

### Current Trends in Anthropological and Sociological Research on and in Southeast Asia

Korff, Rüdiger; Schröter, Susanne

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:  
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Korff, R., & Schröter, S. (2006). Current Trends in Anthropological and Sociological Research on and in Southeast Asia. *Südostasien aktuell : journal of current Southeast Asian affairs*, 25(4), 63-72. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-337220>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

## Debatte

---

### ***Current Trends in Anthropological and Sociological Research on and in Southeast Asia***

Rüdiger Korff, Susanne Schröter

In their study on “The modern anthropology of Southeast Asia”, Victor King and William Wilder raise the question in how far the region can be taken as a field of anthropological enquiry. After their initial discussion of cultural and social trends as well as anthropological studies, they conclude that the common issue of the region is its diversity. They come to the rather pragmatic solution that “South-East Asia constitutes a convenient unit of study, ... but ... we should not think of it in terms of a bounded, unified and homogenous socio-cultural area” (King/Wilder 2003: 24). We doubt that there are homogenous socio-cultural areas anywhere else. These are usually constructed through the invention of traditions and ideological simulations. The interesting case with regards to Southeast Asia is, why no such homogeneity has been constructed, not even by anthropologists or sociologists.<sup>1</sup>

Africa f.e. is as heterogeneous, but on the ideological-political level as well as in social science discourses the region has been constructed as comparatively homogenous. In contrast to Southeast Asia we do have some basic paradigms like segmentary society, rentier- (or even failed) state, etc. These emerged from comparative studies and discussions. Concerning Southeast Asia, we have f.e. a prominent production of theory regarding kinship issues and ritual speech<sup>2</sup> but this is mainly focused on Indonesia.

Looking at Southeast Asia common ignorance is rather wide spread. Those working on Indonesia tend to ignore concepts based on research on the mainland

---

<sup>1</sup> Prior to the Asian crisis Sharon Siddique argued that with the economic boom in East- and Southeast Asia, such a homogenization process in terms of an “Asian” identity might emerge. The discussion of Asian values and the community culture approaches of several NGO or the post-colonial anti-westernization discourses of W. Bello, C. Mustafa Theerayuth Boonmee aim into such a direction.

<sup>2</sup> The centre of this approach was formerly related to the “Leiden school of Anthropology” (van Wouden, de Josselin de Jong etc.) and had shifted to Canberra (Fox) at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

and vice versa, and those working on the Philippines find it easier to compare local processes with Latin America. A telling exception is the old discussion on the “plural society” and the “dual economy” or of the “Indianized states” during the first half of the last century. In contrast, later research is far more localized. Geertz “involution” has, as far as we know, never been applied for the analysis of development in Thailand, Vietnam, or anywhere outside of Indonesia. On the other hand the “loosely structured social system” or “patron-client” perspective has not received any attention outside of the discussion of Thailand. In these cases it can be discussed whether this really is a loss or not. However, it is surprising that the studies of Leach or Condominas of the minorities in the Mekong uplands, have received far more attention within anthropology than as stimulations for further research in Southeast Asia. Even in the later ethnographies of the “hill-tribes” one hardly finds any reference to Leach or Condominas.<sup>3</sup> As King and Wilder (2003) indicate, this has a lot to do with the colonial past when the initial paradigms for the study of Indonesia, Burma and Malaysia or Indochina were formed. This tradition of colonial fragmentation perpetuated by the languages used in publications, and teaching courses at the Universities, is one reason why no paradigm of Southeast Asian Studies has emerged, from which it might be possible to define the region as such as a field for anthropological enquiry. An additional more pragmatic reason certainly is the need to be fluent in quite a few rather difficult languages to do comparative field research.

