social sciences, the development and flourishing of indigenous approaches like KM and SP seems at all truly remarkable. One can easily imagine the risks proponents took and the tenacity they sustained to pull this project off. The similarity in the ideas, content and approaches between KM and SP, against the contrasting trajectory of

their developments, affords us a chance to see the importance of the broader academic-political contexts in assessing the viability of an indigenous approach. Aside from the contrasting position between KM and SP vis-à-vis dominant institutions in their respective countries noted above, the intensity of anti-colonial sentiment also seems to matter. For Maoris, it was easier to see colonization in black and white, evil vs good terms. For Filipinos, their experience with and responses to colonization have been deeply ambivalent. Much bigger in number, and being under two colonial masters that provided two different colonial “flavors”, Filipino nationalism and anti-colonialism are fragmented by various fault lines. Thus, while there were Filipino scholars and activists who favor and support indigenous approaches like SP, there were also many others comfortable with, and even actively supportive of, conventional Western-oriented social sciences. SP did not manage to have a critical mass of supporters necessary to sustain a counter-hegemonic scholarly-political project unlike KM.

Indigenous methodologies like SP and KM highlight the pragmatic character of knowledge. The questions, “Knowledge for what and for whom?” are foregrounded rather than elided, and both SP and KM were categorical about the interests that drive their scholarship. Many scholars find such honesty unsettling. They question their apparent lack of concern for impartiality or objectivity, which, they believe, research is supposed to be about. If political interests should drive scholarship, why do research at all? Others, however, welcome the explicit admission of political interests in scholarship as refreshing and empowering.

The indigenization movement in the social sciences and area studies do share some similar roots in recognition of the situational nature of knowledge production. While area studies have evolved as to become even looser in disciplinary and methodological orientations (Huotari, Rüländ, and Schlehe 2014; Mohammed Halib and Huxley 1996) and observers have talked about crises in area studies (Burgess 2004; Jackson 2003; Rutland 2001), area studies were originally conceived as a corrective to the disciplinary parochialism and pretentious universalism of Western social sciences, just like the indigenization movements. The very notion of an area worthy of

being studied presupposed a particularity that deserves to be uncovered or highlighted, which is precisely what the indigenization movements do in their effort to develop an internalist epistemology. The highly interdisciplinary approach of KM that cuts not only through language, arts, literature, education, philosophy, and history, but also health and agriculture, offers a pathway to envisioning the future when the indigenous approaches to a truly interdisciplinary area studies become possible. It so happened that area studies, both classical (and Orientalist) and modern, have been hijacked and enlisted to serve in the state-sponsored political projects such as colonization, imperialism, the Cold War, and neo-colonialism. As such, it has been used as a tool of powerful countries to facilitate control of countries that are objects of area studies. But as the gravity shifted, seeing Southeast Asian Studies increasingly becoming the domain of the Southeast Asian themselves, with more and more scholars from the region studying other countries in the region, the platform is set for internalist approaches to be developed, including indigenous methodologies. If Southeast Asian scholars wish to wrest the driver's seat from foreign scholars in Southeast Asian Studies, as Goh Beng Lan (2010; 2011) suggested, then one way this may be done is via the indigenization route. Southeast Asia as a region is wealthy in cultural resources necessary for indigenization.

As already noted, efforts at the indigenization of the social sciences in the region have gone the farthest in the Philippines. SP is duly recognized internationally for its theoretical and methodological sophistication, as well as its practical application (Allwood and Berry 2006; Baker 2012; Sinha 1997). Not only in Psychology did indigenization went far enough, but also in history, anthropology, and Araling Pilipino or Philippine Studies (Bautista 2000; Covar 1991; Navarro & Lagbao-Bolante 2007; Rodriguez-Tatel, 2015). The Philippines, in other words, offers to other Southeast Asian countries ample experience that illustrate the promises and pitfalls of indigenization.

A major challenge to the indigenization effort is the increasingly interconnected world made possible by the almost incessant flow across borders of information, ideas, goods and people. Geographic space that used to be relatively stable, conveniently contained as

they were by national boundaries, has been made fluid by the advances in information, transportation, and communication technologies (Appadurai 1996; van Schendel 2002). Under this situation, it has increasingly become precarious to talk about the notion of culture that is more or less stable (Steadly 1999). If culture has become more fragmented and fluid, what kind of indigeneity might be left to serve as a platform for the indigenization effort? Critics of SP and other indigenization projects in the Philippines often raised this vexing question.

Observers noted, however, that the increasingly encompassing and intensifying globalizing processes have not necessarily resulted in the homogenization of the world (Kellner 2002). There are aspects or areas of global interactions that generated the strengthening of local, national, or regional dynamics and identities, partly as a response to the threat of homogenization (Appadurai 1996; 2000). The case of KM may be a good example of this. Rather than be intimidated by the vastly superior presence of Western scholarship and identities in New Zealand and beyond, Maoris have strengthened their assertion for self-determination. The increasing and expanding scope of activism in the past few decades among indigenous communities in various parts of the world, and the solidarities they built across the globe, appear to be energized by the so-called threat of globalization. Against this background, it is premature to proclaim the end of the indigenous approaches to scholarship. Things might have just started for them.

The final point I wish to reflect on is whether indigenization is the answer if the need is to address the question of unequal power relations. Some scholars tend to conflate indigenization with decolonization. For them, to indigenize is to decolonize. Indigenization is the specific means to decolonize (example is Smith 1999). There are those who even nudge us to "Always Indigenize!" (Finlay 2000). For others, however, they are not one and the same. They worry that the focus on indigenization might distract attention away from what is actually needed, to decolonize (Hill 2012). What this refers to has to do with the altered nature of colonization. With the rise of the neoliberal, global economic order, the power-inequality that operates in colonial relations is no longer between one country or

one civilization over another. Sharp inequalities exist within nations such that the Third World conditions coexist side by side with First World environment, both in developed and developing countries. As Macedo aptly noted, “no longer can it be argued that the colonized experience is the domain of Third World contexts only” as “we are experiencing a rapid Third Worldization of North America” and “First World opulence in the oligarchies in many Third World nations” (Macedo 1999, xii). The point is, the complex economic order has also made power relations between actors, institutions, interest groups, and countries very complicated, such that colonial relations ceased to be just between nations or civilizations, but more so between various smaller entities within and between ethnicity, class, gender, intellect, etc. Therefore, to indigenize might help address certain power-inequality issues but not all power deficit issues. It could even provide a smokescreen that inadvertently hides or merely changes the contours, but not the substance, of inequality. If one dominant group is replaced by another, which also acts as dominant, the logic of inequality is retained and thus no real decolonization has been effected. Indigenization, in short, is an important step, but it may not be sufficient.

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# A Holistic View of the Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia



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[ *Abstract* ]

The paper examined Southeast Asia as a whole and focused on similarities among countries composing what is now known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In order to determine these similarities, the analysis focused on the fact that during World War II the whole of Southeast Asia was occupied by one political power: Japan. The policies the Japanese implemented in the region were to a degree very similar in terms of pressures and tensions that occurred in the different countries. The paper argues that these pressures and the responses of the various peoples of Southeast Asia instilled a nucleus of common identity in Southeast Asia as a whole. Basically, the policies that the Japanese implemented all over Southeast Asia were the following: the setting up regional administrations; the extraction of resources and emphasis on local self-sufficiency; the implementation of cultural Japanization; and local indigenization policies. The Southeast Asian responses that crystalized this joint Southeast Asian identity may be described as: accommodating and resisting the Japanese;

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commemorating portraying; and collectively remembering the era. The process of action and reaction between Japan and Southeast Asia was formative of this joint Southeast Asian identity.

**Keywords:** Japanese Occupation, Southeast Asia in World War II, Identity, Policies, Commemoration

## I . Introduction

Southeast Asia is a region of more than 600 million people. The region now sees cooperation developing under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) flag, where the nations in the region strive for closer socio-cultural and economic cooperation. Creation of a regional identity is a major aspect of these activities. It remains very clear to most observers that despite these efforts of integration, there is one aspect that is clearly lacking. The member countries of Southeast Asia are simply very different and very politically diverse. National interests of the various countries remain paramount in determining the degree of cooperation in Southeast Asia.

It needs very little explanation that historically, Southeast Asia has been subjected to a tremendous influx of cultural, social, economic and political influences that through the centuries came to the area and shaped the identity of the region. Southeast Asia only became a clearly distinct region during World War II, where strategists began to see the region as this body of countries distinct from Oceania, South Asia, and East Asia. But who was it that forced the hand of the strategists to re-conceptualize the region? This paper will argue very straightforwardly that the only time in history that Southeast Asia was under one political leadership ever in long centuries of history was during the Japanese era of 1941-1945. This created a nucleus of joint identity in Southeast Asia. In about three and a half years, one political system created a great impact to the whole of the region. Various local degrees of indigenous self-rule or colonial control remained in place during some stages of the Pacific War as the whole Southeast Asia was under placed under the

leadership of the emperor and his imperial administrators. Even in prevailing nationalist histories which focus on the struggle against colonialism, the extent of how the three-year occupation tipped of the accepted balance of power in Southeast Asia between colonized and colonizer was not summarily dismissed. What were the impacts of such an era on the identity formation process of the region?

Japan had expanded its colonial territory since modernization had gripped the country in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. At the outbreak of World War II in Asia, Japan already obtained decades of experience in colonial administration and rule through its prolonged control of what is now Korea, Taiwan, as well as various island nations in the Pacific obtained after World War I. Large areas in China were also under the Japanese government for many years. After the Pacific War, nation-states emerged in Southeast Asia, giving rise to dominant political forms of government in the region today. It is recognized in various historiography of Southeast Asia that Western colonial powers shaped the political identities of Southeast Asian countries by way of colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The Netherlands was instrumental in shaping Indonesia. Great Britain governed Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and Myanmar. The French created Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. The United States ruled the Philippines, and even Spain and Portugal were considered important in the shaping of regional identity. The only independent country of the region, Thailand, found itself heavily influenced by France and Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

All this is amply represented and recognized in the historiography of the nations that now constitute ASEAN. National historiography that dominated history writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century also emphasized the struggle against colonialism. Southeast Asian historiography however consistently ignored the importance of this joint colonial experience of occupation shared by these countries during the one and only time ever in history that Southeast Asia was governed by one political power. The end of the war saw the liberation of many of the Southeast Asian nations. Myanmar/Burma became independent in 1948, while Indonesia and Laos in 1945. Cambodia declared independence in 1953, and the Philippines in 1946. Thailand was basically independent through and through. Vietnam was engulfed

in the Cold War struggle that lasted for decades, which began in 1945. Only East Timor, Brunei, Singapore, and Malaysia took many more years to become nations. In general, the war years greatly shaped the fate of Southeast Asia to such an extent that colonial dynamics was changed in the 10 years that followed.

Nation-state historiography may be old-fashioned or not considered paramount anymore in the shift to transnational and regional government, yet nationalism does remain at the heart of decision making for many societies. As one expands to a global scope, it may even be argued that nation-states recently jeopardized by external military interventions shown difficulty in replacing their governments. The nation-state and nationalism seem to be losing their ground but remain valuable in adapting stable forms of inclusive government in a world where borders cannot be dismantled from our conceptualization of the world.

The argument for a more holistic view of Southeast Asia as an extra layer of identity for inhabitants of this region is in no sense negated here. The thesis presented here is that if colonialism and the struggle of the local population against colonialism were important in the formation of national identity, it then makes sense that the uniform policies emphasized by one colonial power and the response by the Southeast population in the short but intense years of the Second World War somehow crystalized a Southeast Asian political identity that complements the various nodes of Southeast Asian identity. Put more simply: as the people of Southeast Asia assumed similar imperial policies of localized government during the war years, their responses must have indirectly created a shared identity. This assumption shapes this paper's initial analysis of the Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia from a holistic viewpoint. The fact that Southeast Asia was quickly re-dominated by diverse local forces because of the bottled-up national influences that made them reassert themselves and become politically victorious is also acknowledged as mitigating this Southeast Asian layer of political identity emerging in the shadow of so much nationalist post-war fervor.

The degree of similarities of Southeast Asian political identity



remains difficult to gauge especially considering the political dominance of the elements of national political identity reaffirming themselves after the Japanese occupation where an attempt at Southeast Asian nation-building and identity construction was undertaken. Specific questions may shed light on this political communality of Southeast Asia. Since the Japanese found themselves in control of the whole of Southeast Asia, what were the policies that they implemented in the area? To what degree did the stress of war require a “one size, fits all” concept for the Japanese as they administered the different areas of Southeast Asia? To what extent did this Japanese element play a role in the local yet general anti-colonial struggle emerging all over Southeast Asia? How many of these experiences were shared by the people of Southeast Asia during the years predating national independence? In the decade after the Japanese Occupation, most countries of Southeast Asia quickly proclaimed independence. Other countries in Southeast Asia which experienced more prolonged struggles found themselves with local leaders formed and trained during and emerging from the Japanese war years. Is this a coincidence?

## **II . Japanese policies in Southeast Asia during World War II**

### **2.1. Setting up regional administrations**

World War II arguably began with the German invasion of Poland in 1939. In Asia, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in China in 1937 brought Japan into a conflict that would end only in 1945. By May 1940, the German forces quickly overran the Low Countries and France, inflicting a painful defeat on Britain. Southeast Asia was indirectly affected by the worldwide conflict. Struggling against the Chinese forces of Chiang Kai-shek in Chungking, Japan demanded France and Great Britain in June 1940 to close the borders of Vietnam (Indochina) and Myanmar (Burma), respectively. The British sought for American intervention, but because this did not happen, the Anglo-Japanese Agreement of July 18, 1940 led to the closure of Burma Road to force Chiang Kai-shek to negotiate table (Carr 1985: 105). Aware of the fact that the colonial position of the Dutch and

French in Southeast Asia was weakened because of the German occupation of the Netherlands and France, the Japanese decided to pressure the said colonial administrations to provide Japan with various concessions. Japan pressured the Dutch into providing quantities of raw commodities and the French into allowing the imperial forces in Vietnam to monitor the closed border Vietnam-China border (Iriye 1987: 100-101).

