Where Do We Begin? Reclaiming and Reviving Southeast Asia's Shared Histories and Geographies

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Accepting our Cluttered and Constructed Past

'Men make history, and the leading members of the revolutionary generation realised that they were doing so, but they could never have known the history they were making … What in retrospect has the look of a foreordained unfolding of God's will was in reality an improvisational affair in which sheer chance, pure luck – both good and bad – and specific decisions made in the crucible of political crises determined the outcome … If hindsight enhances our appreciation for the solidity and stability of the (historical) legacy, it also blinds us to the stunning improbability of the achievement itself.' (Ellis, 2002: 4–5)

Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*

Today, as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region once again comes within the ambit of larger geopolitical contestations for hegemony and dominance by greater powers, there is much talk of Southeast Asia's shared cultural identity and of ASEAN centrality. But talk of the recovery and reclaiming of Southeast Asia's complex past – replete as it was/is with overlapping multiple histories, geographies, and epistemologies (Andaya, 2010) – is neither new nor unique to our part of the world. There have been many attempts to recover such a complex past before, in many parts of the world, and it has come in a myriad of forms as well – from the philosophy of Africanism or Negritude that was proposed by the likes of Aime Cesaire and Leopold Seghor, to the effort to allow the historical subaltern to speak, or at least regain a voice in history.

Yet as far as our efforts are concerned, we remain beleaguered by the historical bugbear of neat compartmentalisation, casual definition/nomination, and the problem of historical essentialism – where attempts to return to the past are often understood and configured along the lines of a return to **a** past – one that is singularly identifiable, whose historical coordinates are known (and can be plotted, so to speak, on a historical map), and one that is ontologically given, fixed, and already defined.

Should our efforts proceed along these clearly appointed lines, I would argue that we are destined to failure, for all we have done is backdated the ontological thing called Southeast Asia to a time when the term was not even in use; and by doing so made the fatal mistake of historical post-rationalisation. Beginning from the singular standpoint of the immediate present, with the present all around us, we would simply be walking backwards and bringing the present with us as we attempt to revisit the past. As such, we would never leave the present, and would only see the present around us all the time.

One of the reasons why we have been making this mistake time and again is due to the equally simple fact that we ourselves are trapped in a modernity that we can glibly escape from; and this is a modernity that is instrumentalist, economical, rationalist, and which shapes our worldview and perspective as the modern simple-minded people that we really are. To return to a complex past, we would need to jettison much of the conceptual baggage that we carry today, and this is a baggage – philosophical, epistemic, and linguistic – that we have inherited from the colonial era to the modern present.

It would also require a frank admission of the fact that what we today regard as Asia or Southeast Asia is in fact a discursive construct; one that was discursively invented and built upon by countless scholars who imagined Asia as an ontologically given thing that had an identity and presence as if it was an object to behold, study, and speak of. From the moment that Asia was seen as Asia, its invention had begun; and it is that historical process of inventing that also reveals to us to what extent Southeast Asia – as we know it today – was and is a construct that was discursively assembled and thus rendered knowable.

It might, therefore, be useful for us to return to the beginning, and look at how that singular notion of Southeast Asia came about, and how a thing as complex, multifarious, and fluid as that could be brought within the arresting gaze of scholarship. And like many foundational myths, the etymological roots of 'Asia' – as it was seen and defined by Western scholars – was likewise rooted in myths as well.

In 1520, Johannes Boemus published his *Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges et Ritus*, which is regarded as the first work of ethnography produced in the Western world.[1] Translated into other major European languages and re-published throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the work was considered an authoritative account of societies beyond Europe at the time. Having advanced from classical Hellenic sources, Boemus' account of Asia extended it beyond the limits that had been set by Herodotus, for whom Asia had stopped at Anatolia and the Persian empire. That 'Asia' emerges from within the corpus of classical Western mythology is telling, for it means that Asia – though cast and framed as the Other beyond the pale of Europe – was never radically outside the discursive economy of Western mythology. And because the Other is always an 'internal Other' that is bound within the oppositional dialectics of identity and difference, there is never a radically exterior Other that can be known/spoken of. From the outset, Asia is framed in dialectical terms as Europe's constitutive Other, and can only be known thus, in dialectical terms.