Even globalization has not really lead to socio-cultural homogenization or stimulated comparative studies on a larger scale. A structural discrepancy among those working on Southeast Asia might have its root in this:

**Firstly**, this discrepancy concerns the status of the researchers with regards to their discipline. In the European social science discussion Southeast Asian studies are marginal. In sociological research in Europe, the so-called “own society” still reigns supreme. Less so in anthropology and ethnology where field research in a far away location has always been part of the initiation rites. Most social science research in Southeast Asian universities or research institutes has in common with European institutions the focus on the own society and culture, which is in this case the own country. As mentioned, studies comparing processes in Thailand with Indonesia or Malaysia and vice versa are hardly found outside of the NUS (National University of Singapore). Thereby mainstream research in Southeast

---

<sup>3</sup> Here Turton has to be cited as exception.

Asia is marginal for Europe and vice versa mainstream research in Southeast Asia is ignored in Europe. This is probably one reason why except theoretical discourses hardly any aspects of “European studies” feed into Southeast Asian studies and vice versa nothing much from Southeast Asian studies is cited by the great social scientists like Luhmann, Giddens, Bourdieu not to speak of Foucault, Baudrillard or others. Here Castells has to be cited as an important exception! However, interestingly, Castells is much less discussed in Southeast Asia than f.e. Giddens or French post-modernists.

So far the impact of the Asian – European Centres established at Southeast Asian universities, namely at Universiti Malaya and Chulalongkorn University can not be evaluated. Very interesting is the establishment of the “Centre for Occidental Studies” at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). In difference to the other centres, this is entirely funded by UKM. Perhaps these regional studies centres might stimulate the exchange of knowledge and cooperation. Perhaps, the social science discussion in Europe might receive some new ideas.

**Secondly**, there is an important implication to this different status of Southeast Asian Studies within the region and outside. Research by those working in Southeast Asia has to address issues defined politically as relevant.<sup>4</sup> The findings have to be fed into the local discussion of future development and of how to solve problems. In contrast, not the least due to the marginalization of foreigners doing research on Southeast Asia, they can, and quite often do, focus on quite specific and sometimes “exotic” topics that are not that closely connected to local social science discourses in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Exotic topics are a general problem of anthropologists, or at least for those anthropologists who follow the traditional path of our mighty ancestors. As a novice the anthropologist comes to his or her field site, ideally in a village located in a remote area. He or she is isolated from other foreigners, has a hard time to learn the local language which can take years, suffers from culture shock and recovers, tries to grasp every detail of the local culture which definitely takes years or the whole life, becomes more and more part of the local society and

---

<sup>4</sup> With scientists working in Southeast Asia we mean those working in universities or research institutes within the region regardless of whether they are nationals of Southeast Asian countries or aliens. In contrast, with those working outside the region we refer to those employed at universities or research institutes outside of the region proper. In most cases these are foreigners. A special case are Southeast Asian Ph.D students enrolled in European, American or Australian Universities.

<sup>5</sup> An example is the Tsunami. We were quite surprised when we started to do some research in Aceh, Khao Lak and Sri Lanka that we did not meet other foreign researchers.

in some cases even goes native. Finally, the anthropologist becomes an expert for his or her particular people. Ideally, he or she is the only expert for this culture in the whole world. He or she imposes a copy right and struggles over gate keeping. Somebody who is trained in such a manner is not very keen to engage in a wider debate with colleagues and to contribute to area studies. It seems that in times where post-modern anthropologists develop ideas of fragmented identities and multi-sited ethnographies on one hand an intensified particularism can be observed on the other hand.

A remarkable exception of this is gender studies. Influential theories on gender and power relationships have been drawn from comparison of SE-Asian societies. We indicate "Power and difference. Gender in island southeast Asia", edited by Jane Monning Atkinson and Shelly Errington, a pioneer work which came out in 1990. Since then Southeast Asian anthropological findings have constantly fuelled anthropological and interdisciplinary gender discourse. We will mention only a few of them: Aihwa Ong's and Michael Peletz's book (1995) on body politics in SE-Asia, Lenore Manderson's and Pranee Liamputtong's volume on adolescence in SE-Asia (Manderson/Liamputtong 2002), and a study published by Lenore Manderson with Linda Rae Bennett on Violence against women in Asian societies, with examples drawn mainly from Southeast Asia (Manderson/Bennett 2003).

