

Walking-to-think-with in Indonesia: beginning a new discourse in area studies?

Abstract

There is an emerging discourse on more-than-disciplinary experiential research that has the potential to bring about a new direction in Indonesian and Malaysian studies. Developments in the way that scholars engage with area studies in the future are likely to be driven in part by research that begins on the ground and outside disciplinary boundaries, and is written with a literary or poetic force that produces more complex and nuanced understandings. The idea of immersive ‘walking-to-think-with’ research is one potential trajectory for Indonesian and Malaysian studies, that encourages a more tentative, open and reflexive approach to discipline boundaries and the researcher’s relationship with ‘the field’. The author’s experience in learning the language, geography and history of one part of Indonesia through talking, walking and being present, is used to explain the potential for an embodied, seeing and feeling research practice in area studies beyond the purposivity and representational conventions of discipline-based research.

Key words: Aceh, Indonesia, walking, autoethnography, transdisciplinarity, more-than-disciplinary

Introduction

Some of the questions raised for this special issue of RIMA concern the potential for greater cross-disciplinary collaboration between researchers on regional issues, and whether university researchers and their writing would in future be better identified with particular disciplines or with area studies. If the study of Indonesia and Malaysia is to develop a new discourse on scholarly engagement with those two countries, one response might be to look towards trans- or inter-disciplinarity. Of particular relevance to studies of the region is that transdisciplinarity is now being theorised as a reflexive, collaborative approach focused on ‘real world’ issues and producing transformative learning in all of its participants; moreover it is argued that it should move beyond disciplines to work with community and traditional knowledges, and address its outputs to a wider audience than the readers of academic publications (Palmer and others 2009; Palmer and others 2014; Mitchell and others 2015). Implementing such an approach to research and teaching would of course require significant changes to universities, including different reward and career advancement structures, and new and expanded opportunities for publication (see for example Manathunga and others 2006).

While these are necessary conditions for enabling transdisciplinary research, I argue here that such changes are likely to be *driven* by breakthrough experiential research that opens up new ways of connecting with the world. In the case of regional studies across cultures, this breakthrough research is likely to include ‘stories from the field’ that emerge from work that is not purposive in any discipline-specific sense. Ethnographies, autoethnographies, documentaries and memoir can draw together ‘discovered’ knowledges and practices in deep ways, often with literary or poetic force, that point us towards more complex and nuanced

understandings (see for example Wylie 2005:237); they can also cast a new light on the researcher, that allows a more tentative, open and reflexive approach to this role and its relationship with ‘the field’. Descriptions of personal journeys, such as autoethnographies, are a way

... of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us (Ellis and others 2011).

Below is (part of) the story of my personal journey as a researcher new to both the field of Indonesia, and the field of Indonesian studies. I present it as an example of what there is to be learned by experience that is outside any particular discipline, but that can valuably be informed by, and inform, multiple disciplines. It is not strictly an autoethnography but a reflective picking out of particular points on my research journey, which together engaged me in a new way with my field of study. Describing how this engagement emerged has, I suggest, the potential to begin a new discursive direction for Indonesian and Malaysian studies.

The journey-points and the changes they produced in my relations with ‘the researched’ will be seen to have value for developing the idea of transdisciplinarity, but I explore them firstly through the idea of ‘walking-to-think-with’:

... how a person moves through a landscape and among the people living in those spaces, constitutes how they relate to that place and how and what they learn about it. Similarly, it also shapes the walker’s mind and body as she or he moves in and through the landscape (Banerjee and others 2013:241).

Walking seen in this way is a form of “respectful wayfinding” (Instone 2015), and I use it here in a partially figurative sense; it is the researcher’s movement through space and time over several months that I represent in ‘affective’ terms: “the shifting mood, tenor, colour or intensity of places and situations” that “enters into, and ranges over the sensations and emotions of a subject who feels” (Wylie 2005:236). The journey-points I describe are drawn from my research on old people’s life stories in post-tsunami, post-conflict Aceh, Indonesia. I have focused for brevity’s sake on the ways that language, physical geography and history became present in my experience as researcher and produced a particular kind of affective relationship with the place and people I was studying. Such relationships, I suggest, go beyond what is possible from within the discipline areas of language, geography and history.

