ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY
AND NATION-STATE FORMATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA*

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching of anthropology as an academic discipline within the 'departmental structure' in the universities of Southeast Asia is relatively new. Although in the Philippines it was taught as early as in 1911, in the rest of Southeast Asia the discipline was formally introduced only after the Second World War. In fact, the newest anthropology programme is barely three-years old, established in 1995 and located within the Academy of Brunei Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

However, anthropology has made its entry into Southeast Asia much earlier than 1911, mainly through European colonialism, and the corpus of anthropological knowledge regarding the peoples and societies within the region was already available before the Europeans came to the region. Notwithstanding the political and ideological role of anthropology during the colonial rule, be it in Africa, Asia or Latin America, we need to take a closer look at its influence in the politics of identity and nation-formation in these regions, in particular Southeast Asia.

Many of the internal markers of 'national identities' in the newly-formed nation-states of Southeast Asia arose out of a combination of social science research and analysis, especially anthropology, and the needs of colonial administration. What is less understood in this context is the role of the anthropologists, often unwittingly, in laying down some of the intellectual foundations of the post-colonial nation-states in the region. In fact, the internal markers of identity that arose under colonialism were adapted and adopted by the nationalists in the individual Southeast Asian nation-state for their own purpose.

What is also not really discussed and understood is the role of anthropology in assisting the United States of America (USA) in establishing its political dominance in Southeast Asia particularly after the Second World War. Of course, the Thailand-based 'Camelot Project' during the Vietnam War has been heard of, but not much more regarding the culpability of anthropologists as willing if ineffectual servants of imperialism.

However, it is not my intention in this essay either to praise or poison anthropology. I am basically interested to highlight some of the issues that have been the con-

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cerns of the community of Southeast Asian anthropologists, especially those involved in academic planning and others who have been actively involved in public-oriented endeavours. We have also been encouraged by the 'unexpected' popularity of anthropology among our undergraduates, and we are still struggling to find a satisfactory explanation as to why this has been so. Perhaps it is owing to the 'plural society' nature of our societies in Southeast Asia, in which 'living anthropologically' is an everyday thing and 'peddling cultures' an economic and political virtue. The recent economic crisis seems not to diminish the undergraduates' interest in anthropology.

For these reasons and others it is useful to re-examine the role of anthropology beyond its academic boundaries, or 'the anthropological invisible and not so invisible hands' so to speak, especially in the political realm and particularly in the process of identity and nation-formation in Southeast Asia, both during and after the colonial period. Anthropology's political role in Southeast Asia has always been understated, or even muted, for a variety of reasons, even though anthropology and its practice in the region or elsewhere has never been really a-political.

I shall begin, in this brief essay, by looking at, in a general manner, the relationship between nation-state and social scientific disciplines, especially anthropology, both of which are modern inventions. Specifically, I am interested in its role in the formation of 'colonial knowledge' which subsequently has come to be accepted as the embodiment of history, territory and society of the post-colonial state. I am also interested in the role of the anthropology-based 'cross cultural knowledge', a knowledge product which is specifically American but not unlike 'colonial knowledge' in nature, and in its impact on the politics of identity and nation-formation in the decolonized states.

I shall then proceed to examine anthropology's direct and indirect contribution, in a redefined political situation, to that process of identity and nation-formation in post-colonial Southeast Asia. The emphasis shall be on the 'formal' relationship between the state and anthropology, both in the spheres of the academia and state policy formulation and its impact on the society at large, which hopefully would shed some light on the continuous popularity of anthropology among our undergraduates.

FROM 'COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE' TO 'CROSS CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE'

Both the nation-state and social science are generally regarded as modern inventions. An acknowledged feature of modernity is the crucial role of knowledge for the expression, maintenance and reproduction of power. While knowledge represents a form of power, certain modes of power, such as policing, crowd control and policy implementation, in the conditions of modernity can only be expressed through its relationship with knowledge, such as the activity of intelligence gathering, continuous surveillance

and feedback reporting. Even as social science requires the resources of the modern nation-states for its teaching and research needs, it is equally dependent on a vigorous civil culture distinct from the state, lest the state conflates its interests (particularly in 'nationhood') with (civil) society at large. In other words, knowledge is not only a relationship of power, rather power requires new forms of knowledge, such as social science, for its effectiveness in modern society.

