Approaches in Southeast Asian Studies:
Developing Post-colonial Theories in Area Studies

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[*Abstract*]

This paper proposes an approach in Southeast Asian studies using a post-colonial framework in the study of post-colonial Southeast Asia. This framework is based on the sociology of knowledge that analyzes the dialectical relationship between science, ideology, and discourse. Post-colonial studies is critical of the concept of universality in science and posits that a scientific statement of a society cannot stand alone, but is made by authors themselves who produce, use, and claim the so-called scientific statement. Several concepts in post-colonial theories can be used to develop area studies, i.e. colonial discourse, subaltern, mimicry, and hybridity. Therefore, this study also explores these concepts to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asian culture. The development of post-colonial theories can be used to respond to the hegemony of social theories from Europe and the United States. The main contribution of area studies in the field of the social sciences and humanities is in revealing the hidden interests behind the universal social sciences.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, Power/Knowledge, Post-Colonial Theories, and Methodological Approach

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Ⅰ. Introduction

There is no agreement among area specialists on developing methods in areas studies. Huotari (2014) explains the recent debate between area studies and social sciences-oriented scholars. Area studies experts are criticized because they do not focus on generalizing scientific knowledge. On the other hand, social sciences-oriented scholars are criticized due their lack of grounded experience (Shea 1997). Area studies experts mostly avoid universal abstractions based on their ontological approach maintaining the study of an area is not capable of universality (Cheah 2001; Johnson 1997; Keim 2011). This debate then raises further questions on how to develop a methodology in areas studies that accommodates the particularity and universality of areas studies. According to Turner (2007), methodology consists of issues arising from theoretical perspectives and those arising from specific techniques, concepts and methods. In this article, I will explore the first element, how to develop post-colonial theory in Southeast Asian Studies.

The aim is to address the following questions: (1) how is the historical development of Southeast Asian studies to be understood as a part of area studies? (2) what are the recent theoretical debates in Southeast Asian studies; (3) and how can the contribution of Southeast Asian studies help solve social problems in Southeast Asian countries? As part of the social sciences, area studies plays an important role in portraying and describing social development in various countries. By starting with the major themes of research, we can examine to what extent area studies can contribute in developing the social sciences and humanities, and what should be done to make area studies play an important role in solving social problems. This study maintains that Southeast Asian studies, as a part of the social sciences and humanities, should have an orientation towards subaltern communities. Moreover, the social sciences should encourage the praxis of emancipation and social change without abandoning its academic principles.

Ⅱ. Historical development of Southeast Asian Studies

There is no single definition of areas studies agreed upon by areas studies experts. Areas studies is a form of translation, i.e. "an enterprise seeking to know, analyze and interpret foreign cultures through a multidisciplinary lens" (Tansman 2004: 184). Interdisciplinary cultural specialists like Appadurai questions area studies for its recent transnational and cross-cultural interventions in social processes that compel social sciences to study globalization (Ludden 2000). Social processes on the one hand often relate to other social processes in other sites due to the transnational movement of people, commodities, information, and ideas (Appadurai 2001). Consequently, my definition of areas studies incorporates both the classical concept of area and the recent concept of cross-cultural areas. It is a study of other cultures, either in one or several sites, supported by various disciplines such as languages, history, and anthropology.

The utilization of multi-disciplinary perspectives is still important in areas studies. Michel-Rolph Troulliot (1997 cf. Slocum & Thomas 2003) reminds us that, in the past, the approaches of area studies promoted multi- and interdisciplinary dialogue and discussion with regard to certain areas of the world. Sidney Mintz (1998 cf. Slocum & Thomas 2003) also believes that the concepts of regions, areas, and communities are still an important part of area studies as localities and societies develop a kind of specialization based on their everyday contexts.

The history of Southeast Asian studies cannot be separated from the history of area studies. Area studies is rooted in the development of western colonialism in Asia and Africa. Area studies was developed primarily by Dutch, English, and French colonial governments with the founding of special scholarly associations that conduct research on local art, archaeology, prehistory, culture, history, and language. These associations also recommended political and cultural policies to colonial governments to strengthen colonial hold. The Dutch government established the Department of Indology in 1830 in place of the Batavian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1778. The English colonial

government established the British Study of India, the Burma Research Society, and the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1917. The French government set up the *Ecole des Longues Orientals Vivantes* in 1864 and *Ecole Francaise de l' Extrême-Orient* in 1898 to conduct studies of peoples and cultures of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Bonura & Sears 2006: 12; Thum 2012 cf. Khudi & Anugrah 2013: 12). Benedict Anderson (1992) notes that these local studies emerged when European researchers also served as officials of colonial governments who were granted access to various reports and documents for writing colonial history.

