

ERIA Discussion Paper Series

**Shared Cultures and Shared Geography:
Can There Ever Be a Sense of Common
ASEAN Identity and Awareness?**

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Abstract: *This paper looks at the state of identity politics in Southeast Asia today, and focuses on how the postcolonial nation-states of the ASEAN region have been trapped by the somewhat exclusive narratives of national history, as written by the first generation of postcolonial historians of the 1950s/60s. However, it is argued that such narrow national narratives overlook the fact that Southeast Asia has always been a region characterised by fluidity and movement, and where identities – of individuals, communities, and nations – were seldom fixed. For there to be a deeper understanding and appreciation of Southeast Asian identity, a more comprehensive and less exclusive approach needs to be taken in the writing of history which takes off from the premise that the region was always a fluid continuum and that societal development never takes on a linear trajectory. The chapter calls for a different way of understanding Southeast Asian identity that accepts hybridity and complexity as the attendant realities of social life, anywhere.*

Keywords: ASEAN, Southeast Asian history, precolonial Southeast Asia, nationalism and national identity.

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1. The Burden of National Histories and National Identities: Living in the Shadow of the Modern Nation State

All of us today are modern individuals who live as modern citizens of modern nation states that in turn exist in the modern era. Modernity informs us in almost every aspect of our daily lives, in the manner that impacts our worldviews, belief systems, values, and epistemologies. As Hegel might put it, we cannot escape our own historicity, our location at this specific juncture of history and modernity, and we are thus not merely actors and agents on the stage of human agency, but also the products and outcomes of historical processes that define us.

It is against that broader context that we look at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) today, which itself is an entirely modern construct that was put together at the behest of, and through the active participation of nation states and their respective governments. The first working premise of this paper is that ASEAN is and has always been a construct, and that there is no reason why it should exist, or assume the shape and form that it does today. Though there remains the tendency to speak of ASEAN as a given reality – a tendency made easier by the concrete, tangible presence of ASEAN in the form of buildings, structures, and symbols that are sensible – the artificiality and constructed nature of the thing-in-itself has to be emphasised time and again by scholars who write about it. Ontologically, ASEAN has no essentialist-reductivist basis to it; in every sense it is an abstract construct that was put together by deliberate agency. History did not determine its necessary genesis, and without the active agency to keep it together and sustain it, it is an idea that can dissipate instantaneously.

In terms of the genealogy of ideas, ASEAN was in turn founded on another abstract construct that likewise had no essential basis to it, namely the notion of Southeast Asia – a concept that came about in the mid-20th century as a result of geopolitical and geostrategic calculations and which had no organic basis to it. Layer upon layer of abstractions have contributed to our sense of Southeast Asia today and our sense of what such a Southeast Asian community may look like. But it should be noted from the outset that we are approaching this abstract construct from the perspective of modern day subjects who are ourselves shaped by modernity; one can

ask the hypothetical question of whether a person of the 16th century would even be able to make sense of such a thing like ASEAN from an earlier historical perspective.

1.1. The Community to Come

As we approach the deadline for the creation of the ASEAN Economic Community, policymakers and technocrats are preparing the way for further integration of the economies and societies of the region, and already there are signs that the state-centric mindset of the recent past is being discarded in favour of a new regional sensibility and outlook.

Some of the projects that are being contemplated and some of which have been initiated are indeed mind-boggling in the manner that they will effectively lead to a radically new understanding of state identity and national belonging. The communicative infrastructure that will eventually connect Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore – not least the sophisticated high-speed rail link between Singapore and Peninsula Malaysia – will effectively collapse time and space and render national boundaries less relevant, if not totally obsolete in the years and decades to follow. With this may arise a radical new sense of identity and belonging amongst the citizens of the aforementioned countries, when Singaporeans and Malaysians will be crossing borders at unprecedented speed and frequency; this tells us something about the level of comfort and confidence that these countries feel towards themselves and each other.

Yet at the same time the region is also home to a wide and complex range of disputes that can sometimes border on the surreal and primordial. Over the past decade, the countries of Southeast Asia have argued and quarrelled over things as trivial as cuisine, music, pop culture, monuments, and material culture like batik. Despite their proximity to each other, it is equally evident that there continues to exist pockets of distrust and animosity in some quarters, and sensitivity levels that can be high when they touch on issues and themes that are deemed vital to the preservation of identity.

The upshot of this is that geographical proximity does not entail better understanding, familiarity, or comfort (in the face of alterity and difference) at close quarters; the reasons for this are many.

