Development and Disease: The Case of Malaria in Sri Lanka

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Abstract
Malaria control in the tropical world evolved as part of the colonial project of Western Powers from the 19th century onwards. Advances in Western Science were used to justify colonial rule and its territorial expansion as reflected in the development of malariology in Western Centres of Tropical Medicine. Development discourse may be seen as a legacy of colonialism in the postcolonial era in that Western science was further deployed with the blessing and active participation of nationalist elites in the developing world in order to promote rapid economic growth in the tropics and retain the newly independent countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America within the ambit of the western political and ideological influence in the cold war era. The postcolonial development discourse in Sri Lanka centred around reopening of the Dry Zone, identified as the cradle of ancient Sinhala Buddhist civilization, for irrigation development, hydropower generation and colonization of mostly Sinhala peasants in state-sponsored colonization schemes in formerly multi-ethnic spaces and buffer zones. The impact of these policies on the formation and intensification of ethnonationalist rivalries in the country has been explored in many recent studies. Less clearly understood is the impact of these policies on environmental and population shifts and related processes of disease transmission. Malaria eradication employing western antimalarials and vector control measures was seen as a prerequisite for dry zone development, which in turn was identified as an important political goal in newly independent Sri Lanka. Using evidence from Sri Lanka, the presentation questions the widely held view that malaria blocks development in the tropics as well as its corollary, malaria control unblocks development. Infectious tropical diseases such as malaria as well as many of the emerging non-communicable diseases in the third world may be understood as development induced in so far as they are related to environmental impact, population mobility and behavioural change produced by the so-called development processes. This, in turn, calls for a through reexamination of the discourse of development and its relation to disease control. This presentation will draw from the author’s forthcoming book “Decolonization, development and disease: a social history of malaria in Sri Lanka” (London: Orient Blackswan, South Asia Modern History Series).

About the Speaker
Kalinga Tudor Silva holds BA from the University of Peradeniya and PhD from Monash University in Australia. He is a senior professor in Sociology in the University of Peradeniya. This university has been his primary base for the past 35 years. He served as the Executive Director of the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) from 2002 to 2003 and the Executive Director of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies from 2009 to 2011 and the Secretary General of the Asia-Pacific Network of Social Sciences and Health (APNET) from 1998 to 2001. His research areas include social aspects of tropical disease, ethnicity, caste, social inequality, suicide and problems of poverty and development. Currently he is engaged in research on the role of charity and philanthropy in development and challenges of post-war reconstruction in Sri Lanka. Among his most recent publications are "Healing the Wounds: Building Sri Lanka after War" (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies); "Post-war Reconstruction in Sri Lanka: Prospects and Challenges" (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2010); and “Casteless or Caste-blind? Dynamics of Concealed Caste Discrimination, Social Exclusion and Protest in Sri Lanka” (Colombo & Chennai: Kumaran Press, 2009). His latest book “Decolonization, Development and Disease: A Social History of Malaria in Sri Lanka” (London: Orient Blackswan) is currently in press.

Event Details
Friday, 30 August 2013
3.00pm to 4.30pm
Malay Studies Seminar Room
AS7 #04-13
Kent Ridge Campus
National University of Singapore

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