



## The Emerging Diasporic Connections in Southeast Asia and the Constitution of Ethnic Networks



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[ *Abstract* ]

It has been widely argued that Area Studies is in a critical condition especially in Australia, Europe and the US. However, in the Southeast Asian region, most especially Indonesia, we are witnessing the rise of Area Studies programs with the establishment of several such programs both in research institutions and universities. In this paper, I will discuss a few examples of Area Studies research on the emerging diasporic connections in Southeast Asia and reflect on the constitution of ethnic networks as “sites” where transnational identities are forged beyond state boundaries. Indeed, transnational movements of people have occurred and continue to happen due to particular events like wars and political turmoil, as well as for economic reasons. Today, we find many diasporic groups, including minorities, in the border areas of Southeast Asian countries and historically, minorities have been known for their movements in mainland Southeast Asia. If previously, the diasporic connections, especially with the homeland, had been very limited or even non-existent, today such connections have emerged across national boundaries. On top of this, economic and social networkings are equally on the rise

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both within and at transnational levels. It is, therefore, important to discuss the identity of diasporic groups and transnational networkings in the cases of two border areas in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** area studies, diaspora, identity, border areas, Southeast Asia

## I . Glimpse of an Interdisciplinary Approach in Area Studies<sup>1</sup>

The reasons for establishing Area Studies are various, from political to economic, with the utilization of an interdisciplinary approach associated with the challenges of understanding the complexity of any society studied. The notion of an interdisciplinary approach in Area Studies is to be able to explain or to find a solution within the complexity of the issue to be investigated, which by using a mono-discipline could not be sufficiently explained. However, this does not mean ignoring the recent trends in which various disciplines have also engaged using interdisciplinary approaches. Philip has even noted the need for being “more radically interdisciplinary than we have been so far” (2014: 984). He further pinpoints the overlapping areas of environmental humanities, history, and philosophy of science and so forth (ibid.). In a similar vein, Tsing (2013) argues the involvement of the non-humans in social sciences. She further explains the social relation in connection with plants, like the life of fungi (2013: 32). Basically, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines also utilize an interdisciplinary approach, even a transdisciplinary approach, which involves non-humans.

In this paper I will emphasise Area Studies which not only utilizes an interdisciplinary approach but also has touched upon interconnected issues within the context of certain geographical areas. Guyer (2003) states that the use of the interdisciplinary approach and representations to understand certain areas has been very meaningful with Africa, South America, and Europe, studied

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<sup>1</sup> Some ideas from this section on interdisciplinary approach were presented in the workshop “Asian Studies,” International Office, Udayana University, Denpasar, November 19, 2012.

with different focuses. In South American Studies, for instance, culture and race have been important issues in relation with the political and economic factors; while in African Studies disputes have often been related with race. In the 1990s, scholars of Asia played important roles in areas seen from a collective approach. Similar interests and concerns have interconnected different areas and were seen from various perspectives.

Nevertheless, after a long period following its establishment in the US, Area Studies has been challenged in various ways. Slocum and Thomas (2003) note that anthropologists have developed the new notion of global and local processes which has resulted in critical questions of the Area Studies paradigm established since the end of the Second World War. They argue that based on the study of Caribbean and Caribbeanist anthropology, there have arisen the possibilities for understanding the global issues within the local context which in turn could enable the study of the local area resulting also in knowledge of the global dynamics.

Though Area Studies was booming in the US, in Australia, it has “not been more successful” (Reid 1994: 227), for at least three reasons:

Firstly, the demands of theory in many disciplines grow ever more intense, so that specialization on any country or region brings grave dangers of marginalization. Secondly, universities, and hence teaching departments, are expected to teach ever more students with fewer resources, creating reluctance to experiment with appointments or courses which may not draw big student numbers. Thirdly, there has been a recent expansion of student interest in courses on Australia, which have an immediacy difficult to replicate for Asia. (Reid 1994: 227).

Fluctuations in Area Studies has occurred and in contrast, as I will elaborate, in Asia, Area Studies has started to grow, both in universities and research institutions. In terms of Southeast Asian Studies, for example, Abdullah and Maunati (1994) note the growing interest of scholars in the region in understanding each other. In 1993, the Toyota Foundation in collaboration with the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) held a conference on “Toward the

Promotion of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia” with three major sub themes:

... a) Teaching of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asian Universities; b) Recent trends in Southeast Asian Studies; and c) Institutional networks of Southeast Asian Studies (Abdullah and Maunati 1994: iii).