In September 1940, the French allowed Japan to station soldiers in Tonkin. However, it was only in July 1941, after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, that Japan moved into the South of Vietnam. In response, the US froze all Japanese assets and implemented an oil embargo. It was only a matter of time for Japan to declare war as it found itself in a position where it must make its stand. Japan has been negotiating with the Dutch in Indonesia to obtain oil since September 1940, but they were held off until talks finally failed in late June 1941 (Goto 1997: 120). The diplomatic sabre rattling had not impressed the Dutch, and one month later, the Americans also cut off access to other raw commodities. Japan was in a very difficult position fighting a prolonged war in China, as it was also outmaneuvered in Southeast Asia. On the December 8, 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Japan captured the whole Southeast Asia by May 1942, its imperial occupation lasting until 1945.

A 3 to 3.5-year timeframe was given to the Japanese colonizing power to implement various policies in Southeast Asia. Japan prepared in advance and did not have to wait until it conquered Southeast Asia. Many documents were destroyed but enough remained, enabling the reconstruction of these Japanese policies. Japanese policies for Burma and Indonesia reconstruct for us the general policies of Japan for the rest of Southeast Asia.

The Japanese adopted the *Principles Governing the Administration of Occupied Southern Areas* on November 20, 1941. In this document, military governments as to be installed in all the areas which must have three priorities: restoration of public order, acquisition of vital resources for the war, and local economic self-sufficiency (Benda, Irikura & Kishi 1965: 1). The Japanese

decided to do the following: make use of existing governmental organizations wherever possible; acquire and ship back resources for the economic planning of Tokyo; make the indigenous population comply with these burdens and as they are also to trust the Japanese forces (Benda, Irikura & Kishi 1965: 2). In Burma, there is a large measure of success in working with the local population. In December 1941, Colonel Keiji Suzuki drew up a plan to use locals to support the Japanese military attack on Burma. The Minami Kikan under his watch armed the Burmese and implemented uprisings. Leaders of the Burma Independence Party coordinated with the Japanese attack on Moulmein (Trager 1971: 27-28). Suzuki proposed a provisional government that took control of Burma (Trager 1971: 29). A plan drawn by the Southern Forces dated February 6, 1942 was more cautious and decided to place the voluntary army under the Japanese operational commander, with the promise of a new regime in the future (Trager 1971: 32).

In November 1941, the Japanese also divided the locality between the Army and the Navy (Benda, Irikura & Kishi 1965: 4). It was agreed that both would be in close contact with Tokyo and provide regular updates (Benda, Irikura & Kishi 1965: 4). General administrative matters, public peace and order, acquisition and development of resources, finance and economic matters, infrastructure matters, propaganda and intelligence matters, and then finally, control of enemy property and facilities, would all fall under their joint responsibility (Benda, Irikura & Kishi 1965: 4-5). A division of administrative areas in Southeast Asia was also agreed upon. The Navy was assigned all of Eastern Indonesia and Dutch Borneo. The Army was in charge of Burma, Malaya, British Borneo, Java and Sumatra, and the Philippines (Benda, Irikura & Kishi 1965: 5). This Army administrations were further streamlined in Burma, Malaya including Sumatra, Java, North Borneo (amalgamating various administrations of Labuan, Sarawak, Brunei, and the North Borneo Company), and finally the Philippines (Benda, Irikura & Kishi 1965: 53). In the case of North Borneo, four different British colonial administrative areas were restructured into one, five provinces which included Brunei were lumped with Miri to form one province, and Labuan was reassigned to be part of another province (Reece 1998:

54). In April 1943, Sumatra and Malaya were put under different Army administrations (Benda, Irikura & Kishi 1965: 53). The Navy gained control of Eastern Indonesia and had a more simplified structure, having only one command structure for the area.

The French colonies remained under Vichy France and were regarded by the Japanese as foreign until the re-conquest of the French homeland in Europe by the Free French forces in 1945. In fact, after the Vichy regime took over, Japan opened an embassy in Indochina in October 1941 (Hata 1998: 47). This changed in 1945 when the Japanese 38<sup>th</sup> Army came in and took over the administration from the French (Hata 1998: 47). Thailand was also seen as an independent country by the Japanese and they did not to set up any military administration in the country. Also, an agreement between Japan and Thailand was formalized on December 21, 1941, where Thailand is to be allowed to regain previously lost territory (Numnonda 1997: 5). Thailand was pragmatic in working with Japan. Despite sending Japanese troops in the country, the imperial army respected the Thai government (Numnonda 1997: 46). East Timor was a colony of Portugal, and Portugal remained neutral in World War II. Japan occupied the area but did not implement any specific independent administration. All these were undertaken to implement the first order of the day: that the military administration restore public order.

## **2.2. Extraction of Resources and Local Self-sufficiency**

The main goal for setting up of local administrations and the organization of the Japanese in each region was obviously the extraction of resources for the war effort. This was implemented in a very general way for all the colonies/areas, but also very specifically, depending on the area's resources. It was the most important goal of the Japanese at war effort. A plan was drawn up to facilitate and coordinate this extraction in November 20, 1941. It clearly stipulated that "great emphasis must be placed upon the procurement of resources" (Trager 1971: 38). Complementing this was local self-sufficiency, where Japanese and local populations were to live on locally available resources. Thailand's alliance with

Japan allowed right of passage and the extraction of economic resources without having to wage war (Numnonda 1997: 46). In this way Thailand managed to largely accommodate the Japanese.

Basically, Japan managed to pass through Thailand without having to expend many resources to subdue the country. Other countries would be overrun by the Japanese forces looking for resources. The most important resource the Japanese sought to obtain was oil. This oil came largely from Borneo and was used by the Japanese as a substitute for the oil lost when the Americans implemented the embargo of 1941. The petroleum industry was controlled by the military (Trager 1971: 40). The second important resource the Japanese exploited was labor. Men and women were sent to become laborers. In Indonesia, many came from very densely populated Java and were exported all over the region. Japan assigned men to heavy labor. In many instances, women were turned to sex slaves. Shigeru Sato showed how rice and labor were ruthlessly exploited and extracted by the Japanese in Java (1994). Also, many in Burma worked in this case on the Thai-Burma Railroad. Yet local situations and political factors also varied. Filipinos were not sent abroad to work under these conditions. In the case of Malaya, rubber and minerals became important commodities (Trager 1971: 40). In Myanmar, forestry and mining products were considered prime resources (Trager 1971: 66). Java supplied labor, which was divided over larger areas for use by the administrations. When the Thai-Burma railroad was envisioned, around 2,000 men from each of the districts of Burma were said to be needed to compose the labor service corps (Trager 1971: 232-233). It would later be estimated that the Burmese comprised the largest labor force on the Thai-Burma railroad project, with around 175,000 drafted. Half of them deserted the project, which left some 90,000 to carry on the work. Still unknown today are the number of people who deserted the project. 44% died in the process (Beattie 2005: 52). Providing the second largest contingent of workers was Malaya. No Thai worked were involved in the project (Beattie 2005: 52).

Important commodities like rice and other foodstuffs were increasingly extracted from local populations. Harvests were

confiscated in Borneo and Indonesia. The Japanese exported or extracted what they needed but did not import what the local population needed; “each area must make efforts to maintain its self-sufficiency in food resources (Trager 1971: 41).” This was in line with the self-sustenance policy Japan applied to all localities, which proved to be challenging for some areas where new crops were introduced and failed to yield harvest. Accounts of scarcity, for instance, the lack of clothes, were very common.

### **2.3. Cultural Japanization and local indigenization Policies**

Aside from extracting resources, the imperial administration also implemented Japanization policies. Indigenous populations, as well as Orientals living in the region and Indo-Europeans, were taught to accept affinity with the Japanese. The Chinese meanwhile were represented as anti-Japanese, and thus were considered enemies (Trager 1971: 50). Looking for support, the Japanese began with recruiting locals to assist them in propaganda efforts in favor of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. This development also gave rise to Japanese language schools, training better low-level workers for Japanese administration. It was recognized as a slow process of acculturation (Trager 1971: 51). In Burma, 50 language schools were established (Trager 1971: 195). The Japanese tried to reorient the local population into an Asian social hierarchy—Asian but with Japan on top. Effectively this replaced one colonial situation with another and the indigenous population was not blind to this. In order to achieve this policy, the Japanese also implemented Japanese schooling and forced the local population to submit to Japanization. They also forced the local population to adapt Japanese customs such as bowing. All of these were implemented in such a brutal way. Locals had to bow to Japanese guards and punishments were meted out to those who disobey. This led some locals to hate the Japanese. The Japanese were also posted in key administrative positions and some orders specifically state the need for them to introduce their own power structure while technically being under indigenous administrators (Trager 1971: 123). In the case of Burma, the Japanese proceeded to gradually assign tasks to this body of indigenous administrators (Trager 1971: 140-144). A

similar situation can be seen in Indonesia and other regions in Southeast Asia. The goal of language teaching was partly to help spread the ideas of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, as was to make local population cooperate better with the Japanese (Trager 1971: 197). It also produced more educated laborers.

The propaganda department had its share of successes and failures. The fact that so many Southeast Asians grandparents today can sing Japanese songs they learned as children testifies to this. Worthy of mention too was how the Japanese training programs instilled a work ethic in the local population. If previous colonial powers approached enforcement using less forceful means, the Japanese did not hesitate to mete out corporal or verbal punishment when locals underperform. The Japanese were consequently disliked for their harshness, but the people had adapted to their policies to some degree. The local populations may have resented the enforcement of Japanese policies, but the young benefited greatly and their generation educated under the Japanese acquired a worldview and skillset large enough to use in later life, enabling them to rise in society after the Japanese occupation. The Japanese also put premium on local indigenous population in business over Chinese immigrants (Trager 1971: 48).

Children went to school were trained not only to pick up useful skills but also to dislike colonial power. The instances of torture and rape carried out by the Japanese were however not lost on the indigenous population. They were smart enough to realize that the Japanese were not any better. Japan gave Southeast Asia indigenous learning options and populations in some countries like Indonesia largely went along with Japanese schemes. The Pembela Tanah Air or National Volunteer Army of Indonesia was a showcase of this aforementioned phenomenon. It still has an impact today, being formative of the core of the Indonesian army, and synthesizing earlier structures of the former colonial, militia, and auxiliary armies. This illustration shows how Japanese policies also empowered the local population as they also pursued imperial goals. Officials worked in the various administrative branches set up by the Japanese. Experiences they obtained became very valuable in the future. Other elements in society refused to collaborate and joined

the resistance, especially when they were supplemented with outside help. In the Philippines, resistance was very pronounced.

### **III. Indigenous reactions of identity construction**

#### **3.1 Accommodation and Resistance**

This was the most important factor that shaped the Southeast Asian identity marker. As people and nations were subjugated, they responded to pressures imposed on them by Japan. In the oscillation between accommodation and resistance, indigenous Southeast Asian identity was being shaped. Some countries were allowed to obtain a degree of independence, and this required indigenous administration. The Thai were able to retain a certain degree of power and avoided exploitation. Despite the project named Thai-Burma railroad, no Thai labored and died in the construction. In a way, this was consistent with Japanese policy to leave indigenous populations under its own institutions as much as possible. However, the pressure on the population and the deterioration of the economic and social conditions caused increasing resentment and dislike of the Japanese (Sabihah Osman, Muhammad Hadi Abdullah & Sabullah Hj Hakiq 1995: 106). Accommodation and resistance both carried in them the germ of Southeast Asian self-awareness and the obligation to master one's own destiny.

In 1943, some Thai began to organize and work on the Free Siamese movement, inspired by the Free French movement by De Gaulle in France and supported by the American OSS and the British Force 136 who sent in agents (Bunyaket 2009: 94). Others were not as lucky as support was absent. The failure of the Albert Kwok rebellion in what is now Sabah was a painful case (Hall 2009: 94). The Allied power was just too far away for the rebellion to succeed. History might have taken another turn had support been closer. Where Allied power was close, there resistance succeeded. Yet, everywhere in Southeast Asia, accommodation was also important. In Manila, President Quezon personally explained to Jose P. Laurel that he should cooperate with the Japanese if needed. Quezon also asked Laurel to preserve the unity of the country and



protect its population (Jose 2006: 111). Somehow, those administrators left behind after the displacement of colonial power dealt with the Japanese and had to juggle between accommodation and resistance.

Aung San is an example. In Myanmar, the Japanese created the Burmese Defense Army and appointed Aung San as commander (Trager 1971: 105). These troops were drawn from the Brunei Independence Army (Trager 1971: 106). Heavily controlled by Japan, these troops later rebelled against the empire. Other locals were brought up in the spirit of resistance. The importance of these elements on the future of Southeast Asian identity and even of national history was not sufficiently been investigated and researched in the region. Some level of gratitude was visible, but largely people felt used and abused believing in a dream of brotherhood and independence that Japan did not fulfill. Even independence in Indonesia was not given but only promised until after the war ended. Indonesians had to take their freedom on their own. In Thailand, the local strong man Phibun negotiated from a position of some strength with the Japanese and this resulted in territorial gains for the country and massive popular support. However, after the war, these territorial gains were lost after the Japanese defeat. Thailand gave back the territories it gained in exchange for its entry into the United Nations.

The Japanese tried to appoint capable Japanese personnel in key positions of the administration, but allowed local population to work as administrators in the local regions (Trager 1971: 47). There also seemed to have been little choice. There just weren't enough Japanese administrators around in the war years. In the case of the Philippines, the degree of accommodation was far lower as resistance was mainly adopted. Logistically supported by the USA, the Philippine army continued to resist and the struggle provided legitimacy to some political figures decades after the Japanese occupation. In certain areas, the population and leadership changed sides after the Japanese were defeated or began to look defeated. Opportunism was also key. The local population was largely unskilled and the Japanese brought skill through their schools and even labor projects. The colonial powers supporting resistance also

brought in skills development to those willing to learn, and this indicated that the indigenous population was consequently trained. The balance therefore between accommodation and resistance was quite complex. For instance, Thailand was an ally of Japan, but after the war, Phibun adapted the Thai policy of Westernization and veered away from eating with hands as a way of avoiding Japanese customs (Stowe 1991: 232).

