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Roundtable

Views from the Ground: Reflections on Studying Indigeneity in Southeast Asia

26 April 2019

Convenors: Rusaslina Idrus (RI) and Liana Chua (LC)

Participants: Poline Bala (PB), Kwanchewan Buadaeng (KB), Kelvin Egay (KE), Prasit Leepreecha (PL), Dave Lumenta (DL), Zanisah Man (ZM), Kendy Mitot (KM), Oona Paredes (OP), Shanthi Thambiah (ST) and Vilashini Somiah (VS).

This roundtable took place at the end of a two-day workshop, 'Unpacking Indigeneity in Southeast Asia', which was held on 25–26 April 2019 at the University of Malaya. It was convened by the editors of this special section, Rusaslina Idrus and Liana Chua, as part of their British Academy/Newton Mobility Grant collaboration (NMGR1180433). The participants in the workshop were all Indigenous and non-Indigenous Southeast Asian scholars (mainly anthropologists) who were trained in different disciplinary centres and traditions, and who worked in various parts of the region. In the workshop, we considered how our own subject positions as Southeast Asian scholars working in Southeast Asia shaped our research, collaborations and fieldwork relations; the varied definitions, categories and politics of indigeneity at play in the region; intersectionality; our implication in and departures from disciplinary and colonial legacies; power dynamics in the field; the politics of knowledge-production and publication; and the question of who theorizes, and where from. Here, we present a condensed transcript of the roundtable discussion, which has been lightly edited for clarity.

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We started the roundtable by posing the question of what challenges and opportunities Southeast Asian anthropologists working on indigeneity currently face.

LC: We would like to more explicitly interrogate our own subject positions, which are pretty murky in themselves—as Southeast Asians, as anthropologists, as people who come from different disciplinary backgrounds, who work with Indigenous peoples in different ways, and who are seen by Indigenous people in very different ways. What are the challenges we face in this particular moment in Southeast Asia as Southeast Asian anthropologists?

RI: I would also like to add that while there are challenges, we should also consider opportunities. As Southeast Asian anthropologists working in Southeast Asia, we are particularly grounded to the place and constantly engaging with the people we work with. This also presents many possibilities and opportunities.

OP: We face different types of challenges because we are all different types of regional anthropologists, different types of Southeast Asian anthropologists. Some of us are Indigenous peoples working in our own communities, some are Indigenous peoples working in other communities, some of us are Indigenous peoples working in other countries, some of us are non-Indigenous working in our own country, and so there's also class differences and our own positionalities. So, there are many different types of challenges that we all face and therefore there are different types of possible positionalities. We have to unpack ourselves. But the key to doing that, rather than just thinking and meditating on it, [is that] we should focus on the way we do our research. Talking about it is not as important as doing it. Can we find a way of doing it, methodologically, that is leading to some sort of decolonization?

The thing I am attempting to do is collaborative ethnographic research. On the simplest level, all that means is I am trying to get people involved in the project in terms of conceptualizing the project, actually collecting data, running the project without me there. I just sort of supervise. In a way, it is like I am the PI [Principal

Investigator] and I've got a couple of co-PIs, and there are also other people working as research assistants. They are all part of the Higaunon community [Philippines]. The project on oral tradition was conceptualized originally by a community elder. He and I talked about it a decade ago. When it was time to do it, I talked to him some more. When I applied for the grant, I put him down as a co-PI because he was the one who was telling me how it should be done. He is the one who knows the parameters of what is possible and what is not [in terms of the community and the culture]. He is the expert. I am there more as a consultant anthropologist advising on methodology. Having all these people involved, that are all Indigenous from that group, means that they all learn about the research process and the work that I do. It affects the power imbalance a little bit. In terms of knowledge and in terms of expertise, they see me as an equal rather than a superior, so they know they can tell me how to do things and direct me rather than waiting for me to tell them what to do. It is more collaborative in that sense. [As a result,] the project, over time, has reflected more and more their own concerns rather than mine. They are the ones driving the bus in many ways.

KE: I have been asked by two communities how to do research, how to do oral history. I was talking to a group of seventy households in [a part of Sarawak affected by a dam-construction project]. They wanted to document their own oral history. They were trying to do their community genealogy, so I shared how to do this and gave them small assignments. It was interesting how they created their own diagrams. When I asked, "Why do you do your diagram this way?", they explained their logic; so, they actually have their own ideas on this. I shared how I would do mine and they tried to combine them. In another group, the Penan [Sarawak], they wanted to learn how to write their stories but did not know how. They were asking me about methodology, how to do things. This process made me question our work and our own approach in anthropology.