Language

I begin with language and the four Indonesian words for the single English word ‘rice’, words I learned at language school at Jogjakarta: *padi* for rice plants standing in fields of water, *gabah* for the stacked harvest of drying stalks, *beras* for raw grain stored in woven sacks, and, finally, *nasi* for cooked white rice. This extravagance of words suggested a need to pay attention to something more complex and significant than what I understood as just ‘rice’. My understanding grew in various ways. My language teacher in Jogjakarta would say to me:

“Jane, I eat so much food all day, my husband says ‘How can you be hungry?’, but if I haven’t had rice, then I haven’t eaten anything!” Travelling through the Acehnese countryside months later with my interpreter, our driver remarked that it was lunch time; I pointed to a well-known noodle shop in the village, only to see my interpreter’s eyes widen: “But Jane, the driver must have rice!”

Geography

During this travel into the Acehnese landscape, I found myself paying a new kind of attention to (physical) geography. We drove inland to speak with old farmers, their tiny houses set among the bright green flourishing rice fields (*sawah*). However I heard voices sick with anxiety when they recalled long years of dry seasons and unpredictable rainfall: “Before we had irrigation, when the rains failed to come, the harvest was full of empty husks”. To find rice, poorest families begged from wealthier relatives in other villages: “My daughter was growing up and could walk... She asked them for a little rice, but they refused to give it. She came back to the village with nothing. I was very *susah* [worried] in that time” (Ibu F-m, 86 years).

Closer to the ocean, the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami swept away people, houses and fields; in those villages, we sat on bamboo and timber platforms that the old people had added to their new hard-floored concrete homes, and listened to stories of the tsunami always strongly marked by the search for rice:

This young boy was only 11 months old in that time struggling in the water too. In the mountain, he cried because there was no rice. We didn’t have rice for one day. Then even though we have rice, we didn’t know how to cook it, there was no place to cook. In the evening, we had a little food, wet rice that we cooked and ate together, I think my grandson took it from somewhere but I’m not sure where they got that. Then we had instant noodles, *aqua* (water), bread, that’s all” (Ibu A-s, 70+ years).

When the huge water came in, I got up and ran there [to the mountain] my dear. I stayed there for two nights. When we ate, our rice was mixed with sea sand (Ibu H-s, 72 years).

People took fish to the mountain, without rice, nothing else, just fish. The rice that we found stuck in the wreckage was mixed with sea sand. After that, in the afternoon, we sat in the open field, then the GAM [Free Aceh Movement] members arrived, they were coming from the mountain side, and brought sugar, rice, and other stock, then we felt relieved and happy (Bapak R-z, 85 years).

After the tsunami, the soil in the fields was full of salt; desalinizing the rice fields [*sawah*] was an ongoing project for the Acehnese and agricultural aid organisations during the time I lived in Aceh (Abubakar and others 2008; Gani and others 2008). In one village, where most of the flat land had been permanently submerged, one old man’s prognosis for the future combined, in a way that was now becoming familiar to me, anxiety and dry humour:

We are an agriculture community; we depend so much on agriculture. But now we cannot utilize our *sawah* because the land is mixed with sand... If we cannot utilize the small *sawah* that still exist, then this village will have no hope, as the mountain is already fully planted with crops. I don't know what will happen if the heavy rain falls, the flood. What if the big wave comes again, we'll finish [laughs] (Bapak M-d, 72 years).

History

The memories of my older interlocutors stretched beyond the tsunami and recurring seasons of low rainfall. During the Japanese occupation of 1942-1945, rice fields were filled with sharp, upright bamboo sticks to prevent enemy parachutes landing. The occupying forces also took the rice stores and the clothes of each family, and the search for food became a deadly and humiliating game:

Their shots were coming from the sea. I hid behind the bamboo tree, I dug a hole in the ground. My brother was very little in that time. I was able to bring a little rice for him to our hiding place behind the tree (Ibu A-w, 90 years).

The 30-year conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian military also played out in the rice fields, which were left unattended by owners fearful of gunpoint interrogation by both parties: For many years, until the peace agreement of 2005, there was no evening prayer at the mosque, and no work in the *sawah*:

We couldn't go to the field because they would catch us and then? Later, in the dark behind a tree with the gun pointed at our head, our life would finish (Bapak M-d).

Memories of the earlier Darul Islam rebellion of the 1950s, and the anti-Communist purges of 1965-66 were also recalled in stories about rice:

No matter that we owned the rice field, we didn't even have courage to harvest the rice, so many military hanging around that land. My father was frequently chased across the river, sometimes we're suffering in hunger, we ate banana. The Darul Islam war happened for quite long time.

