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Author 1	Yufu Iguchi
Author 2	NA
Author 3	NA
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"PLURAL SOCIETY" RECONSIDERED

**The Formation of National Identity and
The Knowledge of Social Sciences in Malaysia**

Yufu Iguchi (Dr.)

INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of this paper is to clarify the formation of national identity in Malaysia in terms of the historical construction of the academic field of Malaysian Studies, especially Social Sciences concerning Malaysia. In other words, it is to question the modern technology of "subject" formation in colonial as well as post-colonial situation. In this paper, I will mainly focus on the epistemological framework of "plural society" and examine the relationship between the concept of "plurality" and the formation of "subject".

In the previous International Malaysian Studies Conference in 2001, the main panel "Pluralism in the Malay World" was held, and the plural interpretations concerning the concept of "plurality" were shown by different presenters. These plural interpretations seem to be divided into three major views. The first interpretation regards "plurality" as the lack of unity, totality, and homogeneity. The second one, which can be called the idea of multi-culturalism, sees "plurality" as smaller plural totalities under the bigger single totality. In the third one, the "plurality" is viewed as the "heterogeneous" that contaminates and undermines the boundaries of total entities so that overcomes and transcends the concept of totality itself.

The concept of totality can be said to be an inseparable, individual entity, or an organic body that is enclosed by clear boundaries. It can be said that the idea of totality is one of the major concepts characterizing and defining the modernity. The Social Sciences, especially, presume the totality of an inseparable individual as the minimum unit of analyses, and regard the object of study such as society, nation, and

community, as an enclosed totality with borders.

Undoubtedly, considering empirically, one can know that there is no such an organic and total society with clear boundaries. Yet, as Sakai says,

In modern time, each outline of totalities such as society, national community, national culture, national language, national economy, race, etc. is thought to be as overlapping and coinciding each other. However, this idea is not induced from the empirical studies concerning individual modern societies, but is a demand, or an imperative prior to experiences. (Sakai 1996: 171)

Thus, the knowledge principled by totality functions as commands to belong to and to identify with totality. What is "heterogeneous" is commanded to assimilate and identify with totality because the commands presume the idea that the "heterogeneous" is deviation from and backwardness to the integrated homogeneous totality as it should be. In the modern time, it is only by internalizing this imperative and trying to identify with a certain totality or unity, that people are "subjectified". However, the one single totality, such as a community of whole human being or a community of world citizen, is scarcely constructed. Rather, the knowledge/imperative not only demarcates and differentiate, in arbitrary, "the heterogeneous" to make plural totalities, but also grade them into hierarchical orders. It is the colonialist domination that spread the knowledge/imperative to all over the world. The "Western", the "White", and the "male" occupy the top of the hierarchical order. In the modern era, all the people are forced to confirm their positions according to this modern hierarchical system.

Independence from colonialism never allows one to independent from the modern system of imperative. Rather, it is not until the subjectification through the colonialist relationship that independence from colonialism become possible. The technology of "subjectification" formed through the period of colonial domination continuously functions after the independence from colonialism. The technology of "subjectification" presumes the idea of totality and commands and orders to change the present situation and in order to achieve totality.

As I have shown above, the problem of "subjectification" technology of

Malaysia is complicated because it is related to the concept of "plurality" which, at first glance, is seen as contended to the idea of totality. In order to clarify the technology of "subjectification" in Malaysia, in terms of the concept of totality and plurality, I shall trace the historical process from the colonial period when the modern technology of "subjectification" was established.

It is clear that Sakai's deconstructive challenge towards the modern Social Sciences indeed presumes the "society" where outlines of the totality of people, language, and land can be thought to be coincided each other, such as Japan. How can we think of the area where the people have experiences of colonialism, and where outlines of the totality of people, language, and land cannot be thought of as being coincided easily, such as Malaysia? Of course, the knowledge concerning Malaysia is not situated outside the idea of totality. Yet, as I have stated above, it can be assumed that the knowledge concerning Malaysia is not only formed according to the idea of totality, but also, formed by way of the concept of "plurality".

Paying attention to these points, I shall trace the historical formation of "national subject" in Malaysia from the colonial time when the technology of producing "subject" is established.

