Chapter 1

A Postcolonial Amnesia

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This chapter reconsiders the recent rise in interest in trans-Asian connectiv­ity and/or tensions and the necessity of appreciating its significance within a broader historical perspective. In brief, the recent interest can be read as a response to a set of historically specific material and intellectual condi­tions at the turn of the century. This is a welcome response to what is widely perceived as an Anglo-centric bias in mainstream cultural studies, and to the perceived crises of the U.S.-led Cold War-styled Asian studies and the fledgling efforts at building Asia-based cultural and area studies at the turn of the century. In specific regions, such as Southeast Asia, this upsurge in interest—in inter-, intra- and trans-Asian inquiries—is all the more curious, given the rich but largely overlooked history of such links.

For centuries, what is now known as Southeast Asia has been a hub of transcontinental flows of people, religions and sciences. This chapter will mainly focus on the region's modernist engagement. Such connections were salient features of the activities and events in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, well preceding the birth of nations in this region. Significantly, these engagements involved multi-ethnic and multi­lingual people from all walks of life in urban settings, rather than an exclusive preoccupation with a tiny elite of European descent in the colonies. A serious look at this history will throw new light on the contemporary pursuit of inter-, intra- and trans-Asian inquiries, by providing a broader historical perspec­tive. While a narrow investigation of cosmopolitanism in the region’s past is necessary, it should serve to further the enquiry into the present; namely, why early modernity has been overlooked for so long in Southeast Asia as well as in studies of the region and Asian cultural studies. The following is a preliminary attempt to address these questions with a focus on the case of
Indonesia (formerly the Dutch East Indies colony), the world’s largest Muslim populated nation and Southeast Asia’s largest nation.

This chapter aims to show that modern trans-Asian cultural flows and analyses of their significance, should not be understood primarily as a future prospect in the early twenty-first century. Neither should it be perceived as a novel endeavour, or simply expanding the scope of the intellectual enquiries beyond the nation as a point of departure. Rather, it calls for a rediscovery of Asia’s early modernity and a more serious examination of its transnational engagements a century earlier. The national and the global are neither separable nor opposites as portrayed in public discourses.

SOUTHEAST ASIA: BACK TO THE FUTURE

From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, novels, short stories and serialized fiction in newspapers and magazines disseminated stories throughout the region from Europe, the Middle East, China and India in the Malay lingua franca (Toer 1982). Many of these important stories, along with local folklores, were popularized on stage as plays in local languages, supplemented with music and dance performances (Cohen 2009; Cohen and Noszlopy 2010; Winet 2010). These play productions meant a great deal for a social environment with fairly low levels of absolute and functional literacy. For the same reasons, the introduction and rapid dissemination of electronic media, such as radio sets and movies, heightened the sense of a shrinking world, of global connectedness and shared transregional concerns. While American films took a dominant position early on, the flow of travelling artists, producers and films from India, the Philippines and Malaya in the region was a common scene in the first half of the twentieth century (Biran 1976: Kahn 2006; Setijadi-Dunn and Barker 2010).

Cohen and Noszlopy make a good point when reminding us not to impose the contemporary nation-state grid onto understandings of the practice and network of cultural workers in this region past and present:

Mutual borrowing, fluid transactions and transformations of performances and performers have a long and enduring history in Southeast Asia. ... The division of Southeast Asia into its current constellation of eleven countries (Brunei, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) involved a high degree of what Anthony Reid (2010) has dubbed ‘imperial alchemy’. Each of these countries has immense internal diversity and fuzzy cultural borders. Southeast Asia’s nations are not monocultural monads but geopolitical products of modern histories of colonialism and nationalism. These countries were once called
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‘new states’, but are made up of culturally overlapping old societies. (Cohen and Noszlopy 2010: 2)

Despite some slight variations, particularly with the regard to the government’s interest, control and inference, from the second decade of the twentieth century, listening to the radio was commonly a novel and enchanting encounter for the general population in the French colony of Viet Nam (DeWald 2012), British Malaya (Chua 2012a) and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) (Lindsay 1997). Listening to the radio, and before that, ownership and making use of new technology ‘like the bicycle, the motorcar, the gramophone, and the domestic refrigerator’ (DeWald 2012: 149), all indicated a new lifestyle of being modern. Listeners in all those colonies were kept informed of radio programmes and schedules beyond their immediate surroundings. For example, local newspapers in Singapore in the early 1930s published the daily radio schedules being aired ‘from Saigon in French Vietnam, and Bandoeng, Tanjong Priok, Batavia, Sourabaya, Medan, and Djokjakarta from the Dutch East Indies, as well as stations further afield in Melbourne, Sydney, Paris, Rome, Eindhoven, Zessen, Nairobi, New York City, and Moscow’ (Chua 2012a: 170).

