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East Indies/West Indies: Comparative Archipelagoes

David A. B. Murray, Tom Boellstorff & Kathryn Robinson

A series of debates in anthropology and other disciplines since the 1980s has raised questions of area studies, comparison, and 'the field' in relation to the production of ethnographic knowledge. In search of a concrete framework within which to extend these debates, participants in this special issue of Anthropological Forum bring together research on Southeast Asia and the Caribbean: the 'East Indies' and the 'West Indies'. This introductory paper examines how such a novel paradigm for ethnographic analysis might contribute to new geographic imaginaries in anthropology.

Keywords: East Indies; West Indies; Comparison; Area Studies; Anthropology

Why compare the East Indies and West Indies? Indeed, can we even consider each of these entities as single geographical units? What is to be gained from such a project? At first glance, these regions appear to share nothing more than nomenclature, geographical form and general historical contours—two sets of islands located in big oceans (often with some associated 'mainland' regions), both (mis)named by European explorers, that have been powerfully shaped by colonialism, capitalism and globalisation. The contemporary political and economic contours of these two areas add to the appearance of distinct and non-comparable cultural regions: in the West Indies we find a mix of independent nation-states and 'neo' colonies or dependencies maintaining various degrees of political and/or economic affiliation with their former colonisers, whereas most of the East Indies has become one large nation-state (Indonesia).

This collection of essays, however, demonstrates that direct comparison of the East Indies and West Indies—understood both as discursive formations and contested

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geographies—opens up lines of inquiry for contemporary anthropology. In particular, we are interested in how such an exercise could provide new perspectives on the critique of area studies that has become familiar in the social sciences and humanities. In the last 25 or so years, the notion of ‘area studies’ has come under critique as a cold war scholarly relic that obscures more than it reveals. The ‘metageographies’ (Lewis and Wigen 1997) that have shaped Western knowledges of the world have been identified as limiting and dated. In their place there has been an increasing focus on processual (rather than geographic) conceptualisations of the social world: diasporas (*e.g.*, Clifford 1994), flows (*e.g.*, Meyer and Geschiere 1999), ‘scapes’ (*e.g.*, Appadurai 1996), and so on.

One goal of comparing the East Indies and West Indies is to ask how rethinking spatial imaginaries—rather than simply discarding them—could play an important role in developing approaches that take into account the enduring importance of place in social life. We are reminded of the words of Sidney Mintz (1998, 131), one of the best-known scholars of the ‘West Indies’: ‘Area studies ... can serve as a basis upon which to identify and study research problems that are culturally specific, and that deal with particular historical traditions.’

We agree with this assessment, but wish to emphasise that the fact that area studies approaches retain great analytical value does not absolve us from the duty of re-assessing how certain kinds of geographies get constructed as related areas and some (like East Indies/West Indies) do not. For instance, we find it remarkable that, while ‘Asia/Pacific’ has become quite common as a geographic term challenging traditional area studies divisions between ‘Asia’ and ‘the Pacific’, there remains very little scholarship that either actually compares Asia and the Pacific or treats them as a single geographical unit. In other words, the term ‘Asia/Pacific’ represents a political convenience but is almost never treated as the potential framework for a coherent research program.

This suggests that area studies approaches should be constantly re-evaluated, and those re-evaluations translated into actual agendas for research. As Mintz (1998, 128) notes, ‘It is not that nothing is new under the sun, despite what the old people always tell us. It is, rather, that we need to ask better questions in specifying what *is* new under the sun’ (emphasis in original). Thus one productive way to frame social analysis is to respond to globalisation not by discarding area studies as irrelevant, but by forging new kinds of area-based approaches that allow us to ask new kinds of questions. It is in this light that we find the ‘East Indies/West Indies’ concept a promising avenue for inquiry in historical and contemporary matters of society and culture.

