

# Sociocultures of Insular Southeast Asia: between History, Area and Social Studies

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## 1 Preliminary positioning

The study of sociocultures in Southeast Asia positions itself in the overlap between history, social sciences and area studies. Historians are interested in change over time, its causes and consequences but also in, what they label as ‘Verstehen’.<sup>1</sup> This implies the taking of a view from the inside i.e. an attempt to understand how people in the past viewed social realities around them and how they acted on the basis of these often unspoken assumptions. This attempt to reconstruct the past cannot, however, preclude the historian to be influenced by the concerns of his own lifetime, so history as such cannot be separated from the present. Thus the academic historical narrative constitutes a kind of conversation between present and past, an attempt to make sense of history in the light of the present but also to see the present differently based upon a deeper understanding of history.

Whereas historians in the process of ‘Verstehen’ engage in time travel, area studies try to make sense of ‘situated difference’. This mostly involves travel in a spatial sense, moving from one’s own habitat towards another one and trying to adopt a perspective on the world preferably centered on another place than one’s own. This perspectival shift is assumed to open up unquestioned own worldviews to other figurations of social life. Comparable to a historian, the area specialist tries to capture the specific social, cultural, political conditions of people living in a demarcated territorial zone, enabling her/him to make distinctions to conditions elsewhere. Since the beginning of modern area studies in the 1950s, a lively debate has been conducted on ‘area’ as a unit of analysis in area studies. Area is no longer considered to be a closed container, of which the boundaries are drawn along geopolitical demarcations of the Cold War but rather a flexible and open-ended heuristic device in order to position the phenomena studied in a specific temporal-spatial context.

The social sciences offer a deep understanding on how human societies develop and function. Sociologists have concentrated mostly on the present and by far most social theory has been developed by scientists from the West on the West. Particularly the modernization theory has been instrumental in privileging a Eurocentric perspective on the social world, claiming that what happened in the West will also become true for the rest. From this social sciences have developed a nomothetic ambition, assuming that the theories and concepts adopted can explain the dynamics of society everywhere. Instead of highlighting ‘situated difference’, sociologists seem to aim at ‘nomothetic universalism’ based on a perspective that starts from the West. Since the 1990s at the latest this classic tenet has been challenged by deconstructivist and postcolonial critiques. Modernization is no longer seen as a single, unilinear process but as contingent, multiple and possibly alternative ways of being in the world. Modernity is also seen as now having given way to a condition of postmodernity, in which non-western areas do not necessarily have to go through a modernization phase.

One way to supersede the bias of the West in social theory, which has been called Eurocentrism, is to adopt a global studies perspective, which aims at an understanding social developments in the context of global dynamics, thereby reducing western experience to one of several and looking for connections, transfers and entanglements between global and local developments. Thus the complex interference between local and global is the prime object of global studies, the study of the local within the global and the global within the local, rather than globality as such. Another option, the one pursued here, would be to study concrete social issues from a perspective that integrates historical, sociological and area studies elements. The idea behind this contribution is to combine a bottom-up with an inside-out perspective in order to bear out more clearly the diachronic as well as the area-specific dimensions of

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<sup>1</sup>On ‘Verstehen’, see: Muhlack 2007; Rehbein & Saalman 2009

social inequality. Here the concept of sociocultures will be adopted to obtain a deeper understanding of the particularities of social inequality in Southeast Asia.

## 2 The Southeast-Asian region and its structural characteristics

The term 'Southeast Asia', the area between India and China, has been adopted only almost seventy years ago, as a military strategic concept during the Second World War. Starting from the 1950s, in the era of the Cold War, it became an endeavor within area studies research, as a successor to the European tradition of studying the own colonies – the British specializing on Burma and Malaya, the French on Indochina, the Dutch on what became Indonesia. To Southeast Asia belongs the Eurasian mainland from Myanmar to Vietnam and an insular stretch ranging from Indonesia to the Philippines.