Resistance was an issue. The British set up Force 136 set to operate in Malaya, Siam, Burma and areas of Indochina where it directed pockets of resistance. The British worked with both the Burmese and the Karen. However, the Christian Karen were pro-British but anti-Burmese and anti-Japanese (Allen 1984: 575). British or American organized interventions meshed with indigenous counter-elite or elite resistance yielded smooth take-overs. This was not the case in North Borneo where Tom Harrisson and the Australian Services Reconnaissance Department mobilized the Dayak tribes and where there was said to be more fragmentation of identity. *Agas* and *Semut* were the military operations mounted by Australian and British secret troops in 1944 to more professionally organize and take up the resistance against the Japanese (Harrisson 1959: 140-141). The Japanese were disliked by most of the Dayak tribes while the Malays took a more subdued attitude (Gin 1999: 70). This did not last. The promises of the Japanese turned out to be just that: hollow promises that had no real importance and were used to facilitate the exploitation of Southeast Asia for the Japanese war effort. Even the Malay who were initially accommodating to the Japanese ended up feeling neglected (Barber 2012: 141). Yet in all these, one thing was clear. Southeast Asians all resisted against the Japanese when the opportunity presented itself. Opportunism and realization of self-interest, as well as political awareness, pervaded across Southeast Asia in the harsh years of the war.

### **3.2. Commemoration, Portrayal and Collective Remembrance**

The hardships brought about by the extraction of resources for purposes of war and the infliction of self-sufficiency policy, as well as the suffering, abuse, and torture dragged on. Increasingly desperate, the Japanese often vented out their frustrations on the Southeast

Asians. The extraction of foodstuffs from the local population to Japanese soldiers increased during the later years of the war. This fueled the hatred and struggle against the Japanese, replacing initial accommodation from the public. Not all of the Southeast Asians wanted this policy but many did. The defeat of the Japanese in 1945 led to the outburst of resentment against Japan. Had after all Japan not promised development but given only extraction and defeat?

The Japanese occupation is generally remembered for the cruelty of the Japanese, the extraction of resources. Memorials show this element of local suffering. There is also however a smattering of positivity as many states show reluctance in knowing that what they learned during the occupation served them well against the returning colonial powers. Many years have gone by and World War II is increasingly fading from personal and national memory. The state collectivity used the war as a nation building monument and largely ignored the Japanese when accommodation might be seen as collaboration. The Japanese of course had to be portrayed as an evil power as they also contributed to this through their ruthlessness. All these events instilled a form of remembrance of the Japanese era. There is also some irony in the remembrance of the era. Many feel that the struggle was hard to avoid and Japan broke the status quo that kept the colonized in the clutches of colonial powers. The war era remains however as a time where nations determined themselves as they were either collaborating or resisting the imperial power. Ironically all these were made possible by a joint experience of occupation.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The paper started out with a very basic assumption that wartime years imprinted a similar image of Japanese colonialism that would have triggered similar reactive processes all over Southeast Asia. This may be traced in various Southeast Asian societies at least to a minor but yet discernable level. The Japanese policies issued for the whole of Southeast Asia were identified: administration, extraction of resources and imposition of self-sufficiency, and adaption of

cultural Japanization. The paper also showed how the Southeast Asian populace reacted against these policies either through accommodation or resistance. Finally, the paper explained how these responses formed national identities in relation to the commemoration of the war. The paper showed that these Japanese policies indeed had a lingering effect on Southeast Asian societies. It also pointed out that more research is needed to identify specific effects such as the degree to which pro-Japanese training or how anti-Japanese resistance catalyzed young Southeast Asians to respond and later become local leaders in politics or the army.

From a holistic viewpoint, this ambivalent attitude in Southeast Asia towards Japan is very prevalent. Japan shaped Southeast Asia during these war years through Japanese extraction policies and the indigenous responses were triggered because of this. The militarism of Japan was perceived negatively but its policies also opened up industrial or economic activities. In countries where colonial administration was largely continued after the war, or where colonial experience was not viewed as entirely negative, the Japanese were negatively perceived as having displaced the former colonial power.

The reaction of the local population against the Japanese formed the elites that Southeast Asia had for many decades that followed. In certain countries, some were accommodating and in others, resisting. Clearly, there was a strain of opportunism and a pragmatic taking advantage of furthering the national interests. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia forced the Southeast Asian colonized nations to view their individual colonial experiences in perspective and to make a decisive choices of either going for or against the Japanese. Either way, the choice benefited them positively as rational leaders in developing societies. To an extent, lessons learned during the Japanese occupation became the seed in beginning the modernization of Southeast Asian governmental procedures. In this process, the Japanese cannot be considered to have developed Southeast Asia, but they did bring something different to Southeast Asia in providing the region an alternative model of government besides from the colonial. This then allowed the local population to think critically about the colonial repressive system.


Finally, the Japanese occupation changed the balance of power in Southeast Asia. This ended the colonial era through the import of opportunities for self-development of Southeast Asian, either in accommodating or resisting the Japanese. In doing so, pride and self-reliance, however frail, were infused in Southeast Asia as it evolved a nucleus of regional identity. The Japanese occupation was a collective, Southeast Asian experience. That occupation ended abruptly with the announcement of the Japanese surrender. The end of the Japanese occupation triggered the race of developing Southeast Asian nations to progress and modernity. In that race, some may be leading while others may be lagging behind, but they are all running toward the same goal, increasingly resembling each other more and more toward a joint identity of Southeast Asians in ASEAN.

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## Southeast Asia in Japan's Spiritual Market: The Sacralization of Exoticism



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[ *Abstract* ]

From the migrant care-workers arriving in Japan from the Philippines and Indonesia to support the depleted social support system for the large population of the elderly (Ogawa 2012) to the increasing number of retiring Japanese embarking on long-stay tourism in Malaysia (Ono 2015), the Japanese image of Southeast Asia as an exotic destination offering cheap labor in return for official development assistance seems to be fading away. Yet these changes are not necessarily reflected in the way contemporary Japanese, especially those who belong to the global, “spiritual-but not-religious” (Fuller 2001) population, think of and “consume” Southeast Asia in their daily lives. Using three case-studies, spiritual tours, Thai massage, and an NGO founded by a Japanese spiritual therapist, this paper argues that in Japan's large spiritual market, which targets people seeking alternative ways to express their religiosity, the old-fashioned colonial exoticism of Southeast Asian narratives were integrated in a totalizing discourse, in which Japan remains the exceptional outlier (Tanaka 1993), a country still claimed to be “advanced” both spiritually and economically.

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**Keywords:** Spiritual Tourism, Power Spots, Japan, New Age

## I . Introduction

From the migrant care-workers arriving in Japan from the Philippines and Indonesia to support the depleted social support system for the large population of the elderly (Ogawa 2012) to the increasing number of retiring Japanese embarking on long-stay tourism in Malaysia (Ono 2015), the Japanese image of Southeast Asia as an exotic destination offering cheap labor in return for official development assistance seems to be fading away. Yet these changes are not necessarily reflected in the way contemporary Japanese, especially those who belong to the global, “spiritual-but not-religious” (Fuller 2001) population, think of and “consume” Southeast Asia in their daily lives. This paper argues that in Japan’s large spiritual (New Age<sup>1)</sup>) market, which targets people seeking alternative ways to express their religiosity, the old-fashioned exoticism of Southeast Asian narratives were integrated in a totalizing discourse, which contrasts a “traditionally spiritual Southeast Asia” to a “spiritually advanced West.” Furthermore, in this reification of the old East-West dualism, Japan remains the exceptional outlier (Tanaka 1993), a country claimed to be “advanced” both spiritually and economically. To illustrate my argument, I will discuss three case-studies: spiritual tours of Southeast Asia for Japanese tourists, the recent popularity of Thai massage in Japan, and the case of an NGO active in Cambodia co-founded by a Japanese spiritual therapist and chaneller, whom I

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1) In this paper I employ the word New Age as an umbrella term that refers to the 1960’s and 1970’s millenarian aspirations that drove many youth of the North Western hemisphere (and later around the world) to embrace alternative practices of healing, channeling, and divination in order to transform themselves into “higher spiritual beings”. Although, as Hammer notes (2010: 372), these millenarian aspirations are less common today, they can be considered to have inspired the individuals with whom I associate this word in this paper.



call here Ms. Mizushima.

The cover of the Japanese edition of *Newsweek* on May 16, 2007 bore the picture of television celebrity and self-proclaimed “spiritual counselor” Ehara Hiroyuki, with the title, “The spiritual and the Japanese: A British journalist explores the spirit boom and the gap in the hearts of the Japanese”. Inside the magazine, author Colin Joyce reports that despite several media phenomena centered on occult themes and practices (an area recently called “occulture” [see Partridge 2013]) occurring in post-war Japan (most prominently in the 1970’s with the arrival of spoon-bending Uri Geller and the publication of *the Great Prophecies of Nostradamus*<sup>2)</sup>), “it is the first time that someone like Ehara becomes accepted into mainstream society and receives the support of the youth<sup>3)</sup>” (Joyce 2007: 48). Indeed, on that year, it may have seemed that the so-called “spiritual boom” had reached its peak, with Ehara’s weekly televised spiritualist sessions, where he would call on the guardian spirit of the celebrity guests to receive advice on their past and future lives. The program was broadcast nationwide on Saturday evenings, during the so-called primetime slot of 8 to 9 pm. Newspapers also reported on the popularity of local events such as spiritual conventions (*supikon*), where booth after booth, channelers, spiritual healers, and fortune-tellers, such as Ms. Mizushima, offered services for a few thousand yen in the hope that some of these clients would come for a more expensive session at their private salon. A book published the same year by another journalist Isomura Kentarō reported that ten Japanese cities hosted a *supikon* and the one held in Tokyo gathered approximately 1,300 visitors every two to three months (Isomura 2007: 58).

The popularity of such alternative healing and magico-religious

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2) Gotō, Ben. 1973. *Nostradamus no dai yogen*. Tokyo: Shodensha.

3) Joyce is wrong in this claim because the 1970’s occult boom was probably as mainstream and as youth-supported as the recent “spiritual boom”.

practices can be located along a pervasive modern interest in what has been called “metaphysical religion”, a “religion (that) turns on an individual’s experience of ‘mind’” (Albanese 2007: 6) or “modern spirituality”, which is “central to what is presented as both alternative to empty secular and religious life... (and) seems to allow people to pursue their secular goals in career and life within deeply disciplining institutions without being too stressed or depressed...(because) it leads to feeling comfortable with it (one’s life) from an experience of spirituality, however produced”(van der Veer 2009: 1116). Practitioners such as Ms. Mizushima, who I will talk about later in this paper, entered this “spiritual business” (see Gaitanidis 2011) because of personal dissatisfaction with their lifestyles (see Gaitanidis and Murakami 2014). However, their understanding of the spiritual is still “shaped by their participation in institutional fields that define appropriate ways to encounter and speak of the spiritual, and its religious, aesthetic, and scientific realities” (Bender 2010: 44). Since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of these institutional fields which shaped the definition of “spirituality” consisted of the global network of translations of books and self-help manuals that created an impact on the interpretation of personal religious experiences, from the United States to Western Europe and to Japan (see Yoshinaga 2015). This network has now expanded into the world of television and internet media, provoking several “booms”<sup>4)</sup> (as they are called in Japan) of public interest, the last of which was, most appropriately, called the “spiritual boom” (*supirichuaru būmu*) or Ehara boom, named after the aforementioned Ehara Hiroyuki.

Although this spiritual business in today’s Japan can be sometimes seen as an extension of mainly American and European

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4) Some researchers tried to separate chronologically these media booms using keywords often used in popular outlets at each of these periods, such as, for example, the occult (*okaruto*) boom in the 1970’s, the fortune-telling (*uranai*) boom in the 1980’s, the healing (*iyashi*) boom of the 1990’s, and the spiritual boom of the 2000’s (see, for example, Ichiyanagi 2006).

contemporary spirituality culture (Gaitanidis 2011), it has also integrated, sometimes through the Western route and sometimes directly, Asian beliefs and practices, albeit re-interpreted through a modern spirituality lens. Examples of these re-interpretations are sojourns into Ayurveda medicine to Thai massage, and even to entirely new, “hybrid” techniques, such as the so-called “pranic healing”, an allegedly “highly evolved and tested system of energy medicine by Grandmaster Choa Kok Sui (a Chinese Filipino) that utilizes *prana* to balance, harmonize and transform the body's energy processes”.<sup>5)</sup> Earlier research has discussed claims by practitioners of these “spiritual therapies” who dismiss fortune-telling, a more pervasive and larger business sector in Japan (see Martin 2009), as simple statistics (Gaitanidis 2012: 371), despite the fact that spiritual therapists and hand- or tarot-readers often share spaces in popular healing and spiritual fairs. Indeed, it could be said that much of the “spiritual” involves healing, therapy, and an alternative lifestyle, in contrast to the regular visits to the fortune-teller who would usually answer “mundane” questions such as “when I will be able to marry?” and “what is a lucky name for my newborn baby?” These claims of superiority on the part of the spiritual therapists also form, I would argue, part of the counter-cultural narratives of modern spirituality, the currents of globalization of which are based on the promise of, as already noted, alternatives to both institutionalized religion and secularism, and, by extension, of alternative lifestyles, free of capitalist needs, social pressures, and mundane issues.

It would certainly not be an exaggeration to say that the cradle of sources on which these alternative narratives have been inspired from since the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the colonies (see for example, Owen 2008), and particularly the Orient as it was re-imagined by the (Christian) colonial powers in their “attempts not so much to

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5) See <http://pranichealing.com/explore> (accessed April 10, 2016). Pranic healing was popularized through Choa Kok Sui's book, *Miracles Through Pranic Healing*, first published in 1987.

convert people to Christianity but to find a universal morality or spirituality in other religious traditions” (van der Veer 2009: 1103). Today, these colonial narratives have returned to the Orient, and hence, to Japan, a former colonizer, and a producer, as I argue in this paper, of its own alternative narratives towards popular spiritual destinations, such as Sedona or Hawaii in the United States, but also towards its former colonies in Southeast Asia. In other words, it is neither that Southeast Asia in this paper is treated as a unique case of the spiritualization of exoticism by Japanese spiritually-minded visitors, nor that the three case-studies discussed below are considered to be representative of the modern spiritual arena in Japan. The existence of these Japanese narratives bears particular meaning and provides an interesting illustration of how colonial discourse-driven imagery of an allegedly spiritually exotic Southeast Asia can be found today within the cradle of modern spiritual sources, namely the Orient, where it combines local contemporary discourses of spirituality with old ghosts of imperialist rhetoric.