Matthew Cohen (2009) describes as ‘conceited’ the thought that this new century is a ‘unique moment in human history’, equipped with all the intense globalized flows of financial transactions, media and entertainment distribution and consumption, as if they all took place without precedent. His study vividly shows that the wealth of fascinating links and modern creativity among large segments of the colonized people in Southeast Asia was not limited to the miniscule number of Europe-born elite in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the next century.

‘Showbiz’ and the global entertainment industry have nineteenth-century beginnings. During the course of Alfred Russel Wallace’s ‘wonderful century’, cultural forms and values were propelled to the far corners of the globe by the emergent transportation technologies of railway and steamship and the communication networks of telegraph and post. Photographs and phonographs allowed access to sights and sounds from far away, and offered new possibilities in live and mediated art and entertainment. The creolization of cultures and the global ecumene of today emerged in the nineteenth century, not the twentieth. (Cohen 2009: 298)

In a subsequent work, jointly authored with Laura Noszlopy, Cohen further details the myriad events and activities of the past century:

The growth of cities and print capitalism shaped new audiences interested in novel entertainments. Newspapers from 1890s urban Java contain
advertisements and notices for circuses, magic shows, European social dancing, organ grinders, string orchestras, phonographic demonstrations, magic lantern shows, variety shows, marionette companies, English operetta companies, French and Italian opera, ring toss games and tombola stands, Japanese and Chinese acrobats, firework displays, panoramas, waxworks, cinematic projections, dog-and-monkey shows, ventriloquists, balloon shows, freak shows, fire juggling, magnetism, comic speeches, mimics and many other international expressive forms.

Filipino musicians established their pre-eminence in the pan-Southeast Asian urban musical arena by the late nineteenth century. There are accounts of an orchestra of Filipino musicians playing daily in the esplanade of the colonial town of Medan in the 1890s. Musicians from the Philippines are still playing pop and country-western standards in bars, clubs and hotels in Singapore, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur and cities around Asia and the world today. (Cohen and Noszlopy 2010: 7)

With a special focus on popular music performance in public spaces, the work of Peter Keppy (2008) confirms Cohen’s observation, emphasizing the fact that ‘this popular culture had modern and cosmopolitan features, but it was not merely a derivative of Euroamerican modernity’ (Keppy 2008: 141). In the first two decades of the twentieth century, artists from major cities in the Dutch East Indies travelled and performed in the British colony of Malaya, and vice versa. Hawaiian and jazz were equally popular across the colonies in this region, with the Philippine artists coming from Manila being the most prominent among their counterparts of other local ethnic groups.

In the same period, a similar desire for the modern, cosmopolitanism and daily engagement with fellow Asians across the region developed in earnest among photographers (both amateur and studio types) in the Dutch East Indies, particularly in the major cities of Java. ‘As Holland ceased to be the sun around which the postcolonial world orbited, other centers of modernity—particularly the closer-to-hand pan-Asian centers of Hong Kong and Singapore, the “capital” of the Asian overseas community ... —became more salient to the aesthetic currents and actual circuits through which Indonesian amateur images traveled,’ notes Strassler (2008: 408). A large proportion of these photographers were ethnic Chinese, the majority of whom came from Canton, via Singapore where they had their apprenticeship training (Strassler 2008: 415).

By no means are the preceding paragraphs intended to capture a comprehensive survey of the exciting decades of the past two centuries. Suffice to note that in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, significant and sustained engagements with modernist and cosmopolitan aspirations were salient features of the activities of what is now identified as the Southeast Asian region. Globalized networks or trans-Asian engagement no longer appear to have commenced in recent decades, thanks to the
Internet, smartphones, increased modes of transport and people’s mobility. No less intriguing is the question of why this past history has not been widely known or remembered by many in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Why has global studies been salient only in recent decades, and trans-Asia engagement in area and cultural studies discussed as a desirable but challenging project for the future? The next section is an attempt to provide some answers.

THE NATIONAL REIGNS IN SCHOLARSHIP AND BEYOND

Decolonization in the region gained momentum between the two world wars. Immediately following independence, nation-building has been the single most important project of the political elite. Nationalist discourses acquired unrivalled emotional and political grandeur in nearly all public events and debates. Partly in strong sympathy for these new nations, and partly due to the older and greater forces of ‘the process of reading nationalism genealogically—as the expression of an historical tradition of serial continuity’ (Anderson 2006a: 195), academic and journalistic analyses alike accorded special status, integrity and autonomy to ‘nations’.

