Bonds that Bind

Shared Historical and Sociocultural Characteristics of Southeast Asia*

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[*Abstract*]

The region between mainland China on the east and the Indian sub-continent on the west is referred to as Southeast Asia since the conclusion of the Pacific War (1941-1945). As a region, Southeast Asia appears as a hodgepodge of disparity and diversity, but a closer scrutiny reveals numerous common attributes and characteristics. This study attempts to identify and examine the cohesive and shared characteristics across the Southeast Asian region from a historical and sociocultural perspective. The intention is to differentiate an identity borne of the underlying commonalities of shared characteristics whether physical, experiential, emotive, and/or in terms of heritage. Subsequently, Southeast Asia has more grounds to claim itself as a distinct region, and an "area of

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study," besides the political expediency of ASEAN.

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Ⅰ. Introduction

> The region itself, an ethnic and cultural shatterbelt, where the Cold War was hot and where revolutionary struggles ended decades of colonialism, should excite our [U.S.] interest. The location, bounded on the north by China, on the south and west by the Indian Ocean and on the east by the South China Sea and the Pacific, can only suggest the range of the region's *enormous diversity*. Yet as diverse as it is, there are *certain commonalities* as well. Understanding the mix is essential for an appreciation of the 10 countries of Southeast Asia (Frankenstein 2014; emphasis added).

At first glance, what is today referred to as Southeast Asia, appears to be a region of complexity and diversity as the above quote suggests. The region accommodates, not 10, but 11 nation-states of quaint sounding names,[1] viz. Myanmar (Burma), Thailand (Siam), Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam that comprised the mainland, and Malaysia (Malaya), Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Timor Leste. But in the midst of this seeming complexity and diversity, there are to be discerned commonalities, and shared features. Drawing from such common denominators that to a certain extent characterized the region as a whole, a certain identity emerged distinct and unique from other regions in other parts of the world. It is in this connection that the present study attempts to identify and examine the shared characteristics across the region from the *historical perspective*. The primary intention is to discover an identity borne of the underlying commonalities of shared characteristics, whether physical, experiential, emotive, and/or in terms of history and heritage. As a result, Southeast Asia then has more grounds to claim itself as a distinct region, an "area of study."

Overall, four elements of shared characteristics drawn from the

[1] Parentheses denotes past designations.

historical prism have been selected for discussion and analysis—shared beliefs and cultural practices drawn from imported and internalized influences, rice as staple food, celebration of diversity, and colonial experiences. While the elements of rice and diversity could be taken as local or from within, the shared beliefs and cultural practices drawn from imported and internalized influences and the colonial experiences were external and drawn from without. Nonetheless, collectively all four elements, each in their respective manner, contribute in molding a distinct identity that the region could call its own, not unlike the "South Pacific," the "Caribbean," the "Balkans," or the "Mediterranean."

The four elements were selected and justified from a historical perspective. Undeniably, there are other elements such as gender, language, integration into the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian nations) to consider.

For instance, there is at least five language families or groupings in Southeast Asia, viz. Miao-Yao, Mon-Khmer, Austronesian, Tibeto-Burman, and Tai-Kadai (Goddard 2005: 27-36). Therefore, although linguistic commonality could be discerned, the diversity is far too vast to justify some feature of commonality. Similarly, gender relations could be another element of shared characteristics for the region (Robinson 2014). ASEAN too could be another unifying element. But four historically-borne elements shall suffice for this preliminary look in examining the cohesive and shared characteristics across the region, primarily from the historical perspective.

Ⅱ. Shared Beliefs and Cultural Practices

As a major crossroads between the east and west, and with its proximity to the Indian subcontinent and Chinese mainland, Southeast Asia drew religious and cultural pollination aside from migration influences from without. For the latter, the most significant was the Chinese whose descendants remained important as a minority across the region. World religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, and Daoism were imported and internalized ensuring centuries-long sustainability to

present times.

History ensured that mainland Southeast Asia shared a Buddhist legacy since the early part of the first millennium to contemporary times (Stargardt 2004). The Hindu-Buddhist period (First century B.C.E. to Thirteenth Century C.E.) spread the religious and sociocultural practices of the two Indian-based religious traditions, but it was Buddhism that proved sustainable possessing devotees until modern times. Despite overwhelming political ideologies, Socialism and Communism in particular, Buddhism survived, and continued to serve the religious needs of the peoples of present-day Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and to some extent, communist-ruled Laos and Vietnam. The lotus flower, symbolically identified with Buddhism, is Vietnam's choice of national flower under the current Communist regime. Buddhist Socialism, a phrase coined in immediate post-independent Myanmar ensured that Buddhism remained pivotal in an emerging socialist state (Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2013: 254-263). Buddhism and the monarchy remained the pillars of Thai identity since the Sukhothai Kingdom (1238–1438) (Thosarat and Higham 2012). Across the vastness of island Southeast Asia, there are minority enclaves of Buddhists, particularly within Chinese communities, and to a lesser extent, Indian minorities. Interestingly and uniquely, Bali was, and still is, a bastion of Hinduism and its concomitant sociocultural practices albeit infused, to a certain extent, with local influences (Pringle 2004).

