Review Aihwa Ong's "State versus Islam"

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Executive Summary: Aihwa Ong's "State versus Islam" provides an excellent model for social scientific analysis of disruptive social changes. The author had managed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics among the state, the Islamic resurgence, the Malay identity, womanhood, and family relations. However, there are some minor issues related to nationalism and social agency.

A hubristic impulse might bias people in the 21st century to state they are the ones going through the most dramatic changes in human history. Yet, if we looked at the social changes that are analyzed by area studies scholars in the 20th century, the experience of people might not be that much different. Wallerstein (2004) pointed out in his work on the world-systems theory, how the world in the 20th century transformed beyond people's imagination. Two major changes include: the United State becoming the world's hegemonic power and spreading its liberal economic order throughout the world, and many so-called Third World countries gaining independence and asserting themselves in the global stage. The results are that millions of people had to come to term with the new world order, the new identity of their nation-states, and the new political-economic relations. Area studies in this era can help crystalize how idiographic study of a geographic or cultural area can inform the effects of global trends or events at the local level. Among those studies, there is Aihwa Ong's 1995 article, "State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia," which provides an excellent model for social scientific analysis of disruptive social changes.

The article gives us a glimpse into how the state's neoliberal economic program creates sudden violent transformations in the traditional social structure and identity of a nation. By focusing on the renegotiation of gender relations in Malay society, it helps us make sense of the

competition/negotiation between the Malaysian secular state and Islamic resurgence for different conceptions of Malay identity.

In “*State versus Islam*,” Aihwa Ong detailed how the neoliberalist economic reform of the secular Malaysian state generates tensions and conflicts within the fabric of the traditional identity of the Malay village. She argues the New Economic Policy (NEP), which is designed and executed by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) government in the 1970s to eradicate poverty, “was to have profound social implications for village Malay culture and domestic politics.” (p.163) Figure 1 summarizes the core argument of Aihwa Ong. Both the secular state and Islamic revivalism, the two forms of post-colonial nationalism, are concerned with the control of women sexuality and reproduction, which in turn, defines gender relation, kinship, and family in Malay society. In other words, the negotiation between the secular force of state and the force of resurgent Islam manifests through the “competing images of Malay women and family.” (p.160). These competing forces created a national identity crisis, in which the middle class experienced the strongest sense of moral uncertainty. Finally, this dynamic settled into the middle-class, university-educated Malay women who had come to embrace the Islamic resurgence and negotiate the changing meanings of resurgent Islam within Malay nationalism.

Figure 1: An attempt to capture the core argument Aihwa Ong’s in “State versus Islam.”

The issue of secular Malaysian state and the Islamic resurgence was not new at the time Aihwa Ong conducted her study. Studies on this issue prior to Ong viewed the Islamic resurgence as a strategy of the politically marginalized against the government, however, Ong disagreed with these views and argued that without proper analysis of the gender renegotiation in modern Malay life, and the emphasis on class of the Islamic revivalism, one cannot fully grasp the structural reorganization of Malaysian society. She put forward the ideas that both the state project and the Islamic revivalism must be viewed as two competing forms of nationalism in post-colonial Malaysia. She wrote:

“Challenging these views, I argue that the state project and the Islamic resurgence must be seen as competing forms of postcolonial nationalism that fix upon the Malay family and woman as icons of particular forms of modernity.” (p.161).

Ong’s analysis featured a number of theoretical developments in area studies, postcolonial studies, and sociology in general during 20th century: “official nationalisms” of Benedict Anderson (1992); Partha Chatterjee’s “narrative of community;” “bio-power” of Michel Foucault (1978); James Scott (1985)’s “everyday forms of resistance” of Malay peasant against the state; Marilyn Strathern’s social agency as “how social effects are registered” in the shifting fields of power (1987). Using these theories and concepts, Ong argued that the renegotiation of gender relation was indeed an important feature of post-colonial Malaysian society, which has been largely ignored by scholars in the field. For example, Ong argued that Kahn and Loh (1993)’s *Fragmented vision*’s inadequate treatment of gender relations when trying to explore various versions of postcolonial Malaysian society was a product of male bias. This bias had “reproduced an orientalist view of Asian women, in which, they are only regarded as “sexual objects” and “cheap docile workers” of no political consequences (p.161). Citing examples from France, Singapore, and China, Ong argued that “the political culture of postcolonial societies is often forged in ideological struggles over the concepts of family, gender, and race.” (p.161). Here, the “bio-power” concept developed by Michel Foucault (1978) helps justify why Ong chose to emphasize gender renegotiation instead of peasant politics and electoral struggles in post-colonial Malaysia.