Southeast Asia studies, in the bigger family of U.S.-led area studies in the course of the Cold War, took the nation as a primary unit of analysis. Far from being a peculiarly biased version of area studies, preoccupation with the nation has been no less paradigmatic of the social sciences and in the humanities more generally. Until recently, cultural studies has not radically challenged the status quo. Altogether, and for very different reasons, all the above institutionalized discourses and networks have been complicit in the prominence of nations as a key trope in public discussion, at the expense of broader and older trends in the region’s early modernity and transregional engagement.

The term ‘area studies’ is not a generic or politically neutral reference to the study of regions. Rather, as has been well documented (see Dutton 2002; Emmerson 1984; Heryanto 2002, 2013a; McVey 1995; Rafael 1994; Reynolds 1995), this term has acquired its dominant meanings referring to a specific set of studies of regions, in specific historical periods and contexts. In contrast to the so-called Oriental studies of the colonial period, with major centres in Europe, the dominant meaning of ‘area studies’ refers to the study of the non-West, mainly in English, during much of the Cold War period (with all the political, material and ideological interests, constraints and implications embedded in that war), and with its strongest centres in U.S. universities and think tanks. With the end of the Cold War came a serious decline in the status and legitimacy of area studies.
In post-Cold War years, and with the rise of globalization studies, Asian area studies has frequently become a target of derision. Not only for pos­tulating the integrity of its imagined region as object of study, but also for its preoccupation with single-nation-focused analyses among its prac­titioners (Jackson 2003a, 2003b). While such criticism is welcome among the advocates of area studies, some qualifications would be useful. In area studies scholarship, as well as in the work of its critics alike, ‘nations’ are conceptualized, more frequently than not, in their broad abstraction. The ‘area’ in the label ‘area studies’ is widely understood primarily in terms of a cluster of ostensibly ‘autonomous’ nations. Studying more than one nation is considered conceptually and methodologically ideal, more complex and qualitatively superior to the standard practice of focusing on one nation. The rationales for such discrimination are the presumed value of general knowl­edge instead of the particular. An equally important factor, but too embarrass­ing to be admitted explicitly, in the preference for multinational studies is the ideological interest; ‘multi- or inter-national’ scoped researches would help consolidate and justify the overall rationales or raisons d’être for area studies as distinct and multidisciplinary scholarship in its own right.

Disdain for single-nation-focused studies is even stronger with the growing number of Asian-born persons who went to major centres of Asian studies with a passionate and personal interest in studying their country of birth (Heryanto 2002: 6–7, 10–13). Many came as enrolled students for a university degree; others were employed as lecturers and researchers. The rationale for official censure of such work in a number of degree programmes is based on problematic assumptions that it reflects intellectual laziness or parochial­ism. While such censure is not entirely unjustified, it oversimplifies the mat­ter. Singapore, Malaysia and the northern parts of Indonesia’s Sumatra share deep connections and similarities which date back centuries. Under different historical circumstances, they could easily belong to one and the same nation with solid unity. In contrast, Indonesia is remarkably an ‘improbable’ nation (Pisani 2014), due not merely to its extreme diversity of ethnic, religious and lingual dimensions (which can be easily found in many metropolitan cities around the globe) but, more importantly, also to the huge social gaps and dis­connections among the hundreds of distinct and scattered ethnic communities that inhabit the thousands of islands across the world’s largest archipelagic nation. A comparative study of cultural, linguistic, historical, religious or musical practices in Singapore, Malaysia and northern Sumatra can be a lot less challenging (although it may look ‘transnational’) than one that attempts to compare or seek connections between social life in Sumatra and that in Flores or Papua. One can draw similar cases from huge nations such as China or India and contrast it with small ones such as Timor Leste in the neighbour­hood of other smaller islands of eastern Indonesia.
Criticism of area studies’ disposition towards the particular (i.e. the national) often comes from the conservative elements within traditional disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, which valorise knowledge of the global. Ironically, as Timothy Mitchell shows (2003), the nation-state has also provided the defining framework of many of these traditional disciplines.

As professional, political, and academic knowledge came to see the world as a series of nation-states, it also came to imagine it to consist of a series of discrete national economies, societies, cultures, and histories. The objects that now defined the intellectual territory of the social sciences had borders that coincided with those of the nation-state.