Firstly, despite the seemingly permanent and fixed character of geography and the fact that the land and sea features of the Southeast Asian archipelago have not changed

very much over the past two thousand years, the polities that inhabit the area have. And here we are not speaking of the rise and fall of polities, but rather a radical paradigm shift in terms of the *sort* of polity that arises in this part of the world. With the advent of colonisation and the period of western colonial rule, the pre-modern native king and/or raja-centred polities of the past are all but redundant now. Southeast Asia has always witnessed the rise of some trading kingdoms and the demise of others, but from the 19th century to the present the region has witnessed the emergence and rise of the modern nation state, with all the attendant features of modernity: the fixed border, the sense of exclusive and singular citizenship, the centralised governmental-administrative-bureaucratic complex. The rocks and rivers, valleys and fields of Southeast Asia have not changed: *we have*, and we have now become modern citizen-subjects living in the age of modern nation states.

Secondly, this major change has not only occurred on an institutional level but also on the deeper epistemic paradigmatic level amongst millions of Southeast Asians. Notwithstanding the lingering presence of tropes, themes, and metaphors of the past – that are often culled by politicians and social movements alike whenever there is a need to inject some degree of historical and/or cultural authenticity to their claims and demands – the fact is that in terms of statecraft and governance, the region and its peoples have now moved to the modern era, informed by modern conceptions and ideas. Where gods once walked the earth in Southeast Asia, in our desacralized times their footsteps have been erased by technocrats and engineers instead. The modern sensibility that informs governance today is manifest in the manner in which modern day Southeast Asian politicians and technocrats believe in the creed of state-building, national planning, capital-driven development, territorial management, and the policing of borders, as things that are both mundane and doable, and with no recourse to theology or metaphysics.

1.2. No Escaping the State

The third observation follows from the previous two. As we live in a modern world where the nation state has become the dominant player in the domain of international relations, and there is no escape from the totalising claims and grasp of the state, any attempt on our part to appraise and appreciate our past necessarily begins from the standpoint of the present, where the state is equally present and informs our attempts to grapple with the complex question of identity. There is no radically exterior point outside the logic of the state today, and even in the few and rare instances of communities that attempt to resist the hegemonic logic of modern state-craft and nation-building, they exist as counterfactual examples still caught in the same dialectics of difference, as ‘alternatives’ to the dominant paradigm.

Historians today may be able to reconstruct the premodern era where the state was absent, and where Asia was a fluid region without borders, where fluidity and hybridity were the norm. But even in doing so, we cannot place ourselves in an entirely different historical context where the epistemology of the past can somehow be resurrected as a whole, and/or adopt a vocabulary of the past (which we actually only understand from the perspective of the present). K.N. Chaudhuri’s impressive account of Asia before the age of European expansion, for instance, provides us with many examples of what the Asia of the past *may* have looked like, but here again this impressive work invites us to appreciate the past from the standpoint of the present.

In the case of Southeast Asia, our task is complicated by the fact that there exists no common sense of ASEAN or Southeast Asian collective identity that transcends the political borders of present day states. To begin, there is no common history textbook or history curriculum that truly captures the manifold overlaps and continuities in Southeast Asian history, or which reflects the manner in which many communities that exist in the region today are really the net result of centuries of intermingling, overlapping, and hybridity.

This was partly the result of the first generation of postcolonial historians of the 1940s and 1950s, who in their haste to reclaim their national histories, also foregrounded and centralised the role and place of the nation state in recounting the past. Note how in every country in Southeast Asia today schools teach *national histories rather than regional history*, and how in the process of doing so they

immediately foreground the nation state as the primary actor in historical development. This has led us to the anomalies and contradictions that have become commonplace everywhere in the ASEAN region. The official national history of country A places country A at the centre of historical development, and backdates that history to a time when even the name of country A did not exist. (It is incorrect, for instance to state that the history of Indonesia dates back to the Majapahit or Mataram era, as the people of Majapahit or Mataram were certainly not labouring with a future Indonesia in mind, nor were they remotely aware that centuries ahead the archipelago would be united under the rubric of a centralised republic. This is equally true of the histories of all the countries of the region, and is one of the most common errors found in the recounting of national histories in most countries.)

And yet we cannot fault the historians of the 1940s and 1950s as they were the pioneering generation of native historians who in all probability, felt the urgent need to reclaim the native state from the clutches of western colonial rule. Being themselves first generation citizens of newly minted independent native states, their belief in the primacy and importance of the state as the tool that would lead the way in empowerment and emancipation is something that can be read off their pages, as with their optimism for the future. Yet in the process of doing so, this first generation of postcolonial historians also committed the fatal error of accepting the borders of Southeast Asia as a given – despite the fact that almost all the political borders of ASEAN today are the result of the colonial encounter – as well as the notion of the nation state as a fixed, identifiable entity with distinct national features and characteristics. In the course of doing so, elements of material culture, popular symbols, normative cultural practices, and belief systems were likewise adopted as part of the national repertoire and consigned to the place of national cultural identity and heritage. Almost every country in the ASEAN region now boasts of having a national heritage and culture board, and almost every country has a department or ministry that promotes this fixed and identifiable national culture.