**Thirdly**, the research work of the scholars is embedded in different structures. Europeans scholars are in Southeast Asia for their field research, for conferences etc. in other words outside of their usual work and everyday life. In contrast, those working in Southeast Asian universities etc. hardly find time for field research due to the manifold demands in terms of administrative work, teaching load, consultancies and political engagement. For them the region is the space of everyday life. Still the number of European "Southeast Asianists" who work for extended periods in universities of the region is surprisingly small, as well as the number of Southeast Asians working in European universities outside of the language departments. This seems to be changing though, as more and more young researchers start to work with NGO etc. in Southeast Asia. At least a few Europeans who worked in universities of the region for longer periods are doing comparative studies or focus on Southeast Asia wide processes. Evers analysis of strategic group formation can be cited as well as Mulders work on "everyday life in Southeast Asia" or the studies of Evers, Nas and others on southeast Asian urbanism, to refer to just a few.

The different life styles and research conditions of local and foreign scholars can lead to *meconnaissance* as Wazir (1996) notes, “how representative are the images of the developing world which are created through the globalization of knowledge and how distinctly different are these from the images that the developing world conceives of knowledge produced from Europe and the United States” (2003:135). A way out of such misreckoning is mutual working together. This faces problems resulting from the mentioned discrepancies, and the valorisation of knowledge on a global scale especially in publications.

In a recent study on social science research in Southeast Asia, Evers and Gerke show that during the last decades publications dealing with the region have nearly tripled (Evers/Gerke (2003). Still most publications on Southeast Asia are produced by scholars associated to universities or institutes outside of the region, especially the US and Western Europe. But, the proportion produced within the region is rising relatively faster than publications outside. This shows that possibilities for cooperation are improving, which has and will have the effect that the issues addressed by research might become more comparable. However, the social science capacities are highly unequally distributed among the countries. Most publications on Singapore are produced in Singapore. In Malaysia and the Philippines about a quarter of publications are “home grown” and in Thailand a bit less than one fifth. This rank order of local studies on the own country contrasts with global research on the respective country. Here more than 30% of the publications refer to the Philippines. Second comes Vietnam (26%), thereafter Indonesia (24%), Thailand (23%) and Malaysia (20%). Concerning Vietnam and Indonesia we thus find a strong contrast between local social science capacities and international attention. Whether this indicates that international – local cooperation is less in these countries is a question of further enquiry. With regards to Myanmar, Cambodia,<sup>6</sup> Laos and Brunei<sup>7</sup> less than 5% of publications deal with these countries.

Unfortunately, Evers and Gerke do not differentiate whether the publications referring to Southeast Asia were published in journals of Southeast – or Asian studies, i.e. regional studies journals, or in disciplinary oriented journals. Using *Ingenta* during the last ten years 29 articles referring to Southeast Asia were

---

<sup>6</sup> Probably 90% of the publications of Cambodia deal with the Pol Pot periode.

<sup>7</sup> A third of the studies dealing with Brunei are produced in Brunei.

*Table 1: Comparison of publications referring to regions in disciplinary journals*

	Southeast Asia*	China	Europe	America
Sociology	4 (28)	49	101	227
Anthropology	5 (32)	24	52	40

Note: \* The numbers in brackets are articles referring to a country not to the region.

published in disciplinary journals.<sup>8</sup> This number increases to 60 when articles referring to country names are added. Of course, thereby we have several double entries. This contrasts with publications dealing with “Europe” (153 references) or “America” (267 references).

Certainly, these very rough data have to be taken with caution, but nevertheless they do indicate the marginal status of Southeast Asian studies regardless of their origin within disciplinary discourses. To overcome this marginalization requires improved funding of research especially of cooperative research. However, money does not solve the problem. As important is that Southeast Asian studies (regardless of whether it is local or global) moves out of the niches of regional studies and faces the challenges to get published in disciplinary journals. Leach, Firth and a few others might be taken as example. Thereby the social processes in Southeast Asia might receive more attention by others, as the case of Castells indicates. In other words, the mutual boundaries of ignorance should be overcome.

