Formation of Social Sciences in Malaysia: Contesting Meanings of “Plural” in Malaysian Studies

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Abstract

This essay considers the formation of Malaysian social sciences from the viewpoint of the concept of “plural”. It argues the concepts such as “plural society,” “multiculturalism,” and “cultural pluralism,” which often emerge in the analysis of Malayan and Malaysian society. Malaysia has illustrated many types of self-portrait through the concepts of “plural”. The concept of “plural” was firstly introduced by J. S. Furnivall and then developed through the formation of area studies centered on the United States after the World War II. It was relevant to the problem of national integration and modernization. In the 1970s and 1980s the concept of “plural” began to contain a positive image, influenced by ethnic studies and multiculturalism. In the 1990s, under the context of postcolonial criticism the concept of “plural” is interpreted as “hybridity” that undermines boundaries.

Keywords:
Malaysia, social science, plural, plural society, multiculturalism

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INTRODUCTION

This essay considers the formation of Malaysian social sciences from the viewpoint of the concept of "plural". It argues the concepts such as "plural society," "multiculturalism," and "cultural pluralism," which often emerge in the analysis of Malayan and Malaysian society. The concept of "plural" implies the problem of national integration and modernization in Malaysia as a newly independent nation state.

The concept of "plural" is relevant to the formation of area studies, which was produced after World War II. The formation of social sciences in Malaysia can be said to be the process of appropriating the strong framework of area studies by the local scholars. The term “appropriation” indicates that those who are dominated construct their new cultural identity by choosing the representations in favor of them from the existing representations (Pratt 1992, Hayashi 2001). In short, the identity in colonies is not given, essential and autonomous but is created through colonial repressions. However, the process of identification is not always the one-way process of internalizing the representations formed through colonialism. Rather, it subsumes the arbitrary choice of those representations. In this essay, I shall clarify that the representation of "Malaysia = plural society" is not the one-sided intrusion of dominant representations by area studies of USA, but rather the "self portrait" of Malaysia through the process of appropriation.

This paper succeeds to the Malaysian social scientists who came to raise the questions on the colonial knowledge in the field of Malaysian social science in the late 1990s. It was taken for granted that the historical formation of social science in Malaya and Malaysia traced back to the colonial period and were relevant to colonial administration. P. Ramasamy stated, “during the British colonial period research activities in social science in general were conducted by officers and administrators associated with the British colonial service” (Ramasamy 1983: 67). Rustam Sani and Norani Osman also pointed out that “in this part of the world [the former colonized area], by contrast, the historical origins of the social sciences are closely related to, if not an integral part of, the social conditions created by Western colonial rule” (Rustam & Norani 1991: 2). In the end of 1990s, scholars like Shaharil Talib and Shamsul A. B. added the viewpoint of postcolonial critique and began to argue that the colonial domination gave
influence not only to the field of politics and economy but also to the field of culture and knowledge (Shaharil 1997, Shamsul 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b). Shamsul argues the knowledge “took the form of “colonial knowledge”, which became the critical basis of the colonial rule and subsequently came to be embedded and naturalized into the social life of people in the colonies right through into the post-colonial period” (Shamsul 2001a: 29).

This paper will focus on the formation of social scientific knowledge on Malaysia through the concept of “plural”. In other words, it will argue the concepts such as “plural society”, “plurality”, “cultural pluralism”, “multiculturalism”, and “multi-ethnic society” that are often used for discussing historically the society of Malaya and Malaysia, from the viewpoint of the concept of “plural”. It will also clarify the colonial characters of the formation of Malaysian social sciences and the process of appropriation by the local scholars.

Social scientists who analyze Malaysia use various kinds of words such as “races”, “ethnic groups” and “community” to indicate the “plural” elements that constitute “plural society”, “multi-ethnic society” and so on. I try to mention the meaning of those terms that the scholars imply. But from my viewpoint, those concepts have no essential substance. In short, they are discursive constructions.

In the following section, I will trace the formation of the concept “plural” chronologically. First I will argue the idea of totality and its relations with the concept of “plural”. I will explain Furnivall’s concept of plural society introduced during the colonial period. Second, I will argue how Furnivall’s concept of plural society was applied to Malaya and Malaysia in the 1950s and 1960s. I will also show that it was relevant to the formation of area studies and the concept of Southeast Asia. At that time, the concept of plural society implied a lack of unity. Therefore, it was thought that the plural society situation of Malaya or Malaysia would negate the possibility of modernization and national integration of Malaya or Malaysia. Third, I will focus on the process of appropriation by the local scholars. In the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by ethnic studies, local scholars tried to show that Malaysia could overcome the negative situation of “plural”. They tried to show the possibility of modernization without overcoming “plural” situations. Multiculturalism would be one of those interpretations. Fourth I will argue the situation after the 1990s. In the 1990s, scholars be-
gan to find the possibility of “plural” to remain “plural” without being re-
duced to totality.