Overall, the theoretical justifications of Ong’s core argument and framework provided in the introduction section were convincing, especially, for the argument that domestic relations must be the focal point when analyzing the restructuring of modern Malaysian society. However, the

idea that “the state project and the Islamic resurgence must be seen as competing forms of postcolonial nationalism” (p.161) was not entirely justified, or at least, concisely defended. Aihwa Ong did mention nationalism in the subsequent analyses of the state’s interventions in Malay peasant society, how this had inspired the rise of Arabization of Malay-Islamic culture, and especially, women were used as the marker of boundary in the state and the Islamic resurgence’s visions of Malaysian modernity. However, such mentions of the nationalism aspect were scattered and almost get lost among the details of the tensions within Malay society, which were generated by the introduction of the New Economic Program, and later by the counteracting force of Islamic revivalism. The issue of nationalism was not addressed in full until the discussion on depeasantization and middle-class women. In my opinion, given post-colonial nationalism was a key feature of Ong’s argument, the article can benefit from making explicit what the nationalist discourses of the state from the beginning; here, a summary table of how the competing nationalist visions for womanhood and family relation can provide much greater clarity. In table 1, I attempt to capture the primary points each side put forth and the tensions they create.

State project’s nationalist vision	Tension created by the state’s project	Islamic resurgence’s vision
Family planning is a good for the nation.	<p>Family planning is anti-Islam.</p> <p>State’s vision encroaches on the Kampung’s men’s exclusive rights to their wives’ sexuality.</p>	<p>Based on an invented tradition, and the creation of Muslim patriarchal domination in both public and domestic spheres.</p> <p>Recovering the umma (social and religious community) to deal with the breakdown of social boundaries.</p>
Higher education, out-migration to work, new work ethics for an industrialized society are good things.	<p>Challenging the local norms for regulating female sexuality and social reproduction.</p> <p>Worry over work vs honorable status.</p>	<p>A new “scared architecture” of sexuality must be created through</p>

The NEP promoted a new concept of female duty: as working daughters who could pull their families out of “backwardness” and as housewives who could inculcate “progressive values in their children.	<p>Ignoring the central role of the Muslim father.</p> <p>Liberation of women create social anxieties.</p> <p>Village men unable to fulfill their duties as fathers and husbands, many felt humiliated to rely on daughters or wives’ income.</p>	<p>borrowing practices-prayer, diet, clothing, and social life- from Islamic history.</p> <p>To control a new women’s assertiveness, Islamic revivalists invoke Islamic tenets about the roles of women: respecting male authority, serve husbands and fathers.</p>
Land reform	Fathers did not have land to pass on to their sons, hence, losing authority.	<p>Implementing rigid separation between male public roles and female domestic ones; emphasis on male rationality (<i>akal</i>) and female eroticism (<i>nafsu</i>).</p>

Table 1: Nationalist visions of the State and the Islamic resurgence and the tensions.

After setting the historical as well as theoretical background to the analysis, Aihwa Ong embarked on providing a complete analysis of the tensions for the Malay identity created by the modernization project of the state and its backlash in the form of Islamic revivalism. It is clear from Ong’s analysis that the government’s promotion of working women, the modern family, and the ideal of a secular housewife was an apparent source of social discontents, as they directly challenged the Islamic claims on a Malay moral identity. Ong was right in pointing out the apparent paradox that many young women, who had enjoyed much of the benefits of the economic liberalization had the adherence to the stricter form of Islamic culture more appealing (p.182). Ong explained, for women in *dakwa* visions, “as wives and mothers, they play a central role in rebuilding and preserving Malay society as part of the larger Islamic family” (p.182). Hence, as a response to the social anxieties and moral uncertainties resulted from modernization, the women found in Islam a more comprehensive system of values, which offers them guidance in the rapidly changing era. Ong concludes the *dakwa* movement effectively create a kind of religious

nationalism, which is deprived of indigenous Malay culture's many attractive features, but instead, is "based on an invented tradition, and the creation of Muslim patriarchal domination in both public and domestic spheres" (p.182).