More recently, King (2016) also notes the rise of Area Studies in the region despite the decline of such studies in the West. He (2016: 27-28) pinpoints several issues related to the decline of Area Studies in the West, including the decreasing interest in Area Studies in the West; the decreasing interest of students in Area Studies and other language studies; reduced funding in Area Studies from the West; the question of similarity of methodology and theory between Area Studies and other disciplines<sup>2</sup>; and criticism of academic domination of the West. Similarly, Goh Beng Lan (2011) targets the beginning of Southeast Asian Studies in the 1990s, while it was on a decline in Euro-America. There have been many Area Studies in Indonesia with both government and non-government institutions, especially focusing on Asian countries. For example, we have witnessed the establishment of Area Studies in Indonesian Universities, like the University of Indonesia, which has several Area Studies, including Korean Studies and Japanese Studies; Gajah Mada University, which also has been establishing Area Studies, like Korean Studies and Southeast Asian Studies (Ardhana and Maunati 2009); and Udayana University, which too, has established Asian Studies. Of course, Indonesia is not the only country that has developed Area Studies. Many other Asian countries have also done so, even earlier than Indonesia. Singapore has many well known institutions, like the Asian Research Institute (ARI), the Southeast Asian Studies Program of the National University of Singapore, and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). Siddique (1994: 129-130) for example, explains the success story of the networking

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<sup>2</sup> Citing from King, Victor T 2014. *Southeast Asian Studies: The Conundrum of Area and Method. Methodology and Research Practice in Southeast Asian Studies*. Mikka Huotari, Jurgen Ruland and Judith Schlehe, eds.: 44-46. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

of ISEAS with a broad range of scholars in many ways. She states that senior regional scholars, for instance, are involved in the Regional Advisory Council as program advisors, members of regional program advisory committees, and participants in conceptualizing new research projects. Projects and fellowships are also part of the activities that promote networking. Indeed, I am aware of existing Area Studies in Asia, like in Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand, that have developed more greatly. But in this paper I will limit the discussion about the development of Area Studies to Indonesia, with its Research Center for Regional Resources as an example of understanding the selection of topics which could be relevant for the country.

The establishment of Area Study Research centers such as the Research Center for Regional Resources at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (PSDR-LIPI), contributes to the growing number of Area Studies in Indonesia. The Center was established in June 2001 with three divisions—Southeast Asian Studies, Asia Pacific Studies, and European Studies (Ardhana and Maunati 2009). Ardhana and Maunati further note that the reason for establishing this Research Center was related to the realization that the economic crisis in Southeast Asia beginning in 1997 stemmed from the lack of understanding of our neighboring countries and other countries in general. To understand other nations should indeed be considered crucial. The Center was established by way of the Program of Southeast Asian Studies founded by Prof. Dr. Taufik Abdullah, a former chairman of LIPI, in 1983. Today, this Center is also expanding, especially with the addition of African Studies.

Indeed, the rise of Area Studies in Asia is an important sign of the awareness of scholars in Asia to study outside their own countries.

Below, I will focus on two examples of studies by the PSDR-LIPI, especially on diasporic communities, which look at their networking and identities. Since its establishment in 2001 as Area Studies, PSDR-LIPI worked on several topics in several areas—European, Asia Pacific, and Southeast Asian, and recently African

countries like Tanzania and Kenya. However, I will only focus on examples of studies carried out in the Southeast Asian region and the most recent studies on transnational migration and diasporas.<sup>3</sup>

The reasons behind studying diasporic communities in the border areas in Southeast Asia are several. First, in studying other nations we need to learn from the studies. Diasporic communities for Indonesia are important at the moment since we have many Indonesian diasporas in many different countries. Indeed, it would be beneficial for Indonesia if we knew how to establish and strengthen networking with the diasporas. Brain circulation from Patterson's (2006) argument will be beneficial if Indonesia is able to have such kinds of networking and sharing of ideas from the diasporas, especially those in advanced countries. In early July 2017, in Jakarta, there was an Indonesian Diaspora Congress attended by former US President Barack Obama, where he delivered a speech (Obama delivers speech at Indonesian Diaspora Congress, <http://www.antaraneews.com/en/news/111601/obama-delivers-speech-at-indonesian-diaspora-congress>, 2 July 2017, accessed July 6, 2017). The potential networking of Indonesian diaspora and Indonesians at home is expected to happen and scholars, for instance, should build collaborative research, joint publications, joint seminars/workshops/conferences, scholar exchanges, and for forth.

Secondly, Indonesia has many crucial borders with neighboring countries where the connection is often coloured by "up and down relations." To illustrate up and down relations, Indonesia and Malaysia have many border areas and the relations between Indonesia and Malaysia have often been influenced by problems related to borders. Claims on Block Ambalat from both countries, for instance, had created tensions between both countries. However, this was not to last forever, as Indonesia and Malaysia

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<sup>3</sup> These examples are based on the following: "Transnational Migration and Diaspora in Border Cities in Southeast Asia: Case study Mae Sai Border between Thailand and Myanmar," coordinated by Amorisa Wiratri (2015) with Betti Rosita Sari and Yekti Maunati; and "Transnational Migration and Diaspora in Border Cities in Southeast Asia: Case study Chiang Khong-Huay Xay, border of Thailand-Laos," coordinated by Betti Rosita Sari (2016), with Amorisa Wiratri, Yekti Maunati and Lamijo. Thank you to all team members for the said studies.

have also created collaborations in many different aspects in the border areas, like SOSEKMALINDO (*Kerjasama Sosial dan Ekonomi Indonesia-Malaysia*). Indeed, relations between Indonesia and Malaysia are very dynamic. It is therefore very important to understand how other countries deal with the people in the border areas and also how to manage the people who cross borders. In fact, the establishment of Area Studies is not free from the reasons for increasing the competitiveness of the country by understanding what is going on in our Southeast Asian neighborhood. As one of the reasons for establishing the Center was also due to the economic crisis in 1998 which began with Thailand but greatly affected Indonesia, it is important for us to know and understand other countries, especially our neighboring countries.