Being an 'area at the crossroads', halfway between India and China, the diversity of Southeast Asia has been stressed ever since. There seems to have existed no single core within this area, its major politico-cultural features being imported from the outside, from India, the Middle East, China and Europe. Indeed, from the perspective of India these were the lands at the outskirts al-Hind to which the Indian Ocean belonged. From the Chinese concentric world perspective, Southeast Asia was the area of the southern ocean (*nanyang*), a domain of barbarians. The Malays, living on the shores of Southeast Asia, called their area 'tanah di bawah angin' or the land below the winds. This name centers on the Straits of Malacca where traditional sailing vessels had to wait for the turning of the monsoon winds in order to be able to continue their journey to the East (the South China Sea) or the West (the Indian Ocean). Although being an area in between and as such heterogeneous in character, Southeast Asia, as Anthony Reid has argued, constitutes a human unit since seen from the perspective of popular beliefs and social practices people share many similarities (Reid 1998: 3).

If we look at the landscape, the basis of an area-specific social ecology, we can observe how mainland Southeast Asia, lying South of the high mountain range separating it from China, is governed by north-south running rivers, which link the highlands to the sea. Each of these rivers flows through valleys in which the majority of the population lives and the major polities have emerged. Only the distance of centers to the coast has differed, oscillating between a more agrarian, secluded hinterland and a more maritime, open coastal existence. Insular Southeast Asia has also riverine domains leading towards the hinterland but the rivers are generally shorter and the maritime coast as the major area of trading activity is much more pronounced. In both parts of Southeast Asia, however, comparable patterns of interaction between sea and land as well as hill and valley have emerged over time.

It is within this geographical space that human societies developed over time. In order to capture both the universal and the specific features as well as continuity and change of these societies, the concept of socioculture offers a fruitful tool of analysis. In short, socioculture designates a structure of inequality that developed in a certain historical phase and persists beyond that phase. The social structure of a society is thereby perceived as the relational division of resources for social action, which differs among the members of society. Instead of trying to capture social inequality through the use of general, quantitative indicators, such as the Gini coefficient, HDI-index and the like, socioculture brings out the qualitative aspects, which makes inequality distinct when comparing one area to another.

In an earlier publication together with Boike Rehbein, a comparison was undertaken between the sociocultures of mainland and insular Southeast Asia, concentrating on Laos on the one hand and Indonesia on the other. As will be shown below, the particular configuration of social inequality in Laos in part mirrors that of Indonesia. The juxtaposition of two countries thus allows for a better grasp of what are the differences and similarities within one single but also plural world region. For Laos three layers of sociocultures inform the contemporary social structure i.e. *baan muang*, socialism and capitalism. *Baan muang* refers back to the village (*baan*), with its social structure based on kinship and subsistence ethics, which became incorporated into a hierarchical patrimonial structure (*muang*) headed by a ruler. This resulted in a patrimonial socioculture. The socioculture of *baan-muang* persists until today although colonialism and postcolonial transformation has added new layers. Position within the patrimonial structure is still of decisive importance for peasants and local traders in their connection with urban elites. Socialist socioculture is connected to party position, which allows for acting in the public sphere and in politics. Although the socialist party on the surface preaches egalitarianism, party hierarchy heavily impacts upon the public domain, which is governed by a bureaucracy under party control. Capitalist socioculture has been developed through the opening up to global capitalism, which

has created new avenues of economic action and possible gain. Whereas part of capital and labor are still embedded in the older patrimonial-cum-socialist sociocultures, a competitive market culture in the field of transnational business has now emerged. Capitalism is used by peasant in an occasional way based on immediate needs, city dwellers use it in a patrimonial manner, whereas party-related elites reap the fruits of the fusion of patrimonialism and global capitalism. Thus the current social structure of Laos is characterized by the interaction between different, for the most part already existing sociocultures rather than being the result of a clearly demarcated succession of stages of social development (Houben & Rehbein 2011). The same could be argued for Indonesia and the other major countries of insular Southeast Asia.

