CONNECTING CULTURAL COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES: WHITHER, ASEAN COMMUNITY?

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Abstract:

Do ASEAN people identify themselves first as Southeast Asians, as nationals of their country, or as members of their ethnic or local community? In a heterogeneous region where each country is culturally distinct and each holds on to its hard-earned sovereignty, how does the process of regional community-building fare? As ASEAN declares 2020 as the Year of ASEAN Identity, it is timely to reexamine its regional identity and its implications for creating an ASEAN Community.

The vision for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Community is far from the early ASEAN Member States' (AMS) regional security objective. In the **ASEAN Declaration** (Bangkok Declaration) signed on 08 August 1967, the goal of the founding AMS was to guarantee peaceful national development free from external power interference and to maintain regional stability, among others. In its naissance, ASEAN was absorbed with the pressing task of nation-building within the context of the Cold War and the communist insurgency threat. Hence, the AMS sought to firm up regime security and reduce the probability of external power involvement and communist appeal through economic advancement. The formation of the ASEAN also increasingly encouraged reconciliation amid intra-regional conflicts.

To reflect this growing regional consciousness, ASEAN expanded not only in terms of membership but also its regional agenda and overall goal. Decades since its inception, the AMS agreed to deepen integration by creating the ASEAN Community through the **ASEAN Concord II** (Bali Concord II) signed on 07 October 2003. This Community comprises three pillars: the ASEAN Security Community (ASC), which was later renamed the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Initially planned to commence in 2020, the process of regional community-building was accelerated in 2015 through the **Cebu Declaration** signed on 14 May 2012.

To strengthen the ASEAN Community, the AMS have acknowledged the importance of fostering a collective identity that will urge people to imbibe a genuine sense of belongingness and common destiny. Thus, in its **vision statement**, ASEAN declared to develop by 2020 "an ASEAN Community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage and bound by a common regional identity." On 12 December 2005, **ASEAN adopted the slogan**, "One Vision, One Identity, One Community" to serve as an impetus in attaining a people-centered regional community, anchored on shared values and collective identity.

As a contribution to ASEAN community-building efforts, this paper seeks answers to the following: What is an ASEAN Identity and how does it differ from a Southeast Asian Identity? In what ways can regional collective identities foster an ASEAN Community? What are the regional identity issues in Southeast Asia and how can they be addressed? Where is the Filipino Identity in the ASEAN? What are the ways to enhance ASEAN Community?

To answer these questions, the paper starts with an overview of the theoretical and analytical concepts related to regional identity and regional community. Then, it discusses the difference between a Southeast Asian Identity and an ASEAN Identity, and examines the interplay of regional collective identities. It proceeds with an analysis of the prospects and challenges in forming an ASEAN Community and locates the Filipino in the regional identity and community discourse. Finally, the paper provides a lens on how ASEAN Community, particularly the ASCC, may be promoted, and discusses its implications for Philippine cultural and public diplomacy.

Identifying Identities

Identity is crucial to the understanding of ASEAN´s community-building efforts as "identities are the bases of interests"[1] and "identities both generate and shape interests."[2] Alexander Wendt explained that "an actor cannot know what it wants unless it knows what it is."[3] Simply put, in order for the ASEAN Community to create and pursue its interests, it must be aware of itself first.

In general terms, identity does not only refer to the physical attributes of the people, but also the ideas, norms, behaviors, languages, values, symbols, discourses, practices, and socio-political systems that are constructed through time. These social constructions are often nested under the label culture, which, according to Amitav Acharya, may be considered enough condition for regional identity along with shared history and proximity.[4]

Benedict Anderson emphasized this function of social construction in conceptualizing a community through the role of imagery, invented traditions, representation, imagination, and symbols as constructed narratives.[5] For him, a community can be imagined into being, even if the members do not know each other.

Echoing Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay[6], Fernando Zialcita affirmed that identity includes and excludes—to consider oneself as a part of a group is to dissociate from those who are outside it.[7] Given that identity-building implies viewing oneself with reference to others, ASEAN Identity then rests on how AMS see themselves in relation to each other, and how they develop a sense of solidarity in and out of their loop. Considering this, the term ´collective identity´, as used in this paper, denotes group existence rooted in a claim of being.

The notion of an ASEAN Community is tied to the understanding of the concept of a security community[8] that presupposes the presence of a pooled identity among states. Karl Deutsch posited that a community is created only when people foster common values until a ´we-feeling´ is shared among them.[9] For Deutsch, the development of a common identity is a precondition for a deeper interstate cooperation as it will encourage people to have a sense of shared responsibility in attaining a common destiny.[10]

That established, the formation of an ASEAN Community is anchored on an ASEAN Identity, which should not be construed as equivalent to the Southeast Asian regional identity, but rather an expression of it.[11] Acharya clarified that Southeast Asian Identity is founded on, but not limited to, important shared geographical, socio-cultural and historico-political features. By contrast, ASEAN Identity is shaped by strategic and political forces through government and societal interactions.[12] In this respect, ASEAN Identity is to be understood along a full appreciation of the broader identities in the Southeast Asian region.