While the parallelism of ‘East Indies/West Indies’ might seem self-evident as one mode for organising knowledge, it has been almost entirely absent throughout the history of anthropology. Even in The Netherlands, which had colonies in both the East and West Indies and is a centre for scholarship for both regions, we and our colleagues have been unable to find any scholarly works that examine both the East Indies and West Indies. To our knowledge, the only cases where such ‘comparison’

took place involved a few highly ideological mass-market pamphlets published during World War II, while Holland was under Nazi occupation and the Netherlands East Indies under Japanese occupation. One such example is Hoebel's *The Netherlands East and West Indies*, which opens as follows:

The Netherlands! Democratic kingdom far-flung across the wide reaches of the world. A national commonwealth of four equal parts: Holland, the Netherlands East Indies, Surinam and Curaçao. The time was when Holland was the Motherland, and the East and West Indies were her colonies. But the freedom-loving Hollanders have kept to the forefront of the march of Democracy, at home and overseas. (Hoebel 1945, 3)

The best-known example of a scholarly work that examines the East Indies and West Indies is probably Wolf's (1957) 'Closed corporate peasant communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java'. However, this is not a sustained ethnographic work, nor does it treat the 'closed' communities it examines as parts of larger archipelagoes.

A glance at the divergent ways anthropologists have organised knowledge of these societies reveals why it is not simply due to reasons of research impracticality, physical distance or cultural difference that the East Indies and West Indies have so rarely fallen under a single analytic framework. In the West Indies literature, we find an emphasis on the absence of 'natives' and a major debate over the influence of colonialism in producing twentieth-century proto-peasant or working-class cultures. These cultures are framed as originating in transformations of cultural elements derived from immigrant cultures, thus producing longstanding critical reflections and debates on terms like 'survival', 'syncretism', hybridity and 'transculturation' (Khan 2001; Mann 2001; Maurer 2002, 2004; Ortiz 1947; Price 2001; Slocum and Thomas 2003; Trouillot 1992; Yelvington 2001). Scholars of the region often resist applying terms developed for use in the Caribbean, for instance, 'creolisation', to other areas: 'it is certainly important that creolization arose as a term and concept out of what was happening to particular peoples, Caribbean peoples ... Creolization was both geographically and historically specific' (Mintz 1998, 119). Yet the fact that all terms, including analytical terms, originate in specific historical and geographical contexts does not mean they cannot be applied elsewhere. For instance, we find the term 'creolisation' is most usefully deployed for analysing contexts outside the West Indies precisely when its genealogy is kept in mind, rather than occluded.

In contrast to work in the West Indies, scholarship on the East Indies has tended to paint a portrait of discrete and distinct indigenous cultures, particularly (but by no means solely) in the 'Leiden School' of Dutch structural anthropology that has been so important to our understanding of this region (Boellstorff 2002; Steedly 1999). While attention to the impact of colonial rule, nationalism and globalisation is now the norm in this tradition of scholarship, such forces tend to be framed as secondary modifications of already existing indigenous cultures, rather than *constitutive* of those cultures, as anthropological work on the West Indies has tended to do. One important consequence of these quite different approaches is that, until recently, the West Indies has been marginalised in much of mainstream anthropological teaching

and research as a region with impure or hybridised culture(s). Scholarship from the region has been read as useful for critiquing dominant anthropological traditions by allowing for discussions of political economy, history and syncretism, or, to put it slightly differently, for theorising ‘transformations’, not ‘formations’ (e.g., Mintz 1974, 1985; Trouillot 1988, 1995).

The overarching goal of this set of essays is to disrupt and reconfigure these tendencies by looking at the East Indies and West Indies, which might be seen to sit at opposite poles of anthropological inquiry, as a single unit, a unit of comparison but also one of homology and surprisingly parallel themes. The essays are intentionally exploratory and often focus on case studies rather than general principles. They thus point towards the possibilities raised by considering the East Indies and West Indies together, without attempting to pin down the range or limits of those possibilities. More generally, we ask how the notion of ‘archipelago’ might contribute to theorisations of place that do not depend on contiguity. The etymology of the term ‘archipelago’ refers not to islands but to the water between them, to the ‘pelagos’ or sea, as underscored by the Middle English term ‘arch-sea’. The image of the isolated East Indies island has undergirded the anthropological imaginary since the invitation by Malinowski (1922, 4) to ‘imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight’—or since Firth (1936) introduced us to ‘the Tikopia’, Radcliffe-Brown (1922) to ‘the Andaman Islanders’, Mead (1928) to the youth of Samoa, and so on.