After World War II, area studies developed in the United States. Yet, before World War II, studies concerning non-white peoples were mostly focused on the Native Indians. American academics did not have much intellectual interest in people outside North America. Moreover, the study of areas was financially sponsored by the American government to support intelligence-gathering activities in order to supply information and data on the potential enemies of the United States (Najita 2002). The funding was used by the government to assist universities in opening programs for studying the history and culture of other countries in Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The research topics of area studies in this period were mostly about the Cold War between the Eastern and the Western Blocs (Raffael 1994). Area studies, including Southeast Asian Studies, have become a mode of knowledge production for supporting military interests. Area studies was seen as strategic if it paid attention to the study Russia and its satellites, Southeast Asia, and East Asia (Chow 2006: 39 cf Sideway 2013: 986).

Area studies between the period 1960 to 1980 marked notable changes. Topics focused on social and economic development and modern culture in the post-colonial countries. In this period, there was an emergence of a comparative approach in area studies. Studies for instance compared the development of Latin American countries and Southeast Asian countries. The notion of local-level "thick description", a research method developed by Clifford Geertz, contributed significantly to the development of area studies.

Approaches of theorization emerged at the macro-level, reflecting the relation between developed and underdeveloped countries. For instance, there was an emergence of dependence theory criticizing the asymmetric relation between developed countries and underdeveloped countries (Thufail 2014).

Several centers of Southeast Asian Studies were established in Southeast Asian countries. The Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) was founded in Singapore in 1968. The Center of Southeast Asian Studies was initiated by the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences in 1973, followed by the Interdisciplinary Program of Southeast Asian Studies in 1976. Establishing the field not only strengthened discourses on development but also responded to the challenges of the Cold War after the defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War (Khudi & Anugerah 2013). In 1986, the Center for Southeast Asia Social Studies in Gadjah Mada University was established. Then in 1995, the University of Malaya founded the Institute of Malaysia and International Studies. This institute focuses on globalization and Occidentalism in Asia, Latin America, and Western countries. In 2001, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences founded the Research Center for Regional Resources, focusing on Southeast Asia, the larger Asia, and Europe.

Centers of Southeast Asian Studies outside Southeast Asian countries can be found in the USA, Europe, Japan, Korea, and Australia. The USA has become the center of area studies after World War II. However, the development of area studies in America dwindled due to large cuts in budget. The funding for area studies given by the federal government under Title VI managed by the US Department of Education was cut to approximately 40% or as much as USD 50 million in 2011, followed by another 2% cut in 2012 (National Humanities Alliance 2013). This cut proved to be challenging for Southeast Asian Studies scholars in terms of funding (Khudi & Iqra 2013).

This condition resulted in the emergence of Southeast Asian Studies outside America. The Federal Government of Australia, for example, has given AUD 15 million to establish the Australian Centre for Indonesia Studies at Monash University, with some

chapters at the University of Melbourne, the Australian National University, and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) . Moreover, Singapore has several Southeast Studies interests at The Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore, and the Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). With substantial funding, Singapore nowadays plays an essential role in developing Southeast Asian Studies. Japan and South Korea also play a significant role in developing Southeast Asian Studies. In Kyoto University, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies thrives while Korean counterparts support the Korean Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (KISEAS) in Seoul and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at the Busan University of Foreign Studies (ISEAS-BUFS).

Ⅲ. Recent theoretical debates in Southeast Asia Studies

Nowadays, Southeast Asian Studies is challenged by four fundamental problems (Khudi & Anugrah 2013). Firstly, there is the economic and political imbalance of knowledge production in Southeast Asian Studies in both developed and developing countries. Following this is the sociological aspect of knowledge of Southeast Asian Studies development related to the position of Southeast Asian academics in this field of studies. Next is the historical context of the birth of Southeast Asian Studies. Lastly, there is also the ambivalent position of Southeast Asian Studies in relation to several paradigms in the social sciences. Of the four, the most crucial is the position of Southeast Asian academics in Southeast Asian Studies. The articles of Heryanto (2007) and Lowe (2007) state that the position of Southeast Asian academics is regarded by Western academics as both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, it is an advantage since these academics live in Southeast Asia, know the local languages, and possess deep cultural knowledge. On the other hand, it is also a disadvantage as they are perceived to be less critical. By way of illustration, an Indonesian academic who is skilled in a certain field may be regarded merely as an Indonesian expert but not a Southeast

Asian expert. Western academics however position themselves as experts in Southeast Asian Studies despite merely examining certain phenomena in a Southeast Asian country.