Archipelagic Southeast Asia embraced Islam since the thirteenth-fourteenth century CE (Hussin Mutalib 2008). From the Andaman Sea to the Banda Sea, from west to east respectively, and the Sulu Sea to the north, Islam was adopted among coastal communities of present-day southern Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, southern Philippines, and Indonesia. Singapore and the Philippines are the exceptions, the majority in the former embraced Buddhist-Doaist traditions, and the latter, Catholicism. Malaysia designated Islam as the official religion of the federation while other religions and beliefs are allowed to be freely practiced (Ooi 2018). "Malay Islamic Monarchy" encapsulates the national philosophy of Brunei. The sultanate's very foundation and sustainability is based on this

triumvirate where Islam appeared to be the pivotal pillar (Croissant and Lorenz 2017). Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world at 227 million (July 2017 est.).[2] Since its establishment in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Singapore has had a minority Muslim population, comprising 13.4 per cent of the city-state's 5.8 million (July 2017 est.) (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [2017] - Singapore).

The southern provinces of Thailand, referred to as the "Deep South," was, and still is, home to indigenous ethnic Malay Muslims. Historically the Malay Muslims were part of the Patani Sultanate, more akin to neighbors, in fact their cousins, across the border in the northern Malaysian states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and also Terengganu (Ibrahim Syukri 1985). Until 1909, the aforesaid four states were part of the Kingdom of Siam, existing on the basis of tributary relations with Chakri Bangkok as the patron overlord. In that year, an Anglo-Siam treaty "returned" Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and also Terengganu to the British then having a colonial role on the peninsular Malay states since the mid-1870s (Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian 1989). Because of the accidents of history, Malay Muslim residents in present-day provinces of Pattani (Patani), Yala (Jala), Narathiwat (Menara)—once comprised the Patani sultanate until its dissolution[3]—Songkhla (Singgora), and Satun struggled with identity, loyalty, and sense of belonging. An on-going insurgency (since the 1970s) remained unresolved (Abuza 2009; McCargo 2008).

Likewise, Mindanao and Sulu in the southern Philippines had long possessed a Muslim majority while the rest of the republic is predominantly Catholic. Since the late 1960s, a Muslim Moro

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[2] Indonesia's total population was 260,580,739 (July 2017 est.), out of which Muslims accounted for 87.2%, Christians (all denominations) about 10%, and the remaining 3% comprised Buddhist, Confucians, and others (animism) (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [2017] - Indonesia).

[3] Patani had been defeated by Chakri in the mid-1780s and accorded tributary status. Then in 1809, Rama II decided to obliterate Patani in dividing the sultanate into seven puppet principalities, namely Tani, Jaring, Saiburi, Legeh (Ra-ngae), Raman, Yala, and Nongchik. Then in 1901, the seven provinces came under one single administrative unit known as "Area of Seven Provinces" (*boriween chet huamuang*) headed by an area commissioner who reported directly to the Interior Ministry (Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian 2004).

insurgency that had strived for separatism or autonomy, had embarked on a peace process, namely the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro signed on October 15, 2012 brokered by Malaysia. Autonomy for the Muslim Moro appeared to be the best administrative arrangement for lasting peace (Yegar 2002).

The Philippines, Singapore, and Bali are the mavericks from the religious adherence perspective. Since the late sixteenth century, Catholicism brought by Spanish conquistadors had remained the principal religion of the Philippines, with the notable exception of the southern provinces on Mindanao and Sulu that had embraced Islam since the thirteenth century. Out of a total population of 104 million (July 2017 est.), Catholics comprised 82.9%, other Christians 9.6%, thus collectively 92.5% vis-à-vis 5.0% of Filipino Muslims (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [2017] – The Philippines).

Singapore has a Buddhist-Daoist majority (45.2%) drawn mainly from the predominantly ethnic Chinese majority. Christians, of all denominations, accounted for 18.1% of the population whereas Islam, 14.3%, Hinduism, 5.2% (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [2017] - Singapore). Bali's population numbered 3.8 million according to the 2010 census, out of which 83.5% are identified with Hinduism, and Muslim, 13.4% (Indonesia: Urban Population of Cities [2010]; Sensus Penduduk [Population Census] 2010).

Southeast Asia's religious complexities are on the one hand, rather baffling, but on the other, uniquely attractive. Inter-religious tensions are undoubtedly present and occasionally flare-up as witnessed in the last decade of the Rohingya Muslim vis-à-vis a predominantly Buddhist majority population including the ruling elite of Myanmar (Wade 2017; Azeem Ibrahim 2016; Leider 2017). But besides southern Thailand and the Rohingya Muslim issue, to date, tolerance and mutual respect reigned over the region. The diverse and numerous religious traditions and practices contribute to the exoticism and attractiveness of contemporary Southeast Asia.

Irrefutably there are a host of variations within each religious group. Islam, for instance, because of its adaptation to local norms, engendered apparent differences in practice and belief across Southeast Asia. Variations from within are similarly applicable for

Buddhism, Christianity, and other religious faith, simply because of the heterogeneous nature of the region itself.

One conspicuous, shared social element across the region is the Chinese factor. Although their numbers were small, the Chinese in Southeast Asia as a community was, and still is, significant. Their ubiquitous presence in the region could be discerned from the scores of "Chinatowns," viz. Bangkok's Yaowarat, Yangon's Tayoke Tan, Ho Chi Minh City's Cholon, Kuala Lumpur's Petaling Street, Manila's Binondo, and Jakarta's Glodok.

The Chinese diaspora throughout Southeast Asia in modern times owe its antecedent to past centuries of emigration from the mainland to the region (Yen 2008; Wang 2004). Trade opportunities in the Nanyang (South Seas), the Chinese reference to Southeast Asia, was the initial catalyst that brought merchants to this part of the world during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Some of these merchants, following numerous trading voyages-cum-commercial sojourns decided to settle in the foreign lands; others, however, continued to make return journeys to the homeland. There was a ready market for Chinese luxury goods (silk, porcelain/chinaware) in overseas markets, and in turn, foreign lands supplied products such as exotic foodstuffs (bird's nests, *trepang*, spices) that were in high demand on the mainland. Savvy entrepreneurs took the high risks in making the trading voyages. Now and then, the imperial government imposed restrictions on trade with foreigners as well as prohibited Chinese traders from trading abroad. Travels to distant lands and being away from the home for long periods were frowned upon by both family and community owing to the obligations of ancestral worship and filial piety. Nonetheless, enterprising merchants defied norms as well as prosecution in seeking opportunities and fortunes from foreign markets.