### 3 Sociocultures of Nusantara

In this contribution a discussion of sociocultures in insular Southeast Asia is taken up and extended beyond considerations undertaken earlier. Returning to the issue of landscape, Nusantara (the island world of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines) constitutes the world's largest archipelago, an elliptical string of islands with each one possessing its own physical and sociocultural characteristics. Local inhabitants distinguish between coastal and hinterland areas, hills and plains, rural and urban spaces. They have developed a vocabulary marking their environments in terms of these binaries. Besides distinguishing between fixed natural habitats, connections and movements are highlighted in local spatial culture, giving space a singular fluid character. Going upstream or downstream the river (in Malay hulu and hilir), sailing across the sea to the opposite coast (in Javanese *nyabrang*), moving beyond one's own region of origin in order to seek for a better livelihood (in Minangkabau *merantau*) are powerful cultural imaginations of a space that has become integrated through physical movement and travel. Boundaries therefore constitute flexible and surmountable phenomena in an insular environment that is connected by the sea. Social exchange and mixing as a consequence of ongoing migration within and from beyond the area have been core features of life in Nusantara. Therefore in many places, what J.S. Furnivall labeled as, a plural society has emerged (Furnivall 1939). In a similar fashion Bob Hefner referred to ethnic plurality within civilizational communality as a defining characteristic of the Indonesian archipelago in contrast to ethnic homogenization elsewhere (Hefner 2005: 79).

### 4 Precolonial

Like on Southeast Asian mainland, the local community of the village still constitutes the basis of society for most inhabitants. The *desa* (in Indonesia), *kampung* (in Malaya) or *barangay* (in the Philippines) was and is the domain of a highly personalized social structure based on mutual support and subsistence ethics. In a cultural sense Malays see their origin to be located in the village, which they long for and occasionally return to (*balik kampung*). In the Indonesian case there has been an academic discussion on to what extent the village as a homogenous unit was more a colonial invention than an already long established social reality. Today the romantic picture of the village is officially promoted, as the stable foundation of society based upon mutual solidarity. A similar role is attributed to traditional *kompong* structures in large cities. Historical research on nineteenth century Java has shown that within the village there existed a social hierarchy, between the village head and his family, peasants with land and those without. Ideas of mutual support (*gotong royong*) were strengthened during the Second World War by the Japanese, so that the traditional village as a place of little hierarchy and much social solidarity was foremost an example of the invention of tradition (Breman 1983: 6-13; Elson 1994: 29-35).

In the Northern and Central Philippines supra-local polities have not been forthcoming until colonialism, but still there existed a distinction between local heads (*datu*) and their followers on the one hand and the common people (*tao*) on the other hand, either free or subjected to bondage. Social stratification was thus formatted into a web of interdependence (Abinales and Amoroso 2005: 28-31). In Malaya and Indonesia the villages in early times already became part of higher-level patrimonial polities, establishing a patrimonial socioculture on top of the village world.

In the interior of Java, first East in Majapahit and later in the center in Mataram, agrarian polities emerged based on an Indic model of statehood, establishing a patrimonial socioculture. The world was conceived a set of concentric circles (*mandala*) around an exemplary center. The ruler in his palace and

the compounds of high nobility and administrative elites (the so-called *priyayi*) constituted the *nagara*, the capital and, in a symbolic sense, the state as such. The wider circle of lands around the center was named the *nagaragung* (or extended state). This was where the landed estates or salary fields of the elite were lying, the outputs of which they drew their income. The third circle was the *mancanagara*, the outlying land, which was beyond the immediate control of the capital but subject to taxation, in the form of the delivery of agricultural produce and manpower. Connected to this was a strict status hierarchy, based on how close one was to the exemplary center of the ruler either through descent or through state office (see Moertono 1968). The Javanese language mirrors social hierarchy since it possesses up to four speech levels, each conversation being governed by the difference in social status between those engaged in direct conversation.