OP: I think the methodology that we really can teach is not the sort of anthropology we teach in class, but more of how to think

on their own, what they do with the culture themselves, and [how to] form more of a kind of intellectual point of view, somewhat more detached, and thinking [more] analytically, rather than [just] what they feel and what they experience, and really being able to see things more clearly. Really [more about methodology] as a powerful tool for them.

DL: In Indonesia we have been working with Ethiopian and Afghani refugees—there are thousands who have settled in Jakarta. In the beginning it was out of curiosity that we decided to visit them to learn more about their community. We met these young Ethiopian men who are 18, 22 years old and found they like to compose songs and make music. They wanted our help to make video clips. They said, “We want to look cool, and we want to share with our relatives back in Ethiopia.” We worked with them and helped them arrange and make their own music and record video clips. We worked with them for a year and produced eight songs. They liked R&B music and hip-hop but they sing in their own language. My reference is rock, so it became rock with hip-hop. They performed once for a UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] event, and people’s reaction to the young performers was, “Why don’t you make real Ethiopian music?” The young Ethiopian responded, “I don’t know what you mean by real Ethiopian music. I am singing in my language. I like this music.” By saying no, I just like this music, they are actually decolonizing this question.

Similarly, Indonesians came and said that it would be nice if they can translate the songs in Bahasa Indonesia. We said no, because the rhythm would be different and change the performance. But in whose interests is this business of translating, anyway? The lyrics were about their experiences as refugees. One song was about a boy meeting a girl and exchanging phone numbers, and it being the story of the immigrant experience. There’s an immigration raid and the boy loses his cell phone. In this song he was more concerned about losing the girl’s number than about the raid. This is interesting because people were expecting lyrics that were political or about

grievances or repression, but I think those kinds of art collaborations give a lot of space for reflection: reflect on the responses that we got, and reflect on our own transformation throughout the process. Someone commented that what we are doing is decolonizing the process.

VS: In rethinking the position of anthropologists producing scholarship on indigeneity in Southeast Asia, I am reminded of an experience in the field. I remember speaking to a group of maritime Indigenous communities discussing the Bajau Laut, the Sea People. They were discussing who is really more indigenous than the other. And, of course, they were reflecting on their own positions, and they said, "As Indigenous people, we are fighting for our space and our rights", so on and so forth. I interjected and said, "You know, Bajau Laut are also Indigenous." They stopped for a second and then responded, "I suppose it is easier to be our Indigenous than their Indigenous." I thought that was a very important and incredibly apt comment to make because indigeneity can be hard and there is also easy indigeneity. I asked if the communities could come together in their struggles, and they said, essentially, their struggles are theirs, our struggles are ours, but this is not *your* struggle. This made me question and reflect on my work as an anthropologist in talking about indigeneity. We sometimes go into deep sympathy rather than providing an avenue for agency. When we convey their stories through our ethnographies, how do we do so with a form of consent? But also, how do we present their stories in an agentive way, providing them agency … to see their work as being agentive?

And also, based on what Dr Oona has brought up about positionality, there are Indigenous people going to that community, who are the anthropologist to that community, then there are other Indigenous people coming into the community; there are complete outsiders or insider-outsiders at the same time; there are many levels of consent that need to be addressed. I'm not sure whether the work of Southeast Asian scholars has necessarily addressed that yet. At least not enough of us have asked questions about these layers of

positionalities and identifiers. While I have Indigenous heritage, I am in no way indigenous to the people who see themselves as indigenous to the space that I studied. I think it is about really sort of going back and questioning the sort of lenses that we put in place. If a guy from America is coming to Indonesia, for example, to do work, it is quite clear-cut. In my case, it is very complicated. I am indigenous to somewhere near this place. Do I understand the same Indigenous struggles that these people have? It cannot be really transferred in that sort of manner.

I'm critical about this because, I think especially in a place like Malaysia, there is always a discussion: somebody is indigenous to somewhere, right? There are these transferrable experiences of forms of indigeneity or [a tendency to identify] indigeneity with struggles immediately. So, when we talk about Indigenous people or communities, we are [often] essentially talking about struggle. Which goes back to the point where indigeneity can be easy, and it can be hard at the same time, and I think we need to pick up these nuances and differences.