The first three years of my marriage, I didn't have children, then finally when I had one, the child just learnt to sit, and the Communism happened. That war didn't take long, only one year, but for a year we cannot go to the rice field. They hit anyone, they cut people's neck, and they didn't care for the people. We felt not safe going for work, we will sneak here and there and make sure they weren't there and there was no gunshot.

Three times of war, we feel not good, we feel not safe going to the field (Ibu S-p, 65 years).

Throughout the GAM-military conflict, the military systematically destroyed irrigation systems and killed agricultural extension workers, while the Indonesian government starved Aceh of funding for infrastructure and services (Nazara and others 2007; Shea and others 2008; Thorburn 2008; World Bank 2008). The less visible impacts of conflict have been

decades of fear of setting foot in the *sawah*, of hunger and privation, and even today a still precarious sense of security. Many people were unable to answer my questions about these times, saying only “I can’t even think about how hard that history was” (Ibu A-h, 74 years), “I don’t know how to describe this anymore, because it’s too sad” (Bapak I-h, 78 years). Yet a simple statement by an 86 year old woman showed me how rice, a volatile geography and a traumatic history converge in the present: “If I have rice, I feel happy. Not talking about money, it’s something else dear” (Ibu F-m, 86 years).

A journey-for-thinking

Learning the four words for ‘rice’ and the discussions with my language teacher in Jogjakarta, being in the presence of conflict survivors talking about a chronically traumatic past and the still recent safety that has allowed them to return to the rice fields, and hearing in the voices of my Acehnese interlocutors the bitter disappointment of lost fields and low rainfall and the joyful relief of irrigation, were important points on my journey that began to reconstruct my relationship with my ‘field of study’. I found myself sharing in my interlocutors’ pleasure when they talked about working the rice fields, when I saw them stacking bags of grain under a house, and when they offered me a bowl of white rice. I attended a land use conference, made contact with a nongovernment agricultural aid organisation, found myself interested in new forms of irrigation, the rice varieties that were now being grown with less dependence on piped water, the reconstruction of agricultural extension services after the peace agreement of 2005, and the success of efforts to reduce soil salinity after the 2004 inundation of sea water. My language teacher and the old Acehnese farmers had introduced me to another Aceh, beyond historical conflicts, unreliable weather and volatile tectonics; for me it became an Aceh lit by subtle gradations of light and dark, the air now suspended in a precarious stillness as people moved with cautious joy back onto their land. The fields became greener, the *nasi* whiter, the gleam of flat water a benison.

Like walking-to-think-with, journeying to another country offers what Andrea Phillips (2005) describes as a performative understanding of the world. To journey in a new place is to be critical in a different way - more tentative, hesitant, speculative, less framed by academic purposivity - that might avoid traditional discipline-based “static representations” (Phillips 2005:509, 512). In this different kind of criticality the journey becomes “an alternative means of knowledge production, something that provides a new perspective, another way of seeing and feeling” (Banerjee and others 2013:241). The world emerges as a “relational achievement” between researcher and researched (Banerjee and others 2013:241, citing Instone) – in the case above, between, at the least, researcher, people, history, landscape and language. It is an achievement that grows out of the researcher’s “slowed-down attentiveness ... a move away from always observing to categorize, to locate, and to define data. It shifts toward an embodied, sensing, and becoming-with research practice” (Banerjee and others 2013:242). This may also require, as Wylie points out (2005:237, citing Dewsbury) a new experimentalism in academic writing that can “contribute to the stretch of expressions in the world.”

An embodied, seeing and feeling research practice is likely nonetheless to direct the researcher towards other more conventional disciplinary knowledges. The ‘matters of fact’

these disciplines address may become, for the researcher, ‘matters of concern’ (Banerjee and others 2013:241). It might become important, as it did for me in Indonesia, to know more about farming practice and agricultural research, about plate tectonics, weather patterns, histories of regional conflict and governance, and about the local language as a pattern of significance. As a result, the researcher may want to explore in a deeper way the potential impacts on communities of changes to government policies and programs, or technological innovation – for example in crop diversification, water conservation, and river mining. Such research could contribute to more ‘historical, descriptive and democratic accounts of thresholds and limits’ (Mitchell and others 2011:29).

The kind of research practice described above is one potential trajectory for Indonesian and Malaysian studies – immersive, attentive, engaged, and ultimately transformative. The researcher thus transformed may find that they stand as advocate or vanguard of a new experiential, experimental and more-than-disciplinary form of area focused research.

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