Connecting Cultural Collective Identities

As diverse as its 1,518 ethnic communities,[13] Southeast Asia is a region of cultural and linguistic mix. The borderless and dynamic interactions of precolonial ethnic minorities explain the many resemblances in Southeast Asian customs, traditions, values, beliefs, language, clothing, music, and food, among others.[14]

Throughout Southeast Asia, indigenous people have been isolated from others and dispersed in rural areas. They are typically nomads, seafarers, or domestic folks with traditional agricultural, fishing and hunting skills. Ethnic tribes have preserved their way of life by speaking their own language, practicing their cultural traditions and religious beliefs, and upholding their social and legal institutions that predate the modern nation-state.

With the birth of the Westphalian state system, however, these indigenous cultural values and institutions have been increasingly threatened by their acculturation into the dominant society, thus exposing their vulnerabilities.[15] The result has been a mix of weakened and obliterated ethnic cultures due to the unsuccessful assimilation of the minorities in some societies.

Precolonial Southeast Asian states did not regard themselves as separate units with distinct identities as they had not yet ´imagined´ themselves within fixed boundaries. The indigenous cultural values stayed fluid among ethnic polities until foreign powers merged them within geographical bounds. Except for Thailand, all countries in the region have had colonial influence, which became a key factor in the construction of distinct national identities. Anti-colonial struggles turned out as a potent force in nation-building, which eventually separated Southeast Asian nation-states in geopolitical terms.

Colonization left behind identities based exclusively on political allegiance to the nation-state, replacing the once fluid ethnic identities. Colonial ideas about governance and economic progress have shaped identity politics, producing different ideologies and government systems. While the resulting national identities have been varied, they have nonetheless co-existed and evolved until they harmonized to create regular patterns of interaction through a supranational institution, the ASEAN.

The commingling of national identities with the creation of ASEAN has reinforced Southeast Asia as a world region that is culturally distinct from its neighboring regions such as East Asia and South Asia. Although the history of precolonial affinities could have served as a basis for regional identity, the AMS have developed an institutional identity through informal, non-confrontational, consultative, consensus-based, non-binding, and non-legal mode of interaction, which is better known as the "ASEAN Way".

While this ASEAN Way of doing things may be considered a collective identity,[16] it has nonetheless reinforced identities based on exclusive state boundaries. To an extent, the ASEAN Way has been used to pragmatically secure the AMS´ national interests. This is evident in many regional accords, such as the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, whose success of implementation has been left to the AMS.[17] The AMS´ preoccupation over state sovereignty has constrained the formation of a genuine ASEAN Community.

As such, the question remains: Do ASEAN people identify themselves as Southeast Asians, as nationals of their own country, or as members of ethnic or subnational groupings? The enduring dialectics of hard-earned sovereignty acquired from fixed political boundaries hinder Southeast Asians from accepting altogether the entwining collective identities of being an ethnic folk, a country citizen, and an ASEAN kin. This leads to Southeast Asians having little or no affinity or trust[18] with each other.

Challenging Collective Identities

Ethnocentrism not only rivals against nationhood but also regional community-building. The inherent tension among these three may be attributed to the disregard of the coexisting features of collective identities.

The interweaving collective identities in Southeast Asia have not only shaped linkages that foster positive interactions but have also highlighted differences that disrupt cordial relations. On the one hand, the similarities in values, beliefs and cultural heritage of Southeast Asian people bolster the prospect of a regional community. On the other hand, the divergence of identities rooted in ultra-nationalism and ethnocentrism underpins the hindrances in forming one.

For instance, the tension between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear[19] shows how cultural symbol and ethnic discord may cause interstate hostilities. Its escalation into an armed conflict provides further credence to the danger of unbridled ethnic and nationalist sentiments. Similarly, the military confrontation over a boundary dispute between Myanmar and Thailand demonstrates how ethnic-based insurgency may spill over trans-border relations.[20]

Equally important, the conflicting claims over the *Batik* art among Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore, and the *laksa* cuisine between Singapore and Malaysia illustrate the disagreements arising out of a shared heritage. These enduring conflicts, though in varying degrees, bring to the fore sociocultural-ingrained problems that serve as roadblocks to building a regional community.