Indeed, Japan’s spiritual business includes a wealth of spiritual tours, with Indonesia and Thailand occupying today the top two destinations (after the still unbeatable Sedona, in Arizona, and Hawaii in the United States). The cover of *Travel Guide of the Power Spots in the World*<sup>6)</sup>, a one-off magazine publication of 2010, shows the names of three destinations, Sedona, Hawaii and Bali, as “the world’s three greatest power spots that can be visited in 5 days 3 nights”. Subsequently, Sedona was explained as a location where “the Yavapai Indians have opened several doors between the world of the gods and our world” (p.13); Hawaii was described as an island filled with legends and with the footprints of Ancient Hawaiians (p.51), while readers were reminded that Bali is often referred to as “the island of the gods: (p.73). Considering that many

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6) This is the subtitle of the magazine. The Japanese title translates as *Guide of Power Spots in Japan and the World* (Nihon to sekai no pawā supotto gaido).

of the photos and descriptions in this and other Japanese magazines on power spots<sup>7)</sup> borrow the viewpoint of American photographer and popular website [www.sacredsites.com](http://www.sacredsites.com) owner Martin Gray, it would seem that local Japanese voices do not particularly stand out in this colonial rhetoric. Yet, this is not always the case. In this instance, for example, the small print assumingly targeting the Japanese reader often hints as to a distinction between Southeast Asian destinations and the rest of the world. Indeed, under the title page of Bali, a few lines read as follows: “elderly visitors are heard saying that if it were not for the palm trees, Bali looks like old Japan. Is there a connection with Japan? When in Bali, there is something that resounds inside our hearts” (p.72). In order to explore, therefore, the role played by Southeast Asia in contemporary Japanese “spiritual” imagery, I shall first delve into a brief analysis of the region as a “spiritual destination” for contemporary Japanese.

## II . Japanese view of Southeast Asia: poor, exotic...and spiritual?

In his seminal study of Japan's relations with Southeast Asia, Ken'ichi Goto argued that the Greater East Asia War was not a war to liberate the colonies, but an attempt to reorganize colonies with Japan as the leader. “Japan viewed Southeast Asia as an area possessing great wealth in the form of unexploited resources that Japan needed, as a region politically suffering under the harsh rule of Western colonialism, and as an area where the people had only reached a very low stage of development. With this Japanese perception of Southeast Asia, Japan justified its southward advance using the slogan, Return to Asia” (Goto 2003: 23). Indeed, at a recent exhibition of the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo<sup>8)</sup>, a

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7) Such as volume 4 of Voice Style special issue magazine entitled *200 Power Spots* and published in 2009.

8) *Visit Japan: Tourism Promotion in the 1920s and 1930s*, January 9 to February 28, 2016 ([http://www.momat.go.jp/archives/english/am/exhibition/visit\\_japan/index.htm](http://www.momat.go.jp/archives/english/am/exhibition/visit_japan/index.htm))

poster advertising Dai Nippon Airways (the forerunner of the Japan Airlines) dated 1940 showed a large aircraft of the company flying over a map of Southeast Asia, with the shadow of the aircraft covering most of the region. Underneath the shadow, Southeast Asia appears as a uniform area (there are no country borders or city names) in a sand-like yellow color. Here and there, rivers and groves are depicted, as well as “exotic” animals such as an elephant (in northern Thailand), a cobra (somewhere north of Kuala Lumpur) and a crocodile (in East Kalimantan). Some people are also shown scattered around the region, two of them half naked, and the other in what may be assumed as “traditional attire”, fishing, playing music, or dancing. Finally, accompanying this image of “untouched” wilderness and “under-development,” and as if to confirm Goto’s argument, icons representing gold (in southern Philippines), coffee (all along Indonesia) and petroleum (in east Borneo) complete a Southeast Asia waiting to be “freed” and explored by the Japanese tourists of the time.

A quick look through online brochures of spiritual tours to Southeast Asia offered in Japan seems to affirm that this view of the region as that of “untouched tradition and nature” persists even today. For example, a list of top 50 world “power-spots” or locations where visitors can go to replenish their “energies”, in a popular website for “experienced travelers” (*ryokō no tatsujin*), ranked Myanmar’s Golden Rock and Bagan at 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, Tanah Lot and Borobudur Temples at 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, Angkor Wat at 10<sup>th</sup>, and, finally, Wat Phra Kew and Phi Phi Island at 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>9). AB-ROAD, another website claiming to be Japan’s largest search-and-compare web engine of travel and tours to foreign destinations, lists 68 spiritual tours. The website shows that the two most popular destinations appear to be Hawaii and Chennai (in South India). Its list also includes the following: 6 tours to Indonesia (3 in Bali where

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9) <http://ryoko-tatsujin.net/world-recommended/15856/> (accessed April 10, 2016).

visitors are invited to buy power stones, bells and singing bowls, take photos of their aura at a local Japanese therapy salon, and try out the local spa; a tour to Surakarta to experience the traditions of Islam; a tour to Tana Toraja to see the Toraja tribe; and a tour to Borobudur); 4 tours to Singapore (2 tours to Little India to try out Indian fortunetelling, a tour to China Town to experience the “mismatch of different architectures”, and a tour to a Sikh temple to experience Sikh altruism by tasting the food distributed for free to all visitors); a tour in Cambodia to have a taste of Cambodian divination; and a tour in Myanmar, to observe the strict rules, particularly concerning women, of Theravada Buddhism<sup>10</sup>). Save for Singapore where the spiritual tourist is invited to try out Indian, Chinese and Sikh spiritual experiences and never any “Singaporean” one, the rest of the destinations are either related to nature (power stones, spa) or related to “local” religious cultures, such as visits to centuries-old temples and experiencing local divination techniques.

It appears therefore that even in this new spirituality culture of tourism, where the individualization of religion has led to the reinvention, (re)discovery, and re-imagination of certain locations as spiritual power spots (Okamoto 2015: 151-181), Southeast Asia has joined other locations around the world described as destinations of exotic untouched nature and untouched religious traditions. Yet, if our analysis stops here, it would come short of revealing how this imagery of Southeast Asia reveals a very significant aspect of modern spirituality, that of a cultural ethnocentrism by which certain religious traditions considered as old and representative of a certain culture are *selectively* integrated in the modern spirituality discourse, with the hope of re-categorizing them along a spiritual hierarchy that reinforces existing political views. In fact, I argue here that this selective “spiritualization” of an exotic and traditional Southeast Asia mirrors a similar phenomenon in Japan. Indeed, the

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10) [www.ab-road.net/kw/海外スピリチュアルツアー/guide/](http://www.ab-road.net/kw/海外スピリチュアルツアー/guide/) (accessed April 10, 2016)

1995 terrorist attack in Tokyo by the new religious group Aum Shinrikyō led to an exacerbation of existing mistrust towards institutional religion, though some of these “traditional religions” escaped criticism by being relabeled “spiritual”. Some Shinto shrines have become power spots (Kan 2010) and several Zen temples also act as yoga and meditation centers (Borup 2015), having thus reached “the same status and quality as the globally circulating New Age spirituality” (Horie 2013: 100).

This transfer of the Japanese phenomenon of cultural ethnocentrism through selective spiritualization of “traditional” religion to Southeast Asia can be said to have happened under the influence of the “New Asianism” which arose in Japan in the 1980’s. The thorough analysis of this New Asianism complicates, indeed, the recent image of Asia in Japan by identifying at least three normative positions: Asia as Japan (or Asia as a vehicle of reproduction for Japan), Japan in Asia [“a therapeutic project aimed at healing past wounds through contrition and building communities of trust and direct human interaction” (Avenell 2014: 1598)], and Asia for Japan (or an in-between position which downplays the existence of an Asia community, but recognizes the necessity of regional cooperation and engagement). Among the three positions, the cultural nationalism of the Asia-as-Japan discourse stands out as the strongest remnant of war ideology, albeit modified to fit the new economic situation of Japan in Asia. Some theorists, as Avenell describes, came to imagine Asia “as a fantastic mixture of the “pre-modern,” the “modern,” and the “hyper-modern,” all of which reacted, “giving off sparks,” to produce the “fascination” of a “wonderland” far more authentic than the ordered monotony of urban life in contemporary Japan” (ibid: 1610). Paradoxically, therefore, together with that of a region with large sex industries (see Leheny 2006: 89), Southeast Asia by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century acquired a “feeling of spiritual authenticity”, as the English description



of a Bali yoga and healing tour advertised by a local Japanese tourist office, shows below:

There are many power spots and superb view spots in Bali surrounded by Indian Ocean, and it has been called an 'Island of magnificent energy' and 'God's island' since long time ago. Yoga lessons are really popular to purify body and mind. Balinese people believe Bali Hinduism and pray every day to keep tradition of healing.<sup>11)</sup>

### III. Orientalization of orientalism and the psychologization of Thai massage

Of course, photos of blue lagoons, yoga, or meditation postures in front of a sunset beach or a Hindu temple, and semi-naked models facing down on a massage table, confirm that the staged authority of promotional markers of Southeast Asia, namely nature, tradition, and alternative therapy, are maybe as old as modern tourism itself. And these markers are not only used to advertise tourist destinations, but also the practice of allegedly "authentic" Southeast Asian therapies in Japan as well. A representative example of this is the relatively recent popularity of Thai massage in urban centers such as Tokyo, where neon signs advertising "traditional Thai massage" (*koshiki tai massāji*) promise passers-by to relieve them not only from headaches, lower back pain, or stiff shoulders, but also from stress, anxiety, and sometimes even hysteria<sup>12)</sup>.

The Japan Thai Massage Association was founded in September 2001 and has since grown exponentially. For example, Wai Wai Thailand, a Japanese portal website for information on Thailand, currently lists 1,099 salons offering Thai massage nationwide<sup>13)</sup>. In

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11) <http://www.bali-spa-hirochan.com/hi-yog/english.html> (accessed April 10, 2016)

12) See for example, the English page of the NPO, Traditional Thai Massage Association, Japan (<http://traditional-thai-massage.com/effection/index.htm>, accessed April 10, 2016)

the yearly *Therapy All Guide (TAG)*, a magazine published since 1997 and annually compiling the most popular alternative therapies and salons, Thai massage appeared for the first time in the 2002 edition, in an article sponsored by the Japan Thai Massage Association. The article informs us that Thai massage is a traditional type of massage founded 2,500 years ago by the personal doctor of Buddha himself, Shivaga Komarpaj, who was inspired by both Hindu and Chinese medicines. The author further reports on two specific advantages of Thai massage, described as a perfect balance of finger-pressure massage, stretching and chiropractic (*setai*), and is influenced by Buddhism that helps achieve the relaxation by way of the spiritual state of perfect selflessness (*muga no kyōchi*) (TAG 2002: 76). The 2007 edition of the same magazine contains the same text, although the original and rather simple title of “Thai massage” was replaced by the more eye-catching “A Traditional Therapy Leading to Spiritual Selflessness (*Muga no kyōchi e michibiku dentō ryōhō*)” (TAG 2007: 90). Five years later however, in the 2012 edition of the *Therapy All Guide*, the tone of the double-page feature on Thai massage changed.

In 2012, the article was retitled “A Healing Art that Helps Your Breathing”. A brief description under the title reads: “Thai massage leads both the client and the masseur to a healthier life and that is why it is also called a ‘healing art’. Recently it has attracted the attention of elderly care and rehabilitation professionals, as well as athletes. In our stressful society, Thai massage makes people feel better, and is therefore bound to become more demanded” (TAG 2012: 52). Another difference with previous editions is that the article is not sponsored by the Japan Thai Massage Association, but by the Shibuya Nuara Life School, the Japanese branch of International Training Massage School, a Thai massage educational institution based in Chiang Mai.<sup>14)</sup> As Thai massage, therefore, has escaped the

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13) <http://www.waiwaithailand.com/shoplist/massage.html> (accessed April 10 2016)

original route of transmission from Thailand to Japan, it is perhaps no surprise that it has also undergone a certain degree of psychologization (Rose 1998: 59-60), which characterizes modern spirituality and which can be clearly demonstrated by the substantial decrease of body-based therapies against an increase of mind-based therapies throughout the fifteen editions of *Therapy All Guide* from 1997 to 2013 (Gaitanidis 2013). What is maybe more surprising, however, is that, like modern yoga (Singleton 2010) and Ayurveda (Langford 2002), contemporary Thai massage is a product of global modern spirituality, and not a 2,500 year-old tradition.

Indeed, as Junko Iida shows, the whole-body Thai massage involving balance, harmony, and the revitalization of spiritual energies, was a 1990's product of transnational encounters among three groups of actors: "Eastern"-oriented Europeans and North-Americans, who found similarities between Thai massage and yoga, "foreign"-oriented Thais, who aimed to benefit from foreigners' Orientalist imaginations and expectations, and the Thai urban middle class, who have been influenced by the globalizing culture of healthism" (Iida 2013: 105-106). As we can learn from Iida's study, Thai massage was introduced to a Western audience through a book first published in 1990 by Harald Brust, better known as Asokananda, a German who had originally learned yoga and meditation in Sri Lanka from an American Buddhist monk. In the 1980's, Asokananda moved to Chiang Mai to learn Thai massage because he found it had similarities with yoga, something that influenced his emphasis on the Indian origins of Thai massage. Iida argues, however, that Asokananda's translation (or mistranslation) of *sen*, the Thai massage concept referring to the part of the body that causes pain or stiffness when it is tensed or shifted out of alignment, into "energy line" in English, integrated Thai massage into the global imaginary of "ancient oriental" healing methods (ibid.: 95-96). As a

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14) <http://www.itmthaimassage.com/> (accessed April 10, 2016)

result, Thai massage was standardized by the Thai government along similar lines to Asokananda's understanding of the technique, and later exported to non-Western countries such as Japan. Worthy of note here is that Ōtsuki Kazuhiro, the president of the Japan Thai Massage Association and alleged importer of Thai massage to Japan, says on the association's official homepage that he learned Thai massage in 1988, from Sombat Tapanya, a psychologist at Chiang Mai University<sup>15</sup>).