LC: Of course, easiness or hardness is not just dependent on the particular Indigenous identity; it could also be determined by different cross-cutting elements. So, in certain ways, it's easier to be 'Indigenous' in an internationally recognized sense if you are a fairly well-connected, educated individual, who is urban-based, because you have much more of a voice and presence in the international sphere than if you're, say, one of Kelvin's and my [rural Bidayuh] friends, who are not sure whether they want to be [defined as] Indigenous or not, but in the meantime they need to go and get their rice, otherwise they starve. So, it's also determined by these factors that come into play. Gender is also one of them.

VS: Yes, it's true, indigeneity is gendered, it is political, it is strategic, it's economic. I think those are the things we should be mindful of when writing about it, especially in Southeast Asia. I'm sure in places like Africa, Latin America, parts of the Americas, these come into question as well, but I'm not sure if we have explored the fact

that indigeneity is not two-dimensional here. I am concerned that there are not enough conversations on the extent to which we paint indigeneity. Indigeneity is not struggle porn, is what I am trying to say, and I think we have to be incredibly mindful of that.

ST: It’s very intense, my relationship with my [fieldwork] community. I know who passed away last night. I know who is sick, who is going to the hospital. When someone is sick in the hospital in KL [Kuala Lumpur], I go visit them; I bring them what they need. I have to take care of nearly two hundred people.... They are family. They treat me like family. They have certain expectations of me. They have appropriated me as a member of their family. They demand things of me. I can’t deliver in terms of, say, solving big problems, but I help with day-to-day life. The relationship is very intense.

PB: I remember Marilyn Strathern [a British anthropologist] narrating her own experience of going back to Melanesia the last time she went. They slaughtered pigs for her, and they scolded her for not coming back [and said], “Now our sons are old, you should come back for their weddings, and if they send one of them to university that you should provide for them.” And she’s like, “I didn’t realize that they really treat me like family!”

ST: I feel that way with the Bhuket. I go there, we sit down together in a circle, we start crying first. They give me a long list of people who passed away. “Four years, you didn’t come back, this is what’s happened.”

RI: The relationship with the communities we work with also changes over time. When you are just starting out, for example, you are just a student, someone who doesn’t know much, hanging around in the village. But as you grow and you progress in your career—for example, now you teach at a university—that changes the relationship, and it shifts the feeling of responsibility as well. I also want to throw out something. I mean, it is very simple, but we forget about writing in languages that are accessible to the

people we work with. Most of us, myself included, publish mostly in English. This is something we need to think about.

DL: I actually started working with the Kenyah in Apo Kayan twenty years ago. Only a few years ago, people realized [that] Dave was always here talking to our elders. Now it is time to actually ask him because all the elders have passed away. What did they tell him? They started phoning me in Jakarta asking me about the stories. [In] one interesting case, the son of my adopted family went to school to be a history teacher. For his final thesis, he had to do research on a regional history topic. He wanted to do research on the Konfrontasi [Confrontation, 1963–66] in Apo Kayan, but his proposal was rejected on the basis that there was no published literature on this topic. They cannot accept pure oral history only. He called me: "Uncle Dave, I have this problem, what can I do?" I told him, "I have a paper I wrote about the Apo Kayan that has some information about the Konfrontasi and some articles from the *Sarawak Gazette*. I will send them to you." With that he was able to complete his thesis and now he is back in his community and teaching. Now I often get requests to document and write down stories. Those are unexpected consequences, when research becomes something more in our engagement with the communities.

OP: This is like when we hear stories of older ethnographies being used by, say, Native American groups who have forgotten how to do certain things. They go back to what some anthropologist wrote a hundred years or fifty years ago. [As in,] "This is how our ancestors did it." We are in a way preserving those memories as well.

LC: This brings us back to this really problematic question about our complicity with what may or may not be 'good' histories of anthropology. I always get excited by these cases, but at the same time there is a move within anthropology, and academia in general, to push those sources aside and just say they are evil because by definition everything colonial is evil. We have sort of been doing this a little bit; we have been talking about how anthropology, especially

colonial anthropology, has artificially reified taxonomies, it has created categories that do not exist, created all sorts of problems, created all these maps that don't make any sense to local place formations. I sometimes find myself wondering as well what my work will be doing in twenty years' time. Am I going to be ashamed of what I did or would I be glad I did it? I really don't know.

OP: Well, if it's collaborative, then you're not the only one responsible.

RI: This makes the case that when people wrote and published, they were not thinking that the people they were studying would be reading their work. I think we have to start writing with the view that they *are* reading, and that we have these conversations much earlier on, even if it's not a collaborative project. Also engaging them not just in terms of ethnographies and documentation but also with our analytical pieces. We need to have more conversations with the people or movements we are studying.