## II. Diasporic Communities on the Rise: Some Examples of Research in Area Studies

Several scholars have discussed the term of and issues on “diaspora” (Baumann 2000; Werbner 2002; Patterson 2006; Wang 2007; Faist 2010; Bruneau 2010; Cohen and Fisher 2019; etc.). Citing from Wang (2007: 877)<sup>4</sup>, the definition of diaspora by William Safran is as follows:

- (1) They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original centre to two or more peripheral or foreign, regions;
- (2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland . . . ;
- (3) they believe that they are not, perhaps cannot be, fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;
- (4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would eventually return . . . ;
- (5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity;
- (6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence

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<sup>4</sup> Safran W. 1991, ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return’, *Diaspora*, 1(1): 83-99.

of such a relationship (Safran 1991: 83-4).

Werbner (2002) also claims that in the beginning, studies on diaspora have concentrated on the Jewish. Since then, the study on diaspora has developed and touched on many different groups like the overseas Chinese seen from various relevant issues. Bruneau (2010) further claims that the term diaspora is recently used for “all forms of migration and dispersion of a people, even where no migration is involved” (Bruneau 2010: 35). This is because he believes that it is not only about international migrations but also the process of globalization which limits the role of nation-states (Bruneau 2010: 35). The term diaspora is subject to change, especially of those who are included as diaspora. Gamlen (2019: 302-303) believes the debate on the meaning of diaspora has started since the late 1960s. Cohen and Fisher (2019) report that in debating diaspora, Turner, for example, proposes questions like “*how* are diaspora made, *who* make claim to be part of a diaspora” (2019: 4). I am aware that the definition of diaspora is still debatable.

There are many studies on diaspora, but one of the important issues related to diasporic communities is the formation of their identities as these people have to adjust and struggle for survival economically and culturally in the new place. Diasporic communities have often experienced many obstacles and dilemmas in the process of the formation of their identities. The development of studies on diaspora has touched upon various diasporic societies living in many different countries (Cohen 1997; Barclay 2004; Shain 2007; Cohen and Fisher 2019) and there are many studies focusing on diasporas and the formation of identities in the new places from different parts of the world (Patterson 2006; Wang 2007; Jones and Mielants 2009; So 2013; Maunati and Sari 2014; Maunati 2016; Barber, 2019; etc.).

Jones and Mielants (2009: 2) note that the formation of migrant identity is closely related with the issue of incorporation into their host communities. Diasporas (often also called “immigrants”) could experience a shift of economic and political position. The historical background of their movements into the countries should be understood as well . The need of the host of the migrants to



fulfill job opportunities could bring about different status if we compare this to those who are unwanted. Besides, countries of origin could also produce different results. For example, Patterson claims that the position of African people who are at “the bottom of the global hierarchy” could be explained from historical perspectives (Patterson 2006: 1895), arguing the position of Africa as the periphery (Patterson 2006: 1893). Citing from Henry<sup>5</sup> and Hewitt,<sup>6</sup> Patterson (ibid.) notes that the above global hierarchy in the United States is in correlation with the racial-ethnic hierarchy. In a rather similar vein, Barber (2019) notes the notion of visible and invisible diaspora groups in super-diverse cities like London. Southeast Asian people, like the Vietnamese for instance, are to be labelled as Chinese as they include those who are of the invisible groups. Ultimately, it is a complex matter which cannot be looked at from a single perspective.

Another important issue for diasporic groups is to establish and widen networks as a strategy for survival. Each group has its own strategy in doing so. Ammarell (2002) claims that the Bugis struggle to play an important role in economic and political domains in new places has been a crucial strategy. In a similar vein, Maunati (2016) notes that the Bugis diaspora in Malaysia has strategies of using their traditional advice of three ends handed over from generation to generation as well as creating and strengthening networks among their group and even with outside groups. The three ends are:

*jagalah ujung lidah* (look after the tip of the tongue); *jagalah ujung badik* (look after the end of the badik or knife); and *jagalah ujung “anu”* (look after the edge of the male genitalia) (Maunati 2016: 22-23).

Bugis diasporas have multiple identities depending on certain situations. For example, according to interviews with many Bugis in Johor-Malaysia, Bugis people often refer to themselves as Malay, but

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<sup>5</sup> Henry, Sheila E 1999. Ethnic Identity, National, and International Stratification: The Case of the African American. *Journal of Black Studies*, 29:438-54.