Would the establishment of Southeast Asian Centres facilitate such a development? Looking through the internet it seems that most universities in the US have Southeast Asian Centres. In Germany the situation is quite different. With a few exceptions (Passau, Bonn, Münster, Freiburg)<sup>9</sup> the centres for Southeast Asian Studies have their focus on language, literature and history, neither on political science, anthropology or sociology. In the lists of larger scale interdisciplinary research programmes funded by the DFG,<sup>10</sup> only two deal explicitly with South-

<sup>8</sup> Disciplinary journals were defined as those having the term “sociology” or “anthropology” or conjugations in their title.

<sup>9</sup> In difference to the other two universities, there are no centres or institutes for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Freiburg or Münster. However within anthropology (Münster) and anthropology, sociology and political science (Freiburg) several scholars work on Southeast Asia.

<sup>10</sup> These are: Forschergruppen, Schwerpunktprogramme, Sonderforschungsbereiche (including Transregio and Transfers) and Graduiertenkollegs (incl. internationale Graduiertenkollegs).

east Asia namely the “uplands programme” of the University of Hohenheim and STORMA of the University of Göttingen. No Southeast Asia Centre has been involved in these.<sup>11</sup> To put Southeast Asia on the agenda, more engagement of the regional institutes and individual scholars to involve in such large scale projects is necessary and, what is as or even more important, to get together and establish such a programme as international cooperation focusing on Southeast Asia. For us as relative newcomers to the regional studies scene, this rather limited involvement of the regional institutes is slightly surprising.<sup>12</sup>

Taking all these arguments together, the question emerges whether the marginalization of regional studies within the global social science discourses is accompanied by a wider marginalization within the process of knowledge production in general. Keeping in mind the argument raised before that research of foreigners on Southeast Asia is embedded in structures different from those working in Southeast Asia, who tend to be far more oriented towards local problems, it might be that regional studies in Europe are as well marginal to the Southeast Asian discussion of Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> Here a closer examination of publications (including translations) might provide more information.

We will not go into a discussion of anthropological and sociological research in this presentation. On one hand the study of King and Wilder provides a detailed overview at least on anthropological research,<sup>14</sup> and as the data by Evers and Gerke indicate, the fields has far expanded during the last decades. The focus will be on what has not become a field of anthropological or sociological enquiry.

The regions left out (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar) have been mentioned already, as well as the lack of comparative studies and the need for closer working together. With a comparative perspective we do not mean the comparison of one country with another one. A comparative perspective requires a theoretical perspective by which similarities and differences can be identified, or by which socio-cultural units can be defined. In other words, there is still, even after the postmodern deconstruction the need for a “sociology” or “anthropology” of Southeast Asia.

---

<sup>11</sup> This is no indication of a marginalization of Southeast Asia. Of all projects only eleven refer explicitly to a region outside of Europe.

<sup>12</sup> Here we find a difference to African studies. At the African Studies Centre in Bayreuth since long SFB have been established.

<sup>13</sup> Looking at the Social Science Citation Index, the number of especially Germans cited by Southeast Asians is rather limited.

<sup>14</sup> Although the study is a bit biased towards research within the Malay civilisation (to apply a term of Shamsul) and anglophone scholars.



Not as “great theory”, but as shared discourse of diversity, not necessarily in terms of “unity in diversity” though.