The close links social science has had with the modern state were forged at a time when European nation-states were engaged in establishing a new global order. Imperialism and colonialism required that the main European powers reached an understanding for an efficient exploitation of their resources. The global economy then required the increasing co-ordination of transnational regions of production, exchange and consumption. This required a basis of consensus beyond the nation-state, which was provided by the transnational community of scholars, namely, the social scientists, who then provided the much needed ideals of a universal and empirical (social) science. In fact, 'colonial knowledge' as well as the 'cross-cultural knowledge' of the HRAF (Human Relations Area File) kind, also emerged as forms of knowledge to be propagated and consolidated in such circumstances. They have been powerful but often subtle political tools that came to shape imagined reality and representations which in turn became naturalized and taken-for-granted as given.

It is widely recognized that within social science, anthropological knowledge and, later, the discipline of anthropology played a crucial role in the politics of identity and nation-state formation, both during and after the colonial period. It still does so, particularly in the ex-colonies, even in the present so-called globalization era.

During the colonial period anthropologists were always directly or indirectly involved in the colonial project. In fact, the origins of anthropology as a distinctive form of knowledge lay in the internal and external colonies of the Europeans. They played a crucial, if ambivalent, role of the mediator between the colonial subjects and ruler. They helped to construct 'official ethnography' for the colonial government and developed practices that sought to erase the colonial influence by claiming what they recorded was genuine indigenous culture. Nonetheless, their epistemological universe remained part and parcel of European social theories and classification systems shaped by the projects of the colonizing state which were meant to reshape the lives of the colonized subjects as well as those at home. Anthropological knowledge became an integral part of what is now known as 'colonial knowledge', which, in turn, became the taken-for-granted embodiment of history, territory and society of the postcolonial state.

Besides contributing to 'colonial knowledge', anthropology also contributed to the construction of 'cross-cultural knowledge' and 'national character studies' introduced and developed extensively in the USA for overt and covert political use, globally. However, initially, it all started at home. Anthropology and anthropologists in the

USA were since the 1930s, heavily involved with Native American affairs; from writing their histories and sociologies, to planning economic development programs of Indian Reservations, with the overall long-term political objective of bringing the Native Indians into the mainstream economy and culture, thereby hastening the process of assimilation.

During the Second World War, in its political pursuit to consolidate itself as world superpower, or new imperial ruler, the USA was dependent on social scientific knowledge, social analysis and research. The setting up of a multi-disciplinary social science research centre, called the Institute of Human Relations, at Yale University demonstrated this fact. The Institute brought together sociologists, anthropologists, psychoanalysts and psychologists, and the dominant intellectual mode was positivism. The Institute had several research projects but the most significant was the anthropological one, that is, the creation of the now famous HRAF.

The HRAF was, and continues to be until today, the most elaborate and sophisticated creator of an anthropology-based 'cross-cultural knowledge' which incorporates into a precise and accessible, comparative analytical framework, a vast and ethnographically rich descriptive literature that no other social science discipline can even remotely match in terms of sheer quantity. Like colonial knowledge, cross-cultural knowledge defines, quantifies, classifies and categorizes anything and everything perceived as cultural. But it goes beyond that, it creates an almost global cross-cultural map, which colonial knowledge did not.

To complement an already impressive anthropological effort, the HRAF-created cross-cultural knowledge greatly assisted the psychoanalytical studies on 'national culture' which were conducted by well-known American anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead.

Both the cross-cultural knowledge and national culture studies became directly involved with the war efforts of the USA, especially in the Pacific-Asia region, because of their great value in strategic manoeuvres. For instance, when the US Navy was getting ready to liberate Micronesia and Melanesia from Japanese control, it had to take charge of the civilian government in these territories and their native populations. The HRAF stepped in to assist the naval officers and policy makers to learn quickly about 'customs and practices' of the local natives. At the macro-political level, the national culture studies helped the USA to shape its military and foreign policy towards Japan and other countries in Pacific Asia. In other words, the practical knowledge provided by the HRAF was deployed beyond the boundaries of the academy not only in the business of international relations but also in the local *realpolitik*.