1.3. When States appropriate National Histories

The state's appropriation of culture and history as national concerns leads to the related problem of how and when states appropriate history to pursue national agendas. This has often resulted in situations where the official national histories of states tend to foreground certain majoritarian interests, sometimes at the expense of diversity and complexity in their own societies too. Furthermore, it erases the dynamic process of societal development and it can also deny the fact that cultures and civilisations are the net result of interaction between ordinary human agents and actors, often without the state playing a decisive role.

Complicating matters further in the ASEAN region is that some national histories also tend to highlight instances of political contestation and conflict between kingdoms and polities of the premodern and precolonial era: though the historian might insist that the facts relating to wars of old are crucial in the understanding of the present, my concern here is how old conflicts from the past can and sometimes are used to justify hyper-nationalist agendas that can lead to inter-state rivalry. (In this respect some revisionist attempts at reappraising the past has happened in some cases, with positive results. Indonesia's official history, for instance, has revisited the Konfrontasi period between Malaysia and Indonesia, and today's history books are more nuanced and objective in their analysis of the event.)

What is missing from some of these nationalist accounts of conflict and rivalry in the past is the equally important emphasis on the extent of cooperation and active codependency between societies and polities in the past as well. This is partly due, again, to the manner in which contemporary national histories take off from the starting point of the presently constituted nation state, and thus cannot accommodate other non-state actors – such as merchants, migrants, settlers, and their activity – as factors in the historical development process. Thus, what is required is a fuller picture of Southeast Asian history that presents the region as a whole as a network of interrelated and mutually dependent communities that also worked together. There is no need to deny the fact that the polities and kingdoms of Southeast Asia have known bitter rivalry in the premodern era, but this ought to be supplemented with an equally frank and detailed account of how centuries of cooperation, trade, and mutual exchange and dialogue have helped to create the complex and plural region that we know today. In

short, history does not always have to focus on wars and conflict to give nations a sense of identity, for if that were the case, then we will be stuck in the situation where all identities (national, communal, individual) can only be understood and framed in the context of oppositional dialectics where the understanding of ‘we’ is framed as ‘not them/the other’.

2. Going Back to a Shared, Hybrid, and Fuzzy Past: Can We Moderns Be Messy?

Policymakers and technocrats are not always able to live with fuzzy borders and messed up identities, but the fact is that the world is a messy place.

Southeast Asia is home to some of the messiest communities in the world, and long before the arrival and installation of the impressive communicative and logistical infrastructure that now spans the region, long before the advent of cheap airline travel that has increased mobility for millions, long before the term ‘globalisation’ was coined, the region was as global as globalisation gets. Traces of this natural, organic global contact and interchange can still be seen all over the Southeast Asian region today. The region is home to many diasporic, migrant, and nomadic communities that transcend political borders in the most casual manner: the Hmongs who live between Viet Nam, Lao PDR, and Cambodia, the Bajo Laut sea nomads whose homeland is the sea and who cross between Sulawesi and Kalimantan (Indonesia), Sabah (Malaysia), and Mindanao and Sulu (Philippines), the Dayaks who straddle the border between Indonesian Kalimantan (Indonesia) and Sarawak (Malaysia), amongst others. For millions of ordinary Southeast Asians, multiple identities and multiple belongings are not some postmodern abstraction to be indulged for the sake of intellectual curiosity, but a living reality which is meaningful and tangible in their daily lives.

The question that needs to be addressed, therefore, is this. Acknowledging the inter-connected, fluid, and hybrid realities of Southeast Asia’s past is something that most academics – historians, in particular – have no problems doing; but how can this past be somehow remembered, resurrected, and rendered meaningful and relevant in the present day context, as a means of socialising the general public across the region

and reawakening an interest and awareness of our interconnected past and common sense of shared belonging to the region as the common homeland for all? In other words, how can the past be made relevant in the present, and how can it be used to provide counterfactual models and alternatives for the mode of ASEAN integration that we are seeing today?

Additionally, we would argue that in the process of revamping and reformulating the school curricula in the respective national education systems across the ASEAN region today, the following considerations should be taken into account.