ST: We can also share our data. As anthropologists we have a long-term relationship with our communities. I recently shared a song I recorded twenty years ago in a Bhuket WhatsApp group. There are seventy members of different age groups, including some very young Bhukets. They were so excited to hear the voice of their elders, and then we started having a long conversation about the past. Sometimes they request certain pictures. They say, "Shanthi, do you remember before the Bakun Dam, Long Sunen [name of a place along the Sunen River; Long Sunen today has been flooded by the Bakun Dam, Sarawak] was very beautiful; there were many butterflies, and wild fruits, do you have pictures?" So, I send them pictures of Long Sunen, and then we have a long conversation about their memories of the place and moments of history.

VS: A lot of my respondents nowadays open up WhatsApp groups with me in it. They say, "You weren't here for this event, we keep the pictures for you. This is our way of participating. We will take photos with our phones and share them with you." They are sending

me photos all the time. They tell me, when you write a book, I can have a credit because I gave you a picture. Clearly, technology has impacted how we gather data. Suddenly we can have massive participation.

RI: Going back to colonial records, I'm in this moment where I am collecting colonial records to include in my expert reports. The existence of these records holds weight in court. At the same time, I feel really uncomfortable because I do not want to continue reifying them because these records can be flawed; they are based on these explorers who want to lay claim to all these places they went to, the things they collected. When we give a lot of weight to them, there is that danger of putting expertise and knowledge of a community in the hands of outsiders that come in and document. How do we then try to balance that? Yes, we do need to refer to the historical records, but in my writing this evidence report, I also make sure to include the oral history, what the community is telling me, what they have observed and what I have observed in my own fieldwork. I don't want to give too much power to those colonial records. It gets tricky down the line if there are communities with no random colonial person who went on this expedition exploring down their river. When there are colonial records, it provides strong evidence. But what happens when there are no colonial records? Then, does it make it a weaker case for another community?

DL: I had the same dilemma once. The community asked if there are any maps from the colonial period that I can help find to negotiate their boundaries. I went to the archive and there was a map, but the area that the Dutch had marked was actually smaller compared to their village area. I was hesitant to show them, and I told the villagers, "Actually, the Dutch maps show something that will not benefit you. It is much smaller than your claim. The size of your district now is far larger than what was reported." They accepted that and they gave up. This is a case [where] you think twice about using colonial records.

PL: Most of us are trained as anthropologists according to Western traditions. We are adopting Western ways of thinking when we think about Indigenous peoples and marginalized peoples. My concern is, in order to investigate indigeneity, we need to create new concepts and analytical tools in thinking about indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia. I don't have the answers, but I am throwing this question out to the floor. We must think and build from the ground what we learn from the Indigenous peoples we work with. We need to create new concepts of indigeneity from the ground. For example, in political science, senior scholars have developed new analytical tools based on Southeast Asian practices, such as the Mandala in understanding political systems in Southeast Asia. But in anthropology we have yet to do that, to identify new concepts based on Indigenous practices and knowledge. It is challenging for us as Southeast Asian anthropologists.

RI: We need to be braver. We often fall into a pattern where we provide the empirical fodder for Western-based scholars to theorize with, and then we end up using the frameworks developed by the Western scholars in our work. We need to be braver, to theorize, to come up with our own frameworks, and to think beyond just our own empirical work. As anthropologists we also tend to work and write alone; to go in our caves, so to speak. Perhaps it is through these cross conversations that we can push ourselves to think beyond our empirical data and move to theorizing.

ZM: In Southeast Asia it is difficult to identify who is Indigenous, as we use many different terms. In Malaysia you can't really use 'Indigenous' [English]; we are only allowed to use the concept *masyarakat adat* (custom-based societies). In the Malaysian case, we can use 'culture' or *adat* (customary law) as a claim towards indigeneity, but not in the Indonesian context. So, it's quite challenging. When we talk about indigeneity, what kind of terms do people want to use? How do they want to be addressed? What do *they* really want to be called?

KE: In Sarawak there are a lot of movements nowadays by NGOs and activist groups [to promote indigeneity]. But they don't necessarily realize that not a lot of people really call themselves 'Bidayuh' [for instance], as they have their own way of identifying themselves, like Bijagoi, for example. People in Serian were the only people to [originally] call themselves Bidayuh.… Now I don't even want to use 'indigeneity' that much anymore. People may position themselves more as belonging to a certain ethnic group. Even the Iban, for example; they're no longer talking about Iban: they call themselves Saribas or Skarang.… Basically, they identify with certain geographical areas or river systems or mountains, for example.