After the war, the incredibly rich pool of accumulated cross-cultural knowledge became important in at least two significant forms, for the United States' global political project that directly affected the process of nation-state formation in the decolonized territories in Asia and Africa. First, the 'war scholars' founded the 'area studies' programmes as we know them in the American academic world. In fact, the term

'Southeast Asia' emerged from the war activities, hence 'Southeast Asian studies'. More importantly, anthropological knowledge, together with knowledge derived from economics and political science, helped to create the famous 'evolutionary modernization model' meant for the newly independent states. The model, framed and funded within the Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944, became the cornerstone of American postwar foreign policy towards these states. Contributions from anthropologists such as Julian Steward, and economists such as W.W. Rostow, were integral components in the formulation of the said policy.

It is in this context that cross-cultural research was critical in evaluating the success and the 'problems of modernization' in the 'new nations', as Clifford Geertz called them, namely, through a monitoring of the trajectory of social change in those territories perceived as moving from the 'traditional stage' to the 'modern stage'. The Vietnam war was seen as an unfortunate political hiccup in this modernization drive. Both anthropology and the anthropologists played a critical role in that war through the support they gave to the US military ground forces' efforts in trying to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Vietnamese, but with negative and tragic results.

It could be said that just as during the colonial era, anthropology through 'colonial knowledge' was involved in the exercise to construct and constitute group and national identities which became the basis of post-colonial nation-state formation, so the anthropology-based American 'cross-cultural knowledge' further reinforced and consolidated these identities through the implementation of the grand USA-initiated 'modernization project' in the newly decolonized Third World territories, largely funded by the important twin institutions of Bretton Woods, namely, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Indeed, the new nation-states began to implement their own specific programmes of nation-building within the framework of the said modernization model, with social scientific knowledge providing the intellectual basis. Anthropology has a special role in this new relationship, namely, between the new nation-states and the social sciences, because the latter were inevitably grounded largely in the said 'colonial knowledge' and 'cross-cultural knowledge'. The relationship was often dominated and characterized by the new nation-states' continuous attempts to 'indigenize' the social science.

ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE NEW NATION-STATES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

The process of 'indigenization' of social science in Southeast Asia has taken place in the context of decolonization. Political independence and a growing cultural awareness demand that the social sciences be harnessed to the new enterprise of nation-building. The notion of political sovereignty assumed by the nation-states presupposes control over the production of knowledge and self-identity. The social sciences become

a resource to be developed for the 'national interest'. This view of social science as a weapon in the neo-colonial struggle or as a vehicle for discovering a national spirit and identity has been advocated by the new nation-states in Southeast Asia.

The first stimulus was provided by academia, but not without the support of the government of the day. For instance, in Malaysia it was by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malaya, in Indonesia mainly by Indonesian Institute of Sciences, in the Philippines by the Ateneo de Manila University as well as the Xavier University in Mindanao, and in Thailand by Chulalongkorn University. Throughout the 1950s to 1970s these institutions conducted wide ranging studies of society and culture within their respective nation-states, which established a new basis for a country-based social science. By the 1980s the local scholars and administrators in the region were in control of the local practice of social science and had started to explore the possibilities of indigenizing its theoretical and methodological practices.

As a result of the organization of social life around the 'nation-state'– or 'nationality'–principle, the nature of social enquiry came to be dominated by what could be called 'methodological nationalism', in which, for instance, the occurrence or absence of 'modernization' in a country was accounted in terms of 'internal circumstances', with little if any attention to the ways in which the resident population was integrated into social relations on a global scale. Hence, it seems as though preoccupations with nationality as a basis of identity and community in contemporary history have infiltrated academia, where they have distracted researchers from the world social condition in which all nations, including those in Southeast Asia, have developed.

Anthropology became important in elaborating and constituting the nationality principle and its related sub-concepts such as 'national identity' and 'national culture'. Through anthropology, the new nation-states in Southeast Asia, since the 1950s, have launched a major exercise of 'butterfly collection' of the different ethnic and sub-ethnic groups' customs, subcultures, traditions and so on for archival and record purposes as well as in the construction of new social categories for policy purposes, other than those already provided by the colonial Census reports (British, Dutch, or French) or by reports of the cross-cultural knowledge kind made available through American researchers.