While some research on the West Indies has focused on similarities and differences across islands, its boundaries have often remained fuzzy (to include or not to include Belize, the Guyanas or even Miami or Toronto), and these boundaries have been defined and debated primarily in relation to their placement between continental landmasses. In contrast, archipelagoes by definition have internal yet fluid boundaries—they are made up of islands linked through nautical proximity—and thus resist definition as single, bounded cultures. One can thereby emphasise a fluid space of culture that highlights both distinctions and similarities, both continuities and disparities. The external boundaries of archipelagoes are socially defined, highlighting how all cultural boundaries are contested rather than innate. This is why, for instance, Lewis and Wigen (1997, 153) can note in their book, *The myth of continents*, that ‘a useful metaphor for the sociospatial form engendered by diasporas is the archipelago ... the boundary between archipelagic cultures and their surroundings is rarely so sharp as that between land and water’.

As noted above, our East Indies/West Indies project responds to and extends recent critiques of area studies in both North America and Australia, where contributors to this collection are institutionally located. As US-based scholars Gupta and Ferguson (1997, 9) note, area studies often reflect Euro-American institutional mechanisms and politics that provide intellectual legitimacy and financial support for doing fieldwork. The politicised institutions of area studies have tended to assume isomorphisms between space and culture: ‘The presumption that spaces are

(culturally) autonomous has enabled the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 8). In Australia, Morris-Suzuki (2000, 13) argues that 'the spatial frameworks of understanding—the image of "areas"—which has emerged from "area studies" is in some respects an obstacle which makes the nature of the contemporary world system *less* rather than *more* visible and comprehensible' (emphasis in original). Also in Australia, Jackson (2003, 1) has written of the need for a 'theoretically sophisticated area studies project' as 'an essential method for understanding the twenty-first century world'. Noting that 'in contrast to the ideas upon which essentialist varieties of area studies were based, we cannot assume that these borders or zones of rupture will be neat, tidy, non-porous lines on a map' (p. 3), he calls for a 'transculturated poststructuralism' with regard to Asian studies and area studies more generally (p. 29). While Jackson, a scholar of Thailand, does not comment on the provenance of 'transculturation', we note that the term was coined by Ortiz (1947, 98) to characterise 'extremely complex transmutations of culture' in Cuba. The productive use of a West Indies concept to interrogate questions arising in another location highlights precisely the kinds of conversations we wish to further with this collection. As the amalgam of two discontinuous regions with unclear boundaries of their own, the East Indies/West Indies framework resists the forms of essentialist co-optation that, for instance, produce the 'geo-body' of contemporary nationalisms (Winichakul 1994) and the assumptions of cultures lying neatly within their borders.

In fact, scepticism towards comparative area studies was one of the founding premises of the co-editors' initial challenge to the authors of these papers: given the obvious socio-cultural, political and economic differences between these two archipelagoes and the critique of area studies, could a comparative 'regional' approach develop productive insights that lead to better understandings of social processes within these societies, as well as refine the analytical concepts used to understand these processes? We think these papers provide an affirmative answer. Collectively, they demonstrate why comparative ethnographic analysis still has a place in anthropology. While keeping in mind all that the critique of area studies has taught us about the problems of frameworks that lead to misleading cross-cultural comparisons, this collection demonstrates the potential of a 'critical regionalities' approach (Johnson, Jackson and Herdt 2000). Not only does such an approach help us to understand better the contours, nuances and uneven results of globalising social, political and economic forces, but it also leads us to ask new questions about similarities and differences in the structures, processes and practices occurring in these so-called marginal societies.

The authors in this collection have approached the 'East Indies/West Indies' rubric from diverse perspectives, providing the reader with a variety of ways in which to think about a critically comparative anthropological project. These range from critical historical studies of the colonial encounter (Aravamudan) to contemporary ethnographic analysis. Some authors interrogate one region utilising the theoretical and ethnographic material of the other (e.g., Boellstorff), while others focus on

individuals who have moved between the East Indies and West Indies (e.g., Robinson). We also find influential the analysis of literary texts produced within each region for similarities and differences in the rhetorics of memory (Rodgers), and a more transnational framework challenging us to redraw the boundaries of each of these areas (Balliger). Taken together, this array of critically comparative perspectives analyses the similarities and differences in historical, cultural, political and economic processes in these two regions. These papers examine ongoing problems in the constitution *and critique* of traditional area studies, suggesting how 'mapping the world in this way obscures human commonalities not based on geographical proximity' (Morris-Suzuki 2000, 17).