1. THE EMERGENCE OF THE CONCEPT OF “PLURAL”

(1) The Idea of Totality and the Duality of Social Sciences

Before launching the activities to trace the historical formation of Ma-
laysian social sciences from the viewpoint of the concept of “plural”, I shall
identify the main characters of social scientific knowledge. In the field of
social sciences, the concept of “individual” is the smallest unit of analyses
that can be inseparable. Social sciences in particular presume the totality
of an inseparable individuum as the minimum unit of analyses, and re-
gard their objects of study such as a society, a nation, and a community, as
enclosed totalities with fixed borders. The concept of totality can be de-
scribed as an inseparable, individual entity, or as an organic body that is
enclosed by clear boundaries. It can be said that the idea of totality is one
of the major concepts that characterize and define modernity.

While social sciences consider their own mission to be the pursuit of
universal principles for all “societies” in the world, in doing so, they implic-
itly define “the exterior” which does not fit with such principles, and re-
gard them as the “exotic Orient” and an object for anthropology (Waller-
stein 2004: 7-9). However, as the pursuit of scientific rationality as a social
scientific principle came to connect with the rational integration of the
state through national mobilization brought about by the two World Wars
and the Great Depression, an area once situated outside of social scientific
analysis became an object of social scientific analysis (Yamanouchi 1995,
Iyotani 2002, Wallerstein 2004). Colonial studies was formed to properly
govern and administer colonies, while area studies was formed for the con-
tinuous domination and control of the former colonies. These sciences had
to conduct the project to understand, in a scientific way, the areas that had
been defined as “the exterior” of modernity. In this regard, the colonies and
post-colonies can be said to be the points of contradiction and ambiguity
for social scientific knowledge characterized as thinking in terms of totali-
ty. It is at such points that the concept of “plural” is produced.

(2) Furnivall’s Concept of “Plural Society”

J. S. Furnivall developed the argument on plural society primarily in
Netherlands India (1939) and Colonial Policy and Practice (1948) where he analyzed Burma and Indonesia during the colonial period\(^1\). These works are generally treated as colonial studies.

Here, we shall examine Furnivall’s concept of plural society. Furnivall’s famous definition of plural society, which many writers have cited, is as follows:

[A plural society is] a society, that is, comprising two or more elements or social orders, which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit. (Furnivall 1948: 304-5)

First, Furnivall’s argument on plural society sees colonial space as a countable analytical unit. As Benedict Anderson points out, the newly independent nation states in the Third World kept the administrative units created during colonial times as their national territory (Anderson 1991). Such a way of seeing a colony as one space might lead to the imagination of a national community.

A second feature is that a plural society is described in contrast to a homogeneous society. In short, Furnivall sees a plural society as a lacking society. For example, Furnivall says that the most crucial feature of a plural society is the lack of a common will, which a homogeneous society should have, and as a result, a plural society lacks the common social and economic demands characteristic of “a homogeneous society” (Furnivall [1939] 1967: 448-449). Furnivall calls the elements of a plural society “crowd” since there is no common will in the inside of each element (Furnivall [1948] 1956: 307).

In the third feature, Furnivall points out that it is the sectional (racial) division of labor that obstructs the formation of a common will in a plural society (Furnivall [1939] 1967: 450). In short, the meaning of the “plural” in plural society derives from the situation where a division of groups into “race, freed or color” corresponds to a division of labor.

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1) John Sydenham Furnivall (1878-1960) was a colonial public servant in Burma and a scholar of Burma and Indonesia. He obtained a degree in natural science at Cambridge in 1899. He joined the Indian Civil Service in 1901. He was appointed as Assistant Commissioner, Settlement Officer, Deputy Commissioner, and Commissioner of Land Settlement and Records in Burma. After his retirement from the Indian Civil Service in 1923, he became Lecturer in Burmese Language, History and Low at Cambridge University. He wrote several books on Burma and Indonesia.
The fourth feature of a plural society is the penetration of capitalism and its concept of economic value into all sections of society, including that of the “natives”. According to Furnivall, the natives were generally viewed as those who could not adopt capitalist principles. On the contrary, Furnivall sees the colonies as completely penetrated by capitalism, and the natives as sharing the values of gaining profits (Furnivall [1948] 1956: 308). It is because of this fourth feature, the penetration of capitalism, that the argument of “a plural society” survived during the period of urbanization in the Third World.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF “PLURAL”

In this section, I will argue how Furnivall’s concept of plural society was applied to Malaya and Malaysia and how it made root in the analysis of Malaya and Malaysia.