1. COLONIAL PERIOD

THE BIRTH OF THE TOTALITY THINKING

From the viewpoint of technology of "subjectification", the colonial era might be divided into two periods. It is because in the end of 19th century the expansion of British colonial administration in the Malay Peninsula brings about the transformation of epistemological framework concerning space, time, people, and language.

THE FORMATION OF THE TECHNOLOGY OF TOTALITY

In the beginning of the 19th century, the idea of totality is introduced by the Europeans as the knowledge concerning space, time, people, and language. In terms of the concept of space, the early Malay Studies by the European scholars like Raffles, Marsden, Crawford, and Wallace, adopt the demographic unit such as "Malay Archipelago", and "Indian Archipelago". Although the size of demographic unit is

different from today, the basic idea of totality is already established. In short, the demographic unit is described as an entity enclosed with boundaries

At that time, the concept of history in a sense of our time was not established. History indicates the natural history. However, the description of natural history is very modern in a sense that a certain space has closed with borders and filled with characteristic elements such as natural environments, climate, plants, and people.

As for language, dictionary compilation introduced by the European since the 17th century might bring about the emergence of the new way to perceive the language as totality.

As for the people, it is not until the "scientific" research on "race" starts from the beginning of the 19th century Europe that the European scholars describe the people of the area in terms of "race".

TOWARD THE IMAGINATION OF NATIONAL SPACE

Since the end of the 19th century, the expansion of colonial administration system brings about the transformation of epistemological framework on space, time, people, and language so as to enable the people to imagine the future nation.

As for the idea of space, instead of the Malay Archipelago, the Malay Peninsula is seen to be a closed totality so as to be adopted for analyses.

For the history also, the Malay Peninsula becomes the object of history in today's sense. History writing presumes the view where a certain "nation" or "area" is seen as an organic totality with a temporal development. At the same token, the apparatus of history posits and reinforces the totality of a certain "nation" or "area".

According to Charles Hirschman, the concept of race or the technology of knowledge in the 19th century Europe is introduced into Malaya with the project of census taking (Hirschman 1987). It results in the construction of social economic order according to race. In the beginning of the 20th century, the categories such as the European, The Eurasian, the Chinese, the Malays, the Indians, and the others are gradually established.

2 THE PERIOD OF AREA STUDIES

THE EMERGENCE OF THE IDEAS ON PLURALITY

In the colonial period, although the idea of totality is introduced and flourished, the idea of "plurality" is not fully developed. The concept of "plurality" emerges, when the center of Asian Studies shifts from European countries to the United States and the American based Area Studies are established. Thus, the emergence of the idea of Malaysia as a "plural society" might be encouraged by the connection between Furnivall's research on Burma and Indonesia, and American-based Southeast Asian Studies. Under the new concept of "Southeast Asia", the arguments on Burma and Indonesia are shared in the whole area of "Southeast Asia".

FURNIVAL'S CONCEPT OF "PLURAL SOCIETY"

Here I will explain Furnivall's idea on a "plural society" from four points. First, Furnivall's argument on "plural society" succeeded to the way of seeing the colonial space as a countable analytical unit from the 19th century Colonial as I have explained before. A second feature is that "a plural society" is described in contrast with "a homogeneous society". In short Furnivall sees "a plural society" as a society of "lack". The third feature of "a plural society" is the penetration of capitalism and its economic value into all the sections including the Natives. The fourth feature is a racial division of labor.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A "PLURAL SOCIETY" IN AREA STUDIES

It might be Thompson and Adloff's book of "The Left Wing in Southeast Asia" where the concept of "plural society" in Furnivall's sense connects Malayan situation under the idea of community of "Southeast Asia" (Thompson and Adloff 1950). According to them, the specific racial structure in Malaya as well as the racial division of labor delays the development of a single strong national emotion.

As Malaya achieves independence with a territory of the Malay Peninsula in 1957, the repetitious descriptions on Malaya produce the idea of three major groups. Many books concerning Malaya repeat to use the explanation of the racial ratio for starting their arguments. This functions as an apparatus to construct, reinforce, and

reproduce the idea of three major groups.