Notwithstanding the embargo on private trading during the Ming period whereby the imperial court had a monopoly of foreign overseas trade (mid-fourteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries), many merchants defied the ruling (*haijin*, lit. sea ban) and continued their trading ventures. Returning to the homeland became less infrequent lest they were prosecuted by the authorities. The noose became

even tighter in prohibiting Chinese involvement in overseas trade when the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) was established (Shi 2006: 8). Returnees faced death penalty as Qing officials took cognizance of those supporting Ming remnants that had fled to Taiwan. Hence, the southern coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, whence Chinese merchants traded across the southern seas, were guarded against returnees. Consequently, many Chinese merchants who were sojourners in foreign lands, owing to trading activities, became settlers. Owing to their changed status, domestic arrangements also transformed, from patronizing brothels or co-habitation with local women to contracting formal marriages. Gradually, Chinese merchants gradually developed a community of traders. Later mercantile émigrés from the sixteenth century brought with them artisans and peasant workers as expertise and labor needs for their trading establishments abroad, viz. erection of shophouses, warehouses, schoolhouses for the young.

Interethnic-marriages between Chinese merchants and local women brought forth the genesis of the Chinese *Peranakan* (literally, local born)[4] comprising the offspring of such unions. While retaining their Chinese sociocultural traditions and practices of ancestral worship and filial obligations, *Peranakan* were akin to their mother's local traits in terms of language, cuisine, and attire. But the Chinese Peranakan only numbered in their hundreds even during their heyday of the 1920s and 1930s.

While most of the mercantile and trading groups were of Hokkien and Teochew stock, the Hakka were well-known as miners, and they too had ventured abroad. The 1740s witnessed Hakka gold mining in north-western Borneo when Malay rulers in Mempawah, Mandor, Monterado (Montrado), and Sambas, in particular, the districts of Singkawang, Loemar, and Larah, initiated this extractive industry in inviting immigrant Chinese labor (Heidhues 2003).

[4] As I have stated elsewhere, "Singularly, peranakan does not ascribe to any racial or ethnic background, but with a qualifying noun of the particular descent, the patriarchal, is identified" (Ooi 2017: 53). Hence, there are *Peranakan Belanda* of Dutch descent, *Jawi Peranakan* or *Jawi Pekan* of South Indian-Muslim descent, *Thai Peranakan* of Sino-Thai union, Chitty of Indian-Hindu descent.

The bulk of Chinese emigration occurred during the mid-nineteenth century when the push and pull factors were in play (Lary 2012: 91-102). Rebellions, famines, economic dislocations compelled many of them, mainly peasants, to emigrate for opportunities abroad or simply to escape catastrophes in their home villages. They were also attracted by the promise of foreign lands, viz. gold fields of Australia, California, South Africa; tin fields of the Malay Peninsula and Phuket; trading opportunities in Rangoon (Yangon), Bangkok, Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), Penang, Singapore, Batavia (Jakarta), Surabaya, and Manila; commercial agriculture (pepper, gambier, sugar cane, rubber) across the East Indies (Southeast Asia) and West Indies (Caribbean). The Qing defeat in the Opium Wars (1839-1860) resulted in the ceding of Hong Kong to Britain and the opening of treaty-ports, namely Shanghai, Canton (Guangzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo), Fuchow (Fuzhou), and Amoy (Xiamen). Emigration prohibition was also lifted to allow the outflow of the coolie traffic to the above-mentioned territories abroad.

Hence, the emigration wave from the mid-nineteenth century of penniless coolies channeled into a system involving procurement and transportation abroad of indentured labor, a system identified as the pig trade (Campbell 1969). Labor agents in collusion with captains of junks and ships arranged passage for a coolie. The labor agent paid the ship's captain the coolie's passage fee. Upon embarkation, prior arrangement with local labor agents would see the coolie proceeding to work in a mine or plantation, often for a three-year period to pay off his debt amounting to the ship's passage ticket. Theoretically, upon paying off his debt, the coolie was a "free man," either to continue to work for *his* wages in the mine or plantation, or seek other opportunities (farming, trading, etc.). But, in reality, for thousands, the lure of the gambling and/or opium dens, *arrack* (locally distilled liquor) shops, and brothels, sapped most of their wages. As a result, their debt (passage ticket) would never be settled, besides other accumulated debts from their opium and gambling habits, as well as from brothels. They remained indentured laborers. Opium addiction or overdosage, and/or venereal diseases, consumed many lives of coolies, besides succumbing to infectious diseases of the tropics such as malaria, dengue, cholera,

and leprosy.

While the numbers of resident Chinese across the nation-states of Southeast Asia were small, comprising no more than 10% of the total population, they were mostly assimilated into the wider, indigenous society. Hence, the Teochew rice millers and traders of Bangkok, Saigon, and Jakarta were indigenized in their respective adopted host nations of Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia respectively. Likewise, Chinese traders in Manila too were assimilated into Filipino society. In contemporary Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia, ethnic Chinese by legislation were compelled to adopt native names, their original Chinese names prohibited for official and public usage. Likewise, they also changed their identities to "Thai," "Filipino," "Vietnamese," and "Indonesian," and not "Thai Chinese," "Filipino Chinese," "Vietnamese Chinese," and "Indonesian Chinese." Literally, their ethnic Chinese roots and identity were officially obliterated.