Firstly, while accepting and agreeing with the premise that the objective of any and all national education systems should be to provide the students of any nation with a comprehensive and useful education that would prepare them for life in the working environment after graduation, it should also be emphasised that in the decades to come the notion of a single-track education-to-work life pattern will be challenged. The days when a child born in country A will go to school in country A, get a job in country A, meet and marry a spouse in country A, work and retire in country A may soon come to an end – particularly for those up-and-coming young professionals for whom the region will be their home and workplace. A Singaporean youth may, in future, be educated in Singapore, then marry an Indonesian, work in Malaysia, and retire in Thailand. Present-day developments, coupled with the growing pervasive communicative and logistical infrastructure that we are putting in place, has now made it possible for millions of professional ASEAN citizens to live such lives, and such occupational and geographical mobility is no longer the exclusive right of the superrich and well-connected.

Secondly, while accepting that there is indeed a need for a national history curriculum for any/all nations that is an important component of nation-building and citizenship formation, we would argue that such national histories can and should also be supplemented with an equally detailed, wide and inclusive appreciation of the region's history as well, to situate all the nation states of Southeast Asia in the broader context of a region that has been historically linked through trade, migration and settlement, and where in the past identities were complex, multiple, and overlapping. This ought to remind all students from an early age, that the formation of their respective nation states have always been a contingent and historical process, and that

individual state formation has taken place against the broader context of regional development.

Thirdly, in the process of reminding and teaching all Southeast Asian students of their shared regional history and how the region has emerged as a result of movement, migration, and settlement, it needs to be emphasised again that ‘national cultures’ are never *sui generis*, emerging *ex nihilo* out of a historical vacuum. This is to foreclose the possibility of our common regional culture being claimed by specific nations exclusively and to avoid the pitfall of ascribing exclusive national identities to things that are the result of common contact and exchange across the region. There is the tendency today for national history books to foreground and claim certain aspects of material culture, social norms, and cultural practices as being ‘exclusive’ national concerns, akin to copyrighting products. Yet when we look at how the material culture and cultural norms of Southeast Asia have emerged over the past few centuries, we can see that many of these objects and/or practices are really the result of cultures and peoples interacting with one another, and in the process blending different forms of material culture or cultural praxis to create new and novel objects and/or forms. This dynamic has been lost in the monological retelling of national histories, but can be overcome if we constantly emphasise the dynamic and evolutionary nature of cultural production.

Fourthly, such a broad and inclusive approach to the teaching of history – which includes an awareness of the geographical proximity of ASEAN countries – hopefully should also have a long-term impact on how we think about national cultures and national heritage. There is, at present, the tendency of states all over the world to grasp and dominate the public domain of cultural praxis for the sake of identifying ‘national cultures’ and ‘national heritage’, which in turn are often used in the promotion of national identity as a component of soft power politics. In the process of doing so, there is often the twofold tendency to privilege and prioritise dominant majority cultures and to silence or marginalize minority cultural voices in their respective countries. Furthermore, in the process of the state appropriating culture as a tool of soft power diplomacy, such national cultures soon become ossified, essentialised, and reduced in a simplistic manner. Accepting our common hybrid past in a fluid region may be one way to emphasise that while national cultures do exist – in aggregate form

– they are not homogenous, simple, or static, but are complex and dynamic. This may also mitigate the tendency of some states and societies to make exclusive and essentialist claims on some forms of culture as parts of a more exclusive ethno-nationalist agenda.

In summing up, our recommendations are:

- The respective states of ASEAN ought to supplement and/or complement their respective national history curricula with a wider, more nuanced, and more inclusive account of regional history.
- In the teaching of geography, it is important to note the patterns of movement, trade, migration, and settlement that have shaped the human geography of the ASEAN region.
- A more complex, inclusive, and dynamic account of the historical development of the Southeast Asian region will remind us of the shared cultural-linguistic heritage that is the common theme against which ASEAN today has emerged.
- Accompanying this has to be a concerted effort on the part of educationists to debunk notions of cultural exclusiveness and uniqueness in the ASEAN region, and a sustained effort to note, emphasise, and value our shared cultural past that was partly the result of the socio-geographical realities of the ASEAN region.
- The education systems of ASEAN should also emphasise that long before the creation of ASEAN, Southeast Asian integration and cooperation was already in existence, and that it was made real as a result of mundane people-to-people contact, interaction, and mutual dependency and cooperation.
- The net result would be an awareness of our common shared historical and cultural roots, and the sense that globalisation is not a new challenge or threat to the present generation of ASEAN citizens. If anything, the advent of the ASEAN Economic Community marks a return to Southeast Asia's past and reconnects us to a region that was once fluid, mobile, porous, and hybrid, and where communities and nations were able to live in a complex world with multiple, sometimes overlapping identities.

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