As a discursive nominal construct, 'Asia' had meaning to those who began to speak and write of it. In the centuries that followed, Asia's importance and meaningfulness was amplified even further in the writings of Europeans who came to see it as a place that was distinct from Europe, a mirror-inversion and constitutive Other to what Europe was, could be, and was meant to be. This process of defining Asia continued up to the colonial era, when Asia and Asians were reinterpreted and redefined again, to meet the ends of militarised colonial capitalism. Looking at the region of Southeast Asia, we can see that not only was Southeast Asia identified, located, placed, and defined, but so were its constituent parts: Raffles (1817) framed Java and the Javanese as a land of antiquity trapped in a past that had to be conquered in order to be curated and brought into the order of Western historiography; Crawfurd (1829) had framed Burma and the Burmese as a land and people oppressed by Asiatic tyranny and who needed to be rescued by the forces of the British navy and the army of the East India Company; Anderson (1826) in turn presented Sumatra as a land of boundless natural wealth that could be liberated by colonial capitalism; while Borneo was seen and cast as the den of pirates and headhunters, whose potential would only be realised after the arrival of the gunboat. In all these cases, Asia was known and made knowable; but through every act of knowing-naming, the Other was disabled as well.

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[1] So influential was Boemus' work that many other editions were produced, translated into other European languages. In 1555, William Waterman translated the work and had it published under the title *The Fardle of Facions*, and, in 1611, Edward Aston issued a second version under the title *The Manners, Lawes and Customs of all Nations*.

It was during the 19th century that 'Southeast Asia' came into its own, as a distinct unit of analysis; and it cannot be denied that the discursive construction of Southeast Asia as a regional block was part and parcel of the process of colonial capitalism at work. (Noor, 2016) The net result was the creation of a Southeast Asia that was made up of distinct colonies and protectorates that had borders that were fixed and territories that were ostensibly definable (Fifield, 1976). And in the wake of decolonisation in the 1940s–1960s, the Southeast Asia that we know today is made up of postcolonial nation-states whose foundations were laid during the era of Empire.

The dilemma of the modern historian today is trying to find some means through which the complex past can be conjured up and rendered knowable by those who live in the present, without distorting that past and reconfiguring it in terms of the present. Like archeologists who were unable to decipher the writings of the ancient Egyptians before they discovered the Rosetta stone, we are unable to truly and completely understand our past, and appreciate how complex things were, without the benefit of some key that unlocks the mystery of interpretation. But how can we ever do this, if the only tools that we have at our disposal happen to be the tools of Modernity? Or can we only hope to catch glimpses of our complex past, and at best try to imagine the complex world of Southeast Asia that is no longer with us? Pepinsky's question – of how did Southeast Asia become a social fact? – remains as relevant today as it was when it was first raised by earlier scholars (Pepinsky, 2016).

Beginning from the Modern Present

'Without a convenient epiphany, historians are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness, however thorough or revealing their documentation … We are doomed forever, hailing someone who has just gone around the corner and out of earshot.' (Schama, 1991: 320)

Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties*

Let us admit that we are – all of us – modern individuals, who live in a thoroughly modern setting that is in turn shaped and informed by epistemologies and vocabularies that are also modern. Notwithstanding the manner in which we try to celebrate our Southeast Asian identities in terms that are often reductivist, we nonetheless cannot touch that distant world of the premodern past for we can only think of it in such dialectical terms, with the prefix 'pre', 'other', or 'non' attached to it. **The past is always the Other to our present.**