The Malaysian nation-state, for instance, is forever indebted to Edmund Leach for his excellent effort in bringing some kind of classificatory order into what seemed to be a disconcerting chaos of cultures, languages and societies in British Borneo. In his report entitled "Social Science Research in Sarawak" (1950), Leach recommended that a total of seven major anthropological research projects should be carried out in Sarawak by researchers trained in social anthropology for academic and policy purposes. Each of the said project reports, published as a monograph, became the 'modern' history and sociology of each of the groups, namely, the Iban (written by Derek Freeman), the Bidayuh (by William Geddes), the Melanau (by H.S. Morris), the

Chinese (by J.K. T'ien), the Kenyah-Kayan (by Jerome Rousseau) and the Sarawak Malay fishermen (by Lim Jock Seng).

Similar group identity construction efforts by foreign and local anthropologists in Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and the Philippines made significant contributions to national politics and nationally-sponsored identities because of their constituting power. To construct is, in varying degrees, to constitute.

In other words, there is a dialectical interplay between the two senses of representation, namely, the nominal and the political. To name, that is, to label persons or an entire community (e.g. Iban, Malays, Toraja, Karo and so on) as a certain type and then to elaborate a theory of their essential social identity is to create a symbolic representation of those persons or that community. If this representation then becomes naturalized (which has been the case, for instance, in the Sarawak context), that is, accepted as the 'obvious' depiction of its referent, it becomes a mould that shapes the second sense of representation – the political. Simply put, for a community to be labelled 'Iban', for instance, and to accept the label as valid implies that its members will adopt political goals and strategies that are consistent with those perceived as 'Ibanic' or 'Ibanness'. Similarly, non-Ibans who also assume that the community is an 'Iban' one will deal with it as such.

Modern electoral politics, based on ethnicity, especially in Malaysia and Singapore, survived and thrived on these constructed ethnic identities often dependent on anthropology or anthropological knowledge for its ideological sustainability. Anthropology does have a role in such nation-states in providing a nationalist and instrumental social science orientation to balance what has been perceived as an overly colonial or Western cultural influence. It is also perceived as useful in the exercise of creating national solidarity or national unity. Anthropology departments, along with psychology and political science departments, were established in Malaysia in the early 1970s, soon after the ethnic riot of 1969, to serve that specific purpose. The setting up of a "Department of National Unity" within the national administrative structure, with active participation of anthropologists and sociologists, is another example.

But despite the nation-state's official attempts to redirect the orientation of social science, including that of anthropology, through its absorption into the structure of government, other factors prevented its total incorporation as an arm of the state. For instance, in the Philippines, the Marcos's martial law (1972–81) stimulated much independent and critical social science, indicating how its practice is also a product of a vigorous civil society. An example was the establishment of the Third World Studies Center at the University of Philippines at the height of the martial law (1971). In Malaysia, in the late 1970s, the Institute for Social Analysis (INSAN) was established after the 1974 student riot and the introduction of the "University College and Colleges Act" that prohibited academics and students from participating in partisan politics, rendering them almost as second class citizens.

In other words, even though the nation-state has been a major agent of moderni-
ty, it is by no means its only player. The society, through the market, has been an equal-
ly important modernity agent. The market needs and consumes social scientific know-
ledge as much as the nation-state does but for a different purpose, most evidently for
profit-making. In this so-called private sector context, anthropology in Malaysia, for
example, has found its own niche. Anthropology graduates seem to be sought after by
both small and medium firms (e.g. soya sauce factories and computer companies) as
well as big ones (e.g. banks and locally-based multinational corporations) apparently
for their breadth and depth of knowledge regarding the complex and sensitive local
poly-cultural configurations, particularly those political in nature. They have been
found to be more competent than graduates in economics, business administration, or
political science in dealing with the everyday demands of the government's rules and
regulations, policies and strategies as well as the specific cultural values and norms of
their clients who belong to the various ethnic groups. As a result, the anthropology
graduates from my own department, in the last decade or so, both during economic
growth and downturn periods, seldom have to wait more than six months for employ-
ment. Our only problem is that, as a public university, we could only enroll a limited
number of new students per year (between 150 and 200 students) according to the
quota set by the government. We wished we could go private!