<sup>6</sup> Hewitt, Cynthia Lucas 2002. Racial Accumulation on a World-Scale: Racial Inequality and Employment. *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center*, XXV: 137-71.

when they gather with their fellow Bugis they refer to themselves as Bugis, even the sub-groups, like Bugis Bone or Bugis Wajo. Kuncoro (2016) also supports the idea of networking among the diaspora which in the case of the Muslim community could occur across ethnicity and even transnational factors.

Cohen and Fisher (2019: 7) point that the main bond of diasporas is the relation to homeland. The relation between home and host has clearly been changing over time. If previously, distance could be the problem, today the relation is very important and intense. Bozdog (2014) for example, says that digital communication technology has made possible intensive relations between home and host. Several scholars consider the relations between a diaspora and nationalist rhetoric. New interpretations challenge the notion of losing the homeland for a diasporic community in reality and in the imagination. Both ideologically and materially, a diasporic community has become involved in a nationalist project in their home country. The Chinese Diaspora in the United States of America is a case in point where they have protested against human rights violations in China; the Cubans in the US meanwhile have opposed Castro. This is partly due to global media and communication technology enabling them to participate in and influence the politics of their homelands (Werbner 2002: 120).

Indeed, the above explanations show why the study on diasporas in the Center is very important. Diasporas needs to be approached from different perspectives, from different interdisciplinary approaches—although there must be equity in the application of these said approaches.

Diasporic communities have been growing in many locations (or countries), thus, we could apply the “multisites” method. Henne notes that “multi-sited ethnography aids in examining transnational processes that do not map neatly on to global, national or local levels” (Henne 2017: 104). She (2017) further points out that the process of tracking things from different places could become an example of practicing the multi-sites method. Multi-sited method is also used in Area Studies. For example, in our studies, we have looked into the Cham diasporic experience in several countries like

Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam with the same purpose: to understand their construction of cultural identity (Maunati 2012b; Maunati and Sari 2014). Maunati and Sari (2014) further note that maintaining a certain marker of Cham identity in Cambodia, for example, could be traced by understanding the roots of culture in central Vietnam as the origin of the Cham people. On top of this, it is may also related with transnational movements and globalization.

### **III. Diasporic groups' Identities in the Border Areas between Thailand and Myanmar and between Thailand and Laos**

There are many diasporic communities in the border areas, especially between Thailand and Myanmar (previously Burma) and between Thailand and Laos. Historically, many minorities have moved back and forth from Myanmar to Thailand, particularly due to political turmoil on the Myanmar side. Some of these groups have settled in Northern Thailand. Hangsuwan (2015) notes the sad stories of people from Burma on the northern Thai border. They suffered due to political chaos in Myanmar and had to settle in the border areas of Thailand. Apart from Myanmar, diasporic groups have also originated from countries like China and Laos. Chinese Muslims and non-Muslims are among those groups from China. Ethnic minorities like Tai Lue, Akha, Hmong, among others, have also made transnational movements into Northern Thailand. The groups are further stratified economically themselves, as observed by Patterson above (see Maunati 2018).

Such segmentation and stratification occurred in many countries with variations. Minorities from Southeast Asia who have dispersed in many different countries are often in marginal positions. Sakboon (2013) notes the insecurity and exclusion of hill tribes/minorities in Thailand. However, this is not an isolated case since there are various positions and all ethnic groups cannot be simply located in the same situation. Perhaps, some minorities climb up the ladder and be accepted by the mainstream. According to a Thai scholar, Montri Kunphoommarl, Chinese Muslim and Tai

Lue are among those who have been accepted by the mainstream. He further pinpoints that they can go to schools and engage in economic activities. Many Chinese Muslims have gained higher status as traders and been wealthy while being considered minority (Setthamalinee 2010). This means that there is complexity in the place of diasporic groups. There is no single category or a single position for these people and social mobility has occurred for certain reasons. Migrants, for example, often end up in higher positions than the local group/natives because the struggle for survival of migrants. Studies on the Chinese Muslim and the Bugis diasporas exemplify these cases. (Setthamalinee 2010 for Chinese Muslims; Maunati 2016 for Bugis people; etc). Indeed, I understand that many migrants come from situations, backgrounds, and origins. More recent migrants with a low-level of education may land in low-paying jobs. Interviews with the Cham people who moved to Kelantan<sup>7</sup> at the end of 1970s and the Bugis people in Johor<sup>8</sup> after the establishment of the modern state show that the earlier settlers were much better off. They have blended with the Malay and often refer to themselves as Malay.