The predominant format on the coasts of Malaya and Indonesia was that of the maritime kingdom (*kerajaan*). The exemplary Malay *kerajaan*, upon which all subsequent kingdoms were modeled, was 14th century Malacca. The political system was centered on the ruler (*raja*), inviolable ties binding king and subject, but also open in nature since it incorporated sea people (*orang laut*) and aboriginal forest dwellers (*orang asli*). Associated with the ruler was a small elite of nobles (*orang kaya* or rich men), living on income from maritime trade (Andaya 2001: 47-51). The Malay population itself was mixed, since there had been migration into different directions, for instance from the Minangkabau in West Sumatra to the Malay peninsula. Most Malays lived in rice-growing villages on the banks of rivers, large ones having a chief and an imam responsible for the mosque, matrilineal families working together on the fields (Gullick 1958: 25-37). Villages were connected to river trade, the center where the *raja* resided was the focal point where riverine and maritime trade converged and where most income was generated through taxation. Additional prestige was gained through the promotion of Islam. The *kerajaan* system of the coastal polities led to the emergence of, what could be called, a commercial socioculture (*perdagangan*) characterized by horizontal, ethnic or religious social distinction more than steep social hierarchy. The use of Malay, a trader's language largely lacking markers of social hierarchy, reflected this.

We can see that precolonial sociocultures in Nusantara displayed a double orientation, one being connected to agriculture and comparable to the *baan-muang* patrimonial socioculture in parts of mainland Southeast Asia and a commercial one connected to maritime trade, with a flatter social hierarchy and more horizontal demarcations on the basis of place of origin. The interdependence between maintenance of social hierarchy and horizontal social dynamics has persisted to govern sociocultures in Nusantara until today.

## 5 Colonial

Although the penetration of the colonial state differed both in length and in depth between Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines it changed the social fabric in important ways, adding new social complexities on top of those which already existed. Since larger polities had not emerged in the Philippines, from the 16th century onwards the Spanish crown and Catholic church were instrumental in creating an administrative superstructure that reached from northern Luzon southward towards the areas of the so-called Moros. Villages were effectively run by friars and peasants were turned into serfs working on large plantations. Similarly, on the island of Java in the framework of the so-called Cultivation System a major mobilization of peasant labor took place during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to plant and harvest cash crops which were sold on the world market. Later major plantations were set up outside Java, for which the labor was recruited in the heavily populated island of Java. Also in Malaya a sizeable plantation and mining industry emerged, in which Chinese, Indians and Javanese were put to work, whereas Malay peasants were kept in their villages. In the late colonial era urbanization increased, making the colonial metropolis into a site of multiple interaction and intensified hierarchy. A capitalist socioculture therefore already developed during the late colonial period.

The European power holders had to accommodate much of the existing social hierarchy, since the indigenous elites, directly or indirectly, had to be incorporated in colonial rule. Therefore existing inequalities were maintained and even strengthened, whilst indigenous power holders were now backed up by foreign might. In Java the *priyayi* were now turned into the indigenous arm of western colonial government and could thus maintain their position. In Malaya the British built a system of indirect rule, in which the Sultans or *rajas*, symbolically at least, maintained sovereignty, although they always had to follow the 'advice' of the British resident. Chinese and minorities were used as intermediaries

in the economic and governmental sphere because the Europeans wanted to avoid depending too much on Muslim subjects they did not trust. Attempts at resisting colonial rule or nationalist emancipation were repressed. Whereas Spanish rule displayed similar features as the Dutch in Indonesia and the British in Malaya, American colonial rule pursued ilustrado nationalist – American collaboration and a Filipinization of the administrative sector, after World War I announcing to withdraw from the area altogether (Steinberg 2000: 62-71). Spanish clerical dominion and American colonization had, however, lasting consequences for the Philippine social structure, since a cacique mestizo elite could successfully cling on to power ever since (Anderson 1998: chapter 9, 192-226).