(1) The Development of “Plural Society” Arguments in Area Studies

It is taken for granted by today’s historians that immigrant workers from China and India already dwelled in the Malay Peninsula at the end of the 19th century. Yet it was the “civilized Malays” and “the primitive races” that appeared in descriptions of the Malay Peninsula since the end of the 19th century such as the Papers on Malay Subjects edited by R. J. Wilkinson2) (Wilkinson 1907-1911). It was not until the application of Furnivall’s concept of plural society to Malaya that the immigrant workers came to be “seen”3). After World War II, the concept of “Southeast Asia” emerged in the development of area studies4). Furnivall’s argument of plu-

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2) It is said that the immigrant societies were formed in Malaya in the late nineteenth century. However, the Papers on Malay Subjects edited in the early twentieth century saw that Malaya consisted of Malays and Aborigines. See Iguchi (2004).

3) Indeed, the immigrant societies of Malaya were the object of control by the colonial government. They were seen gradually as the object of control, as the census was introduced in the nineteenth century. When the independence of Malaya was discussed after the World War II, the citizenship of immigrants was raised as an important political issue. It can be said that Furnivall’s argument on plural society emerged in response to the political atmosphere of Malaya.

4) The term “Southeast Asia” was born relatively recently. It is said that the term Southeast Asia derived from the South East Asia Command of the Allied Forces in the World War II, which was established in Ceylon in 1943 for the purpose of taking back the area occupied by the Japanese Army. However, Fifield Russel indicates that the activities of the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) offered a base for post-war Southeast Asian Studies centering in the United States in the context of the adoption of the term South
ral society on Burma and Indonesia came to be recognized as the shared concept in Southeast Asia. In short, the formation of the concept of Southeast Asia makes it possible to apply the argument of plural society to Malaya.

It was most likely that the research arising primarily from the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) after World War II led area studies to adopt Furnivall’s concept of plural society and transplant it to the Malayan situation. The IPR was a public research institute founded at Hawaii in 1925 for the purpose of establishing friendship among scholars and researchers related to Asia-Pacific regions. At its foundation, it consisted of scholars from 14 areas and countries (The Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, Holland, India, Soviet Union, Philippines, Japan, China, later Indonesia and Pakistan). The major activities of the IPR were hosting international conferences and publishing a periodical journal *Pacific Affairs* and research papers. From the aspect of finance, the IPR actually depended heavily on the donation from American foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation though in principle the IPR declared to collect its budget from membership fees and donations. Until the end of World War II, the IPR played important roles in the policy making process of the participant countries. The IPR took an active role in the United States during the early post-war period of the formation of area studies. Furnivall himself was also engaged in the activities of the IPR after the Pacific War.

At the eleventh conference of the IPR in 1950, Malaya was introduced as a plural society characterized by a “racial” division of labor (IPRJ 1951: 57). Moreover, the round table discussion on Southeast Asia recognized that the Malayan problem was caused by the country’s particular racial ratio composed of the three major races - the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians, - and that the ultimate goal was to integrate those three groups of people into one national citizen in order to solve the problem (IPRJ 1951: 855). The establishment of IPR was prior to World War II. It was a public research institute consisting of many scholars from all over the world. The IPR took an active role in the United States during the early post-war period of the formation of Area Studies. According to Nakami, there are few studies on the IPR (Nakami 2003: ii). For IPR, see Nihon Taiheiyo Mondai Chosakai (IPRJ) (1951), Thomas (1974), Hooper (1980), Hara (1978–1979), Katagiri (2003, 1983), Nakami (1989). Furnivall himself was also engaged in the activities of the IPR after the Pacific War.
According to IPR’s interpretation, the concept of plural society indicated a situation of deviance or backwardness in relation to an ideal situation of total unity. In short, the situation of plural society was regarded as a problem that should be solved and overcome. The nucleus of the problem was considered to be the economic gaps caused by the “racial” division of labor. In this sense, the way for perceiving the Malayan situation as a plural society was established during that period. By referring to this view, the reality could then be recognized as “in crisis,” and new practices become necessary.

(2) The Birth of “The Three Major Races / Communities / Ethnic Groups”

The above view of Malaya as a plural society with a racial division of labor gradually began to prevail as Malaya achieved independence in 1957. In this period, scholars tried to modify the dominant view of plural society as a lack of unity that the scholars of IPR offered in the 1950s.

Malaya achieved its independence in 1957 over a territory in the Malay Peninsula and after that in 1963 Malaysia was established merging with Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah (in 1965 Singapore separated from Malaysia). Many works on Malaya and Malaysia were published during the period of independence and the formation of Malaysia⁶. As Maurice Freedman stated “the idea of a “plural society” was formulated by a British student of the political economy of Southeast Asia” and “it has irritate some sociologists and find favor with others”, the concept of a plural society was established in the analyses on Malaya in the early 1960s (Freedman 1960: 158).

According to Friedman “the plural society then consisted not of ethnic blocs but of ethnic categories within which small groups emerged to form social ties inside and across ethnic boundaries”. For him, the plural society was characteristic for the colonial time and the independent Malaya did not have stronger boundaries between ethnic groups than that of colonial period. He implied that the dependent Malaya was getting out of the plural society situation which indicates the lack of unity.