Indeed, identity is a social construction (Kahn 1995, etc). This also applies to diasporic communities in the border areas. Yu and Jing (2015) believe that people in the border areas often have contesting identities. In a similar vein, Wang (2007) notes the contesting identities of Hakka people in Taiwan. Indeed, they have often attempted to keep their traditions as part of the markers of their cultural identities. Nevertheless, the remaking of their identities could occur in the new place for many reasons, as they adjust to the new environment or gain acceptance. Each diasporic experience vary due to economic and political reasons. Patterson (2006) clearly indicates that the status of the diaspora community is often linked

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<sup>7</sup> Based on “*Diaspora Etnik Champa di Asia Tenggara: Identitas dan Jaringan Transnasional Champa di Malaysia*,” research in 2013, coordinated by Betti Rosita Sari with team members Yekti Maunati and Ari Jayanti. Thank you for allowing me to use this data.

<sup>8</sup> Based on “*Diaspora Bugis di semenanjung Malaysia: Identitas Budaya, Kewarganegaraan dan integrasi Nasional*,” research in 2011, coordinated by Dundin Zaenuddin with team members Yekti Maunati, Betti Rosita Sari, Rucianawati and Lamijo. Thank you for allowing me to use this data.

with the state of the country of origin, meaning that those from advanced countries could end up with a status different from those from developing countries.

Yu and Jing (2015: 111-113) studied the flows of people in the border areas between Vietnam and China, and report that there have been several stages of the important movements of people in these border areas. These include the period around 1959; between 1979 and 1985; and between 1984 and 1986. They further report that the national identity of the people like the Miao/Hmong in the border between Vietnam and China is constructed depending on many aspects, such as international relations, national policies, as well as political, economic (including land resources), and cultural issues.

Clearly, transnational movements of people have been made by numerous groups for many different reasons, including wars, political turmoils, conflicts, and economic problems. Border areas are often strategic places for those people who perform transnational movements either as final destinations or as transit places. Those who have settled down the border areas have to survive not only economically, but also culturally. The processes of adaptation is inevitable. They also need to come to terms with how their cultural identities may be reshaped by their movements to new places. Below, I will discuss the cases of the Yunnan Muslims and the Tai Lue.

#### **IV. Identity of the Chinese Yunnan Muslims**

The border between Thailand and Myanmar is witness to the diasporas of the Chinese Yunnan Muslims and even non-Muslims. This group settled in Mae Sai for a long period of time<sup>9</sup> (Sari 2018; Wiratri 2018; Maunati 2018). This claim is supported by Setthamalinee (2010: 2).

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to transnational team leader of PSDR-LIPI Amorasi Wiratri and member Betti Rosita Sari for allowing me to be part of this fieldwork team in Mae Sai and Chiang Mai of March-April 2015.

Informants also note that the Burmese Muslim community has also resided in the border of Thailand-Myanmar and have come in different waves (Kuncoro 2014 for more detail). The first wave came in the eighteenth century and were assimilated to become Thai citizens. They severed ties with the homeland and were displaced for political reasons. Their connection is also limited to recent migrants of the same group. They also continue to practice Islam. The second wave was that of the contemporary Burmese Muslims, who moved in because of political turmoil. The categorization seems to be also applicable to different groups which migrated to Thailand in several waves like the Chinese /Yunnan Muslims. Berlie (2000: 226) notes that apart from the caravan trade, the “Panthay rebellion” was also one of the reasons for the movement of the Yunnanese Muslims to Southeast Asia.

I will only focus on the Yunnan Muslims to shed light on how they adapted in Thailand while maintaining their unique identity. They lived in harmony in Northern Thailand, kept their core identity as Muslims and engaged in networking to maintain their culture (Maunati, 2018).

As has been widely argued, identity is a product of social construction (Eriksen 1993; Kahn 1995; King and Wilder 2003; Wang 2007; Maunati and Sari 2014; Yu and Jing 2015). It is important for diasporic groups to affirm their existence to also negotiate their power. Identity is fluid and can be multi-layered depending on certain contexts and situations (Eriksen 1993). To shape and strengthen their ethnic identities, diasporic groups have employed strategies like establishing networks, practicing traditions, cooking traditional food, and promoting halal food, as in the case of Yunnan Muslims. Religion has also been a bedrock of identity (Maunati 2018). Berlie (2000), for instance, believes that Yunnan Muslims maintain their culture by their adherence to their Islamic religion while living in Northern Thailand.

Networking is believed to be a strategic way to strengthen and maintain group identity. Kang (2015) provides an example of the Tai Lue residing in the USA. They established helpful networks with the Thai diaspora from Thailand and also with other groups like the

Hmong. It enabled them to cope. Meanwhile, Kuncoro (2016) argues that a mosque also functioned in social, economic and educational matters. Social networking in Muslim communities, including that of Burmese Muslims, has been growing regardless of their ethnicity and nationality. This may be seen in the example of the Masjid Nurul Islam, established in 1901 by Indian Muslims and which has been opened to Burmese refugees and even Pakistanis.