It is only in Malaysia where the Chinese community, though a minority, retained and legally protected their identity. Moreover, the Malay-dominated Malaysian federal government supported Chinese vernacular schools, and one of three streams of national schools at the elementary level (Year 1 to Year 6) utilizes Mandarin as medium of instruction (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2018). Chinese-dominated political parties are commonplace in Malaysia's political landscape. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component party of the once ruling Barisan Nasional coalition (until May 2018), is reputedly the largest Chinese political party in the world, second only to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Singapore, since its foundation, has remained a Chinese-dominated city-state comprising 74.3% of the total population of 5.8 million (July 2017 est.) (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [2017] - Singapore). Trade and commerce remain as Singapore's forte since its foundation to present times owing to Chinese expertise and preoccupation. Since its opening as a British free port in 1819, the Chinese have flocked to this entrepôt for trading and commercial activities, with links that stretched throughout Southeast Asia, Hong

Kong, Shanghai, and Taipei in East Asia.

The Chinese tradition of diligence, perseverance, resourcefulness, and instinctive traits of adaptivity and pragmatism sustained them in whatever environs and situations in foreign lands. Not only did they survive. They thrived and prospered over the generations, some more prominently than others. Whether assimilated or unassimilated, the Chinese as a community played an important role in the economic growth and development of their host countries. Chinese, as individuals or business entities, featured prominently in the contemporary list of high-achieving entrepreneurs or top companies in the region. The Chinese factor, then and now, undeniably continue to contribute in driving the economies of their adopted nation-states and the rest of the region. This proves that the Chinese diaspora, as a shared commonality in Southeast Asia, is an asset and boon to host countries and the region overall.

Ⅲ. "We must have rice"

The second binding bond is rice (*Oryza sativa*), the staple grain and food across the region. Literally, everyone living in Southeast Asia consume rice on a daily basis, savored in every meal. Steamed rice served with an assortment of other dishes of meat, vegetables, and preserved condiments compose a typical meal, whether consumed in the interior of Thailand's northern highlands, on the coastal plains of Cambodia, in high-rise apartments in urban Singapore, onboard boats in the Sulu Sea, in the *ruai* (gallery) of a longhouse in the upper Baram in Sarawak, or in the cafeteria of the oil company in Seria in Brunei, on the roadside stalls in Surabaya, in one of the cafes in Dili, Timore Leste. Rice in all its manifestations —fried, steamed, baked, as a component in *kuih* (cakes), in ground form to make vermicelli and other noodles—has been the sustainable grain of sustenance of the peoples of Southeast Asia for centuries.

Varieties range from wet to dry, hill-originating, and glutinous (sticky). Cultivation methods too range from flooded plains with bunds as perimeters, dry cultivation on hillsides, to irrigated terrace

fields on hill slopes, and in jungle clearings as in swidden agriculture. The latter is one example of cultivation on a subsistence basis. Rice is also grown on a massive scale in commercial agriculture.

During the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, rice was cultivated commercially or on a subsistence basis in the alluvial plains of the lower Irrawaddy and its delta in Burma; the lower reaches of the Chao Phraya in the Central Plains of Siam; the lower and delta areas of the Mekong in Cambodia and southern Vietnam; the Red River delta of northern Vietnam; the plains of Kedah on the western coast and the Kelantan plains on the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula (present day West Malaysia); on the northern coastal low lands of Java; and in coastal and river valleys throughout archipelagic Southeast Asia. Large-scale commercial cultivation of rice was undertaken in Burma, Siam, and Vietnam, and mechanized processing delivered rice to the global market (Hanks 1992).

Contemporary Thailand and Vietnam are major rice cultivators and exporters. Domestic rice self-sufficiency continued to be the elusive objective of most nation-states in the region. Once a rice exporter, present-day Myanmar imports its rice supply.

Rice is not only food for sustenance but also plays an important role in religious rituals and practices, particularly during the pre-Islamic/pre-Christian period. Communities that retained animistic beliefs continue to regard rice as sacred, guarded by spirits that need to be ritually nurtured, and/or placated to ensure bountiful harvests. An observation of harvest practices in pre-Hispanic Philippines underscored the significance placed on rice:

> Harvesting was accompanied by strict religious taboos. For three days before, harvesters had to remain continent and keep away from fire. Neither could outsiders enter the house: otherwise, they believed, the rice would be all straw and very few grains. In some places they [the farmers] even camped in the field all during the harvest, lest the rice decrease—as they said—by running away angry because the house had not been left to it alone (Scott 1994: 38).

The Kadazandusun, the majority ethnic community of the East

Malaysia state of Sabah, still maintain their pre-Christian beliefs in *adat* (customary practices). One of the common and important beliefs is of *bambarayon* (rice spirits) or *bambarazon* among the Rungus of Kudat. According to the Rungus, they acquired rice from *bambarazon* in the remote past, therefore they made sacrificial offerings of chickens and pigs to the rice spirits. Negligence of this placating ritual might be fatally disastrous, and may result in meagre harvest or rice crops being plagued by calamities (Shimomoto 1979).

Apparently, there are different types of rice spirits, each with specific functions in Tempasuk Dusun beliefs. British ethnologist Ivor H. N. Evans in the early 1950s recorded seven types, viz. Ohinopot (helps guard the supply of rice in the store); Sambilod (looks after the damaged rice and sees that the amount does not increase); Gontolobon (gives rice piled up in "boulders"); Momiaud (similarly gives rice as abundant as spring water); Moniudan (gives rice as abundant as spring water); Sompidot (gives *opidot*, that is full grain in the ear); and, Kabang (makes the rice *kambang* or swell in the cooking pot) (quoted in Low and Lee 2012: 76).