LC: Maybe what we can do better is foregrounding their own taxonomies. Rather than saying they call themselves this and they call themselves that, so we'll just call them all 'Indigenous people', maybe we can turn it around and say, while we anthropologists may call them Indigenous people, here is how they classify themselves. The state may refer them as 'Bidayuh' but they identify themselves by a particular mountain or area, or language that they speak, but maybe they have commonalities with other Dayak and call themselves Dayak. They recognize they are kin with other Dayak (including in Indonesia) and there are similarities there. People are playing with taxonomies at the same time as we are.

KE: And it's all very temporary: sometimes it's this and sometimes it's that.

KB: In Thailand the Indigenous movement is influenced by international activism and the discourses of [international] Indigenous movements. Indigenous organizations or movements sometimes are essentialist; they practise strategic essentialism. They talk a lot about culture and tradition and encourage villagers to go back to their traditional culture. But these villagers, they are also changing; they have adopted Christianity or changed into a more modern lifestyle. Some of the NGOs romanticize the old traditions, talking about going back to old traditions. They encourage the community to go

back to shifting cultivation because it is seen as the symbol of the Karen. But sometimes the community says we cannot go back to that anymore.

LC: This is really an interesting point. It picks up on a lot of our discussions over the last two days. First of all, ethnographers are not as powerful as we think we are. Very often we are kind of working at the mercy of other people, what they think of us, and also what their expectations are of us. What do they want us to do with their words? What do they want us to do with the materials? These are different things. The other point is we have been talking about how our relationships with these communities are evolving, but the political situation is also changing around us at the same time. That makes things really tricky because, as you said, you have some Indigenous movements that are trying to turn back the clock in a very strategic way. And that has repercussions for how [communities] treat you as an anthropologist as well.

Going back to [the question of] what is distinctive about Southeast Asian scholars working in the Southeast Asian context, this presents us with specific problems. Some of us have the luxury of disconnecting. I can go back to the UK and never come back to Sarawak again, but not everyone in this room can. Whether it's because you live in this country, or you've got positions of responsibility, you are from that particular group, there is much greater difficulty of disconnecting when somehow you are more embedded in these particular areas.

RI: Or you don't want to disconnect.

ST: I don't want to disconnect. I go back as a grandmother.

KM: My background is in fine arts. I study how traditional arts are related to cultural and ritual ceremonies. When I started doing my research, I found it challenging too, even though I am a Bidayuh studying Bidayuh cultural and ritual ceremonies. When I need to interview certain individuals, I need to use my father because if I go on my own people are reluctant to share. But since my father is the head of the village and he has friends in other villages, he becomes

the middle person, then it becomes easy to get the information because they trust my father. But even then, it takes time for them to trust me. During my first visit, they were still reluctant to share too much, but after I had been there five times they shared more. As a Bidayuh, it is still challenging to study another Bidayuh community. Sometimes it is easier if you are an outsider.

LC: Yes, I sometimes happen to visit different Bidayuh villages and they are happier to share some of their stuff because I'm not a Bidayuh, I am an outsider. I am not trying to lay claim to their knowledge or steal land or items or anything because I've got no stake in them. And again, there are a lot of these different sorts of cross-cutting relations and loyalties that inflect our work.

ZM: I have a different experience. Although I am accepted inside the community, there is a gender boundary, because even though my uncle was one of my main informants, he is a medicine man, a *bomoh*. In the Orang Asli community, there is this taboo against women when it comes to healing ceremonies. As a woman, I am not well received within this sphere. That is a clear-cut gender bias. I am not saying that I am not accepted, but I am saying that as a woman I am not really well-received in the male-dominant culture at a certain point.

OP: To go back to the topic of decolonization and sharing our work with our communities, one of the things is that we can also create a habit of literacy. The Higaunon do not have any books in their language except for the Bible, so I was thinking at some point to translate all the other works about them at least into their own language and create a library of sorts. And one of the things I had to promise when I got permission from them to do my project was, "When you write your book, you have to present to us, before you publish it, and later we tell you if you have violated our customary law. That is part of the deal." So that is the whole process.

The other thing about decolonizing is that, as Rusaslina said, we provide the empirical data, and the theories all come from

abroad; we are sort of captive minds. So, what should we do? We are trained in the Western tradition and all of us are under pressure to publish, [and] we have to engage with other work. We should be conscious about citing each other rather than looking at some Western, American or European anthropologists, but citing our local anthropologists. Use it at that level and be more conscious. That is one step. And next we need to theorize. We need to be willing to step off the ledge and start theorizing ourselves.