Networking among diasporic groups has not been the same. Maunati (2010; 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2016) notes that Bugis people in Nunukan, on the Indonesian border, have close connections with other Bugis on the other side of the border in Tawau, in Malaysia. This networking has social as well as economic functions. Sari (2012) observes the development of Cham networking in Malaysia and outside Malaysia, especially in Cambodia, and concludes that networking for diasporas is very important, especially as ethnic groups cross transnational boundaries. Diasporas that had often no connection with the homeland in the past are today transformed by networks. Faist (2010) even argues that some states have attempted to connect and control their diasporas. The terms “diaspora” itself has changed. Nowadays, it covers wider ranges of people, and not only those who disperse in many different countries. According to the Congress of Indonesian Diaspora in Los Angeles in July 2012, the definition of Indonesian Diaspora is *“Setiap orang Indonesia yang berada di luar negeri, baik yang berdarah maupun yang berjiwa dan berbudaya Indonesia, apapun status hukum, bidang pekerjaan, latar belakang etnis dan kesukuannya.* (Every Indonesian who is abroad, whether he/she is of Indonesian blood or spirit and culturally Indonesian, regardless of legal status, occupation and ethnic background) (Forum Diaspora Indonesia II, Berlin 15 November 2014).

Maunati (2018: 103) also notes that the networking of Yunnan Muslims is a very strategic way to create their identity. They have established networks with fellow Yunnan Muslims from the north of Thailand and from their places of origins in China. There is a Yunnan Muslim Association in Mae Sai which invites teachers from Yunnan to teach the Chinese language, a marker of cultural identity, to young Yunnan Muslims in Mae Sai, aside from helping its people

look for jobs. Berlie (2000) observes that the Yunnan Muslims in North Thailand has maintained the use of their language. In a similar vein, Maunati (2012b) also finds the same practice with the Cham people in Malaysia.

The building of the mosque has also been supported financially by Muslims in Yunnan, China. Connections between Yunnan Muslims and their compatriots in China continue to be maintained and strengthened (Maunati 2018). This exemplifies what Cohen and Fishe (2019: 7) suggest about the importance of the diasporic link with the homeland. In the said case, the mosque goes beyond its religious function to also become a center for Islamic teaching, especially for the younger generations in the primary level, and also for the informal teaching of Islam. Yunnan Muslims have attempted to maintain and strengthen their identity by continuing to incorporate Islamic culture and language (Maunati 2018: 103-4). Thai scholar Montri Kunphoommarl<sup>10</sup> say that the Thai people are basically accepting of the Yunnan in the north. In the past, if they created problems, they were asked to move to the South. Yunnan Muslims have been living harmoniously with Thais in the North.

Meanwhile, Omar (1999) shows that in Thailand in general, there are two main groups—Thai Muslims and Malay Muslims—and that “The Thai-Muslims, who are generally more assimilated into Thai society, are represented by various ethnic groups such as Thai Malay, Thai, Chinese, Javanese, Cham, Pathan, Tamil, Persian, Arab, SamSam, Bengali and Baweanese”<sup>11</sup> (Omar 1999: 222).

Even though they use Islam as a marker of identity, this does not mean they are the same as other Muslim communities, like the Malays, for instance (Andaya 2001). Grey areas often occur in the markers of identity (Kahn 1995). The point here is that though they are using Islam as marker, the Yunnan Muslims in Northern Thailand have also selected different elements as to mark their identity. Thay Eng (2013) uses the concept of core and peripheral

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<sup>10</sup> The interview was conducted on 5 December, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Citing from Omar Farouk Bajunid. 1988. The Muslims of Thailand: A Survey. In *The Muslims of Thailand: Historical and Cultural Studies*, A Forbes, ed. Bihar: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies



elements of identity where religion has been considered as a core element in the case of Cham identity in Cambodia. The Yunnan Muslims who have been residing in Northern Thailand for a long time have not been changed in terms of their identity as Muslims. Setthamalinee (2010: vii) states that Chinese/Yunnan Muslims residing in Northern Thailand for a long time, from time to time have been perceived differently. Prior to 1940, they were seen mainly as traders. From 1940 to 1990, they were viewed as a Thai Muslim middle class due to their economic mobility and national integration. In relation with the transnational Muslim movement, from 1991 until now, Chinese Muslims have been referred to as coming from three religious streams: “Hanafi Muslims connecting to China; Tabligh Jamaat Muslims connecting to India; and Salafi-Wahabi Muslims connecting to Saudi Arabia” (Setthamalinee 2010: vii).

Setthamalinee (2010) further argues that conflicts among these groups often happen. However, outside threats brings them together. Threats strengthen identity as Eriksen (1993) argues. Maunati (2010) also notes that although frictions among sub-groups of Dayak have often surfaced, members of the community will stand side by side when under pressure from outsiders.

We can also further note that Chinese Muslim identity is contested. An informant in Mae Sai that while there have been transnational Islamic movements in the area, especially the Wahabi and Tabligh Jamaat, these have not expanded widely. Majority of the followers are local Thai Muslims; the Yunnan Chinese Muslims tend to be oriented towards the Hanafi Muslims (Maunati 2018: 106).