3 ETHNIC STUDIES ON MALAYSIA OVERCOMING "PLURAL SOCIETY"

It should be noted that the "plural society" situation is seen as the "problem". It might be the Ethnic Studies in the United States, developed since the end of the 1960s, which provides the technology to solve the "problem" (Gordon 1964). In the 1980s, Social Scientists in Malaysia try to appropriate the concept of ethnicity instead of "race" which inevitably entails the problem of racism. As I have shown before, there emerge three different approaches toward the problematic situation of "plural society". The first is aiming at "one".

AIMING AT "ONE": NEGATIVE IMAGE OF PLURALITY

As for approaches to aim at "one", I shall examine two different principles under which the people aim at "one". One is modernization. Another is the "Malayness".

In general modernization theory, it is seen that the ethnic conflicts are the pre-modern remainder and that when the "universal" value is achieved through modernization process, the conflicts are solved and both the national integration and economic equality are accomplished. However, some social scientists, Syed Husin Ali, and Sanusi Osman regard the ethnic conflicts as false consciousness by that the modernization theories skillfully conceal the real conflicts -- class conflicts.

For the "Malayness", since the colonizers represent the "Malayness" as "particularity" in contrast to "universality" of the West and "backwardness" to the West, the colonized people are forced to internalize such a framework and construct their "subject". Yet, in the identification process of the colonized people, their silent disagreement to colonialism revise, improve, convert, and reverse the colonial framework.

For example, Wan Hashim provides a contradicting view with the pre-colonial Malaya that is a result of an assimilation of other groups, yet not "a homogeneous society" but "a society of plural features". For him, the figure of the Malayan land is a

contact zone or platforms where the different people from all over the world meet, negotiate, and trade, while it is integrated under the common principle.

Such an interpretation leads to a positive image to the concept of “plurality”, which indicates the possibility of integration without repressing "plurality".

"ONE" AS THE ASSEMBLY OF "PLURALITY":

POSITIVE IMAGE OF PLURALITY

Now we will go to the second approach, cultural pluralism or multi-culturalism, which is “one” as the assembly of “plurality” or an integrated national community consisting of the plural totalities. Here, the second interpretation of "plurality" that we discussed in the first part is introduced.

Tan Chee Ben says that the common principle, or a common will in Furnivall’s sense, that is transcending ethnic groups is needed in order to attain the national integration without repressing plural totalities (Tan 1984). In this sense, cultural pluralism of Malaysia can suggest either the "universality" of the Western modernity, the "Malayness", or "Islam" as its principle.

We can see the contradiction and ambiguity in the discussion concerning aiming at “one” as well as “one” as an assembly of “pluralities”. The pluralist approaches try to become “one” under the common single national principle without repressing plural totalities, while the project aiming at “one” is sometimes accompanied by the contradiction of subsuming “pluralities”. However, since the knowledge of totality is a command and an imperative before the empirical research, any disproof, exceptions, and contradiction can never deny the modern colonialist knowledge/command. In this sense, even the pluralist approaches function as the modern technology of identification based on totality, and repress heterogeneity.

However, the expressions of disagreement gradually appropriate new theories concerning identity. In order for “the plural” to remain “plural” without being reduced to totality, the framework of modern nation state system would be required to be transcended and overcome.

THE IDEA OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In the 1990s, when the globalization seems to undermine the territoriality of nation states after the end of Cold War, Ethnic Studies in Malaysia problematize the concept of identity itself. For example, Zawawi Ibrahim explains that identity is not essential, unchanging, nor static. Rather, it is continuously constructed, renegotiated and reconstructed. It can be said that the new concept of identity challenges radically to the idea of totality, because it embraces the “plurality” without totality, or the heterogeneity. The heterogeneous situation might be established when we throw the idea of totality that the category of land, language, people etc. should have the same outlines. In the world without totality thinking, it would be usual for an individual to belong/un-belong to different levels of languages, different parts of the world, and different groups of the people at the same time.

However, how can we think about the new concept of identity in the process of globalization today? Toshio Iyotani says that globalization is not replaced with the nation state system, and that de-territorial movements of globalization are underscored rather by the nation state system based on territoriality (Iyotani 2002). In this sense, It might be those practices such as to resist the imperative to be a totality and to aim at the "plural" without being reduced to totality, that lead to the deconstruction of the totality thinking based on the complicity of colonialism, modern nation state system, and globalization.