Sociology and anthropology are reflective sciences, what means that the research topics evolve from current processes and have effects on them, especially when social science findings are applied in development projects and scientists are involved in these development processes, what is commonly the case in Southeast Asia. In these processes theories of culture and society are created. Currently, the national mindedness implies that Malaysian scholars construct their national theory of Malaysian society as base for research and development strategies, Indonesian create an Indonesian theory of Indonesian society and Thai’s of Thai society etc.<sup>15</sup> Thereby the wider regional perspective is lost on the way. This attempt to create “national” theories for “national” development is a highly relevant topic for research namely in the framework of a sociology or anthropology of knowledge. How are concepts and theories adapted to the social circumstances within the countries, and under what circumstances do which concepts emerge? In how far reflect these theories syncretism so commonly seen in Southeast Asian religious practises?

The creation of “national” theories has one focus on “identity,” which forms one background for the popularity of “Asian values” among anthropologists and sociologists. Here a comparative perspective centred on notions of identity, power and the construction of the person in hierarchical and egalitarian systems in Southeast Asia can provide a wider, regional perspective. Especially with regards to identity this has turned into an important background for local conflicts within Southeast Asia.

Sociology and anthropology, in difference to economics and political science do not take political boundaries for natural or as constituting socio-cultural units. As always, political boundaries usually disconnect integrated societies, and only with the rise of nationalism a social correspondence had been created. An example is the straits of Malacca, the northern states of what is today Malaysia and southern Thailand, or the mountainous Mekong region, where only since the end of the last century a process of integration into the surrounding states has taken place. In how far do these cross-boundary regions constitute fields for anthropological enquiry? How do the interactions between the different groups, the minorities and majorities as well as the majorities that are minorities change? How does

---

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps only at the NUS an attempt is made towards a theory of Southeast Asian society.

national integration lead to new differentiations or fragmentations and conflicts? Here the Mountainous Mekong Southeast Asia (MMSEA) conferences are an example for approaches to overcome existing political boundaries and to focus on socio-cultural and political processes within the region. This approach is as well different from the traditional studies of a specific ethnic group, in which the interactions are often less analysed.

While in this perspective comparison means the analysis of more or less integrated socio-cultural units, it is as important to do comparative research in not related regions that share common characteristics like minorities living in mountainous areas in the Mekong uplands as well as in Borneo or the Philippines. Similarly, no comparative research that we know of has been conducted on the “sea-nomads” in the Indonesian archipelago and the Andaman sea, and how these minority groups are integrated/integrating into the nation states and affected by globalization as much as nationalism. Another highly relevant field for comparative studies is urbanism and urban dynamics in the Southeast Asian metropolis and regional centres. Further topics which need the comparative perspective are local conflicts, the raise of new ethnicities, and the so-called return of religion, as Martin Riesebrodt from the Chicago fundamentalist project has designated the revival of fundamentalisms.

Such studies can not be conducted individually. Because all these issues are beyond national frameworks cooperation is required. Increasingly, NGOs construct their networks on different levels, and it might be useful for researchers to learn from them. In our understanding, the result of such an endeavour might be that the study of Southeast Asia is not just a special field of regional sociology or anthropology, but itself an integral part of global discourses regardless of the identity in terms of ID-cards of the scientist doing research.

## References

- Atkinson, Jane Monning/Shelly Errington (Ed.) (1990), *Power and difference. Gender in island southeast Asia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Evers, H.D., S. Gerke, 2003, *Local and global knowledge. Social science research on southeast Asia*, working paper 18, Southeast Asia Studies, University of Bonn
- King, V.T., W. Wilder, (2003), *The modern anthropology of Southeast Asia. An introduction*, London: Routledge

- Manderson, Lenore/Pranee Liamputtong (Ed.) (2002), *Coming of age in South and Southeast Asia*. Richmond: Curzon Press
- Manderson, Lenore/Linda Rae Bennett (Ed.) (2003), *Violence against women in Asian societies*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon
- Ong, Aihwa and Michael Peletz (Ed.) (1995), *Bewitching women, pious men. Gender and body politics in Southeast Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Wazir Jahan Karim, "Anthropology without Tears: How a 'Local' sees the 'Local' and the 'Global,'" in: Henrietta L. Moore (Ed.), *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, London, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 135