The descriptions by other scholars would indicate that the concept of a plural society made root in the analyses on Malaya and Malaysia. For ex-

ample, Ratnam using the term “community,” argued that Malaysia consisted of three groups such as the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians (Ratnam 1965: 1). Vasil used the term “race” and explained that Malaysia was a “multi-racial society” consisting of the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians (Vasil 1971: 3). As Hirschman pointed out, in the 1960s and 1970s it became a routine to explain Malaya or Malaysia as a country consisting from three groups such as the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians (Hirschman 1987: 555).7)

Different scholars use different terms such as “race”, “community” and so on.8) However, the representation of Malaya or Malaysia consisting of three different groups took root in Malayan and Malaysian studies in the 1960s. It could be said that such representations resulted from the negotiations by the scholars who tried to modify the way of recognizing the current situation of Malaya or Malaysia. Indeed, the idea of “plural” still implied a lack of unity as the scholars of IPR indicated in the 1950s. However, the meaning of the idea of “plural” was revised. While Furnivall saw each element as “a crowd”, the scholars in the 1960s began to see it as a unity (Furnivall [1948] 1956: 307). Ratnam saw that each community was a unit of political process, where he could see a sort of “common will”.9)

This way of viewing each society as a totality generates a new problem; the inner heterogeneity of each totality could be oppressed. Moreover, the representations of Malays, Chinese, and Indians were continuously repeated even after the formation of Malaysia in 1963.10) This could unexpectedly promote Malay Peninsular-centrism in the formation of knowledge concerning Malaysia since the representations of Malays, Chinese and Indians ignore the existence of non-muslim indigenous residents in Sabah and Sarawak who do not speak Malay language.

7) Rupert Emerson’s Malaysia ([1937] 1964) might be the oldest example of using the idea of three groups. Emerson explained that Malaya consisted of “Malays”, “Chinese” and “Indians” from the analysis of census. On the other hand, Richard Winstedt, a Malayan officer, analyzed that Malaya consisted of “Aborigines”, “civilized Malays”, “Chinese”, “Indians” and “others” in his Malaya and Its History ([1948] 1966).

8) It is important to examine how different scholars used the different terms of “race”, “community”, “ethnic group” and so on. Yet, the analysis was not completed in this paper. Please see Iguchi (2004) for example.

9) See Ratnam (1965) and Vasil (1971) for example.

10) In 1963, Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore formed Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia.
3. Appropriating the Concept of “Plural”

As we have seen above, Furnivall’s plural society was applied to Malaya and Malaysia with the formation of Southeast Asia after World War II. In the 1960s the concept of plural society gradually prevailed and the representation of three major groups were born. Representing Malaysia not as a plural society but as “a country of three major communities or races” produced ways of revising, modifying, criticizing or sometimes even evading the problem of the “racial” division of labor in the arguments on plural society. Although representations of the three major racial groups or communities sought the cause of “being plural” from the view of diverse problems such as those of race, economy and culture, however, the idea of “being plural” as a lack -- the dominant idea characterizing the accounts on plural society -- still remained. In this section, I will focus on the 1970s and 1980s. During this period scholars basically succeeded the view that Malaysia consisted of three major groups, but they tried to appropriate and modify the concept of “plural” that had had negative connotation in the 1950s and 1960s.

(1) Introduction of Ethnic Studies

In the 1970s, the term “race” began to be problematized in Malaysian studies. Furnivall’s “racial” division of labor could negate the possibility of the modernization of the newly independent countries in the Third World, if one understands Furnivall’s argument from the viewpoint that admits the essential connection between a certain race and a capability of economic development.

Thus, the new concept of ethnicity was introduced as a result of criticism toward those who defined the problem of “plural” as a “racial” problem. The concept of ethnicity was developed by American scholars since the end of the 1960s (Gordon 1964, 1975, Glazer and Moynihan 1975). Since the 1970s it began to be used for the analysis of the Malaysian situation by scholars like Cynthia Enloe and Judith Nagata who received their academic training in the United States of America. For example, Enloe used the term “race” as a subordinate category under a category of “an ethnic group”. Enloe’s “race” was a variable that determines “ethnicity” and it was an indicator to represent one’s innate appearance (Enloe 1970: 9, 28). The concept of “ethnicity” emerged in Malaysian studies right after
the “racial riots” in 1969, which was also the time when the world discovered the possibility of modernization and economic development in Asia.