Our modernity makes itself most evident in the way through which we write our modern histories today – almost all of which begin from the starting point of the modern Southeast Asian nation-state, which confirms the fact that we are all inheritors of that epistemology that dates back to Westphalia, modern Europe, and of course colonialism. The ways in which we have internalised the vocabulary and epistemology of Empire is also self-evident in the manner that we accept our boundaries as given, as fixed, and as non-negotiable. In terms of our understanding of who and what we are – as nation-states – we stand on the foundations of the colonial enterprise and are, in so many blatant ways, the inheritors of colonial knowledge and power. It is not a surprise, therefore, that our national histories begin with the foundation of our modern states that themselves emerged from the womb of Empire; that our borders are colonial borders; that our national cultures are pastiches of the tropes and symbols that were in currency in colonial Orientalist discourse (when we were 'studied'), and that our national cultures are derived from the works of colonial authors of the past.

One of the best examples of our own modern-centric approach can be found in the official historical narratives that we weave about ourselves and our respective nations. In the course of my own work as a historian, I have always had an interest in the teaching of history at primary and secondary school level. Yet in the historical curricula that I have looked at – particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and also the Philippines and Thailand – I have always been struck by a common trait: To recount the history of the nation and its people from the moment of independence, with the nation-state occupying the centre stage in the drama of history (Noor, 2012).

Almost all of the schoolbooks that we use to tell the story of ourselves begin with the postcolonial nation-state as the primary actor, and the story of that actor is then backdated to the past. Such national histories, nationalistic as they are, are also populated by heroes and villains, who likewise assume the form of nations readily constituted and presentable as unitary, atomistic entities. And so schoolchildren in Viet Nam may learn of the incursions by China (though to what extent China was an entity that is singular as we understand it today may be disputed). Similarly, the conflicts between the polities and kingdoms of both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia are represented in solid, bold, dualistic terms, marshalling the names of modern present-day states like Burma vs. Thailand, Cambodia vs. Thailand, in an effort to frame neat and simple dichotomies.

In all these cases, we assume that these entities were as solid, distinct, and particular in the past as they may seem to us today. Yet we forget that these instances of conflict, migration, settlement, and movement took place at a time when Southeast Asians did not see or know themselves as 'Malaysians', 'Indonesians', 'Filipinos', or even as

'Southeast Asians'; and that they occurred at a time when the passport and the modern boundary were distant concepts that had yet to make their appearance in the world. And yet the state is now accepted as inevitable, as argued by Steinberg (1985) and Taylor (1987), and it would be futile to deny the fact that Southeast Asian politics and statecraft today is managed primarily by the state, which is the only actor on the stage of regional politics (Steinberg, 1987). And so how can we ever reactivate a memory of a Southeast Asia that exceeds the epistemic confines of the nation-state, and can we ever hope to reconnect with a premodern pre-state Southeast Asia where identities were more fluid and shared?

That the vocabularies and epistemologies of Modernity and modern governance continue to inform us, and continue to frame Southeast Asia and Southeast Asians in terms that are definitive and fixed, can be seen everywhere: Their workings can be seen in our political economies, our statecraft, our modes of governance, and the ways through which we understand, present, and represent ourselves. Traces of this vocabulary are found all around us, from our tourist ads – where invariably Southeast Asia can only be presented in terms exotic – to our history books – where the postcolonial nation-state takes centre stage as the primary (and often only) actor on the stage of history, and our histories are invariably national histories cast and written in a distinctly Westphalian mould.