Clearly, Aihwa Ong had managed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics among the state, the Islamic resurgence, the Malay identity, womanhood, and family relations. However, with regards to the question of women agency, in my opinions, the author did not fully provide a satisfying analysis of how the theory of social agency by Marilyn Strathern could be applied here. Given the overwhelming scope of the paper and how successful the author had managed to defend the core argument, adding the analysis on women agency seems to only provide a distraction. The concept of social agency by Strathern as opposed to individual agency presumed by James Scott should be more thoroughly introduced, unpacked, and discussed in more depths before analyzing the choices faced by Malaysian women in the period after the introduction of New Economic Program. Although I agree with the Aihwa Ong that there should be more nuanced views for what factors constitute a proper understanding of Malay women's responses to both modernization and Islamic revivalism, I believe that this discussion can be dealt with in more depth in another paper, where the philosophical analysis of agency is adequately introduced.

In the end, Ong completed her analysis by analyzing the response of the government to counter the Islamic resurgence. A new "family development" discourse promoted by government-sponsored programs had co-opted many aspects of the *dakwa* movement. The rise of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia did not result in the country became militaristic, nonetheless, a strict form of Islamic culture became a well-integrated part of Malaysian modernizing society, and with that, Malay domination became well-assured. The author finally gave remarks on how the Islamic resurgence had settled on a pervasive and low-key part of urban Malay culture. Women in Malaysia still dressed in long robes and *mini-telekung* (*headcloths*), however, the clothes were more colorful and stylish. Using the body politics language, she wrote:

"As inconsistencies between the *dakwa* political body and the physical body of desire and affluence grew, women's outfits reflected an interesting nexus of religious and fashion consciousness. It is not so much that eroticism is breaking through the *dakwa* body, but rather that the body is being remanaged with a lighter hand." (P.184).

Despite some minor limitations with regards to the lack of clarification of different nationalist visions and women agency, Ong's article has been very influential over the past 25 years. It was cited over 430 times in Google Scholars across disciplines and geographies. For example, the paper was cited recently in a number of interesting works: a book on a social history of women and gender in the modern Middle East (Meriwether, 2018), or on reinventing Chinese tradition (Wu, 2015), or the negotiation of religious space in African American mosque (Prickett, 2015). The influence of "State versus Islam" perhaps owes to the fact that there is something universal about the process of negotiation and renegotiation between modernization and religious inclination through a factor X; in the case of Ong's article, factor X is the female body. In other cases, the factor X can be a tradition (Wu, 2015), or religious architecture (Prickett, 2015), or gender relation (Meriwether, 2018). Aihwa Ong's "State versus Islam" shows that area studies done in the 20th century can offer very valuable lessons for future studies in the 21st century, a time of dizzying social changes ushered by the rise of advanced technology and networking platforms.

As a suggestion, future studies about this negotiation and renegotiation process between old values and new values can explore the dynamics of cultural additivity—a concept developed to examine the interaction of (contradicting) beliefs and values of three great religions: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (Vuong et al., 2018). As Southeast Asia falls well within the influence of these three religions, cultural additivity can be a useful framework to understand the region in the 21st century, where we find vibrant economic development, diverse political orientations, and multifaceted cultural identities. Another afterthought is that although "area studies" is invented in the mid-20th century by the U.S. (Wallerstein, 2014) due to various geopolitical and academic reasons, countries in the area of "area studies" are now capable of producing their own researchers, who are approaching the scholarly standards of the world (Vuong, 2018; Vuong, 2019). Hence, it is now time for scholars in the countries to truly revisit area studies.

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