In the 1980s, the term “ethnicity” began to be used by “local” scholars in Malaysia. Syed Husin Ali edited the book, *Kaum, Kelas dan Pembangunan Malaysia (Ethnicity, Class and Development, Malaysia)* in 1984. This could be one of the results of the influence of ethnic studies in Malaysia. In introduction, he emphasized the importance of the ethnic problem and ethnic relations in Malaysia. “The problem of ethnicity and ethnic relations is of much concern in Malaysia because it is ever present in our daily life and often regarded as a threat to national unity and welfare of the people” (Syed Husin Ali 1984: 7). He pointed out the misuse of a term “race” in Malaysian Studies and stressed the importance of the concept of ethnicity in Malaysian Studies. According to him, the various “ethnic groups” that were called “racial groups” in Malaysia “actually belong to the same racial stock” (Syed Husin Ali 1984: 8) and “differences between Malays, Chinese and Indians are not “racial” as such, but are more social and cultural in nature” (Syed Husin Ali 1984: 14).

At that time many scholars insisted that the cause of “being plural” resided not in economic gaps but rather in cultural differences between the different ethnic groups. They argued that economic gaps due to the division of labor were almost solved. Syed Husin Ali pointed out that though the ethnic division of labor did not existed and the problem of poverty of Malaysia was of a class nature, it was presented as a racial or ethnic one (Syed Husin Ali 1984: 30). Tan Chee Ben also argued that the problem of national integration in Malaysia arose from a strong “ethnicism” (Tan 1984: 210). In the following section, I will examine the different views toward the concept of “plural” by different local scholars.

(2) **Negative Images of “Plural”: Aiming at “One”**

As we have seen above, being “plural” was the paradox in the formation of social scientific knowledge whose subject matter is Malaya or Malaysia. Since plural society indicated a lack of totality, it would deny the subject matter that Malaysia is a society as a totality. Therefore, the social science that addressed the subject of Malaya or Malaysia was formed in order to solve the plural society situation of Malaya or Malaysia.

In the 1980s, Malaysian studies saw a lot of scholars who were from Malaysia. As Rustam Sani and Norani Osman states, an attainment to
overcome the “plural” situation parallels the “indigenization process” of Malaysian social science by local scholars (Rustam and Norani 1991: 2).

Many kinds of projects were produced to construct national unity or totality in which the outlines of the Malaysian state coincide with the outlines of the different levels of community such as the language, culture, the people, the economy and so on. First, we shall examine the idea of assimilation to modernity. When plural society is situated in opposition to modern homogeneous society, assimilation to modernity can then be thought of as one of the solutions for overcoming the situation of plural society.

In general, modernization theory views ethnic conflicts as pre-modern remainders. It is thought that when assimilation to modern “universal” values is achieved, the conflicts are resolved, and that national integration and economic equality are accomplished. However, many Malaysian social scientists in the 1980s found the relationship of domination skillfully concealed within modernization theory. Thus, they sought the causes of the plural society situation, or the lack of national integration, in economic colonialism and class conflicts (Tan 1982, Syed Husin Ali 1984, Sanusi Osman 1984). They regarded ethnic conflicts as false consciousness that concealed the real relationship of conflicts -- class conflicts.

Secondly, I shall examine the arguments on “particularity” represented in contrast to the “universality” of Western modernity. In the Malaysian context, I will consider “Malayness” and “Islam.” Malay Studies by European scholars during colonial times “discovered” Malayness within the framework of the dichotomy between the Orient and the West. The colonizers represented Malayness as “particularity” in contrast to the “universality” of the West, as “backwardness” in contrast to the “civilized” West, as a “child” in contrast to the “adult” West, and as a vulnerable woman that needed to be protected by the Western man (Iguchi 2001). The colonized people were forced to internalize such a framework and construct their identity. By referring to this idea of Malayness constructed during colonialism, the Malay conservatives of the Malayan independence period tried to imagine the nation state of Malaya. In their accounts, the outlines of

11) The modernists see that the process of modernization transformed the basis of people’s acts and thought from ascriptionism, particularism, localism, tribalism, and traditionalism to universalism, achievement, secularism, rationalism and egalitarianism (Sekine 1994: 55).

12) For example, see the editorials of Dewan Bahasa, the periodical published from Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka that mentioned the Malay language as one single national language in Malaya. See Iguchi (2002b).
each totality such as territory, language, and people should coincide exactly, and immigrants should be assimilated into the majority group.

However, the view of the three major groups originally introduced by area studies and developed in Malaysian studies by local scholars functioned strongly as the knowledge that commanded people to form totality for each group. Under this view, Malayness is nothing but one of plural totalities constituting the state of Malaysia. Under the predominance of the argument of plural society and the three major groups, Malayness has occupied the “universal” position, not the “particular” position, in order to become the principle for the national integration of Malaysia. Thus, Malayness as “universality” was set in the past and projected into the future. For example, let us examine Wan Hashim’s account:

Furnivall’s concept of a plural society is mainly concerned with the effects of colonialism as an economic force. He contends that prior to the colonial period, societies of the East were integrated by common will. Malaya during the pre-colonial period, he said, was a society with plural features but not a plural society. There were, no doubt, several ethnic groups sharing their origins from Java, Sumatra, Arabia and even from India and China. But these people did not form separate minority groups with distinct cultural features. They were assimilated into the dominant society. (Wan Hashim 1983: 19)

Wan Hashim seemed to propose the contradictory view. According to him, pre-colonial Malaya was not a plural society regardless of its plural characteristics, and that all the different ethnic groups that originated from Java, Sumatra, Arab, India, and China were integrated into the universal value or Malayness which transcended ethnicity (Wan Hashim 1983: 19). His view can be understood without contradiction, if the dominant society is regarded as “universal”. In short, Malayness needed to be suggested as the principle for transcending all other minority groups. Thus, Wan Hashim implicitly showed that Malayness was thought as a “universal” principle of integration that transcended the plural groups, and that colonial domination deprived the totality that supposedly existed in the past.