One of the reasons why we have not been able to escape this modern vocabulary is because the very tools of analysis and description that we use are themselves **modern**. And the way that our histories, sociological and anthropological research, cultural studies, etc. today tell the history of Asia is often a modern recounting of the tale. Our research – much of it analytically and methodologically sound and bona fide – is nonetheless **modern** research, and consequently reveals the workings of modernity at work. This is true of some of the best works on Asia we have seen since the post-war era, and works like Steinberg's (ed.) (1987) *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* come to mind. Thorough though the scholars of that edited work were recounting the history of Southeast Asia, they were nevertheless working within the parameters of nation-states as ontologically given entities that were/are clear and distinct. The history of Southeast Asia that we find in Steinberg's edited work is one that traces the development of Southeast Asia to the era of nation-states, but one that also compartmentalises the criss-crossing histories, geographies, and cosmologies of the peoples of the region within set political borders; and as a result – driven as it was by a teleology – the work leads us 'naturally' to the modern era of nation-states while inadvertently relegating to the silenced margins the communities that straddled borders, communities without borders, and those communities that might have been.

In fields such as International Relations and Political Theory (both of which impacted upon Area Studies and Asian Studies in so many ways), states, borders, and territories (both terrestrial and maritime) were, and remain, ontologically given things that are deemed valid objects of analysis. And it is in those domains that we see 'Asia' well and truly fixed as an ontological object that is identifiable and locatable, notwithstanding the discursive construction that went into the idea of Asia itself.

At the same time, scholars who reside in other domains of the humanities have grown increasingly concerned and critical about the manner through which Asia has been nominated, labelled, and categorised, and historians in particular have gone to great lengths to show how Asia's location (as a discursive construct) has never been an accidental or innocent one. Awareness of the fact that the framing and labelling of Asia in terms that are exotic, strange, alluring, etc. has always been part and parcel of the dialectics of naming where Asia was named by others, we have also seen attempts by scholars to reverse or overturn the violent hierarchies that have located Asia and Asians in a negative position, as the constitutive Other to the West/universal norm. Some of these attempts, however, have led to a mere overturning of violent hierarchies without ending those hierarchies instead; and have come in the forms of nativist-essentialist scholarship that extols Asian identities as positive (such as the 'Asian values' debate of the 1980s) while keeping the logic of binary oppositions intact. On a personal note, I would like to state clearly that in my opinion such strategies do not work, and in fact do a disservice to scholarship in the long run; for such projects have often led to the production of self-serving and self-referential nationalist narratives that are reductivist in nature, and where everything Asian is seen as positive and everything Western is cast in a negative light. It is not an external Other that Southeast Asia needs in order to know and define itself, but rather a recognition of the Others within, and the acceptance of the fact that these Others are always **our** Others – the constitutive Other that makes us what we are.

Looking for the Blind Spots in our Regional History

Granted that we cannot simply step out of the discursive economy of modernity, we can still interrogate it from within and perhaps even try to upset some of forms of binary logic we see at work there. Understanding and appreciating the fact that what constitutes our identities (ethnic, national, regional) are **processes** – rather than things – is the first step to accepting the constructed character of our region's identity, which was imagined and discursively assembled, as Anderson (1983) had so eloquently argued. It entails also having to understand that while Southeast Asia – even as a political construct – undoubtedly exists, there are also other ways to imagine our region and understand how other individuals feel a sense of belonging to it.

That we in ASEAN need to do this today is apparent in the way that we are urgently trying to revive a sense of common Southeast Asian identity, and to emphasise the concept of ASEAN centrality and neutrality. But this can only happen, I would argue, when we take into account that within this vast network of nation-states that spans a geographical region larger than Western Europe there are millions of ASEAN citizens for whom ASEAN remains a distant concept, floating aloft on the higher register of interstate, intergovernmental discourse.