Mary Steedly (1999 cf. Thufail 2011), in her review of the state of Southeast Asian Studies, proposes an interesting explanation concerning the limited number of academics who pay attention to violence and conflicts in Southeast Asia. Steedly argues that conflicts and violence are not part of the Southeast Asian cultural theories as researchers cannot significantly explain the normative and symbolic systems of Southeast Asian society.

Heryanto (2007) examines the reasons why local Southeast Asian academicians usually end up underappreciated in the production and consumption of discourse. Although the academicians have more knowledge about the problems in their area, they are usually subordinated to Western academicians. The East's unequal relation with the Western world is deeply embedded in the development of this field of study. To respond to this, Japanese and American institutions provide scholarships for the researchers of Southeast Asia to conduct more studies in their own home area

Heryanto's view is consistent with Celia Lowe's position (2007) that academics or researchers from Southeast Asia are expected by their colleagues from the West to contribute data rather than theories. Lowe's study of the collaboration between Indonesian and American academics in research concerning conservation issues in the Togean Archipelago shows that Indonesian academics are always assigned to read European or American scientific literature which are often irrelevant to observed phenomena. Most Western academics suppose that Indonesia provides a space open to scientific research. In contrast, Indonesian academics tend to hold to the view that the nation—the concept or the identity—is their main focus of study. Lowe furthermore explains that Indonesian academics have been striving to be admitted into the domain of transnational biodiversity conservation.

After the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001, a change of orientation has occurred in Southeast

Asian Studies in the USA. Although Southeast Asian Studies are still considered important by American academics, studies of the Middle East have become more strategic in responding to the phenomenon of increased terrorism. Bonura and Sears (2007) note that along with the emergence of armed conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan and the fear of Al Qaeda spreading onto Southeast Asia, the training in language and comparative analysis play an important role in developing national defense. Textual translations and analysis, religious studies, comparative politics, and ethnography play important roles in training and informing flying squads, intelligence agents, and government functionaries. Southeast Asian Studies nowadays faces problems almost similar to that of area studies as it developed in the conflict-ridden colonial era and the Cold War.

According to Bonura and Sears (2007), area studies in the face of global conflicts should have continuously proposed questions about complex social and political realities, and surrendered to being a contributor to state intelligence in the context of political geography. Southeast Asian Studies scholars should have been critically involved in the economic and political debates that reflect political conditions of the war against terrorism. Such critical involvement is important to support higher education in a democratic society. Southeast Asian Studies is expected to not only reveal the economic and political motives beyond the campaign against terrorism, but also to strengthen the consolidation process of democracy in Southeast Asian countries.

Meanwhile, what has area studies contributed towards the development of the social sciences and humanities? Miyoshi and Harootunian (2002), in *Learning Places: the Afterlife of Area Studies,* elaborate the influence of cultural studies and post-colonial studies on East Asian Studies, and compare the economic configurations between East Asia and Southeast Asia. The topic concerning economic inequality and the subject of Southeast Asian Studies have rarely been discussed. Harootunian sees the future of area studies in both methodology—by way of drawing on the scientific specification of area studies—and the sophistication of post-colonial theories. Referring to David Szanton (2003), the

main purpose of Southeast Asian Studies in the present is to develop indigenous vision and knowledge. In the future, these studies are expected to change academic and public visions by developing post-colonial perspectives in the social sciences and humanities.

Ⅳ. Using Post-colonial Knowledge in Southeast Asian studies

Knowledge can be placed as either discourse or ideology. Analyzing knowledge as an ideological discourse means analyzing it at the level of consciousness by which it legitimizes the existing social order. Tim Dant (1991) proposes that western ideology's emphasis on rationalism is the best way forward in seeking knowledge. Sciences and technology have increasingly dominated human life through the ideologization of scientific knowledge. Following Foucault (1972), however, contestation between discourses has always been related to contestation of power. Discourses aim to determine scientific truth. Consequently, knowledges determine truth and error in societies. In reality, no knowledge is free from interest because knowledge is correlated with power. Every form of knowledge contains the will to power and every will to power needs knowledge to support its legitimation.

I put post-colonial knowledge as a critical standpoint of modernity as well as the theoretical framework in analyzing Southeast Asian problems. As mentioned above, the critique of modernity in the context of Southeast Asian studies reveals how post-colonial views strive to explore the impact of modernity on current social life. As theoretical framework, post-colonial knowledge explains the extent and legacy of colonialism on the social, political, economic, and cultural realms.

The following discussion examines several concepts in post-colonial studies (Ashcroft, et al. 2003). Let us begin the colonial discourse. Discourse for Foucault is a system of statements within which the world could be known. It is the system by which the dominant group constitutes the truth by imposing some specific knowledge, disciplines, and values upon dominated groups.