The social sciences ... were built around the nation-state as their obvious but untheorized frame of reference. The study of the economy, unless otherwise specified, referred to the national economy. ... Political science compared ‘political systems’ whose limits were assumed to correspond with the borders of the nation-state: society referred to a system defined by the boundaries of the nation-state; and even culture came to refer most often to a national culture. In each case the nation-state was assumed to define the normal location and extension of social phenomena. (Mitchell 2003: 156, 158)

Cultural studies is but one of many attempts to seek out innovative ways of engaging with the problems of linking the local and the global, the modern and non-modern, Western and non-Western social agencies, histories and ideas. From early on, cultural studies has tried to be sensitive to and engage with specific social relations and practices within specific contexts, in appreciation of the local in the global and vice versa. Characteristic of this work are disclaimers about the limited scope of one’s project. Unsurprisingly, a centrifugal tendency has marked its otherwise transnationalist practice, making it increasingly difficult to make any general statement about cultural studies across the globe (for more on this issue, see Heryanto 2013b).

Before long, in this world of inequity, cultural studies evidently, if inadvertently, became American- or Euro-American-centric. In response, there was a widespread call for the ‘internationalization of cultural studies’ (see Abbas and Erni 2005; Ang and Stratton 1996; Shome 2009; Stratton and Ang 1996). Curiously, this ‘internationalization’ has resulted in new clusters of activities and networks that articulate themselves in terms of national or regional territories: British cultural studies, French cultural studies, American cultural studies, Japanese cultural studies, South Asian cultural studies and so on.

Is there a way out of the national in search for the transnational, one might ask? I suggest that, instead of searching for a way out, it would be worth investigating the ways into the deep and complex interior of the national, in order to rediscover and interrogate the transnational elements, connections
and conflicts at local levels within a nation. Before we pursue this idea in the next section, let me sum up the preceding paragraphs.

A host of material, political and intellectual conditions in the past century converged and led to institutional practices of privileging the national. Such tendency manifests at the centre of analyses and debates among people of various occupations and academic disciplines who do not necessarily agree with each other on many other issues. This focus on the national has been made with a particular conception of the nation as a fairly autonomous entity, at the expense of serious consideration of the sustained networks, connections and conflicts both at subnational and transnational levels. Against such a backdrop, the more recent upsurge in desire for transnational engagements in Asia and in the study of Asia can be appreciated as a backlash or redress of the shortcomings of the preceding decades’ dominant practices.

Incidentally, the serious decline of Cold War-style area studies at the turn of the century coincided with the rise in the economies of select industrialized nations in Asia (followed by hype regarding the ‘Asian Century’). The notion of a trans-Asian connectivity in Asian cultural studies has been particularly appealing to Asia-born and Asia-resident scholars, as it conjures up the spirit of warranted correctives to decades of imbalance in the global production and distribution of, as well as access to, certified, authorized, legitimate or prestigious bodies of knowledge, moral codes and artistic works of and in Asia. A light appears at the end of the tunnel of intellectual, political and artistic practices, which hitherto had marginalized or silenced locally born and bred Asians.

Therefore, in the face of the ‘rise of Asia’ fervour, and renewed interest in trans-Asia connections, a note of caution is necessary. It is necessary not to reduce the new call for ‘trans-Asia connections’ to what has been the staple in international relations studies or global studies: comparative study of two Asian nation-states, or a study on how one Asian country interacts, influences or perceives another. A great number of studies on Korean Wave, Bollywood or J-pop can easily fall under this category. It is important to discontinue the old habit of taking nations as given, as unproblematic and as equal units of some universally understood social collective, or as inherently sovereign entities with fixed identities that can be demarcated in line with a neat geographical boundary. It is critical to recognize the problematic theorization of the national, in order to minimize the possibility of a naïve or simplistic conception of the transnational. Focusing on the colonial and post-colonial Indonesian cases, the next two sections will show that the national has always already been globalized and transnational. These sections will also investigate why the cultural wealth of this national cultural heritage has been systematically suppressed, resulting in the nation’s major amnesia for well over half a century.
COLONIALISM: INTIMATE VIOLENCE

It took a series of extremely violent confrontations for the Dutch forces to create a stable, durable and lucrative colony (East Indies), and as many violent confrontations again for the (Indonesian) nationalists to get rid of foreign rule in the middle of the last century. This violent history is comparable to the Philippine experience of decolonization and is in sharp contrast to the case of Malaysia and Singapore where "the colonial past was ... reinterpreted as "benign," and appreciated as the benefactor who had brought modernity to the new nation" (Chua 2008: 233). However, despite these violent confrontations. Indonesia's independence has not resulted in any radical transformation of the colonial political, social and economic order. To a large extent, the reasons for this continuity can be seen in the seemingly unique style of Dutch colonialism, as detailed below.