In Thailand, rice planting took on formal garb where there is an annual ritual known as the Royal Ploughing Ceremony, a religious royal ritual held in the Grand Palace in Bangkok. This ceremony is believed to have been practiced since the thirteenth century. It took a hiatus in the nineteenth century and was revived in modern times by King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927-2016) in 1960.

> It's more than just a religious ceremony—this ritual is a State-sponsored event involving highly-placed civil officials. The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives takes on the position of Lord of the Harvest; four single female Ministry officials are appointed Celestial Maidens to assist him. … With half of Thailand's people still dependent on farming for a living, the Royal Ploughing Ceremony is an important yearly event that honors the bond between the King, the government, and the farmers who sustain the country (Aquino 2017).

Altogether there are two ceremonies, namely the Cultivating Ceremony (*Phraraj Pithi Peuj Mongkol*), and the Ploughing Ceremony (*Phraraj Pithi Jarod Phranangkal Raek Na Kwan*). The King himself

is personally involved in the former, "supervising the blessing of the Lord of the Harvest and the four Celestial Maidens," as well as presenting "a ceremonial ring and sword to the Lord of the Harvest to use in the next day's ceremonies … in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, within the Grand Palace complex" (Aquino 2017).

A day thereafter is staged the more elaborate Ploughing Ceremony at Sanam Luang, a plot of land near the Grand Palace. Here, centuries-old rituals are re-enacted:

> The Lord of the Harvest performs several rituals … to predict the conditions in the rice season to come. First, he chooses one of three cloth garments—the longest one predicts little rain for the coming season, the medium one predicts average rainfall, and the shortest one predicts a lot of rain. … the Lord of the Harvest initiates the ploughing of the ground, accompanied by sacred bulls, drummers, umbrella bearers, and his Celestial Maidens bearing baskets filled with rice seed. After the bulls have ploughed the earth, the beasts are presented with a choice of seven foodstuffs—their choices will predict what crops will be plentiful for the season to come. … [In conclusion,] the Lord of the Harvest will scatter rice seed over the furrows. Guests will try to gather some of the scattered rice grains as good luck charms for their own harvests back home (Aquino 2017).

It is clear that in Thailand, rice is given great honor. Similar practices, less formal and/or as elaborate, undertaken by peasant farmers themselves, are commonplace across the region.

Notwithstanding the fact that American-style fast food chains proliferate across contemporary Southeast Asia with brisk sales of fried chicken, burgers, and sandwiches, particularly popular among Gen X, Gen Y, and commonplace and taken-for-granted within Gen Z circles, the status of rice as the preferred food appeared not to be under threat.[5] One scholar assured of rice's unassailable status vis-à-vis other foods.

[5] Borrowed from demographers and market researchers, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z refer to those born between 1966 and 1976, between 1977 and 1994, and between 1995 and 2012 respectively. Generally, the particular cohort is identified with particular traits and characteristics.

> There are signs that dietary preferences in the region may be changing with the availability of imported foods, but there is *little chance* that rice will be displaced from its central place in Southeast Asian cuisine (Kratoska 2004: 1148; emphasis added).

Ⅳ. "Unity in Diversity"

In recalling the opening quote that Southeast Asia "can only suggest the range of the region's enormous diversity," it also resonates with Indonesia's motto of, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" or "Unity in Diversity." On the occasion of Indonesia's seventy-first anniversary celebration of independence in 1945, the *Republik* was commended for its achievements:

> From Sabang in Aceh to Merauke in Irian Jaya, Indonesia is home to a diverse group of people who have contributed to the richness of culture and tradition of the country. These are the Batak in North Sumatra, the Dayak in Kalimantan, the Ambonese in the Moluccas, the Javanese, the Sundanese, the Balinese, the Acehnese, and the Minangkabau, each with a different language. The difficult task of bringing together all these diverse groups under one governing system, as stated in its motto "Unity in Diversity," represents one of the *great accomplishments* of any nation in the 20th century (Farolan 2016; emphasis added).

Indeed, Indonesia's success as a sustainable unitary state speaks volumes of its political leadership in being able to hold together peoples of varied ethnicity, cultures, religions and beliefs, languages, creeds, socioeconomic levels, and political affiliations. Indonesia, in fact, represents a microcosm of Southeast Asia itself, where diversity is characterized by multiethnicity, multiculturalism, and multi-religious traits as a norm. Despite the predominance of major ethnic groups like the Bamar in present day Myanmar, or Tai in Thailand, or Viet in Vietnam, or Malay in Malaysia, other ethnic minorities are found in all the aforesaid countries. For instance, Malaysia's eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak support 30 and 20 ethnic minorities respectively. The Chinese community in Malaysia, unlike their counterparts in other neighboring countries in the

region, comprised a sizeable minority accounting for almost a quarter of the total population of 30.8 million (2016 est.) (Ooi 2018: 366).

Even far more diverse in terms of ethnic groups is contemporary Myanmar with an estimated population of 53.86 million in 2018:

> The country is very ethnically diverse with 135 *ethnic groups* recognized by the government. There are at least 108 ethnolinguistic groups in Myanmar. The Bamar account for around 68% of the population, followed by the Shan (10%), Kayin (7%), Rakhine (4%) and overseas Chinese (3%). … Other ethnic groups include the Mon (2%), Overseas Indians (2%) and the Kachin, Chin, Anglo-Indians, Nepali and Anglo-Burmese (World Population Review – Myanmar, 2018; emphasis added).