Colonial discourse is a complex of signs and practices that organizes social existence and social reproduction within colonial relationships. It is a system of statements concerning the colonies and the colonial people, the colonizing powers, and the relationship between these two. Fanon (1965) and Said (1978), who both introduced colonial discourses, emphasize the contradictory and conflictual positions between the colonializer and the colonized.

Now, let us continue to discuss the idea of the subaltern. Gramsci (1999) formulated this concept to identify non-hegemonic groups or classes whose rights to participate in writing history and culture are rejected by the ruling. These groups are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling class. "The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a state. Their history is intertwined with that of civil society and thereby with the history of states and groups of states" (Gramsci 1999: 202). We can investigate the history of subaltern classes in Southeast Asia and their objective formations —their active and passive affiliations to the dominant political formations, the establishment of new parties and the dominant groups, the way these groups produce their claims, and the new formations within the old framework which assert their autonomy. Following the Gramscian concept (1999, 204), it is necessary to trace how subaltern classes in Southeast Asia have developed into hegemonic and dominant groups, how they defeated their enemies and which groups actively and passively support their struggle.

Afterwhich, let us move to hybridity and mimicry. Different from Fanon (1965) and Said (1978), Bhaba (1994) emphasizes that colonial relationships are not simple. There is a difference between the colonizer and colonized subjects that enable both of them to interact. Bhabha states that post-colonial discourses do not make themselves easily recognized in a contradictory opposition between the two subjects. The continuation of colonial discourses does not result in deep oppositions between the two cultures, but in ambivalence and forms of multiple and contradictory beliefs (Bhaba 1994: 94-95). The place of difference and otherness is never fully outside of the subjects, but partly comes from

within. The strategy of subversion of colonizer in recognizing the discriminated groups occurs in the disturbing distance between the colonialist self and the colonized other (Bhaba 1994: 112). Bhaba calls this space as a hybrid gap where the subject is represented in a differentiating order of otherness (Bhaba 1994: 58).

Hybridization is the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. It covers language, culture, politics, and race. All cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the third space of enunciation (Bhabha 1990). Hybridity can be implemented via mimicry, which can be understood as the copycat of colonial culture, behavior, manners, and values pursued by the colonized. It contains both mockery and a certain menace. Fanon (1992) argues that the colonized subjects at the beginning were forced to adapt the identity of the colonizer. Different from Fanon, Bhabha (1994) says that mimicry reveals the limitation of authority of the colonial discourse. He explains mimicry is also a part of the colonizing strategy or civilizing mission (1995, 106). The colonizer requires the other, the colonized, as it forces the copying of its norms, values, and behavior. Nevertheless, the self still maintains the distinction between itself and the other, so copying and repetition result in something different (ibid 111).

These three main concepts can be used to analyze a number of phenomena in Southeast Asia. In studying diasporic communities, locating third space for cultural dialogues between migrants and settler's communities is often suggested. The research focus could explore the migrants' strategies in constructing their identities, and how it relates to the realm of politics, economics, society, and culture. It also includes the product of dialectical interaction between the migrants and the native or local culture.

Ⅴ. Contribution of Southeast Asian Studies in Solving Social Problems

Nowadays, social sciences and humanities are considered less

important or less useful in solving social problems compared to the natural sciences. Therefore, to what extent can Southeast Asian Studies be used to solve current social problems?

The contribution of Southeast Asian studies in solving social problems could be seen in Lowe's paper (2007) on the collaboration of Southeast Asian academics. The result of such collaboration could be perceived as an effort to decolonize the social sciences, as well as to reconsider the ideas of area studies. In Indonesia, the works of Iwan Tjitradjaja, an anthropology professor at the University of Indonesia, develop new theories by finding creative solutions to problems in controlling natural resources in Sumatra. He worked on the issue of community forestry, confronting problems in the distribution of natural resources, proprietary rights, bureaucracy, participation, and the local communities' capability to take advantage of community forest resources.

Tirtadjaja pays attention to the impact of forestry policies in Indonesia and their implementation. His research not only focused on forest degradation but also on the welfare of the local community living near the forest. The forest rehabilitation he proposes strives to return the forest to the community. His approach could be a model not only in Southeast Asian Studies but also in community forestry studies in the USA. The approach begins with returning forest proprietary rights to the community in peaceful ways.