Independent Indonesia has been preoccupied with an ambitious determination to assert a self-manufactured authentic identity. Ironically, it does so by the contradictory act of reproducing its colonial legacies and refusing to acknowledge the colonial origins of these legacies. Subscribing faithfully to the official history of the nation, especially since the New Order government (1966-1998) came to power, Indonesians are well trained to imagine that their nation came into existence ex nihilo; 'as if it had given birth to itself' (Winet 2010: 31) from time immemorial. It suffered miserably from a series of foreign invasions before it made a complete break from colonialism by declaring independence in 1945. What actually happened is quite the opposite. The success of the national delusion about its sovereignty, integrity, resilience and autonomy is an index of the effectiveness of the official nationalist propaganda and a denial of critical aspects of the colonial past, including its globalized and trans-Asian experiences as outlined in the earlier section. Even well into the 1950s, just a few years after independence, trans-Asian flows of popular culture were considered a threat; local filmmakers urged the government to impose one of the earliest protectionist policies against the influx of films from Malaysia and the Philippines (Biran 1976).

In comparison with its British, Spanish, Portuguese or American counterparts, the Dutch colonial government did not inflict intense creative destruction upon the vernacular cultures in the colony and take up the mission of imposing a European-derived modernity as an alternative to the existing political and moral order of the native population. Rather, having defeated the native military power and subordinated the existing political power in the colony, the Dutch colonial regime preserved an elaborately styled, but effectively token, authority over the more compliant segments of the native elites, complete with their regalia, and made these elites an extension of the colonial power to exploit their land and subjects.
In contrast to the Philippine experience, we see in what is now called Indonesia many cultural and political legacies that have either developed from, or are assumed to have originated from, precolonial times. In more than a few cases, far from being traditional heritage handed down from the natives’ ancestors, these traditions were, in fact, a recent invention, a product jointly manufactured by the Europeans and the local elite. This collusion persists in present-day Indonesia and continues to evade most public scrutiny. Looking back 200 years, Anderson observes the following:

The fact that the Dutch ended up by co-opting the Javanese ruling class, rather than eliminating it as the British did in Burma, meant a particularly grave fossilization of the Javanese social system, in which ever greater pomp was displayed by the ruling class to conceal the reality of increasing impotence. (Anderson 2006b: 201)

The unique Dutch colonialism in the East Indies grew not only out of a reluctance to spread Western education, culture and language in the colony (Hoffman 1979) but from hostility to the idea for much of the time (Cribb 1999: 9). All of this led to an unusual case in the history of colonialism, whereby the Dutch East Indies was ‘the only case of a large colonial possession in which to the end a non-European language remained a language-of-state’ (Anderson 2006a: 110, fn. 62).

Dutch colonialism operated as a kind of intimate violence, where the colonized class (natives and non-natives alike) was pressured to collaborate with the colonizer (mostly white European, but also local elite) in the reproduction of the former’s own subordination. Like in similar cases elsewhere, this intimate violence sowed its own seed of destruction, among several other things through mass education. It was this colonialism that inadvertently gave birth to the Indonesian nation, its current territory and the version of Malay turned into the national language. Instead of giving due recognition to this historical process—fraught with violence, internal contradictions and the collaboration of the colonized natives—official historiography paints the Dutch and brief Japanese colonialisms largely as temporary interruptions by external forces in the course of the nation’s much older history.

Underestimating the constitutive power of colonialism, and denying them credit for the formation of the nation, the legacies of colonialism are believed to be already over and thus ignored. As Dutch colonialism preserved what appeared to be authentically indigenous traditions and structures from precolonial times, Indonesian nationalists found little to de-Europeanize after the colony has been liberated. What was deemed ‘urgent’ was reviving and regaining the ostensibly precolonial glory, as imagined in colonial and postcolonial times. The native rulers simply supplanted the foreign-looking
elements of social life and state administration while retaining the colonial framework intact.