Southeast Asia appears to embrace and celebrate diversity, the colorful kaleidoscope characteristics of multiethnicity, multiculturalism, and multi-religious traditions. Undoubtedly, predominant ethnic majority groups have a tendency to assimilate small minorities. They have a higher tendency to do this if they hold the reins of political power. Assimilation, then, may be adopted as state policy. Minorities persist despite attempts by central governments in Thailand, Indonesia, or in the Philippines, by force of policy, to assimilate them into the mainstream majority's sociocultural milieu. In Myanmar, for instance, "ethnic minorities in the country prefer to be called *ethnic nationalities* to fight against the proliferation of the dominant Bamar people" (World Population Review-Myanmar, 2018; emphasis added). Likewise, the substantial minority of the Chinese in Malaysia not only have two Chinese political parties in the ruling coalition (until May 2018) Barisan Nasional (National Front), but also a forceful and vociferous political party in the rival camp Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope), all lending voice for Chinese interests.[6]

[6] Both the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan; Malaysian People's Movement) are members of the Barisan Nasional (National Front), the incumbent ruling coalition prior to the general elections of 9 May 2018. In the rival camp—currently a component of the Pakatan Harapan coalition government (since 9 May general election)—is the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP).

The existence of a variegated population composing a tapestry of various ethnic communities undoubtedly presents multiculturalism in practice. Each ethnic group brings their sociocultural traditions and practices, language, religious beliefs, way of life, and worldview. Multiculturalism and multi-religiosity are inevitable in multiethnic population settings. Generally, social plurality does not necessarily lead to inter-ethnic conflict. If the dictum of "live and let live" is embraced by all quarters, and the government does not favor any particular group, a spirit of co-existence will generate peace. Contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia exhibit such peaceful existence. On the obverse side, Myanmar continues to struggle with separatist minorities, due to real or perceived Bamar predominance, discrimination and sidelining of minority interests.

Malaysia's brand of multiculturalism is analogous to one of its favorite street foods, the *rojak* a.k.a. the Malaysian salad, which also presents itself as a dessert. Literally, derived from the Malay, *rojak* means "mixed up." This offering comprises cucumber, *jambu-air* (rose-apple), *sengkuang* (yam bean), *ambra* (ambarella or June plum in Sri Lanka, *kedondong* in Indonesia and in Malaysia), pineapple, cuttlefish, *hae-ko* (shrimp paste), chili paste, molasses, and crushed (unsalted) peanuts, *all mixed up*, hence *rojak*, and served in a cone-shaped paper, eaten with bamboo sticks. Without doubt, savoring mouth-watering *rojak* means experiencing a feast of flavors:

> The multiethnicity and multiculturalism of Malaysian society are likened to rojak: the various sociocultural elements drawn from each ethnic and cultural group *are mixed together, but each element keeps its distinct character and identity* (Ooi 2018: 284; emphasis added).

In other words, despite the thorough "mixing up altogether" of the rojak, the pineapple remains a pineapple, and the *jambu-air*, *hae-ko*, and other ingredients retain their unique flavors.

Similarly, the multiethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious mix of modern day Southeast Asia too, to a certain extent, resembles *rojak,* whereby each ethnic, cultural, and religious group has its own identity, characteristics, idiosyncrasies. These remain intact despite the plural and variegated setting of the region.

What holds each "unity" forged amidst the "diversity" within each nation-state is different from one another. Malaysia, for instance, often falls back on the so-called "social contract" forged by the founding fathers drawn from the main ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese, and Indian, who pledged to share the burden as well as the fruits of the country among them. Owing to the comparative backwardness of the Malays at the time of independence (1957), affirmative action as translated in the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1970-1990) was adopted (Gomez and Saravanamuttu 2012; Jomo 2005). Indonesia's "unity," to a great extent, was galvanized by the protracted *Revolusi* (1945-1949), or the war of independence, to fulfil Sukarno's declaration of independence on August 17, 1945.

> Like other revolutions, it demanded a huge price in violence, human suffering, and the loss of cultural traditions; like them too, it offered a glittering prize. The prize turned out not to be the freedom and equality of which the revolutionaries had dreamt, but a previously *inconceivable unity* enforced by a state of a completely new kind. (Reid 2011: blurb; emphasis added).

Ⅴ. "We were once colonized"

All the territories of Southeast Asia, with the notable exception of Thailand, were once colonized by European imperial powers and the U.S. (Table 1 and Map 1). Economic motives of trade and commerce, and access to raw materials and markets were the common denominators and catalysts for colonization. Whether aggressively intending to colonize or forced by circumstances, often to deny rival powers, all the imperial powers ended up with colonial territories. Forms of administration varied in name but all basically imposed colonial possession.