The project of positing Malayness as the “universal” principle in the past can be seen as the project of transforming the “plural” into the “one”.

However, we have to pay attention to the fact that Malayness as “universality” still has a feature of plurality rather than that of homogeneity. Malayness as “universality” here has a different image from a homogeneous, coherent and a-historical totality. The Malay language is thought of as the *lingua franca* that prevailed over the Malay Archipelago during the period of commerce before colonial domination, and the Malay Peninsula is thought of as a platform where people from all over the world met, negotiated, and traded.

As a result, such a view led to the transformation of the negative image of “plural”. The concept of “plural” not only had the negative image of lacking integration but also the new image indicating the possibility of integration without repressing plurality. It led to the concept of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism, rather than the idea of assimilation into the majority groups, and opened the way to transcending the modern thinking of totality as “one”.

(3) Positive Images of “Plural”: “One” as the Assembly of “Plurality”

The new image of the concept of “plural” was introduced during the thriving period of ethnic studies in Malaysia of the 1980s. In other words, the concept of “plural” had an ambiguous image, not only the negative one that had to be solved and overcome, but also a positive one. This was accompanied by the emergence of a new idea of the integrated national unity consisting of the parallel existence of plural totalities -- cultural pluralism and multiculturalism.

Under the positive image of “plural” such as the idea of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism, each group did not need to assimilate into a dominant group or Western modernity, nor each group did not need to integrate together with other groups into a melting pot. Under the idea of this positive image of “plural”, people began to think that the national integration could be achieved with each group maintaining its own cultural characteristic. Therefore, this idea indicated an integrated national totali-

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13) Multiculturalism denies the national integration policy based on the idea of assimilation where a nation state should consist of one language, one culture and one ethnic group. In the 1970s some western countries began to adopt multiculturalism as their policy. Peter Brooker states that “its announced aims are to introduce children in schools and all sections of the community to the different belief-systems, customs, crafts and arts of the nation’s heterogeneous population” (Brooker 2003: 169).
ty under which there exist plural totalities. Tan Chee Ben explained such a situation using K. J. Ratnam’s discussion.

In general, there are two ways of achieving national integration – through accommodation and through assimilation. The latter is an extreme form of integration whereby the politically dominant group (usually also numerically dominant) seeks to assimilate the minorities. Accommodation involves each ethnic group in a country seeking to preserve its own cultural and ethnic identities but recognizing the need for national integration and making socio-cultural and even politico-economic adjustments towards this end. The main difference between accommodation and assimilation is that the former recognizes the reality of cultural pluralism, the latter seeks to eradicate that reality (Tan 1984: 202)

What is needed to produce the one single national totality without repressing the parallel existence of plural totalities? Tan Chee Ben said that a principle or existence transcending plural ethnic groups, or the “common will” in Furnivall’s sense was needed in order to attain national integration with the coexistence of plural totalities (Tan 1982: 37). Some scholars criticize multiculturalism since it “disguises an assumption of the centrality of predominantly white ethnic groups or of the dominant culture a dominant culture” (Brooker 2003: 169). In other words, multiculturalism needs a concealed premise of integrated principle. Cultural pluralism in Malaysia could suggest either the “universality” of Western modernity, “Malayness”, or “Islam” as its organizing principle. Therefore, cultural pluralism in Malaysia might have the same logic with what Wan Hashim showed in the discussion of assimilation to the one single principle.

I shall examine the characteristic of pluralist approach toward the concept of totality compared with the approaches of assimilation and a melting pot which aim at becoming “one”. The pluralist approach tries to become “one” under the common single national principle without repressing plural totalities. At least, the plural totalities within the one state do not have to assimilate into the culture of the majority group. However, the groups presumed to be plural totalities are commanded to be homogeneous, and the heterogeneity within each group and intersecting groups are forced repressed. Moreover, as Tan said, if the pluralist approach cannot
help but require one single organizing principle, it could be same with the idea that aims at “one”. In this sense, it can be said that the pluralist approach still aims to become “one” or the total unity\(^\text{14}\). Thus, is it possible to overcome the modern imperative towards totality? Is it possible for the “plural” to remain “plural” without being reduced to totality?