Maunati (2018: 106-7) also notes, that another important Islamic element that marks identity is the promotion of halal food. Based on interviews and observations in Mae Sai, Yunnan/Chinese Muslims promote halal food. As they live in the border city in Northern Thailand, a tourist destination, Yunnan Muslims sell halal food that respond to the demand of Muslim tourists. Halal food is booming not only for its popularity as a cuisine but for its certification requirements. For instance, Malaysia has been strategizing to become a hub for halal food (Othman et al 2009).

Budiwanti (2015) on the other hand notes halal food is also growing in popularity in South Korea.

In interviews in Mae Sai in 2015, we found out that halal food was inaccessible. My own observation in the early 2000s prove this. Today, halal food are offered in many restaurants run by Yunnan/Chinese Muslims, who also engage in trading fruits, cheap CD/DVDs, Korean series, among others (Maunati 2018: 106-7). Mae Sai is a tourism destination that attract local and foreign tourists (Maunati 2018: 107). Muslim traders take advantage of this (Maunati 2018: 107).

<Plate 1> A halal 'burger' for you?



Photograph by Betti Rosita Sari

## V. Tai Lue in the Border areas Between Thailand and Laos

Minorities have often been described as being in marginal positions, and minorities are not foreign to Thailand which has hill tribes that struggled from exclusion (Sakboon 2013; Fujioka 2002; etc). Sakboon (2013: 213) observes that several upland ethnic minorities living in Northern Thailand have been treated differently and excluded by society. The intention of the government to treat them as a homogenous group has only added to the complexity, worsened by their location in the border areas. Citing Horstmann (2002: 8),

Sakboon notes that “the nature of borderlands—where the sovereignty of the state is marginal or even abandoned” has led to the state not trusting the minorities (2013: 215). Fujioka (2002) also reports on the vulnerable and marginal position of minorities in Thailand, and notes that tourism has also placed the minorities’ cultural traditions in the horizon.

Promoting cultural diversity becomes a way to preserve cultures which in turn become important markers of identities. This is what may be observed with the Dayak in East Kalimantan where the promotion of cultural tourism has brought about positive impact (Maunati 2000). This is also the case of the Ainu of Japan. Friedman argues that the formulation and reformulation of Ainu identity were shaped by movements in the global market in the context of international tourism and commodification of culture. He claims that “the Ainu produce traditional goods in order to create themselves” (1990: 323). In Sarawak of Malaysia, Bidayuh and Iban long houses have been showcased for international tourism (Research Center for Regional Resources-The Indonesian Institute of Sciences 2002; Maunati 2002; 2009). Cultural/ethnic tourism improves the economic state of the groups promoted. Poverty is reduction by community-based tourism (Oula 2007: 181), as cultures are preserved.

In Laos, Oula who studied in Luang Nam Tha where community-based tourism activities are being engaged in by two Akha villages. These villages mostly rely on swidden agriculture and collecting non-timber forest products (Oula 2007: 182), but also open their lands to tourist activities like trekking, cultural immersion, and cuisine. People are being given a chance to experience of the daily life of the Akha (Oula 2007: 183-4).

Historically, ethnic minorities residing in the border areas of Northern Thailand like the Hmong (Tapp et al 2004) and Tai Lue (Kang 2015) directly migrated from China or through Laos.

A few of the Tai Lue reside in the town of Chiang Khong and engage in tourism, running souvenir shops, travel agencies, or homestays. They also promote culture by showcasing traditional weaving (Maunati 2018). Thai scholar, Montri Kunphoommarl says

that the Tai Lue are different from that of other minorities or hill tribes, as they are Buddhists and have been accepted by the mainstream. They have access to economic opportunities, education, among others.

Maunati (2018) describes the Tai Lue people in the Thai border area between Thailand and Laos as having a distinct identity from other minorities like the Hmong. They adhere to Theravada Buddhism like the Thai. The Tai Lue village, located along the river banks, has opened itself for tourism, showcasing the group's rich cultural heritage, like traditional weaving. It is accessible from the city of Chiang Khong. When we visited the village, we saw several food stalls along the riverbank serving traditional Tai Lue food, like large portions of rice noodles with hot chilli sauce. (Plate 2). There was also a bigger food stall on the opposite side of the riverbank which provides varieties of traditional and non-traditional. The Tai Lue people we interviewed told us that they moved from a previous area on the border before finally ending up staying in their current location. Meanwhile, a few elderly people told us that before moving to Northern Thailand, they lived in Laos with their ancestors originating in China. The younger generations were born in Thailand and can speak Thai (Maunati, 2018: 124). The movements of people, including of the Tai Lue, have been very common within the areas of China and mainland Southeast Asia. Today we can find Tai Lue in different countries in Southeast Asia and China. In an interview, Montri Kunphoomarl claimed that people of Thailand and Laos in the border areas between Thailand and Laos were originally of the same groups. Other studies show similar hypothesis (Bala 2002; Ardhana et al 2004). For instance, Ardhana et al (ibid.), in a study in Kerayan, East Kalimantan, Indonesia and Ba Kelalan, Sarawak, Malaysia, reveal that the people who live in the border areas used to be part of the same group. Only after the borderlines were drawn have people evolved their present identities.