This orientalizing of the Orient, in the case of Thai massage, or easternization of the East, as Borup (2015) calls it in his discussion of Zen and spirituality in contemporary Japan, complicates further the spiritualization of Southeast Asia in the Japanese imagination, because certain aspects of Southeast Asia reached Japan *after* having been sifted through a Western orientalist filter that renders them simultaneously more "exotic" and also more "Western," hence exasperating, in a sense, a reification of the old East-West dualism in which Japan remains the exceptional outlier, neither Western nor Eastern (Tanaka 1993). Yet, this analysis of the imagery of Southeast Asia in Japan's new spirituality culture would not be complete without a third vector in this complex network of hegemonic and orientalist discourses. Indeed, if some spiritual therapists see Southeast Asia as a hub of "authentic spirituality" mirroring their own search for an "authentic spiritual tradition", and as an alternative source of alternative therapeutic techniques seemingly unique, but actually already adapted to the global market of modern spirituality, some may also see the region as a locus of action, where they can ultimately colonize Southeast Asian spirituality through an utterly modern nationalist discourse of "religionless" Japanese spirituality. It is to this aspect that the next and final section of this paper is dedicated to, through an analysis of the case of Ms. Mizushima, a spiritual therapist, not dissimilar to the rest of therapists active today

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15) [http://thaimassage.jp/menu\\_01.html](http://thaimassage.jp/menu_01.html) (accessed April, 10, 2016)

in Japan, but holder of an interesting list of professional activities that include the management of a non-governmental organization in Cambodia.

#### **IV. Teaching “proper” religion through “spiritual” means: a spiritual therapist in development work**

Ms. Mizushima is 55 years old, single, and lives in a spare room that she turned into a healing salon, on the ground floor of the mansion of a popular film and television drama director in the outskirts of Tokyo. She moved in fifteen years ago, when the owner of the mansion, convinced of her healing powers during a trip together to Okinawa, invited her to open her practice at his home. Although it is still early in the day, the curtains are closed and the room is only dimly lit up. As Ms. Mizushima shows me inside, I see a bed at the back, which she uses for the clients during her spiritual therapy sessions, and a small desk with two chairs. The place smells of a mixture of flower essences and the walls are covered with pictures and drawings of various deities from the Buddhist and Hindu pantheon. There are also other types of drawings, some looking like psychedelic art, and some photos of Ms Mizushima herself, in what I assume is Cambodia, the reason I came to interview her. Indeed, from what I had read in a women's magazine dedicated to spirituality, Ms. Mizushima founded with two other Japanese women an NGO that supports local Cambodian production and manufacturing of silk garments for export to Japan. This is a relatively rare case among over 70 Japanese therapists, similar to Ms. Mizushima, who I have interviewed in the past six years. Although some of these “spiritual therapists”, may be contributing regular donations to various types of social support organizations, rarely had I seen anyone personally engaged in community-based development work.

In other aspects, however, Ms. Mizushima is no different from the rest of the spiritual therapists I have interviewed in the past. Born in 1961, by the age of 26 she had reached the rank of brand chief in a fashion designer company in central Tokyo. She remembers those times as times of excess: long hours of work, a lot of money but not much happiness. At the time, she starts visiting fortune-tellers and is led to a seminar of holotropic breathwork, a type of breathing technique deriving from transpersonal psychology and assumed to have therapeutic effects among New Age circles. She is “hooked”, as she said to me, and joins regular sessions, during which her trance states lead her to visions of what she believes to be her past lives where she appears as, sometimes, a Tibetan monk, and sometimes a Spanish witch later killed in the witch hunts of the Middle Ages. However, as Japan’s bubble economy burst in the beginning of the 1990’s, Ms. Mizushima starts feeling at odds with her workplace’s changing policies, and decides to quit. She then embarks on a spiritual tour to Egypt, where she attends several meditation sessions with Kevin Ryerson, a channeler mostly made famous in the book of American actress Shirley MacLaine, *Out on a Limb* (1983), a sort of New Age “bible”.

On her return from Egypt in 1992, Ms. Mizushima starts having channeling contacts with several divinities, some of them Buddhist. She starts participating in various meditation circles around the country and becomes involved in New Age events, from music concerts with Japanese trumpeter Kondo Toshinori, to spiritual talks with the Dalai Lama, whom she heard speak to her directly in her head. It is in one of these events where she meets Gayuna Cealo, a Japanese monk ordained in the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Myanmar. Cealo, she claims, inspired her to put her heart into practice (*kokoro o jikko suru*), and led her to establish with two friends an NGO in Cambodia. Considering the long history of Japanese involvement in development projects in Myanmar,

Cambodia, and other countries of Southeast Asia (see Peng Er 2013), Ms. Mizushima's decision is not surprising, but when she became the author of a series of articles in which she linked her spirituality to her development work, I was intrigued to find out how she conceived of this link between her profession as a healer and her view of Southeast Asia.

Ms. Mizushima's first contact with Cambodia and her ensuing interpretation of Southeast Asian spirituality seems to have originated and continues to be influenced by Cealo Gayuna. Ms Mizushima met Cealo in Heart Expo 2004<sup>16)</sup>, a weeklong international event organized in Kagawa, Japan, by the Non-Profit Organization *Cealo Global Harmony Japan*. Participating as a volunteer, Ms. Mizushima found Cealo's message of "you can apply your heart anywhere" (*kokoro o dokodemo jikko dekiru*) inspiring, and later followed him for a tour to Cambodia. Since then, she often accompanies Cealo to Sedona, where Cealo gives talks and offers individual séances<sup>17)</sup> through his *Foundation for Global Harmony*, based in Evanston, Illinois. Cealo's foundations organize meditation events and public speeches, as well as hot-spring retreats for both Japanese and non-Japanese since 2011.

Convinced by Cealo that "just being spiritual is not enough", Ms. Mizushima related that she decided to put her spirituality into practice and, with the two women she met on her first trip to Cambodia with Cealo, founded a Non-Profit Organization (NPO) in 2008. The NPO has so far mainly managed a small project in a village of the Prek Veng province, in the south of the country. There,

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16) <http://cealo-ngo.org/record/HE1.htm> (accessed April, 10, 2016)

17) Stewart M Hoover's *Religion in the Media Age* discusses briefly the case of Priscilla, an American woman who has been following Cealo's sessions both live and on the internet, spurring Hoover to make the argument that Cealo's web-based ministry is not based on the authenticity of a Buddhist tradition (he used to be after all a Japanese businessman), but on the kind of exploratory spirituality that is conveyed through his accessibility on the Internet (Hoover 2006: 138).

Ms. Mizushima and her friends support the manufacture of silk clothes that are then purchased by one of the NPO co-founders, who resells them to the Japanese fashion industry.

Asked on what she thought about Cambodia, Ms. Mizushima compared it first to Okinawa, where, she argued, “original spirituality” had started being corrupted by the opening of the place to urban development and tourism. She even went as far as claiming that, in Cambodia, it was maybe “thanks to the military junta that the modern lifestyle only came later (*gunji seiken atta okagede modan na seikatsu ga haitte konakatta*)”, and thus allowed the Buddhist temples to “keep their original energy”. Asked further on her thoughts about her work in Cambodia, Ms. Mizushima presented a rather paradoxical analysis of the role the Japanese are supposed to play in the country. On the one hand, she criticized the entire Southeast Asia for being jealous of the Japanese for having reached such a state of wealth and happiness, without understanding how hard the Japanese work to earn money. But, she also blamed Japan for sending such an image through anime and popular culture rather than through documentaries, such as Project X<sup>18)</sup>, that demonstrate Japanese craftsmanship. But, when talking about the contributions that Japan can make in terms of spirituality, Ms. Mizushima’s analysis becomes difficult to follow: on the one hand, she blamed Japanese Buddhism for having become too commercialized, but, on the other hand, she believed that most Cambodian monks are corrupt and, therefore, cannot teach children “proper Buddhism”. For this reason, therefore, she said that she had also volunteered in the past for a Japanese NGO that makes children books to teach

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18) *Project X: Challengers* was aired between March 2000 and December 2005 on NHK. The show reenacted the trials and triumphs of technical innovators of postwar Japan, such as the inventors of the VHS, the bullet train or the LCD television. Shimoda has argued that Project X romanticizes the collectivism of Japan’s militarized past and “praises the war’s positive, if unintended, yield, thus redeeming the wartime experience and making it more palatable” (Shimoda 2013:248-248)



“correct Buddhism” (*tadashii bukkyō*) to Cambodian children.

Ms. Mizushima's engagement in Cambodia as a spiritual therapist could be summarized in the following manner. On a personal level, she seems to be considering her participation in the development project and her volunteer work as a way to apply her spirituality in daily life, beyond the one-on-one sessions she usually conducts in her salon in Tokyo. This personal objective, however, does not extend to a deeper understanding of the local society. In our discussion, for example, she often talked of the Cambodia women in the project, as if needing constant supervision in order to make clothes that would be of appropriate quality to sell to the very demanding Japanese consumers. Based on her comments on Cambodia's religious culture, she also seems not to expect to learn anything from it, but is rather ready to teach them “correct Buddhism”. This view of Southeast Asia has undoubtedly been influenced by other Japanese she met on location, as well as, in her particular case, Cealo Gayuna himself.

As mentioned above, Cealo Gayuna used to be a Japanese business man, who in his latter life became a monk in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism. In the third book on Cealo, and first book not written by him but by two supporting members of *Cealo Global Harmony Japan*, we read that the name Cealo Gayuna comes from Cealo's original mispronunciation of two words: *Sayadaw* (meaning ‘elder’), as Burmese tended to call him, and the Sanskrit ‘*karunā*’<sup>19</sup>) (meaning ‘compassion’) (Sunami and Nishioka 2007: 15-16). In the book, we also learn that Cealo Gayuna was born in 1947, and upon graduating from high-school, he chose to become a chef, and went as far as traveling for training to France, before building a career in Japan as a specialist of Japanese traditional cuisine with a French twist (ibid.: 21). Having reached success “by counting only on

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19) Incidentally, if one searches for *karunā* on the Japanese web, most of the top results would refer to the practice of Thai massage.

himself”, in his mid-forties, Cealo meets a charismatic Indian “saint”, who changes his perspective on life. This saint is never named in the book, but according to Ms. Mizushima’s testimony, this is the famous Indian guru Sai Baba (1926-2011), who is also clearly visible in a photo of Cealo taken in his Tokyo apartment (ibid.: 17). On his way to Sai Baba’s ashram, Cealo stops by Myanmar to visit the Kyaiktiyo Pagoda over the Golden Rock (one of the destinations of the spiritual tours for Japanese tourists as mentioned above), and there, at the hotel, he receives a message from a monk who suddenly emerges out of the floor of the room and invites him to come again and make offerings for which he will be “given strength and become very popular”. After visiting India, Cealo returns to Myanmar in 1995 and meets at a temple near the Golden Rock, a Buddhist priest who welcomes him back and tells him that he had heard of him from Sai Baba himself. Cealo then is ordained at the same temple.

It is important to note here that Sai Baba and the Sathya Sai movement he founded in the immediate postwar period formed a central component of the 1960’s counter culture, and later the New Age and contemporary spirituality. The movement with an estimated following of 20 million in 2007 has been the subject of over 600 texts authored by Sai Baba, his devotees and scholars (Srinivas 2012: 184-185)<sup>20</sup>). One of the most talked about aspects of the movement, besides the allegations of corruption, fiscal management, abuse and, most famously, the faking of materializations of objects in the guru’s hands, has been its “faith-based development model”, by which he “inspired millions of his followers around the globe to take on charitable works in education, health, and healing initiatives, and in

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20) In her book-length analysis of the movement (Srinivas 2010), anthropologist Tulasi Srinivas mentions that at the time of the publication there were 1,200 Sathya Sai centers around the world, with 192 in the United States, 170 in Great Britain, and 113 in the Malaysian archipelago, Thailand and Vietnam. The Japanese webpage records 26 centers ([http://www.sathyasai.or.jp/english/html/centres\\_groups.html](http://www.sathyasai.or.jp/english/html/centres_groups.html), accessed April, 10, 2016).

infrastructural and social development for charitable giving, philanthropy, and charitable work” (ibid.: 191). Like Cealo, and also like many of the spiritual therapists today, Sai Baba represented the epitome of modern spirituality by consciously drawing from various religious traditions, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity to produce a spiritual movement with a global appeal.

Consequently, I argue here that Cealo's direct action (what Ms. Mizushima called “put your heart into practice”) and his claim that he refuses to do religion with all the institutional and clerical baggage (Cealo 2005: 175-176) stems from a combination of Sai Baba's faith-based development model with the non-religious character of Japanese faith-based organizations which, particularly in the post-Aum period, avoided being accused of proselytism, but at the same time aimed to be “making persons” (*hitozukuri*), a term that Japanese officials involved in international aid have been promoting as uniquely Japanese (see Watanabe 2015: 276-277). In other words, Cealo employs his status of re-born (not Japanese, but Southeast Asian) Buddhist to promote a New Age-type of religion-less global spirituality that makes him an exceptional outlier both in Japan and the United States, where he seems to offer an alternative “spiritual” worldview, and in Myanmar and Cambodia, where he is the Japanese bringing “correct Buddhism”.

## V. Orientalists on orientalism

In his introduction to *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia*, Thomas Dubois writes that “(f)or many European writers of the nineteenth century, all that was essential to Asia was expressed in condensed form in its religion, particularly when compared with that of the West. Asian religion was alternately portrayed as decadent or spiritual, primitive or sublime, depending as much as anything else on how the writer felt

about particular aspects of Christianity” (DuBois 2009: 6). In this paper, I have first argued that the spiritual Southeast Asia is created outside of Southeast Asia, in the American and Japanese spiritual markets of spiritual tours, and Thai traditional massages.

But I also claimed that this spiritualization of Southeast Asia may be said to reflect specific ethnocentric trends that form a central component of the Japanese spirituality discourse, which combines an aversion for anything religious, particularly after the Aum affair of 1995, with a long-lasting hegemonic view of Southeast Asia as the land of “untouched traditions and nature”. I have shown that the meeting of a Indian New Age guru with a Japanese businessman-later turned monk has inspired a middle-aged spiritual therapist from Japan to engage in development work in Cambodia, and export an orientalist discourse in which Japan remains the exceptional outlier, a country advanced both economically and spiritually, but sometimes seemingly prone to forgetting its heritage and, thus, needing to find it in Southeast Asia, still untouched yet corrupted by modernity. Like the “fake” Chinese magician Chung Li Soo (a.k.a. William Ellsworth Robinson) who became more famous than the “real” Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America (see Goto-Jones 2014), Cealo Gayuna, the “fake” Burmese monk who teaches “real” Japanese spirituality, demonstrates once more that “fake” and “real” lose meaning in a global orientalist discourse, where authenticity is more about performance than fact and where orientalists can be both objects and subjects of their own discourse.