4. THE POSSIBILITY OF “PLURAL” WITHOUT THE THOUGHT OF TOTALITY

When the concept of “plural” was introduced in Malayan and Malaysian studies after the World War II, it had implied the meaning of a lack of unity, obstacles toward national integration and modernization. However, in the 1980s, many local scholars of Malaysian studies tried to revise the negative connotation of the concept of “plural”. As a result, the concept of “plural” attained the new positive meaning where the national integration is achieved with plural totalities. Although the new concept of “plural” entailed various kinds of contestation toward Western universality, the thought of totality itself was not questioned at that time. In other words, the concept of “plural” in the 1970s and 1980s were situated in the discourse of national integration.

(1) The New Concept of Identity

In the 1990s when globalization seemed to undermine the territoriality of nation states after the end of Cold War, the researches of ethnic identity in Malaysia started to question the concept of totality itself and the concept of identity itself. Let us examine Zawawi Ibrahim’s introduction for a special issue of *Southeast Asian Studies* entitled, “Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysia.”

As a nation state moves through its post-colonial era to meet both the internal and global challenges of nation building, development and all

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\(^{14}\) Indeed, senses of incongruity were often represented in many places. For example, Tan said that a premise of cultural pluralism was that ethnic groups in Malaysia were not unchanging fixed totalities (Tan 1984). According to him, each ethnic group experiences acculturation through interactions with other groups over generations. However, even though there are exceptions and examples based on experience, the framework cannot be undermined because it is an “ethical demand or imperative” (Sakai 1996: 171). The dominant framework continuously revises and modifies itself.
the attendant processes of modernization and transformation that come with it, have become the order of the day. But what is often forgotten is that these are also processes of contestation involving the state, institutions, various social groupings and classes of social actors in which identities are continuously being constructed, renegotiated and reconstructed. Hence mediating identities should be recognized as a crucial process in the whole phenomenon of the emergence, consolidation and sustainability of the modern nation state. (Zawawi Ibrahim 1996: 4)

Here the concept of identity no longer has an essential unchanging character. Zawawi Ibrahim says that his understanding of identity “moves away from the conventional “plural society” or “race relations approach” (Zawawi Ibrahim 1996: 4). Shamsul A. B. also draws attention to the new concept of identity as follows:

The first and basic one [i.e. critical challenge toward the study of identity] involves what I would call the “conceptual” challenge of how to perceive identity, either in a “static” manner, meaning identity is perceived as something “given”, “ready-made” hence “taken-for-granted”, or in a “dynamic” manner, meaning “identity” is viewed as an ever-changing phenomenon, that is, being redefined, reconstructed, reconstituted and altered hence problematized. (Shamsul 1996: 8)

Here, the study of identity in Malaysia steps foot into a new theoretical field. Identity is now constructed in political, economic, social, and cultural relationships. Indeed both Zawawi Ibrahim and Shamsul A. B. consider the new concept of identity underneath the “subject” of Malaysia. Their arguments do not try to problematize the modern nation state system, which in the end aims at “one” according to the thought of totality. However, the concept of identity itself as “an ever-changing phenomenon, that is, being redefined, reconstructed, reconstituted and altered hence problematized” might radically challenge the idea of totality and resist the imperative of making a totality constitute the national identity15).

However, how can we think about this new concept of identity in the

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15) Although scholars such as Zawawi Ibrahim and Shamsul point out the historicity and the construction of national and ethnic identity, they seemingly regard a nation and an ethnic group as a constructed substance not as a discursive construction.
process of globalization today? It is often said that the process of globalization undermines the modern nation state system itself. The following question might be asked: Does the idea of constructionism that supposedly challenges the nation state system actually support the movements toward globalization? In other words, does constructionism together with globalization, really challenge the nation state system based on the command to totality? Upon encountering the anti-globalization movements, the movements of globalization seem to re-demarcates the world and throw people who were once under the protection of local systems into a sea of global competition. Do we then have to support the nation state system in order to contest the process of globalization?

The problem here is whether globalization is an alternative to the modern nation state system or not. Toshio Iyotani says that globalization does not replace the nation state system, and that de-territorial movements of globalization are rather underscored by the nation state system based on territoriality (Iyotani 2002). In short, assimilation to one single principle such as a global standard also implies a technology of identification. In this case, it might be those practices that resist the imperative for totality and aim towards the “plural” without being reduced to a totality, that lead to the deconstruction of the thought of totality, which is based on the complicity of colonialism, the modern nation state system, and globalization.