The community's knowledge of the praxis of forest management helps in reconsidering ideas of forest management. Tirtadjaja started to communicate this issue to the official functionaries of planning and forestry, and discovered that they did not have an adequate knowledge of the field through the policies devised previously. Tirtadjaja's research bridges communication process between the bureaucrats and the community. The community members have different interests in managing the forest. The community is expected to manage the forest transparently, democratically, and responsibly. The team of researchers then invited bureaucrats to observe the community practices. The

functionaries directly witnessed the interaction between the team and the community. The functionaries and the community were afforded learning opportunities.

From here, area studies may be seen as useful in solving social problems. Academics graduating from universities in the United States or Europe do not have all the adequate knowledge in these areas. American anthropologists also face a similar problem, thats convincing bureaucrats and biologists to think ethnographically. The question is whether or not it is possible for this participatory observation to be accepted by forest researchers in the USA and the West at large.

Southeast Asian studies contributing in solving social problems may also be seen in the study of the Papuan conflict. Several research projects integrate West Papua into Southeast Asian studies, such as that of Sukma (2005) and Trajano (2010). The research conducted by a team of LIPI researchers led by Dr. Muridan Widjojo produced a book entitled *Papua Road Map* (Widjojo et al. 2008), which identified four fundamental problems in Papua, namely: 1) Papua's history of integration, status, and political identity which are differently understood by Papuan natives and the national government; 2) the political violence and the violation of human rights experienced by Papuan natives; 3) the failure of development in Papua caused by the implementation of the Special Autonomy Law; and 4) the marginalization and discrimination against Papuans.

Various opinions on such matters as Papua's history of integration, status, and political identity cannot be resolved either by exercising unjust violence or development without some inclusive and participatory dialogues involving the central government and Papuans. The political violence and the violation of human rights could be solved by the special courts of human rights or the reconciliation facilitated by the Truth Commission of Reconciliation while the failure of development could be resolved by a more inclusive program of government. In this context, the central government and the regional government of Papua could work hand in hand in defining some new strategies to implement

development centered on the native Papuans. Additionally, the marginalization of native Papuans could be solved by policies of affirmation in the political, economic, social, and cultural realms of Papua.

Based on our study, the office of the Vice-President of the Republic of Indonesia initiated an exploratory meeting to enable the stakeholders concerned with Papua's problems to engage in a dialogue. To follow up the initiative, LIPI working with the Network of Papuan Peace (JDP) held several exploratory meetings attended by some representatives of civil society, the regional government of Papua, and the national government. These meetings were aimed at building constructive communication, and identifying some problems, indicators, and solutions to reach a settlement concerning the conflict in Papua. Such meetings were also intended to bridge the gap between the central government in Jakarta and the people of Papua. Political issues, security, law, socio-economic and socio-cultural issues were also discussed there. The agenda of the exploratory meetings was entirely based on the book *Papua Road Map* (Widjojo et al., 2008), while the discussions concerning the indicators of a peaceful Papua was based on the proceedings of the Papua Peace Conference (*konferensi perdamaian Papua*) in 2011 as the source of reference.

The contribution of area studies in solving social problems could not be easily determined. The most important contribution is the form of social commitment of area studies since these studies form part of the social sciences related to human life and behavior. According to Budiman (2013), the social commitment of area studies should not be limited to the two main streams of the field, namely post-modernism, which tends to stop at the deconstruction process of social phenomenon, and the project of neo-liberalism in science which demands practical relevance to the social sciences. It means that areas studies should not be technically oriented, only resolving social problems in Southeast Asia. Instead it should offer a comprehensive and deep understanding of such social problems.

Ⅵ. Conclusion

Several matters related to area studies can be inferred from the previous discussion. First, the history of Southeast Asian studies shows that the field does not only focus on the community or the culture in a certain area but also on issues of the movement of people, ideas, commodities, capital, and information from one place to another. Globalization, transnational issues, and the impact of globalization predominates the contemporary subjects of area studies. Second, theoretical debates in Southeast Asian studies contribute to the development of the social sciences and humanities. Several Southeast Asian experts have provided critical thought to the ideology and practices of Orientalism in the Third World. In the future, Southeast Asian studies may provide a larger space for developing post-colonial knowledge in the region. Third, several research projects in Southeast Asian studies have played a substantial role in providing solutions to social problems as exemplified by the works of Iwan Tjitradjaja and Muridan Widjojo.

Area studies in Indonesia have not developed well because of the limited literature and human resources, as shown by the limited number of researchers and academics who work seriously in area studies. This situation presents several difficulties in evaluating how far area studies in Indonesia can contribute to the development of the social sciences and humanities, and play a significant role in solving social problems. Therefore, researchers should examine the area studies conducted by all research centers and universities in Indonesia. This is important due to the potential of area studies to identify the phenomenon of interconnection and interdependence among cross-border communities beyond political and geographical boundaries.

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