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## Taking Expedience Seriously: Reinterpreting Furnivall's Southeast Asia



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### [ *Abstract* ]

Defining key characteristics of Southeast Asia requires historical interpretation. Southeast Asia is a diverse and complicated region, but some of modern history's "grand narratives" serve to unify its historical experience. At a minimum, the modern history of the region involves decisive encounters with universal religions, the rise of Western colonialism, the experience of world wars, decolonization, and the end of the "cycle of violence". The ability of the region's peoples to adapt to these many challenges and successfully build new nations is a defining feature of Southeast Asia's place in the global stage.

This paper will begin with a question: is it possible to develop a hermeneutic of "expedience" as a way to interpret the region's history? That is, rather than regard the region from a purely Western, nationalist, "internalist" point of view, it would be useful to identify a new series of interpretative contexts from which to begin scholarly analysis. In order to contextualize this discussion, the paper will draw upon the writings of figures who explored the region before knowledge

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about it was shaped by purely colonist or nationalist enterprises. To this end, particular attention will be devoted to exploring some of John Furnivall's ways of conceptualizing Southeast Asia. Investigating Furnivall, a critic of colonialism, will be done in relation to his historical situation. Because Furnivall's ideas have played a pivotal role in the interpretation of Southeast Asia, the paper will highlight the intellectual history of the region in order to ascertain the value of these concepts for subsequent historical interpretation.

Ultimately, the task of interpreting the region's history requires a framework which will move beyond the essentializing orientalist categories produced by colonial scholarship and the reactionary nation-building narratives which followed. Instead, by beginning with a mode of historical interpretation that focuses on the many realities of expedience which have been necessary for the region's peoples, it may be possible to write a history which highlights the extraordinarily adaptive quality of Southeast Asia's populations, cultures, and nations. To tell this story, which would at once highlight key characteristics of the region while showing how they developed through historical encounters, would go a long way to capturing Southeast Asia's contribution's to global development.

**Keywords:** Furnivall, Burma, Southeast Asia, political economy, Fabian and 'plural society'

## I . Introduction

Making Southeast Asia (SEA) visible to outsiders or to those who do not study it remains a challenge. The identity of regions is not always self-evident to both those who live within and the rest of humanity who do not. However, the ways in which regions have been conceptualized invariably involves not only historical dynamics and economic realities, but the needs of actors who seek to define the geographic spaces which come to be known as regions. This paper rests on the assumption that regional definition emerges from circumstances and therefore is itself open to interrogation. With respect to SEA, it seems possible that the needs of political

establishments have been relatively indifferent to the formulations or regional identity. In “Revisiting and Reconstructing Southeast Asian Characteristics”, it is important to move beyond the borders of the region and try to understand its essentializing features. The argument here is that scholarship devoted to the study of the region should be bold in pushing beyond established academic categories. Both the colonial narratives and the nationalist scholarship which followed made useful contributions to understanding SEA; additionally, the region has benefitted from scholars in Western settings (“outsiders”) as well as from practitioners who may be said to write from an “internalist” perspective. Instead, this discussion seeks to call attention to conceptualization through a historically informed study of SEA as a region, defined by the adaptive character of its indigenous populations. That is, it might be possible to write the history of the region not from the point of view of nations, but from commonalities which arise from continuous patterns of expedience—as the indigenous peoples that make up SEA adapted to the frequent and powerful external influences which had conditioned their encounters with modernity.

One might think of the historiographical approach which makes possible the tracing of the ways in which historians and other thinkers understood the region over time. This method can be easily extended to other disciplines so that the scholar’s view of SEA can be made evident. The presence of departments of Southeast Asian Studies has ensured that the academic exploration of the region has been enshrined in many universities. The assumption that often undergirds this body of scholarship is that it is ideologically committed to social improvements (Goh 2011). While all of this might be regarded as laudable, it is hardly the only avenue for trying to revisit and reconstruct SEA. In fact, if the history of academic disciplines (apart from historiography) teaches us anything, it is that the knowledge which comes from the world of the university is frequently, if not inevitably dominated by political and ideological considerations—many of them quite crude and narrow. This paper adopts a different approach: it will focus upon a key thinker to revisit the way the region was conceptualized by an influential mind.

At the heart of this discussion lies an interpretation and

re-assessment of John Sydenham Furnivall (1878-1960) whose work, especially *The Fashioning of Leviathan* (1939) and *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (1948), might be regarded as seminal texts. Students of the region will be aware that he also wrote directly about it: *Progress and welfare in Southeast Asia: a comparison of colonial policy and practice* (1941), *Problems of education in Southeast Asia* (1942), and *Educational Progress in South East Asia* (1943), all demonstrated a wide view of the region under various instances of European colonialism.

Furnivall is one of the many understudied figures who came out of British Burma and possibly the most enigmatic. Furnivall would be very influential for a generation of scholars who studied SEA in the first generation in which empires gave way to nations. Wang Gungwu remembered that Furnivall opened his eyes to the “use of social science methods to deal with Southeast Asian questions.” (2011: 68) It was Furnivall’s conception of the plural society, which followed from his studies of Dutch colonialism, that made him an essential reading for those who embarked on the academic exploration of SEA. While it is possible that Furnivall’s influence on the study of SEA peaked in the 1970’s (Lee Hock Guan 2009: 36), it is clear that scholars regard him as “essential reading”. Furnivall remains a frequently quoted and read author, but he has yet to be the subject of biographical study.

A brief sketch here must be necessary. He was born in 1878 in Essex, attended Royal Medical Benevolent College, and won a scholarship to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He arrived in Burma in 1902, and not long after married a Burmese woman, Margaret Ma Nyunt.

It would probably be fair to add that Furnivall was an activist civil servant. That is, he understood his role to be connected to the development and improvement of Burma. He would be involved with both the founding of the Burma Research Society and the subsequent development of the *Journal of Burma Research*. Julie Pham has intellectual emphasized that Furnivall’s trajectory was highly unusual. As an Indian Civil Service (ICS) man he had married a local woman, but must have been seen as a rising star in the

country administrative firmament. (2004: 242-244) Furthermore, he would convert to Buddhism, but 10 year later reconvert to Christianity. (Pham, 2004: 242) Furnivall retired to Britain in the 1930's, but unlike so many civil servants, he went to study at Leiden University. His desire to study comparative colonialism might be remembered as a small, but important point in the development of SEA studies. Here was a civil servant who moved beyond writing reflections about the country where he had played a role in governing and, instead, chose to investigate another colonial administrative system. He became a lecturer at Cambridge, and in 1940 published a Burmese-English dictionary. In 1948, he returned to Burma, bringing with him a frame of reference which drew upon the concerns of British policy makers. In the new independent Burma, he was appointed National Planning Advisor. Furnivall would be expelled from Burma by Ne Win's government in 1960. (Pham 2004: 240-244)

To put this sketch in perspective, by the time he wrote many of his key works, Furnivall had seen Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, lived through the First World War and Russian Revolution, seen British rule be challenged in India (which included Burma), and watched the rise of Japan and the emergence of totalitarianism. Furnivall arrived in Burma early enough to witness the apex of British colonialism. He also engaged the region during the period when colonial rule was increasingly challenged and then witnessed the Japanese conquests. Writing in the 1930's, he labored with the Great Depression and Japanese invasions of China in full view. In effect, Furnivall's regional perspective reflected historical circumstances. Possibly, Furnivall's brief led him back to the region as it began to successfully reject colonialism against the background of the Cold War. All told, the evolution of Furnivall's vision might be measured against the emergence of the region as a collective of independent nation-states, whose larger success was still very much affected by global political developments.

Furnivall's career, then, allowed him to see SEA from a number of vantage points. As we will see, the fact that he remained in Europe between 1931 and 1948 meant that he may have missed much about what the region was experiencing at it underwent

significant challenges and transformations. Furnivall does not seem to be sensitive to either the power of the nationalist movements which were quite visible in the region prior to World War II or the wide and irrevocable impact that the conflict had upon SEA. Future students of Furnivall ought to ponder this point carefully because these seventeen years were important—if not decisive—half generation for the region. It meant that while Furnivall was immersing himself in the study of Dutch colonial administrative practices in Leiden, his knowledge of SEA was almost certainly becoming progressively out of date.

This article takes another look at the concept of “plural society” because it had a substantial impact on the conceptualization of SEA. Furnivall famously described this condition:

In Burma, as in Java, probably the first thing that strikes the visitor is the medley of peoples—European, Chinese, Indian and native. It is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labour along racial lines. Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations. There is, as it were, a caste system, but without religious basis that incorporates caste in social life in India. One finds similar conditions all over the Tropical Far East—under Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, British, French or American rule; among Filipinos, Javanese, Malays, Burmans and Annamese; whether the objective of the colonial power has been tribute, trade or material resources; under direct rule and under indirect. The obvious and outstanding result of contact between East and West has been the evolution of a plural society; in the Federated Malay States the indigenous inhabitants number barely a quarter of the total population. The same thing has happened in the South Pacific. The Fiji chieftains invited British protection, and one result has been that half the inhabitants are immigrants from India. In African dependencies there are Indian immigrants in East Africa and Syrians in West Africa, and in some regions the ‘coloured,’ or Eurafrican, population forms a separate caste....One finds much the same thing

in Java, and in all tropical dependencies ‘westernized’ natives are more or less cut off from the people, and form a separate group or caste. The plural society has great variety of forms, but in some form or other it is the distinctive character of modern tropical economy. (1948: 304-305)

In fact, it is almost embarrassing to quote directly from many key passages of *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* because the statements are known so well. Yet, the passage certainly helped to make the region visible and therefore it merits “revisiting”, as a brief re-examination of the “plural society” should be in order. Furthermore, it might be remembered that much of the discussion about methodological issues in studying SEA worried about “genealogies of knowledge”, often focusing upon the origin or early trajectories about particular issues in scholarship. These conversations have proven valuable and they are often connected to the much larger projects of social criticism and development. However, it might also be useful to reflect on those episodes in which scholarship about the region made an impact outside SEA. Studying the region from the outside also means gaining perspective on the ways in which developments in SEA had influence beyond it. With that, it would be just as convenient to reflect upon the viability of the “plural society” because it is a concept which was framed with information from Burma and the Netherlands Indies, but it has also applied to many subjects beyond SEA.

It is clear that Furnivall’s description of the “plural society” became influential to those who were actively thinking about the development of SEA. For instance, Hans-Dieter Evers noted that Furnivall’s conception of the plural society, “soon became fashionable in academic circles and among politicians side by side with the concept of the dual society it had thought to replace” (1980: 3). In fact, the basic idea of the plural society proved influential with policy makers as Evers noted:

Furnivall’s paradigm spread fairly rapidly and was applied to a great number of societies, particularly in South-East Asia and in the West Indies. It also carried favour with politicians and nation-builders.

Slightly modified to 'multi-racial society' it became part of the national ideology of the Republic of Singapore in which an extreme diversity of ethnic and cultural groups was neatly classified as 'Malays, Chinese, Indians and others', granting cultural and language autonomy to each community, but demanding political and economic co-operation (1980: 3).

At the same time, the idea of the plural society was regarded as significant for social thought. John Rex, the British sociologist, argued in "The Plural Society in Sociological Theory" that the concept was of crucial and "strategic importance" for sociological theory (1959: 114). Rex related Furnivall's work to Bronislaw Malinowski and Gunnar Myrdal, and argued that it was important: "Furnivall was the first to emphasize, and has emphasized more strongly than any other writer, that the sort of society to be observed in Indonesia or Burma was of a different sociological type from any European society" (Rex 1959: 115). Furnivall, as may be seen, was regarded as an important voice of the postwar era, one who ostensibly established some of SEA's distinctive characteristics.

The argument in this paper, however, is that the "plural society" may well be a critical concept of regional study, but its limits might actually become touchstones for subsequent analysis. The point here is not to rehash criticisms of the "plural society", though this discussion will take proper note of some of them. Instead, the stress here will be to situate Furnivall into a broader canon of authors whose works helped conceptualize the study of SEA. Most importantly, in challenging some of the assumptions of the "plural society", it might be possible to develop a new vocabulary and set of questions for the reconceptualization of SEA.

One way to revisit SEA is to account for its the "classic" works, in order to better grasp the ways in which some of the region's features have been identified, remembered, and possibly "essentialized". It might be good to first remember that Furnivall did not seek to write comprehensively about SEA. Instead, he engaged a wider, but less defined target: namely the "tropical" world. The reliance on the characterization of SEA as defined by tropics amounted to a common "orientalist" trope. The discourses about the "tropics", of



course, was a fundamental part of colonial characterizations of the region.

However, it was the rigorous comparative approach to the subject which distinguished it from much of colonial scholarship. In addition, it was comparative study that drew upon the vocabulary of Fabian socialist thought, while reflecting what amounted to sustained field work. Possibly, the fact that Furnivall became a determined critic of colonialism in the region meant that his writings could draw upon the rich (if flawed) wealth of empirical information produced by imperial governance and use it to chronicle its destructive practices. That is, if the governing colonial discourses produced a wealth of information which might be used to justify imperial practices, Furnivall used the same resources to expose them.

*Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (1948) was listed in the 14 most influential books of Southeast Asian Studies (Hui 2009). The list, produced by *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, was gathered using a very stringent criteria that sought for books that

- a) have influenced theory formation and/or empirical perceptions in Southeast Asia;
- b) continue to serve as pivotal reference points for contemporary scholars; and
- c) transcend the period they were written in (Hui 2009: viii).

*Colonial Policy and Practice* joined the seminal works of Geertz, Anderson, Iletto, Scott, Reid, Leach, and others. A good number of these classics were not written to present any kind of essentialized reading or definition of SEA. It may not seem obvious, but regions (and other entities) are made comprehensible, when they are made visible. In this instance, Furnivall's readers might conclude that one discourse applied to Burma and the Dutch East Indies would be applicable to SEA. That is, the relevance of the "plural society" lay in the concept's attractiveness for explicating the complex social relations and political economy of Southeast Asia.

*Colonial Policy and Practice* might well count as a "classic" of

Southeast Asian Studies because it has been widely read by more than two generations of scholars who have attempted to understand the political economy of the region. Following this trajectory enables us to raise yet another issue: how do various articles and books become influential in the first place? This is a topic for another day or conference, but it might well point to the multiple contexts (and disciplines) in which the study of the region has been configured (King 2015: 47). The case has been made that Southeast Asia Studies should be “de-centered” from its Eurocentric biases to help address the crises of area studies, which has revived the “insider” and “outsider” tension prominent in scholarship about the region in the 1960’s and 1970’s (Goh 2011:3). Rather than “de-center” the study of SEA, it might become the case that the best possibility of reconstructing the region is when its most provocative (however flawed) genealogies are taken seriously in the first instance. Recovering these genealogies (and interrogating them) should make it possible to first understand their wider ability to define the region and its characteristics, in order to ask new questions about SEA.