The legacies of the colonial style of governance found their strongest expression during the New Order government. As the late scholar of the Indonesian political legal system Daniel Lev succinctly argued, both the New Order government and its immediate predecessor (Guided Democracy) ‘were genetically linked to the structure of the colonial state. In this one respect ... the independent state was not merely similar to the colonial state. It was the same state’ (Lev 1985: 72). Despite its formal downfall in 1998, the New Order’s ideology has remained the single most dominating imprint on public life for the first two decades of this century. The New Order was a government that was adamant in advocating a mystified, essentialist and nativist idea of an Indonesian true Self, modelled on an aristocratic 

Java (Foulcher 1990). The New Order propagated a nativist self, based on an irreconcilable dichotomy between the East and the West, and seemingly without the slightest awareness of the extent to which that dichotomy is attributable to Western colonial knowledge, in a way similar to Mahathir’s Malaysian and Lee’s Singaporean propagation of so-called Asian values (Ang and Stratton 1995).

Understandably, in advocating the idea of the nation’s authentic self, stories of past and present hybridity and the service of non-natives must be underplayed, leadership of non-natives must be denied and transnational engagements are deemed undesirable and must necessarily be suppressed. As recently as 2014, during Indonesia’s presidential election, xenophobia was a major feature of all camps, with rival candidates outdoing each other in a bid to display the most significant gesture of animosity towards vaguely defined ‘foreign forces’ in defence of the national interest.

THE GLOBAL IN THE LOCAL: INDONESIA’S CASE

In the preceding discussion, we have seen that various factors (both local and global, scholarly and non-scholarly alike) have contributed to the exuberant spotlight on the national as the most important agent of history and unit of analysis. So forcefully has this perspective prevailed that the nativist notion of a nation’s authenticity has mesmerized the majority of Indonesia’s population and many of its sympathetic observers, local and foreign alike. Such a national-centric perspective has gone stridently, at the expense of two things. First, it overlooks or denies the extremely rich experience of transcolonial and cross-regional exchanges and borrowing in everyday life in these colonies. Second, it also ignores the rapid growth of locals’ fascination with the early modernity that came with new technology and lifestyle from Europe.
Historian Henk Schulte-Nordholt makes the provocative hypothesis that the majority of the indigenous native middle classes in Dutch East Indies "were primarily interested in modernity" (Nordholt 2011: 438), rather than nationalism or the nationalist struggle of independence. The latter, he argued, was a preoccupation of smaller groups of radicals who attracted a disproportionate number of international scholars of Indonesian politics and history. Furthermore, after Indonesia’s independence, the same radical and revolutionary groups were made national heroes by local politicians in their construction of an official history of the nation. Nordholt’s line of argument is of special interest, as it turns the standard historiography of Indonesia on its head, both inside the country and outside. According to Nordholt, for these colonized people, modernity meant an increasingly popular lifestyle, promulgated and widely promoted through advertisements of consumer goods, household appliances and health products from around the world. As the previous discussion has shown, the local population also actively composed and consumed popular cultures which travelled across the region and beyond.

Against such a background, the call for a counter-narrative of trans-Asian engagements and approaches in the scholarly domain presents itself as a breath of fresh air. I wish to conclude this chapter with a brief reminder of what I have hinted above: namely, that trans-Asianization in cultural studies should not be reduced to anything akin to international relations or globalization studies, especially the crude versions of these two studies where ‘nations’ are either taken as the given or entirely wiped out in a new flat world ruled by imperial powers.

One does not need to abandon a focus on the cultural dynamics of one single nation in order to have a close look at the transnational forces at work, because the global and the local are never conceived as entirely separate entities. Therefore, transnational or, more specifically, trans-Asian should not be understood in the narrow sense of contact between two or more (Asian) nations. Deep flows of cultural intercourse from a wide range of directions and points of departure intersect in the heart of Indonesia’s ‘national identity’. A majority of all things widely and indeed rightfully recognized as ‘uniquely Indonesian’ have taken global routes and had a global genealogy from their beginnings. The most prominent examples would include the music genres kerontjong (Mutsaers 2014; Keppy 2008) and dangdut (Frederick 1982; Weintraub 2010), the national language (Anderson 2006b; Goebel 2002), and kebaya dress (Cattoni 2004). Even the very name ‘Indonesia’ is a true testament to its global origin and route. The word was coined by British anthropologist James Logan (1850), popularized by German anthropologist Adolf Bastian (1884) and found its earliest political expression in the name of an Indonesian student association in the Netherlands in 1922.¹
It is not entirely surprising that children of ethnically or culturally mixed parents—particularly the Eurasians and Peranakan Chinese in the colonial period, and Peranakan Indians in contemporary Indonesia—played pivotal roles in the seminal works of modern art and in the entertainment industry. The same ethnically mixed communities, as well as native elites with a strong European education, took the pioneering roles in the earliest formation of anti-colonial consciousness and mass movement. For reasons already discussed above, the role of these people has been largely under-represented and, in some cases, completely erased in public memory and the official history.