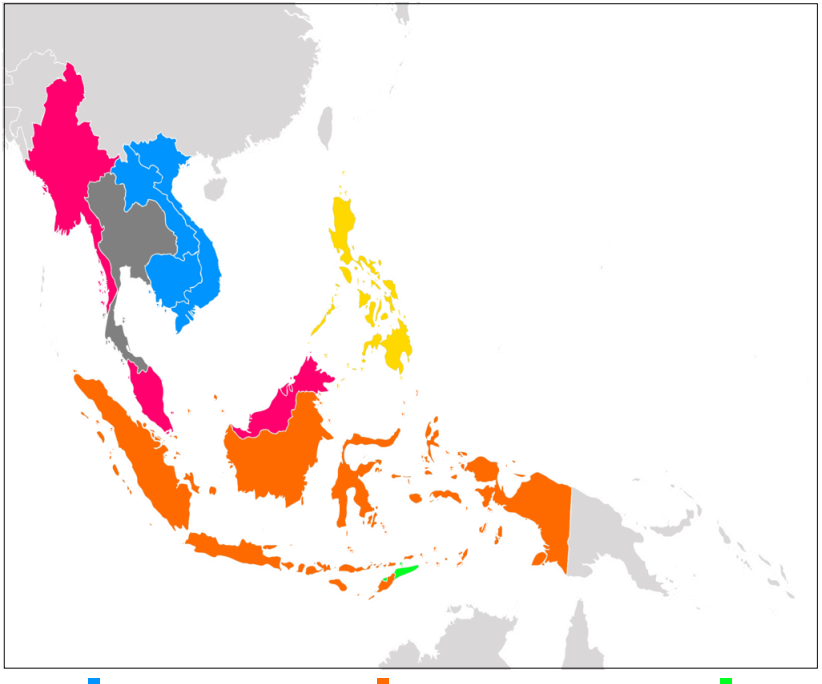
<Table 1> Periodization of Colonial Rule of Southeast Asia

	Britain	Spain	United States	France	Netherlands	Portugal
Burma□	1824–1942 1945–1948					
Malaya◇	1874-1957					
North Borneo*	1881-1963					

	Britain	Spain	United States	France	Netherlands	Portugal
Sarawak	1841-1963					
Brunei	1906-1984					
Philippines		1565–1898	1898-1946			
Laos				1893-1941 1946-1953		
Cambodia				1863-1941 1945-1953		
Vietnam				1887-1954		
Indonesia					1800-1949	
East Timor †						1702–1975 (de jure 1999)

□ Name change to Myanmar in 1989
◊ Malaya refers to present day West or Peninsular Malaysia
* Upon independence within Malaysia in 1963, adopted the name Sabah
† Or Timor Leste

<Map 1> Colonization of Southeast Asia



Legend: France (French Indochina) Netherlands (Dutch East Indies) Portugal (Portuguese Timor) Spain (Spanish East Indies), followed by U.S. (Philippines) United Kingdom (British Burma, British Malaya and British Borneo)
Source: European Colonisation of Southeast Asia.

The French declared protectorates over Laos, Cambodia, Annam, and Tonkin while Cochin-China was governed as a colony (Brocheux and Hémery 2011). All the nine peninsula Malay states were British protectorates, again differentiated as federated (Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang), and unfederated (Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Johor). The Straits Settlements of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore were British colonies (Andaya and Andaya 2016). Until 1937, Burma was administered by the British as a province of British India, thereafter separately by the Burma Office under the Secretary of State for India and Burma (Cockett 2015).

What is today Indonesia was initially colonized piecemeal by the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, "United East India Company," VOC) from 1603 of then known as the East Indies (Ricklefs 2008). When the VOC folded up towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Netherlands government assumed governance of the Dutch East Indies (Netherlands East-Indies; *Nederlands(ch)-Indië*) as a colony from 1800. Spain, likewise, from the mid-sixteenth century, gradually colonized the Philippines (Francia 2013). As a settlement of the Spanish-American War (1898), the archipelago was sold to the U.S. Consequently, the U.S. was drawn in the Philippine Revolution (1896-1898), and subsequently, the Philippine–American War (1899-1902).

Prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War (1941-1945), northern Borneo comprised Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo. While Brunei was an ancient Malay Muslim sultanate under British protection, Sarawak was governed by the Brooke family, an English family of white rajahs, whereas North Borneo was administered by the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBC) (Ooi 2004a and 2004b; Ooi 2004a).

Colonialism was sustainable, to some extent, because of local collaboration with the indigenous elites. If not for their collaboration and cooperation, colonial regimes would have faced protracted incessant opposition through armed insurrection and anti-colonial uprisings. Despite being engaged in an unequal relationship, local elites were more than willing to partner with foreign colonial power to gain some of the spoils of subjugation.

For instance, the peninsula Malay sultan in pre-colonial times was but one of the chiefs, and it was not surprising that some of the territorial chiefs possessed more manpower and material riches through taxes than the royal personage who was entirely dependent on the chiefs for delivery of taxes (Gullick 1988). But when the British initiated their system of indirect rule through the residential system, the sultan enjoyed an elevated status and enjoyed greater wealth from the centralized system of tax collection.

Without much doubt, colonialism no matter how benign, has its downsides. The native peoples were denied of self-determination and had to march according to the colonial drumbeat. The metropolitan country of the colonial power was the main benefactor of the colonies, from the economic standpoint, in particular, but also politically and socio-culturally in general. The mindset of the superiority of the colonial powers was perpetrated through propaganda, socio-cultural traditions and practices, education and schooling. Generations of native peoples imbibed their inferiority and doubted their own capability. Colonization is sustained when the colonized are made to internalize their sense of ethnic and/or cultural inferiority (Nunning 2015).

On the positive note, colonial rule brought economic development, built infrastructure (transport and communications, sanitation, water, and electricity supply), and advanced social services (formal schooling, public health). The colonial period initiated overall improvements, mostly in the urban centers. Jeevan Vasagar (2018), correspondent of *The Guardian* shares this observation:

> Bombay is Mumbai, Léopoldville is Kinshasa, Cecil Rhodes has been hoisted from his plinth by a crane; but when I moved to Singapore a few years ago it quickly became clear that much of its colonial legacy had been left intact. …The country's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew once said the statue reminds his people of [Thomas Stamford] Raffles' vision of Singapore becoming "the emporium of the east," adding that Singapore was different from most of its Southeast Asian neighbours because it had "no xenophobic hangover" from colonialism. It's an attractive story. In other countries, the end of imperial rule has required a detox regime of

> new names and new doctrines. Singapore has taken a different path.
>
> The Singapore model combines economic liberalism—in keeping with Raffles' free-trading vision—a politics that subordinates the individual to the collective, and efficient government.