It will hardly surprise us that the idea reflected both Furnivall’s intellectual outlook as well as historical circumstances, or that it is impossible to think about SEA the same way after one has read *Colonial Policy and Practice*. Nonetheless, the fascination with the injustices which accompanied Western colonialism and the intellectual interest in depersonalizing exploitation by showing its being economically determined and therefore systemic came at a price. The conceptualization of SEA which emerged from the pages of *Colonial Policy and Practice* massively underestimates the peoples who labored under exploitative conditions.

## II . The Fabian Furnivall

Julie Pham emphasized the importance of Furnivall’s Fabian outlook. Pham has carefully traced Furnivall’s many connections to Fabian thought, showing that it was dialogical. He grew from his encounters with various Fabians and his ideas made notable contributions to the ways in which they regarded imperial questions. Pham reminded

us that while Furnivall was a critic of imperial policy (especially as it was manifest in Burma), he remained an advocate of the empire. More importantly, perhaps he believed that the new nations of SEA were likely to be dependent upon Western economic help and political support in the foreseeable future.

All of that said, the roots of Furnivall's social thought actually go back to even earlier traditions of British radicalism. The valuation placed upon the "organic" quality of society had been well articulated by both Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. These mid-Victorian intellectuals (many of whom tended to look back to the medieval period as a kind of "golden age") assumed that society had an organic character, which was increasingly under siege by the many facets of modernization evident in 19<sup>th</sup> century British life. For these thinkers, the Benthamite representation of social reality, epitomized in their day by John Stuart Mill, regarded society as being primarily composed of atomistic individuals. Society was constituted by these abstract individuals and it would not have made sense to regard the connections between these men and women organic. Above all, the concept of an organic society was invoked in terms of loss. Modern industrial Britain had been purchased by the destruction of an organic society, earlier characterized by community, moral values, and a strong commitment to Christianity. What replaced the organic society was commerce, industry, abstract individualism, urbanization, and a loosening of social bonds. The fact that the growing pressure of democratization reflected these trends was threatening and not reassuring, because an organic society was basically hierarchical. It might not be too much to say that modernity had transformed Britain in a systematic and rather violent way.

The Fabians drew from many of these intellectual traditions. Their priority was achieving socialism, but in a deliberate and peaceful manner. It might be remembered that the term "Fabian" was actually inspired by the Roman general Fabius Maximus who adopted a strategy of patience that wore Hannibal's forces down and avoided a head-on engagement. Furnivall would have been 6 when the initial organization which developed into the Fabian society began to meet. It would hardly have been surprising to find Fabian ideas in circulation at Trinity Hall. Pham is right to emphasize these

connections because it meant that when Furnivall explored SEA, he did so through with Fabian categories. As Pham demonstrates, he maintained an active relationship with Fabian thinkers throughout his life.

For our purposes here, the conceptualization of societies in Burma and Java bore a Fabian stamp from the very outset. This can be gleaned not only by reliance on an “organic” society, but also by the emphasis on the loss of traditional society in the wake of imperial rule and modernization. To anticipate matters a bit, the plural society shared characteristics which British radicals found to be true of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Again, modernization was something that happened to British society and it came at a high cost.

There was a note of regret in Lucien W. Pye’s comment that Furnivall might have been considered a part of the community of thinkers who “profoundly shaped the modern mind” because he was more interested in colonialism than in relating his work to the broader trajectories of European social thought (1964: 430). Two generations later, the sustained treatment of subjects associated with colonial SEA turned Furnivall as a pivotal figure in the development of scholarship associated with the region. However, a careful reading of *Colonial Policy and Practice* shows that Furnivall was actually cognizant of several strands of social thought. He may not have directly engaged the continental tradition (i.e., Weber, Durkheim, etc.), but he worked not only with Fabian thought but also on the earlier discourses of political economy theorists (Furnivall 1948: 312). Most important of all, the globalizing features of *Colonial Policy and Practice* reflect that Furnivall studied Burma and the Netherlands Indies not only to understand the wider region, but to illuminate a set of realities which he believed occurred in the “tropics”. It might have been more accurate to assess Furnivall by saying that it was his reliance upon many forms of European political thought that inhibited him from better understanding the “tropics” (and with it, SEA). Yet, even if Furnivall lived through early decolonization, it does not mean that his understanding of it might make him better at adapting to it. *Colonial Policy and Practice* now reads as a historically conditioned text, reminding us of the many challenges faced by both early nationalists and those who sought to

build regional identity, out of the “tropics”.

### III. Re-examining the Plural Society

The idea and discussion of the “plural society” remain the best remembered and almost certainly most cited parts of *Colonial Policy and Practice*. The idea may well have originated in a combination of Furnivall’s thought about Burma and his studies in the Netherlands. To begin with, Furnivall acknowledges the importance of Julius Herman Boeke, who was Professor of Tropical Economy at the University of Leiden. Furnivall was impressed by Boeke’s contrast between the “rationalist material attitude of western enterprise with the disregard of economic values that they regard as characteristic of the native element” (1948: 264). Following Boeke’s *The Structure of Netherlands Indian Economy* (1942), Furnivall noted that “economic forces both create a plural society and, because unrestrained by social will, continue to prevail” (1948: 312). In a famous passage, he added that in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

economists eulogized economic man; in the last half they said he was a myth. Unfortunately they were mistaken. When cast out of Europe he found refuge in the tropics, and now we see him returning with seven devils worse than himself. These are the devils which devastated the tropics under the rule of *laissez-faire* and which it is the object of modern colonial policy to exorcise (Furnivall 1948: 312).

The myth which Furnivall would create drew upon information from Burma and the Netherlands India to explain the impact of capitalism on the “tropics” rather than SEA. Instead, Furnivall thought that the “plural society” was probably universally applicable to the much wider experience of colonization in tropical regions.

The plural society defined colonial condition as it was manifest in many tropical places, including SEA. Discourses about the “tropics” were basic features of colonial discourses in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Furnivall, the tropics tended to include Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Notably, India (as was

China) was often separated from the “tropics”. One of the chief characteristics of tropical places was that they were inhabited by “natives”. Furnivall could hardly be considered a racist, but his use of the term “natives”, in conjunction with “tropics”, meant that both Burma and Java were described through categories which were at once derogatory and deeply biased.

Readers might be forgiven for thinking that his image of pre-colonial society was a tropical place filled with relatively satisfied natives, possessing the community which helped define the kind of organic society, which was lost, first by Britain, and later by cultures such as that of Java and Burma. This kind of language reflected a very simplistic (if not quite ignorant) view of pre-colonial societies. Tropical social realities, to make this a bit more explicit, were ahistorical, unchanging, and homogenous. *Colonial Policy and Practice* significantly understated the ethnic complexity which already made up a basic feature of SEA before colonization. Instead, it showed how ethnic differences defining plural society tend to be those which were produced by developments associated with imperial rule. Hence, plural society was made up of natives (here a useful shorthand) and groups such as Indians, Chinese, and some cases Malays who had immigrated to a new location. Of course, the plural society contrasted this “medley” with Europeans who were largely removed, while being a small, but constitutive part of it. In essence, the components of the plural society reflected the categories of the colonial census where many groups might qualify as “Indian”, “Chinese”, or “Malay”. It might be argued that the need for these “orientalist” subdivisions reflected a priority of the ICS, of which Furnivall was a part (Pham 2004: 267-268). However, they fit with a different kind of “orientalism” when regarded with the vocabulary of natives and tropics—a vocabulary which does not reflect direct involvement in government, but the need to write for an audience with little direct knowledge of the subject matter.

Furnivall was confident that the plural society was not created by human artifice, but the result of easily understood economic laws. Tropical lands may have been pleasant places, but they experienced decisive change with the advent of European expansion. The impact of European economic development proved to be

decisive for the organic tropical societies. Indeed, it is not too much to claim that the arrival of capitalism was the snake in the garden which disrupted tropical life:

One may distinguish three principles of economic progress: natural, rational and moral; but the two former, which are strictly economic forces are anti-social. So far as these economic forces were active in primitive society, it was a condition of survival that they should be held in check by social custom, and it was only through the evolution of social custom that primitive societies were protected against disintegration. But custom implies that man adapts his wants and activities to his environment. In accepting the rule of custom, man surrenders his unique prerogative, the ability to use reason in adapting his environment to his requirements (Furnivall 1948: 292).

Without any specific reference or concrete example Furnivall elaborated:

This ability of man to master his environment is the key to human progress as distinct from social evolution; and in the tropics, although the rule of custom protected the social order, it was at the cost of progress. (1948: 292)

However, Furnivall went beyond the boundaries normally associated with political economy to add a civilizational argument which reflected the superiority of the rational Western mind over that of the natives. For Furnivall, the “orientalist” bias meant that the history of the Western world was different as it prioritized rational thinking (presumably over custom):

Western Christendom, however, with the rebirth of reason at the Renaissance, achieved a new synthesis of Greek intellectual freedom and Roman law under the energizing and binding force of Christian ideals of duty to God and man. This laid the foundations of social order based on law, informed by will, that could allow far greater scope to economic forces without incurring the penalty of collapse; it raised economic potential to a higher level. Their goodly heritage emboldened Europeans to seek their fortunes in the tropics, and enabled them to impose western rule on the inhabitants. (1948: 292)

Furnivall believed that “in general the West comes to the tropics as a liberator” because it made it possible for social development to occur with the constraints of “arbitrary personal authority”, which he believed characterized the nature of rule in tropical places. Furthermore, Western law expressed social will and reinforced custom, or forced custom to adapt to new circumstances (Furnivall: 293). However, the imposition of Western law meant that it was “imposed on society from the outside” and because it was not grounded in social will, “it is powerless to restrain anti-social economic forces” (Furnivall 1948: 293). Furnivall explained that

These forces, liberated from the control of custom by the impact of the West, pursue their natural course, breaking down the social order, disintegrating native organic society into individual atoms, and, by thus depriving man of social protection against natural selfishness, operate more extensively, eliminating social values, and diffusing poverty (Furnivall 1948: 293),

Here would have been the great nightmare not only for the “tropics” but for English society; the stress on “organic society” would have been well grasped by the strands of mid-Victorian thought represented by Carlyle and Ruskin.

Furnivall’s economic laws reflected not only a Fabian confidence, but the influence of social Darwinism. Not only were economic changes all transforming, but also, they affected much more than political life, created social divisions, and destroyed traditional modes of social existence. Even the attempts at social welfare were undermined by the “survival of the cheapest” and the realities that consumers would be driven by the lowest prices. In learning to act out of economic self-interest, many in tropical societies did, in fact, behaved more as “abstract individuals” in an atomized society.

However, economic developments by themselves were not sufficient to create plural society. It also required the clash between East and West, as Furnivall argued that many of the fundamental cultural differences between the western world and tropical Asia meant that the peoples of the latter were unable to cope effectively with the transition and realities of modern capitalist economies. The



disintegration of tropical societies came not so much from colonial political control, but from the massive economic transformations which accompanied capitalist development. Therefore, the plural society, which required the loss of perceived public common good, came about because tropical societies did not have the cultural resources to accommodate massive economic change.

To state the obvious, here, among the things missing in Furnivall's analysis is any sense that the tropical peoples—mainly here from SEA—had any capacity for historical agency. That is, they found themselves acted on by colonial forces, whose power was all the greater because they happened to be backed by the force of economic law and were on the better side of the East-West divide. Many of the now independent nations were in “dependencies” which virtually ensured that they could never be regarded as having sufficient agency. To put this differently, the tropical peoples were acted upon as the bourgeois had upon the poor who became the proletariat. They seemingly had much less capacity to alter the transformations which would improve their fate. Furnivall, it might be here remembered, was a sensitive observer of developments in Burma. But in crafting the idea of the “plural society” he betrayed an intellectual lineage which predated both his professional career and maturation into a critic of colonial theory and practice.

#### **IV. Reading Furnivall for Southeast Asia**

Given the influence of Furnivall's writings on scholarship devoted to SEA, it seems prudent to reflect on the image of the region which emerged from *Colonial Policy and Practice*. It might be said that while the idea of the “plural society” has not been without its share of critics, it largely carried the day, as the survey for *Sojourn* illustrates. Yet, it seems clear that if SEA is the focus of our reading of *Colonial Policy and Practice*, then it becomes important to see if it was in any way predictive and, more importantly, whether the way it informs scholarship remains apt. The position here is that it should certainly be read as a historical document which shows how parts of the region were regarded in mid-century, as it also

rendered the peoples of SEA to be little more than victims of history. In fact, it might even be fair to say that refuting the implicit image of the “tropics”—here meaning the region—might be a good way to begin a conversation about developing methodologies for exploring SEA.

One way to regard *Colonial Policy and Practice* is to highlight its significance as a historical document. Beginning with the name and the terminologies, and moving to the basic ideas and the assumptions behind them, it is possible to rediscover some of the lost discourses of colonial writing. This might be a rich subject which could be explored usefully in a number of ways, but one of the things which is startling is the self-confidence of the author. This was a work which was written for an audience that probably could not foresee the independence of Southeast Asian nations. The subject (that is, for whom the author might be said to have written) was not future scholars of SEA, but the progressively-minded colonial administrators. As Syed Husseain Alatas has recognized in *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, the ideal would have been a progressive and enlightened colonial establishment (1977:13).

It is not surprising, then, that even though the work might be said to be steeped in “theory and practice”, there is an absence of any kind of critique of knowledge—let alone “colonial knowledge”. Instead, *Colonial Policy and Practice* drew from a mixture of economic positivism (possibly, out of the tradition of Auguste Comte and David Ricardo) and social Darwinism on the one hand and the author’s observations and detailed knowledge of colonial administration. Furnivall’s deep frustrations notwithstanding, the lack any kind of critique of “colonial knowledge” would jar contemporary scholars. Absent from *Colonial Policy and Practice* was any kind of self-reflective hint that might interrogate the conditions required for the production of knowledge and analysis. More than two generations later, the critique of colonial knowledge is obviously among the most fundamental presuppositions for those who currently study SEA or other regions. Consequently, to engage *Colonial Policy and Practice* is to encounter a mind which now appears naïve and biased—if honest and critical.