Two qualifications are necessary. First, it is important to note that the phenomenon of the global in the local is simultaneously at work with its reverse: the local in the global. Globally flowing cultural genres found historically and spatially bound specific expressions within local scenes. In contemporary Indonesia, localization of the global is well illustrated in music scenes in the case of rap music (Bodden 2005), underground rock (Wallach 2003) and hip-hop. Second, it is equally important to mention that in both cases of the global in the local and vice versa, it is not always a unidirectional cultural flow from the West to the rest with locals only making responses, or from the more economically powerful East Asia to its neighbouring countries, as often widely but uncritically understood in discussions of the Korean Wave.

The case of K-pop and the response by fans in Indonesia underscores the fact that this issue is restricted neither to the old colonial days nor to contemporary cases of Asian encounters with the influx of Euro-American cultural products. The ensuing account is one of many stories from Southeast Asia that betray the familiar account of inter-Asia cultural domination—where cultural products from one economically strong Asian nation (South Korea), often dubbed Korean Wave or Hallyu, prevail in other Asian markets. Such narratives have prompted some analysts to speak of South Korea’s new and effective ‘soft power’, while provoking others to launch an anti-Hallyu campaign (Lee 2009). Upon closer examination, things are much more complex and interesting than they first seem.

At face value, the activities of K-pop fans in Indonesia are barely distinguishable from their counterparts in other countries: flash mob performances in public places such as shopping malls, singing contests in Korean or cover dance contests (where they mimic the outfit, hairstyle and choreography of their favourite groups). What is remarkable, however, about their activities across the region is the size and frequency of their events and the strong agency of their fans in their respective social and political environments. Reporting on her research on Indonesian K-pop fans in 2010, Jung notes:

The fans collaboratively re-create K-pop-related texts and images, then distribute their altered content. ... Covering dance is one of the most common
collaborative fan activities worldwide. The term cover usually means a version of a song sung by an artist different than the original singer. However, in the case of fan activities, cover refers to a version of a song or dance performed by fans. … In Thailand, some of the top cover teams dedicated to mimicking K-pop idol groups have gained YouTube fame and have become minor celebrities themselves. (Jung 2011: 4.2)

These activities, dedicated to particular artists or music genres, were unprecedented in Indonesia, and probably elsewhere. In 2010 alone, ‘over 120 fan-operated K-pop-related events were held, including fan gatherings and Korean pop festivals and concerts’ (Jung 2011: 2.2). The Beatles, Michael Jackson and Michael Bublé have huge fan bases in Indonesia, but none of these groups of fans has organized a series of parties or contests imitating the singing and dancing of their idols in public gatherings, on a regular basis, and then circulated globally a recorded copy of these acts online. This distinction alone is worthy of special discussion among those interested in trans-Asian cultural studies. As suggested below, further examination at the local level reveals more fascinating and important insights about local and gendered agency, which complicate the more general notions of Hallyu-mania or South Korean soft power.

Like elsewhere, in Indonesia the majority of Hallyu fans overwhelmingly are young women. What distinguishes them from their counterparts elsewhere is that these Indonesian young women have embraced Hallyu within specific and highly politicized contexts. It so happened that Hallyu swept across this region at a time when major political turmoil was taking place in Indonesia, characterized, among other things, by Islamization at an unprecedented level, as well as by a renewed and timid tolerance for things associated with the Oriental look or sound.

Shortly before Hallyu caught public attention, Indonesia saw the collapse of the 32-year, brutally repressive regime of the New Order. During most of its reign, the New Order suppressed political Islam and communism. Declared guilty by association, citizens of Chinese descent were stripped of nearly all their civil and political rights due to their presumed associations (biological or cultural) with communists in the People’s Republic of China. Under the state-sanctioned racism, Chinese names for persons, buildings or companies were proscribed, and Chinese characters were declared illegal. In some regions, anti-Chinese zealots within local government offices even prohibited Chinese songs being played and Chinese moon cakes being sold during the lunar New Year. Under such circumstances, anything from East Asia with an Oriental look and sound would be immediately associated, if not equated, with ‘Chineseness’ and would thus be politically suspect, in ways comparable to ‘Muslim’ names and looks, causing alarm for many in the United States and its close allies after 9/11.
Young Muslim women are attracted to Hallyu for various reasons. For many of them, South Korean television drama offers an alternative and appealing model for a new modern lifestyle, characterized by the absence or infrequent number of scenes depicting sex. More importantly, these dramas demonstrate in an engaging fashion the resilience of young female protagonists in pursuing adulthood, career and independence against all odds in family life, workplace and public spaces, as a second-class gender in a rapidly industrializing Asian society with a strong patriarchal culture. In one way or another, many of these television dramas provide an alternative position away from two extreme pressures confronted by these youth in everyday life: first, new and highly demanding piety as advocated by the purists in Muslim circles, and second, the daily pressure and irresistible seduction of individual liberalism in the new climate of lifestyle consumerism and neo-liberalism. Indonesian audiences did not find such solace from other venues, including the domestic cinematic and television products or their Hollywood-style counterparts. These Muslims engaged with local, trans-Asian, national and global issues at the same time.