A large proportion of research funding for anthropological research in Southeast
Asia comes from outside the region. Funding bodies based in the US, Europe and
Japan have a more critical impact on the state of Southeast Asian social science, in
general, and anthropology, in particular. Admittedly, many of these foreign-funded
studies investigate better ways for Southeast Asian nation-states to achieve desirable
goals such as functional democracy or an efficient economy. The Ford and Asia
Foundations have supported anthropological and other social scientific research which
is heavily biased towards developing 'appropriate' institutions of the state or improv-
ing official apparatus for community development. Others, such as the Volkswagen
and Toyota Foundations have looked at auxiliary functions such as population control
or the sources of insurgency in order to suggest mechanisms for strengthening the
state's capacities.

But other projects, often funded by the same agencies, have realised the impor-
tance of civil society or the informal sector in shaping Southeast Asian society and eco-
nomy. Support for NGOs and much bilateral research aid, for instance, in the
Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, are often directed at understanding and, at times,
encouraging non-formal institutions to act in place of the state. Increasingly, these
studies appreciate the importance of civil society. Factors such as locality, class, reli-
gion, gender and overseas labour are now accepted as significantly shaping the broad
features of the nation-state.

As such, the funding of anthropological research in Southeast Asia, both by the
state and non-state agents, the latter mostly from outside the region, is not divorced,

in most cases, from the nation-state interests, which are mainly political and economic. Most local NGOs, in which many local and foreign anthropologists are involved, usually funded by foreign bodies, are also political in nature, especially those dealing with human rights issue and eco-politics. Viewed in terms of the political economy of research funding, one could argue that the power of the Southeast Asian nation-states to inform and manipulate the constructed identities is slowly diminishing. However, the strict state control of research permit, especially for 'academic' anthropologists, such as in Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia, indicates that the state is not willing to surrender its political dominance that easily.

CONSUMING ANTHROPOLOGY: THE 'ANTHROPOLOGY PENDULUM'

Worldwide, first, anthropological knowledge and later anthropology became part and parcel of the investigative modality of the colonial state which produced 'colonial knowledge'. In Southeast Asia colonial knowledge not only elaborated and explained plural society but also sustained and justified the whole concept of plural society through the construction of the essentialized ethnic categories which became the key to the success of the divide-and-rule policy. It is not surprising therefore that when the 'colonial states' became 'new nation-states' after independence they become the natural embodiments of history, society and territory. Thus the establishment of the post-colonial nation-state depended upon determining, codifying, controlling and representing the past as well as the present by repeating the techniques of the construction of 'facts' and 'knowledge' already set in place by the colonial state.

'Cross cultural knowledge', generated by the USA since the Second World War, became critical to the new nation-states of Southeast Asia not only in reinforcing colonial knowledge, but also in their modernization efforts, mainly funded by the USA within the Bretton Woods framework. It was in this decolonized context that the quest for nation-building took place in earnest, in which seeking homogeneity was the main agenda, expressed in idioms such as 'national culture', 'national unity', 'national security', 'national identity' and other authority-defined national narratives, informed by anthropological knowledge. But later, local and ethnic interests found space to air both their differences as well as pluralism, also with the support of anthropology and anthropological knowledge, indeed an activity corresponding to the emancipatory needs of civil society. Such being the case, it could be argued that anthropology in Southeast Asia occupies an interesting, in fact unique, position. It is consumed by both the state and civil society for almost opposing rationales, one for the pursuit of the ever elusive homogeneity and the other to maintain and enrich heterogeneity.

This is the 'anthropology pendulum' in Southeast Asia, framed within the politics of identity and nation-state formation in the region. The direction of its swing in

the future depends very much on the state of the state-civil society relations in Southeast Asia. But one thing is certain though, anthropology has proven to be the 'staple food' consumed comfortably by both the state and society. It thus occupies an important niche in the region. Perhaps what is interesting to observe is how it would re-invent or get reconstituted over time in response to the speed and nature of the swing of the 'state-society pendulum'.

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