Yet, there are other ways to read *Colonial Policy and Practice* as a text which reflected historical circumstances, beginning with understanding the ways in which the author regarded the immediate situation. Without wanting to reduce the discussion to “authorial intention”, it is revealing that Furnivall thought that among all “the tropical dependencies few attract as much attention at the present time as those in the Tropical Far East” (1948: 514). He explained that the interest came from fact that there “is a focus of stresses and tensions which endanger peace” (Furnivall 1948: 514). This was, in 1947, primarily an economic question for Furnivall:

When a recent Colonial Secretary was discussing international co-operation in colonial affairs, he urged that it was needed for security. Security is the keynote of almost every such project. But the word security is this connection savours of ‘securities’—investments of foreign capital. We have seen that in the past the whole direction of economic life, and one may say of political life also, lay with foreign capital. After the war foreign capital will again be active in developing oil, tin, rubber and so on. When we talk of security, we are thinking of security for foreign capital? Capitalist interests will be more concerned in security for capital than in the maintenance of peace. It is true that in any given region capitalist interests are particular and local...But all capital has a common interest, well-organized and vocal—if need be, clamorous—and, for the protection of its interest, it can appeal for general support because we are all capitalist now, all interested, one way or another, directly or indirectly, in the capitalist development of the tropics. Organized capitalist interests demanding security for western enterprise in the tropics are likely to prevail over our silent unorganized general interest as citizens and human beings in the maintenance of peace (1948: 514).

To be sure, he added that peace was more important and it was the collective duty of humanity to “promote peace rather than security” (Furnivall 1948: 515). However, he had trouble grasping the immediacy and salience of the emerging political questions facing the region.

There is another side to this: postwar Asia was a difficult place. Ronald Spector has aptly documented the many challenges

faced by the victorious allies, the Japanese, and the many peoples of the region after World War II ended (2009). It is remarkable that Furnivall glossed over so much of this; students of the region could do worse than to focus on the year after World War II to understand much of what followed.

One lesson for those interested in the region: reviewing Furnivall's outlook reminds us that in 1948, the inevitability of the end of colonial SEA could hardly be assumed. In fact, what remains striking is that even as Burma approached independence, Furnivall does not seem able to understand the tropical world of which he regarded it as a part as being capable of self-government. The constructive position advocated in *Colonial Policy and Practice* would have maintained colonial power, which was aptly described as an "anachronistic fantasy" (Englehart: 786).

Furnivall could not foresee independence because there is ample warrant for suggesting that he was indifferent or hostile to nationalism (Alatas, 1977: 12-18). For example, it is worth citing Furnivall's attitude towards emerging national movements:

In statements on colonial policy, self-government is usually identified with some form of democratic government, whether known as responsible government or by some other term. That is only natural, because the colonial powers are democratic powers, whose institutions have evolved as part of the Liberal tradition and who tend accordingly to identify self-government with those forms that they have learned to value for themselves; also it seems easier to export their own machinery of government than to invent new machinery y....Obviously democratic forms have a very practical appeal. They appeal to Nationalist politicians, who think that the numerical majority of the native group will ensure them control over the Government. They appeal also to men of Liberal sympathies in the colonial power, who fail to recognize that the difference in kind between homogenous western society and the plural society of dependencies demands new and appropriate machinery. And they may encounter no more than a show of resistance from the more astute opponents of Liberal ideals, who foresee that democratic machinery will prove the most formidable obstacle to self-government. (1948: 486)

The role of “modern colonial policy” aims to make it possible to redress the problems caused by capitalist economy in order that the “dependencies” might achieve adequate social development.

The more interesting way to evaluate Furnivall would be to locate him as a social thinker, who like many who came out of the broader Marxist traditions, prioritized economic change over political developments and underestimated the powers which were shaping new nations. Yet, it should be remembered that when we regard the nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) today, it might be recalled that a number of them adopted social policies which were at least partly Fabian in origin.

Furthermore, exploring *Colonial Policy and Practice* has the value of reminding us that the language associated with SEA as a specific region, was probably still in its infancy. Instead of comparing Burma and Java to highlight a number of colonial practices and misadventures, Furnivall was writing about places which were part of a much larger “world system”. As John Darwin has formulated it, the world of colonialism was “a global phenomenon; that its fortunes were governed by global conditions” and its power came from “fusing together of several disparate elements” (Darwin 2009: xi). Consequently, when scholars look to reconceptualize SEA, it would be useful to understand that they are referring to a region now defined by nation states but actually carries with it a much richer and nuanced pre-history than is often recognized.

Reading *Colonial Policy and Practice* could be more than a look at colonial literature; instead, engaging Furnivall might be a template for finding alternative models for defining the region’s major characteristics. Possibly, the most obvious problem with both the plural society and the intellectual apparatus which supported it was that Furnivall leaves little room for the peoples of SEA (or elsewhere in the tropics for that matter) to make their own history. In a sense *Colonial Policy and Practice* might be read as an early harbinger of the dislocation of the peoples of SEA within in their own history. It is not surprising that the quest of an “autonomous history and later the call to make sure that Southeast Asians were in Southeast Asian Studies followed at least in part from a scholarly

discourse in which Furnivall's influence was significant" (Smail 1962; Herayanto 2007).

In essence, *Colonial Policy and Practice* might be said to have silenced the people who lived under imperial rule. This was hardly Furnivall's intent, but the effect of the discussion was to make it difficult to imagine indigenous tropical agency. Writing about the prospect of "semi-colonial government", he observed:

In tropical dependencies there is far greater need than in Europe for the organization of knowledge and thought. Europe is both the creator and the child of the modern world, while tropical countries are, at best, adopted children....If then, the object of policy to be made dependencies capable as soon as possible of independence, it would seem necessary to separate representation and responsibility, and in the first instance to create a National Assembly without legislative powers, deferring the creation of a legislature until there is a united and enlightened people." (Furnivall 1948: 497-498)

A generation earlier this kind of bias would have been less surprising. After World War II though, and the obvious and growing power of nationalist movements, it is now hard to understand. In fact, it is possible that bringing in the many challenges to colonial rule (and the many types of resistance used) might well have made the argument based upon economic laws for the plural society less compelling.

Rather, the point of my paper ultimately is that scholars looking to understand the region's commonalities might begin with the adaptive quality of its peoples. If anything, Furnivall underestimated the "medley" that is SEA as far more diverse than he seems to have recognized. In fact, one its characteristics is heterogeneity—which some would still prefer not to acknowledge. The title of this paper "Taking Expediency Seriously" is used to highlight this virtue to suggest that it is precisely in the adaptive, transnational, and multiethnic quality that SEA (and its achievements) become distinct. It might be remembered, for example, that the breakup of the Ottoman Empire produced terrible scars in the Middle East; the end of the Austro-Hungarian empire expedited World War I; the abolition of colonial empires in Africa left nations with unsustainable

borders; the end of British India produced the Partition; and the collapse of the Soviet Union (another empire) continues to produce significant dislocations. SEA was not spared these convulsions, but its new nations have made sustained economic and social progress since the late 1970's quite possibly because its peoples have made adaptation their *longue durée*. This is a story which predates early modern colonialism and will probably be relevant for the foreseeable future. SEA experienced the dominance of outside cultures, the arrival of universal religions, colonization, the rise and expansion of global capitalism, world wars, the Cold war, and the combined effects of many of these changes and episode. One hardly needs to adopt an ASEAN view of history to be able to underscore the region's many achievements, all of which this author believes to be testaments to the adaptive quality of the peoples of SEA. Indeed, the presupposition (a confession that the view of the future surely shapes our assessment of the past) is that SEA offers global development in a successful series of adaptations and hybridities. To underscore these features of SEA requires something opposite of the ways in which Furnivall articulated the casual factors which underlay the "plural society".

In practice this means highlighting expedience—the ability to adapt quickly as circumstances demand. The work of James Scott, for example, suggests that rather than see SEA through the lens of the language of civilized existence, it makes sense to explore the subject from the other end (Scott 2010). This approach will have its limits, but for those who seek to identify the region's most important characteristics, they might do well to give pause to the plural society, while expediently investing in research trajectories which begin with the achievements of the peoples of SEA.

## V. Conclusion

John Furnivall will probably remain a somewhat mythical figure in Burma and for those who have chosen to study SEA. He may come to be regarded as an enigma. Living in age of growing nationalism, he was a scholar-activist who attacked colonial administration, while

working to develop a framework which would perpetuate much of it. At first glance, he was not a likely candidate to write an influential text about the region. If anything *Colonial Policy and Practice* reflected not only his experience in Burma, but his absence from it. Furnivall was writing for a wide audience, but the work drew upon the categories of political economy, comparative study, and knowledge of British ideas about the future of the empire, to explore colonial administration and its consequences. Yet, the book was written without much direct knowledge of World War II in the region. Furnivall probably could not have sensed the profound changes which came with the conflict and its messy aftermath. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that it would also be Furnivall, who from an early moment in Burma, had embraced the country and its peoples. They could not have been “natives” for him and he had to know that there was more to the land than being part of the “tropics”. To return to the plural society, Furnivall succeeded in making life in the region compelling. He showed how the combination of powerful economic forces, colonialism, and cultural difference changed the behavior of peoples all over the world. To believe that Furnivall was right was convenient for those who wished to challenge colonialism. For generation of activists and scholars, the fact that *Colonial Policy and Practice* left little room for Asian agency mattered much less than savage indictment which Furnivall made of colonial rule. For all intents and purposes, it would be the idea of the “plural society” which might be said to have helped make the region—not just the tropics—visible. But it did so without making them audible. At precisely the time when many of the region’s peoples were finding the strength to recover from war and challenge colonial rule, Furnivall might be said to have neglected their perspectives about the social relations made easily visible by the compelling discussion of the “plural society”.

SEA, accordingly, would be regarded as a region in which social relations had been destroyed by capitalism. It was a place where the corruptive power of Western ideas could be demonstrated in an Eastern setting. In Burma, Furnivall would be remembered as well for his activism and deep affection for the country. Ultimately, he was valuable because he was the informed critic from within in



the empire, with his work shaped by significant intellectual resources. All of these things might have meant that the less acceptable formulations of *Colonial Policy and Practice* were easy to overlook. Harry Benda recognized that Southeast Asianists have been reluctant to challenge Furnivall (Pham 2004: 267). However, if the region is to be understood better, scholars need to revisit the genealogies of knowledge which have framed their own conception of what is significant about it. Asking hard questions regarding Furnivall in particular, and possibly of “scholarly activists” more generally, might be a good way to begin.

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# ***SUVANNABHUMI***

Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

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The manuscript should be written in English.

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In general, terms should not be abbreviated unless they are used repeatedly and the abbreviation is helpful to the reader. Initially use the word in full, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. Thereafter use the abbreviation only.

#### **6) Sections, Tables and Figures**

Sections and sub-sections should be divided by "I, 1.1., 1.1.1." And tables and figures should be numbered by <Table 1>, <Figure 1>. The Journal does not accept color figures. Figures should be submitted in black and white only.

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References should be in Roman script and placed at the end of the manuscript.

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### **2) Citations in the Text**

All source references are to be identified at the appropriate point in the text by the last name of the author, year of publication and pagination where needed. Identify subsequent citations of the same source in the same way as the first. Examples follow:

- If author's name is in the text, follow it with year in parentheses.  
Wong (1986)
- Pagination follows year of publication after a colon.  
James (1979: 56)
- If author's name is not in the text, insert, in parentheses, the last name and year. (Duncan 1986: 76)
- Give both last names for two authors. Give all last names on first citation in text for more than two authors; thereafter use "et al." in the text. When two authors have the same last names, use identifying initials in the text.
- Separate series of references with semi-colons and enclose them within a single pair of parentheses.  
(Edwards 1981: 43; Lee et al. 1983: 112).
- In case of daily, weekly, monthly publications and similar references, pagination follows 'dd/mm/yyyy' after a comma.  
(Korea Times 01/04/2014, 3).
- For a manuscript that is planned to be published, year of writing shall be indicated. When there is no year of writing, n.d. shall be written.  
Taylor (n.d.)

- In case of an organization as an author, information that can be identified shall be provided.  
(Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security 1992)

### 3. REFERENCES

Detailed information on all literature mentioned in the text and footnote shall be shown in <References> at the end of the text. Literature that was not mentioned in the text and footnote shall not be included.

#### 1) Books

- In case of one author: for author name that is Romanized, family name and first name shall be put in order.

Jessup, Helen I. 2004. *Art & Architecture of Cambodia*. London: Thames & Hudson.

- In case of more than 2 authors: for the text and footnote, 'et al.' shall be written, but for references, all names of co-authors shall be written. However, if 'et al.' is written on the book cover from the first, it shall be as it is.

Freeman, Michael and Claude Jacques. 1999. *Ancient Ankor*. Bangkok: Asia Books.

- In case of an edited book, it shall be written in ed.

Steinberg, David Joel, ed. 1987. *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- In case of translated books, it shall be in the order of original author, year of publication of translated books, name of translated book, author and publisher.

Coed S. G. 1928. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Susan B. Cowing, trans. Honolulu: An East-West Center Book. The University Press of Hawaii.

## **2) Journal Articles/ Monthly Magazine**

- In case of papers such as journals, monthly magazine, etc, volume and number shall be in volume (number), and the relevant pages shall be definitely indicated.

Egreteau, Renaud. 2008. India's Ambitions in Burma. *Asian Survey*, 48(6): 936-957.

## **3) Chapter in a Book**

- In case of the text in a compilation, it shall be in the order of author, year of publication, compilation name, compiler, related page and publisher. If there is no compiler, then it can be omitted.

King, Victor T. 2006. Southeast Asia: Personal Reflections on a Region. *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*. Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben, eds. 23-44. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

## **4) Thesis and Dissertation**

- In case of a thesis or dissertation, the following form shall be followed.

Parker, John. 1988. The Representation of Southeast Asian Art. PhD Dissertation. Harvard University.

## **5) Newspaper Articles**

- In case of a daily newspaper, by-line story of weekly magazine and column, the following form shall be followed.

Peterson, Thomas. 1993. The Economic Development of ASEAN. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 22: 23.

## **6) Internet Sources**

- In case of the internet searching, it shall be in order of author, year of production, subject and web address (Accessed Month DD, YYYY).

Hadar, Leon. 1998. U.S. Sanctions against Burma. *Trade Policy Analysis* no. 1. <http://www.cato.org/pubs/trade/tpa-001.html>. (Accessed May 07, 2008).