Indonesia is an example of a fundamentally transnational collective that has been striving to build an authentic identity by denying, forgetting and purging its transnational make-up. Selected global traditions (Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist) are incorporated into the nation’s own heritage with due acknowledgement of their sources. However, other identities and practices (European, liberal, communist, Chinese, Japanese or Korean pop cultures) have been staunchly denied such status and declared ‘foreign’, some dangerously so.

CONCLUDING NOTE

This chapter opened with an assertion that trans-Asian engagement and perspectives in cultural studies have a much longer history than has hitherto been adequately acknowledged. In Southeast Asia, such history has not been accorded due attention in scholarship, in journalistic writings, in the official historiography within nations nor in the public discussion at large. Area studies is complicit with the traditional disciplines of social sciences and humanities, as well as cultural studies, in privileging the nation as a central agent of history and as a key unit of analysis. Focusing on the case of Dutch colonialism and Indonesian postcolony, I have offered some accounts of why this amnesia has prevailed for such an extended period, being a product of the state’s systematic effort in forgetting and purging anything that complicates or undermines the valorization of a nativist historiography.
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and the project of constructing an uncontaminated identity of the nation’s authentic self.

In light of the protracted neglect of the rich history of trans-Asian cultural flows and engagements, and in light of the implied notion of trans-Asianization as a future prospect without precedent, this chapter has dedicated more space to a discussion of the past century than the contemporary. To conclude, I have examined briefly the specific case of Hallyu in Indonesia with two aims. First, I hope it slightly moderates the heavy emphasis on the past. However, more importantly, I wish to underscore the notion of the global in the local, and vice versa. In order to radically challenge the long and dominant paradigm which privileges the national in area studies, cultural studies, social sciences and the humanities, one should not conceptualize trans-Asia by reproducing the reified notion of the national by simply adding a number of ‘nations’ to the equation. Hopefully, further study of trans-Asia better than mainstream analyses in global studies or international relations studies. To examine the working of trans-Asian cultural flows, one does not need to abandon a focus on one single nation, because the latter is always already transnational.

Of late, scholars have questioned how ‘Korean’ the so-called Korean Wave really is (Lee 2009; Lie 2012; Shin 2009). Musically, K-pop deviates from Korean traditions. Physically, top artists have disavowed their ‘Korean’ look by having cosmetic surgery. Most successful K-pop tracks and albums have been composed with English lyrics, in collaboration or consultation with non-Korean citizens, and likewise their choreography on stage or YouTube. One secret of the mega success of K-pop across many regions is precisely that it is not authentically Korean, or any other nationality for that matter. The global exists at the heart of the notionally ‘Korean’ pop culture.

As the above illustration indicates, it would be seriously remiss to examine Indonesian Islamization by bracketing the phenomenon within the boundary of the nation-state’s territory: the New Order’s repression of Islamic politics and the New Order’s downfall, the rise of the middle class or the internal division within Muslim communities. The global ramifications of 9/11 and the U.S.-led coalition of the ‘War on Terror’ upon the domestic political affairs in Indonesia, and the reactions of the Muslim militants, have been well noted elsewhere. However, these factors are barely useful for explaining the fascination of tens of thousands of young Muslim women in this world’s most populated Muslim nation with Hallyu. Their embrace of the globalized Hallyu acquired specific local and global meanings, without compromising their religious piety and identity as modern members of the global Muslim community, or as citizens of the Indonesian nation. And, such practices have a long history, dating back at least a century.
NOTES

1. In 1924, the communists used the term in the name of their political party (the first political party in the colony to do so), and the nationalists followed suit in 1928.

2. Other reports with similar characteristics of defying the simple domination theory come from Thailand, where fans of Hallyu accommodate and remould what they see and hear coming from South Korea to create their own cultural products for their own audiences, some of which became more popular than the original (Käng 2014; Siriyuvasak and Shin 2007).