Considering this, what comes to mind is Bruce Gilley's (2017) controversial piece, "The Case for Colonialism," that urged developing countries to seriously consider replicating the colonial governance of the past, citing the successful examples of Singapore, Belize, and Botswana.

Nationalism inevitably entered the psyche and vocabulary of the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia. Ironically, the advances in infrastructure and education served the nationalist struggle. The latter spurred national consciousness, as exemplified in the motto of the French Revolution (1789) "*Liberté*, *Egalité*, *Fraternité.*" Armed with various –isms, nationalists were able to take advantage of improvements in transport and communications to meet one another and discuss their common agenda.

Various revolutions, viz. Chinese (1911), Russian (1917), the protracted struggles for independence in the Indian sub-continent, spurred nationalists in Southeast Asia to oppose their colonial masters. Although the Philippine Revolution (1896) ended unexpectedly in a change of colonial masters—with the U.S. replacing Spain—the writings of Philippine hero Jose Rizal (1861-1896) inspired nationalists throughout the region. Revolutionary leaders and personalities elsewhere such as Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), and Mao Zedong (1893-1976) became models to emulate. Political thoughts and ideologies like fascism, democracy, socialism, communism all had their dedicated followings among nationalists in Southeast Asia, from Aung San (1915-1947), Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969), Norodom Sihanouk (1922-2012) to Sukarno (1901-1970), Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015), and Chin Peng (1924-2013).

Political freedom and independence for some were bloodless through constitutional means, *inter alia* the Philippines (1946), Burma (1948), Malaya (1957). Others, however, struggled through

protracted revolutions and wars, notably Indonesia and Vietnam. Still others, their post-independence period were dogged with conflicts spurred on by the Cold War (1947-1990), Cambodia, being an example.

Possessing a colonial past is a shared experience among Southeast Asian nation-states except Thailand which was spared from colonial domination. Thailand, however, had its share of confronting colonial powers; it was a thoughtful strategy of having a buffer between them, that both France and Britain dissuaded from colonializing Siam. Nonetheless, Thailand paid the price of having to cede economic benefits (Britain) and territories (France), and had to suffer the indignity of the extraterritoriality clause that compromised its sovereignty, just to keep its independence (Wyatt 2003). Others had argued that Thailand was, in fact, "quasi-independent" (see Anderson 1998, and Owen 2005).

Although brief but significant, the military occupation of the region by Imperial Japan, again except in Thailand, during the Pacific War (1941-1945) was yet another shared baggage among Southeast Asians. Mutual benefit between the militarist regimes in Bangkok and Tokyo led to a pact that was concluded in Tokyo on June 12, 1940. Consequently, Imperial Japanese forces did not invade and/or occupy Thailand during the Pacific War.

For better or for worse, Southeast Asians share a commonality of a colonial past, whether Western/European or Imperial Japan. To some extent, such shared experiences fostered greater understanding and empathy of one another.

Ⅵ. Conclusion: A Southeast Asian Identity?

As highlighted, Southeast Asian countries share a whole gamut of beliefs and cultural practices, rice as the staple food, diversity, and colonial experiences. Do all these four elements bring the peoples and the nation-states closer ? Are they ties that bind? And, if they do bind, do they bring forth a Southeast Asian identity?

"Unity in diversity" appears to be the most plausible identity

marker, reflected in individual parts (viz. the component nation-states in different degrees), and as whole (that is, Southeast Asia as a region overall). Nonetheless, questions abound, as in this:

> But does it ["unity-in-diversity"] work as a political strategy to enhance a regional identity, as in the case of the [sic.] Europe? It depends on how it is constructed, both in regards to "unity" and "diversity." Without doubt, Southeast Asia is a region with great diversity, and each country is, in fact, composed of diverse cultures. The question is, then, how much "unity-in-diversity" can be achieved? And who should decide what constitutes "unity" and what constitutes "diversity"? (Jönsson 2010: 65)

Consciously excluded from the aforesaid discussion is ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), admittedly another unifying element, and which increasingly, in the last decade has been forging an identity of its own (Charter of ASEAN 2007: Preamble). But as a scholar rightly forewarned, identity of Southeast Asia as a region must not be misconstrued to be "ASEAN identity":

> As noted at the outset, *the identity of Southeast Asia as a region should not be confused with the identity of ASEAN as a regional organization*. Although the two identities can overlap and be mutually reinforcing, they also have different sources and distinctive trajectories. Southeast Asia's regional identity predates ASEAN's identity…While ASEAN might have strengthened Southeast Asia's regional identity, the latter has a wider basis. It was constructed by a combination of outside powers, foreign (at first) and local academics, regional political leaders, and civil society groups, while the ASEAN identity is mainly the creation of the region's political elite. The Southeast Asian identity is more grounded in historical and socio-cultural factors than the ASEAN identity, which is more of an institutional, political, and strategic phenomenon and is fundamentally statist and elitist in nature (Acharya 2017: 37; emphasis added).

Admittedly, regions, like Southeast Asia, the Caribbean or sub-Sahara Africa, are constructs. Some conspicuous sociocultural features are identified with a particular region hence its identity. Out of the seeming complexity and diversity that characterized Southeast Asia, it has been argued that there is a commonality of shared

elements amidst the diverse features. The "unity" found in these may comprise the region's identity.

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