Meanwhile, on the ground level there are millions of citizens across ASEAN who do in fact have a sense of loyalty, attachment, and belonging to their respective corners of ASEAN, but whose life experiences have never entered into the discussions that are held on a government-to-government level. Connecting these two zones of cultural-economic life and discursive activity is the task of both states and non-state actors, and there are some steps that we can take to remedy this sense of disconnect now:

Firstly, when trying to make sense of a fluid, overlapping ASEAN region we need to give more emphasis on the areas where such overlaps actually take place: the border zones that happen to be the grey zones between states. So far some substantial work has been done in this area, with several governments in ASEAN laying emphasis on cross-border prosperity zones and zones of development. But these efforts have often been directed by the powers-that-be that happen to be based in the political capitals of the respective states themselves. Scholars who work on and along these fluid grey zones, on the other hand, would testify to the extraordinary levels of cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and ease of engagement that is evident in the life and work cycles of the people who live there. For it is along the border that the 'foreign Other' is most real, and where people have to make cross-border contact on a regular basis in order to live and prosper. In the course of my own fieldwork in many border zones in the ASEAN region, I have noted the high instance of cross-border marriages, cross-border extended families, modes of kinship that go beyond national identities, and a corresponding decline in nationalist fervour. For it is the border communities who see the foreign Other close up, on a daily basis, and who recognise the Other as the same. At a time when some parts of the region are experiencing the phenomenon of growing ethno-hyper-nationalism that seeks to identify the Other (any Other for that matter) as the enemy, the experience of borderland communities whose sense of identity is not always predicated on oppositional dialectics is not only instructive, but may be crucial to temper the nationalist rhetoric of violent populist groups.

This form of empathy across borders is something that I have seen myself, close-up, in the course of fieldwork along the Cambodia–Thai, Myanmar–Bangladesh, and Cambodia–China border zones. Contrary to the manner in which Thai–Cambodian

relations were depicted by the media at the height of the crisis involving contesting claims on the Preah Vihear temple along the border, the mood along the border zone itself was calm, and I encountered Thais and Cambodians on both sides of the border who did not regard their neighbours as the enemy. By contrast, much of the anti-foreign rhetoric of the time was engineered in the political capitals of both countries, by nationalist-populist groups that did not live along the borders themselves.

Secondly, there is a need for scholars who work in such areas to work closer with policymakers (and to be engaged by policymakers in turn) so that the impact of their research can and will have relevance in the domain of policymaking as well. Thus far there have been many scholars who have studied such liminal domains and made it their primary areas of research, but sadly the impact of their work and findings have been confined mainly to the humanities and social sciences in academia. Yet the insights gained from such research – when looking at how narrow sectarian nationalism has less appeal to communities who reside by the fringes for example – can have many important implications for how modern states see and conduct themselves in the area of interstate relations.

Thirdly, when looking at how borderland communities challenge the notion of solid state boundaries it is equally important to look at how nations can exist across states, and to examine the important role that transnational diasporas play in the process of nation building. In our region there are many communities that can be identified as mobile nations that cross boundaries: The Hmong who straddle the boundaries of modern-day Viet Nam and Cambodia; the Dayaks communities that straddle the border between Malaysia and Kalimantan Indonesia, etc. There are in fact 'nations within nations' and though within the context of the respective nation-states that they belong to they are often subsumed under the category of sub-groups and ethnic minorities, their ground level lived experiences on a daily basis point to the enduring ability of peoples and communities in Southeast Asia today to maintain multiple identities and loyalties (both ethnic-communal and state citizenship) at the same time, without the loss of identity. In the manner in which these communities straddle borders that are political–national, they also remind us of how territoriality is not always seen in exclusive terms by the communities who reside and work in such areas.

My own research on and amongst the Dayak communities in both Sarawak (Malaysia) and Kalimantan (Indonesia) has shown me that these communities continue to have a strong sense of collective cultural-linguistic identity, despite the fact that they may belong to two different nation-states. In the course of my fieldwork interviews, I have never personally encountered any Dayak interviewees who expressed any sense of uneasiness or inability to reconcile their cultural-linguistic identity with their national identities.

Fourthly, while speaking of the need to understand different notions of terrestrial territory we should also not forget Southeast Asia's maritime past and give equal attention to the mobile maritime diasporas that remain on the region's maritime seascape. The lived experiences of itinerant maritime communities such as the Orang Laut, Bajo Laut, Suluks, Illanuns, and other maritime communities further complexify our understanding of what constitutes maritime territory and national waters, and their lived experiences at sea level provide us with an alternative way of understanding what makes a body of water part of a nation's identity and territory too.