Whereas most colonial systems for reasons of rule maintenance wanted to promote social continuity, censuses and colonial law installed a new, horizontal as well as vertical segmentation of society. Both installed vertical social distinction on the basis of race, putting Europeans and other selected groups in advantageous positions vis-à-vis immigrants and the indigenous population. A color bar of whiteness separated Europeans and the other strata in society, below that line the crucial social distinction was based upon the need to do manual work or not. In Indonesia the system of colonial social classification became more rigid in the 1930s, under the combined pressures of Indonesian nationalism, economic depression and the growing threat of a Pacific war by Japan. Colonial socioculture did not erase existing sociocultures but positioned itself on top and acerbated social cleavages. After independence European privilege was abandoned but colonial socioculture did not disappear completely as distinctions on the basis of ethnicity and/or religion against minorities were prolonged. Both in Malaysia and Indonesia Chinese face systemic discrimination. In the Philippines the Muslims of the South are still being marginalized. Everywhere hill people and aboriginals are discriminated against.

## 6 Postcolonial

At first the transition to political independence did not change the existing social structure much except for the departure and/or marginalization of the Europeans and the minorities associated with them. In Java official elite families (priyayi) could maintain their positions despite the political upheavals of the Indonesian revolution (Sutherland 1973/1974). On the basis of fieldwork in the early 1950s the social scientist Leslie Palmier concluded that, although times were changing rapidly, old social divisions reemerged. Only the social division between nobility and people had now been replaced by that between the 'leaders' and the people (Palmier 1960: 5). The rise of these new priyayi did not alter the life of the commoners (rakyat in Indonesian), however.

According to the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz postwar Mojokuto city in East Java quickly restored social order after the Indonesian revolution but social complexities increased tremendously on the basis of ideologically affiliated groupings. A first order vertical distinction existed between priyayi and intelligentsia as old and new elite, the town mass, village leaders and the rural mass. Besides that five second order horizontal distinctions were identified: javanist versus Islamic, politically responsive versus unresponsive, elite versus mass, urban versus rural and modern versus traditional. Different ways of life on the basis of distinctive cultural traditions had been transformed into religious-political factions, called 'aliran' or streams (Geertz 1965: 119-153). The concept of aliran in order to describe social structure points towards the 'looseness' and fractionalized nature of postcolonial sociocultures. Pre-class 'quasi-groups' developing into 'strategic groups', in order to characterize the emerging bureaucratic and military officials, has been another way of expressing social formations emerging in the early postcolonial period (Evers 1980).

After independence in Indonesia a rapid expansion of the bureaucracy occurred. Being a government official (pegawai negeri) carried high social esteem and political parties extended their influence within the government apparatus by appointing their clients to office. In Central Java the old priyayi stratum fused with the new government officials, at the same time the old court nobility was replaced by a new upper class of university-educated national intelligentsia (Selosoemardjan 1962: 105-132).

Similar observations can be made for the Philippines and Malaysia. In the Philippines elite clans collaborated with the Japanese and knew how to solidify their position after independence in 1946 despite a major internal challenge from a peasant rebellious movement (Hukbalahap). The bureaucracy was increased in size, which enabled politicians and bureaucrats to give jobs to their kin (Steinberg 2000: 110). In Malaysia, the Malay educated elite, organized in the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), succeeded in securing political supremacy on the basis of a racial bargain with the Chinese

and Indians, which opened the door towards independence in 1957. In the meanwhile the challenge to Malay supremacy, a consequence of colonial policy, in the format of a Chinese communist revolt was suppressed with British support.