<Plate 2> Food for the discerning customer



Kang (2015) also says that Tai Lue can be found in the different places in the US, like Colorado, California and Texas. His study shows that these movements to America happened between 1978 and 1994. People from Sipsong Panna were said to have moved to Laos and Thailand first before going to the US. The movement to Laos were carried out “during China’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ period (1958-59) and during the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’ (1966-76)” (Kang 2015: 200).

Kang reports that the process of reviving Tai Lue traditions in the US is evident. He (2015:206) notes that the free social space in multicultural US has made it possible for the Tai Lue to reformulate and modify their traditions. He also (2015: 207) points that Tai Lue Americans are also members of the Thai community and network with other Thais to create associations. They remain to be Buddhists, with the temple at the heart of their cultural activities. They keep using their language, attend Thai or Lao Buddhist temples if they don’t have one, and maintain practices like rituals and intermarriages.

Maunati (2018: 127) observes that among the Tai Lue in the border area of Thailand-Laos, cultural traditions, language, and religion have become important markers of identity. Religious rituals, for example, are very important, as exemplified by one of our informants. He shares that in his family, a son is required to be monk at least once in his lifetime. He presented several photographs of this practice that runs in the family. He has painstakingly prepared for his only son to undergo this. The community from

within and without were invited, which not only shows the family's complete adherence to Theravada Buddhism, but also to connecting with society. The bonds are forged, even with people who have long left the country. In another case, in Borneo, in the border areas between Indonesia and Malaysia, people have an integrated identity as they crossed the borders (Maunati 2012a).

Apart from practicing religious rituals, maintaining traditional cultures also mark identity. Traditional clothes are very important in distinguishing cultures. Bradley (1983:46) observes that in Thailand, minorities maintain their identities through language and material culture, as well as religious, political and economic practices. He notes that in the Akha village of Chiang Rai, in the border area, the community preserves a distinct material culture—much like other groups. On the other hand, Maunati (2018: 128) says that the Tai Lue sport traditional clothes from woven materials. In their village a group of women has established places for displaying the process of making the woven products and the products themselves in different forms: traditional woven materials, traditional clothes, bags, wallets, among others. Originally, these appear in brown and light brown, but other colors are being used today. The women in the display outlets say that they use modern dyes, as well as natural and artificial colors. Usually, the naturally-colored ones are for rituals or important events, like a wedding party. The looms are displayed along side the weavings (Maunati 2018).

<Plates 3 and 4>: Colorful and more traditional woven products



Maunati (2018) believes that the Tai Lue people, like other groups, have created networks from within and without, which consequently strengthened their identity. They make use of family businesses like coffee shops, homestays, travel agencies, and souvenir shops to connect with Tai Lue relatives or fellow villagers. This is true for Chiang Khong, the border city of Thailand and Laos, a tourist destination which had provided Tai Lue families various business opportunities. Networking among the Tai Lue is indeed crucial matter. In the US, Kang (2015) agrees that networking is an important way to maintain Tai Lue identity. In a similar vein, Kuncoro (2014, 2016) emphasizes the important aspect of networking for Muslim minorities in the border areas of Thailand and Myanmar.

Studies on diasporas in other countries need to be developed further. We need to understand local ideas. Presently, we are heavily dependent on Western scholars because of language differences. We lack understanding of the local scholars who may have different perspectives, though their ideas may be shaped by Western education. As King (2016) argues, the insider and outsider notions in Area Studies are hard to separate.

## **VI. Conclusion**

By establishing Area Studies, it has been proven that certain interests, apart from academic purposes, are common in many Western countries, like the US, the European countries, and Australia. We have witnessed the political, economic and cultural interests behind the establishment of Area Studies in the past. Area Studies in the West experienced a decline due to many reasons like the debate on the growth of theories from disciplines, lack of commitment among students, and changing global concerns. However, in regions like Southeast Asia and Asia in general, it is burgeoning. In Indonesia, the field was established not only for academic purposes but to learn the global and regional cultures, at the time of economic slump.

A single discipline will not be sufficient to understand the complex issues in the context of Area Studies. Its interdisciplinary

approach is key in solving interconnected and intertwining problems, and this is not lost on the Research Center for Regional Resources-the Indonesian Institute of Sciences since its establishment in 2001. There have been many topics studied in this Research Center, one of which are the crucial diasporas in the border areas of Southeast Diasporic networking has been considered to be beneficial from the perspective of home-host relations, whereas in the past, it has often been disconnected. Meanwhile, international migration continue to take place for many reasons, like political conflict, economic reasons, to wars. The Indonesian diaspora requires study as its contribution to national development needs to be assessed. This year, LIPI under the program of National Priority, is starting to study the Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Japan, to understand the phenomenon.

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