In the course of my research on and amongst the seafaring communities who live in the maritime grey zone between Southern Philippines, Sabah (East Malaysia), East Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, I was struck by how communities like the Bajao Laut have multiple accounts of their origins, and regard the sea as their common home. Such communities may be divided along political boundaries, and members of such communities may belong to different nation-states, but once again they demonstrate the ability of ASEAN citizens to have a sense of common belonging and shared territory that is not exclusive to others. Surely these are lessons that can be taught to other land bound communities in ASEAN, and lessons that can show us how to cope with the fluid global world we live in today.

And finally, it is also about time that we in ASEAN take stock of the achievements of ASEAN thus far and take note of one significant (but under-reported and under-studied) aspect of ASEAN identity today, which is the phenomenon of inter-ASEAN marriages and families. As ASEAN integration proceeds along its own appointed route and pace, it cannot be denied that one of the drivers of ASEAN integration – at the ground level, again – has been the communicative infrastructure that has been put in place. This means that via cheap flights, better road and rail transport, and better maritime communication, there are more ASEAN citizens travelling across the region, which has contributed to more and more marriages between ASEAN citizens. The phenomenon of the 'ASEAN couple/family' is a development that needs to be studied systematically and in more analytical details, for these are the forerunners to any sense of ASEAN community that we can imagine in the future. The fact that such families bring together citizens of different ASEAN states means that in time a generation of younger ASEAN citizens will emerge, who have grown up in the context of 'ASEAN families' and for whom questions of multiple cultural-linguistic backgrounds, different nationalities, etc. are non-issues which seem mundane and ordinary.

The phenomenon of ASEAN families today reminds us of an earlier era in Asian history where the rulers of different polities would seal their alliances via marriage between royals and nobles. Today the same is happening but on a much bigger scale than ever thought imaginable. The fact that inter-ASEAN marriages are a reality today also means that a sense of ASEAN belonging is being planted in a very organic manner, where ASEAN is no longer a distant concept but a reality that one encounters at home, in the living room, and at the dinner table. The potential that this has to bring about genuine, organic inter-communal understanding and as a means of conflict prevention surely cannot be underestimated.

By way of concluding, allow me to restate the premise of this paper, which is that any attempt to valorise and/or revisit the premodern past of Southeast Asia can only be done through the lens of the present and contemporary; and that as a result we should not fall into the multiple traps of an unreconstructed nostalgia, simplistic essentialism, or the notion that the past can somehow be brought back to life in its original form. We exist in the present, in a modern-day Southeast Asia where ASEAN is a reality, as are the states that comprise it. However, being located as we are in the modern present, and cognisant of the modernity of our political vocabularies and epistemologies, we should also be aware of the blind spots in our modern, state-centric understanding of the world – which often renders marginal and silent other alternative world views, lived socio-economic-cultural realities, and modes of identity and belonging, for millions of Southeast Asians to whom ASEAN may be a distant, or even irrelevant concept. Appreciating the fact that we live in a complex Southeast Asian socio-cultural-economic world where there are other ways of living, trading, moving, and interacting is crucial for us to fully appreciate the fact that Southeast Asia means many different things to many different people. As such, if ASEAN is to retain its relevance well into the future, it would also be necessary for ASEAN policymakers, planners, and technocrats to be aware of these multiple realities, which have been studied and brought to life by those whose work has been in the humanities and social sciences. Accepting the plurality, hybridity, and fluidity of ASEAN is not merely the task of the historian, for these instances of complexity are not confined to the past, but remain with us today. And as we study and recognise these instances of fluidity and hybridity in the present, we are reminded that the complex world of Southeast Asia long ago may have receded into the background of history, but complexity remains with us still, pregnant with meaning and productive potential.

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