The essays demonstrate the centrality of these regions and their scholars to the development of anthropological theory both past and present, a fact which is often elided in mainstream anthropological history and theory texts. Our goal is to interrogate similar historical and contemporary intersections of culture, place and power in each archipelago but also to recognise them as two distinct nodes in a global archipelago of plural societies, cultural transformation and postcolonial struggle. In the anthropological literature of both regions, much has been written about 'traditional' ethnic, indigenous and/or national culture versus 'imposed' Euro-American, global and/or transnational cultural materials and ideologies. These binaries are questioned in this collection, and the authors identify how theoretical paradigms of hybrid, syncretic, creole, dynamic or even multi or plural culture(s) found in much cultural studies work since the 1990s have had a long history in both East Indies and West Indies research. In other words, this collection examines how key socio-cultural theories and frameworks have been formed and transformed by critical engagement with these societies. Scholarship of these regions has produced arguments that have contributed to the toppling of dominant theoretical paradigms whose authors and frameworks were generated in the imperial metropole. For example, Robinson's paper highlights Jayawardena's powerful critique of the hegemonic structural-functionalist model in Australian and British anthropological circles. Boellstorff's paper analyses how the work of scholars like Sidney Mintz and Richard Price reframed the 'cultural retention vs. cultural obliteration' debate.¹ What is highlighted by the authors in this collection is how East Indies and West Indies societies have been laboratories of modernity, where experiments in socio-cultural plurality or hybridity occurred long before they began to 'trouble' the social fabrics (and anthropological representations) of North American and European societies.

These papers not only indicate the centrality of these regions to the development of new theoretical concepts in anthropology and other social sciences but also contribute to the growing literature that challenges the assumption of unidirectional cultural flows from metropole to 'marginal' or 'peripheral' societies (Tsing 2000). By placing two non-Euro-American regions in comparative relief, this collection destabilises the dominant tendency in current globalisation studies to study the effects of powerful 'First World/developed' ideologies, materials, and values on 'Third World/developing' societies. Robinson's paper shows how Sri Lankan anthropologist

Chandra Jayawardena moved between Guyana and Indonesia, and developed his analytical frameworks through observing different practices emerging out of a similar structure of colonial oppression. Balliger and Boellstorff suggest that through the comparison of novels and theoretical paradigms we might find similar rhetorics of memory and culture across the East Indies and West Indies. Such explorations challenge much of the current analytical frameworks of globalisation studies. They ask how comparing cultural, political and economic histories and contemporary processes *between* so-called 'developing' or 'neo-colonial' regions—rather than comparing parts of the East Indies with other parts of the East Indies or Southeast Asia, or parts of the West Indies with other parts of the West Indies, or the East Indies with Holland, or the West Indies with Britain—may both enhance understandings of each region and lead to new analytical and conceptual frameworks that break down the idea that each 'region' is an autonomous geography.

These essays reveal how an examination of the complex impact of historical and contemporary ideologies, politics and economies indicates 'regional' cultural parallels across each archipelago as well as the possibility of larger parallel developments that may demonstrate analogies of a more general cultural ethos, or 'grammar' (to borrow from Boellstorff's paper). In other words, they raise the question of what we might call 'archipelagic' versus 'continental' cultural relations. 'Archipelagic' places an emphasis on the relations between disparate yet related territories. It creates new analytic spaces that simultaneously recognise, redraw and critique borders, whether they be physical, political and/or cultural, asking us to compare what was heretofore viewed as incomparable in order to generate new perspectives. We explore how archipelagic relations reconfigure globally circulated political, cultural and economic discourses. As Aravamudan notes, such a critically comparative approach foregrounds how reductionist generalisations can perpetuate a hegemonic relation of 'complex' industrialised societies to 'simple' under-developed ones. This special issue thus reinforces the legitimacy of comparative regional studies, while pointing towards new foundations for research on contemporary socio-cultural problems and issues.

Note

- [1] Many other theorists such as Aimé Césaire (2000), Franz Fanon (1967), Stuart Hall (1988), C. L. R. James (1963) and Ann Stoler (1955) have challenged theoretical models produced in North American and European metropolises. One striking difference between the East Indies and West Indies is that it is primarily in the latter case that 'native' intellectuals have found a global audience, owing to factors such as the legacy of colonial language policies and the dynamics of the British Commonwealth.

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