Due to postwar economic growth new social groups emerged in Nusantara, especially in the form of a so-called middle class. However, the term middle class seems problematic for this region since it cannot be identified clearly as a category of social interest and action. There are too many internal divisions within. Liberal pluralists have defined middle class as cultural entity due to values of individuals and rationality. Neo-Weberians see the new middle class as outcome of the shift from entrepreneurial to corporate capitalism, in which the middle class constitutes the skilled workforce. Leaving matters of definitions aside, all area observers in the 1980s and 1990s agree on the emergence of a middle stratum in the context of new social interests aimed at more consumption, higher levels of education, the need for legal security and access to information (Robison and Goodman 1996: 8-11; King 2008: 100-105).<sup>2</sup>

To the new middle class in Indonesia belong the ones who are considered to be the *have-enoughs* (*cukupan*), situated somewhere between the poor and the elite strata of society. Inside the middle class civil servants, their numbers growing through the expansion of the bureaucracy and educational sector, constitute the largest group. What characterizes them is not so much income but social behavior and lifestyle considered to be modern, leading to patterns of symbolic consumption by the lower middle class who lack the money for 'real' consumption (Solvay Gerke 2000: 142-150). The middle classes in Malaysia rose in the wake of 1980s economic growth, which was partly based on 'party capitalism' i.e. enterprises based on the patronage by the ruling party UMNO over the corporate sector. The Malay middle stratum consists of professional and technical workers in industry and of bureaucrats but is separate from the Chinese business classes. The developmentalist state engages in an identity politics project making cultural distinctions between 'Malay', 'Chinese', and 'Indian', thereby strengthening Malay participation in industrialization and thus creating a Malay middle class (Kahn 1996; Embong 1998). The middle class in the Philippines seems to be more precarious since the economy has not been doing well since Fidel Marcos, who ruled from 1972 until 1986. A big divide still exists between a *mestizo* oligarchy – labeled as *caciques* – and the *masa* (impoverished masses).

The Asian economic crisis at the end of the 1990s seemed at first to be the start of yet another phase of social reconfiguration. Although political reform has been stalled in Malaysia and the Philippines, with the downfall of Suharto in 1998 Indonesia moved, at least on paper, from authoritarianism to democracy. Neo-liberal policies enabled commercial socioculture to reemerge again in the format of an entrepreneurial class profiting from new business opportunities. Economic globalization enabled the rise of new rich (Pinches 1999). Islamic lifestyles add to the emergence of new branches of consumerism. Yet old business and family alliances, a social structure based on the legacy of a patrimonial state seem to have persisted (King 2008: 115). The same holds true for Malaysia and the Philippines, where social change has not been forthcoming altogether.

## 7 Concluding remarks

This overview article has attempted to show the relevance of socioculture in order to understand persisting structures of social inequality in Southeast Asia in general, insular Southeast Asia or Nusantara in particular. Perspectives from history, social science and area studies have been combined into one comprehensive analysis. In the course of time, particularly during periods of profound social transformation, new layers and new divisions were added to the social structure but the existing ones were not erased. This combination of continuity and change has led to a complex social fabric with qualities that are specific to the area.

Precolonial Nusantara saw the co-existence of a rural-based patrimonial and a maritime commercial socioculture. Colonial hegemony introduced new formats of vertical social distinction, based on race and religion, which were continued after political independence. In contrast, the core feature of colonial socioculture, the superimposition of a European elite on top of the indigenous social fabric, disappeared in the wake of decolonization. In the postcolonial era old elites were joined by new educated elites in the expanding bureaucracy and military. In contrast to the colonial era in which social inequalities were rigidified, postcolonial dynamics produced looser as well as more fractured social inequalities. In Indonesia in the 1950s religious-political 'streams' appeared, from the 1980s onwards a middle stratum

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<sup>2</sup>For a recent contribution on middle Indonesia, see: Van Klinken and Berenschot 2014

emerged between elite and commoners. Yet, as of today, patrimonial and commercial sociocultures persist. A true understanding of social inequality thus necessitates adopting a long-term perspective based on an area-based appreciation of sociocultures.

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