(2) The Situation After the Year 2000

At the 3rd International Malaysian Studies Conference held at the National University of Malaysia in August 2001, the main panel was entitled, “Pluralism in the Malay World”. Different presenters expressed numerous interpretations of the concept of “plural.” As a result, discussions were intertwined with agreements, disagreements and misunderstandings. These different interpretations can be divided into three major views. The first interpretation regards the concept of “plural” as a lack of unity, totality, and homogeneity. It can coincide with the idea that IPR showed in the 1950s. The second one, reminding us of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism,

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16) The panel was held at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM National University of Malaysia) and Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA). There were five panelists: Robert Hefner (Boston University), Yao Souchou (Sydney University), Wendy Smith (Monash University), Zawawi Ibrahim (UNIMAS) and Jim Collins (ATMA). Shamsul A. B. was the chairperson, and Syed Hussein Alatas was the discussant. Please refer to Iguchi (2001).
sees the “plural” situation as a bigger totality consisting of smaller plural totalities. This corresponds to the pluralist view of ethnic studies in the 1980s such as Tan Chee Ben. In the third one, “plurality” is viewed as “heterogeneity” that contaminates and undermines the borders of totality, and transcends the concept of totality itself. This reflects the new idea of identity emerged in the 1990s. In this sense, it can be said that the 3rd International Malaysian Studies Conference was the place of negotiation between the different connotations of “plural” that this paper have traced.

The new concept of “rojak” emerged instead of the controversial concept of “plural” in the 5th International Malaysian Studies Conference (August 8th~10th, 2006). The concept of “rojak” appeared in the panel of “Post-colonial Popular Culture in Malaysia” designed by Chua Beng Huat of National University of Singapore and Zawawi Ibrahim of National University of Malaysia. Tan Sooi Beng of University of Science Malaysia used the term most in her presentation of “We Love Our “Rojak””. She analyzed the popular music of Malaysia or the “rojak song” using “bahasa rojak” or the mixture of different languages, such as Malay, English, Cantonese, Hokkien, Arab and so on17). Rojak songs are popular comic songs whose history can be traced back to the 1930s.

It seems that the concept of “rojak” has profound meanings for the future Malaysian social science. “Rojak” is the name of the popular food in Malaysia. Malaysians regardless of ethnic groups like this food. It is a salad of various kinds of the pieces of chopped fruits and vegetables with a hot and sweet sauce. The piece of chopped vegetable might be a metaphor of an ethnic group. Yet, the piece of vegetable itself does not become a dish. In other words, the piece of vegetable is a fragment which cannot form a totality by itself. In this sense, “rojak” is different from cultural pluralism or multiculturalism where an ethnic group is seen as a closed totality. “Rojak” seems to be similar with the metaphor of a “salad bowl” since the pieces of vegetable and fruit is served in a bowl together with sauce. It can be possible to interpret that like a “salad bowl”, “rojak” indicates the totality in the bowl of a nation state over which the sauce of common national will is poured. However, it seems to me that what Tan focused on was the

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17) Her argument can be situated in the broader debate on the ban of the airing of Malay songs with a sparking of English words in the lyrics proposed by Zainuddin Maidin, Deputy Information Minister of Malaysia in 2004. The debate launched after the announcement.
popularity or hybridity of “rojak”\(^{18}\). “Rojak” is not a national traditional food which the government wants to protect. Rather, “rojak” is a popular food that is sold in stalls of streets and is served in a disposable plastic bowl. In this regard, the concept of “rojak” can be situated in the 1990s attempts to overcome the thought of totality in Malaysian social science.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper examined, in chronological order, the characteristics of social scientific researches of Malaya and Malaysia in terms of the concept of “plural”. It is taken for granted that the chronological explanation has limitation. The feature of a certain period does not completely vanish in the next period. As it was clear from the characteristics of Malaysian social science after the year 2000, a characteristic often crosses the different periods, different characteristics coexist in a certain period of time, and they are intertwined each other. Thus, Malaysian social science is characterized by the plural concepts of “plural”. The concept of “plural” seems to contest the thought of totality in social science. However, “plural” has complicit relations with the powerful and dominant thought of totality, though it shows ambiguous and contradictory relationships. In this sense, the concept of “plural” is the apparatus to form Malaysian social science as a national social science. On the other hand, it could be said that the new concept of “plural” after the 1990s criticizes the thought of totality which is essentialist and a-historical.

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\(^{18}\) A term “hybridity” has plural meanings. The original meaning derives from botanics and zoology. Brooker says, “a hybrid combines unlike parts and is the result, in botanical or animal life, of the cross-breeding of different species or varieties or, in another application, of the cross-fertilization of different languages. In cultural theory these meanings have been extended to refer to the mixed or hyphenated identities of persons or ethnic communities, or of texts that express and explore this condition” (Brooker 2003: 126). Because of the biological origin, “hybridity” has biological connotation. However, in the context of postcolonial theory and studies of race and ethnicity, “it is used to describe the newly composed, mixed or contradictory identities resulting from immigration, exile and migrancy” (Brooker 2003: 127). In this context, it is thought that hybridity emerges in ambivalent spaces, crosses boundaries and undermines totalities.
Iguchi, Yufu. 2002a. “Shutai” Keisei to Mare-go no Ichi” Gengo Chiiki Bunke Kenkyu. (The Graduate School of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) 8: 137-152.


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