Given the antagonism among ethnic units and the strong assertion of national and ethnic identities, fostering an ASEAN Community will likely encounter challenges, just as how postcolonial Southeast Asian states continue to grapple with the construction of national identities. Unless Southeast Asians recognize that their collective identities are not mutually exclusive, achieving a genuine ´we-feeling´ will only remain an aspiration.

The resurgence of an ancient idea of a Sinocentric regional order may also have a bearing on the development of an ASEAN Identity. China´s revitalization of a historical tributary system via the Belt and Road Initiative[21] (BRI) reinforces China´s identities that have already been embedded in the region.[22] With its history of assimilation in Southeast Asia, China´s projection of its role in achieving a ´community with common destiny´[23] will meet head-on the development of an ASEAN Community. This has been observed in the way the AMS relate with China in economic and political terms, including the ongoing and emerging territorial and maritime concerns in the region.

While China´s increasing economic clout may bolster its historic claim of being a regional power center, it is up to the AMS to determine the degree to which Chinese cultural identity may influence ASEAN Identity. The implication of this for the ASEAN community-building depends on how adaptive or restrictive the AMS would be. Southeast Asia´s history of colonization may provide insights on how ASEAN´s openness to a foreign culture may be beneficial or prejudicial to current community-building efforts.

Situating the Filipino Identity in the ASEAN

With over a hundred ethnolinguistic groups and millions of indigenous peoples,[24] the Philippines is a cradle of diverse ethnic identities that are of Austronesian origin as it became a jump-off point of Austronesian diaspora several centuries ago.[25] While ethnic minorities provide a picture of Philippine indigenous identities, idealizing them would fall short in appreciating the Filipino Identity. The Philippines is a product of many cultural, social, political, economic, historical, and religious exchanges within and outside its geographical confines. Hence, if there is any Filipino Identity, it would be a confluence of ethnic and foreign cultures.

Insisting only on the indigeneity of the Filipino culture and ignoring completely foreign influences would fall short in capturing the Filipino Identity. Without foreign cultures, the Philippines as a social unit from which to draw the Filipino Identity would be inexistent as the collective consciousness of being a Filipino emerged only after external power merged the indigenous groups into one, national unit. As Nick Joaquín puts it, "(the) Spanish… produced the Filipino…" while the Americans helped "…to become more aware of this *Filipinoness.*"[26]

Joaquín claimed that the Filipino Identity emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries when the Spaniards "forged the fusion of tribes" all over the archipelago.[27] The sense of being a Filipino hence, is a result of the adjustment to a new way of life. Jorge Mojarro opined that foreign culture was assimilated into the society and transformed until they eventually became Filipino.[28] Thus, Filipinos are all *mestizos*[29], Zialcita declared, for celebrating their indigenous Austronesian, Malay or Chinese roots, and Spanish and American legacies.

The ´we-feeling´ etched in the modern Filipino Identity are often notions of shared ´roots´ that pertain to the dominant characteristics or typecasts of local groupings, such as the frugality of the Ilocanos, the gentleness of the Ilonggos, the fierceness of the Warays, among others. These local-specific descriptions not only mirror the diversity of the Filipino culture but also imply that national identity formation rests on the people, not the state. This is manifested in the 1987 Philippine Constitution´s non definition of Filipino Identity, but only a regulation of Filipino citizenship. Nonetheless, the **National Commission for Culture and the Arts** has recognized the heterogeneity of the Filipino culture as the basis of identity of the Filipino people.

In a study about social categorization and identity in the Philippines, three traits that cut across the country were noted: hospitality, religiosity, and family oriented-ness.[30] Similarly, Felipe de Leon, Jr. stated that Filipinos have a healing cultural identity, with high relational skills and emotionally expressive qualities.[31] This is exhibited by the large number of Filipinos in the health profession throughout the world.[32] While there is a long list of characteristics[33] that could represent the Filipino Identity, there is one that portrays a true collective identity – the *Bayanihan*.

Bayanihan derives from the Tagalog word *Bayan*, meaning community. It is a tradition that traces its roots to the countryside practice of relocating a house by carrying it over the townsfolks´ shoulders. While the partakers´ deed is a voluntary act, it has become customary to serve them food as an expression of gratitude. Today, the *Bayanihan* has evolved into a concept of being one with the community, of caring for each other and giving something without expecting anything in return. This civic spirit has been showcased in many ways, particularly during national emergencies when Filipinos take the extra mile to help their fellows in need.

Remarkably, this community cooperative principle also thrives in other Southeast Asian countries. Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore refer to it as *Gotong Royong* or *Kampung* spirit, while Thailand and Laos call it *Nam Jai* (น้ำใจ or ນ້ຳໃຈ). The same community concept is is understood as *Tình Làng Nghĩa Xóm* in Vietnam, ရပ် ရွာအခြုပြု စိ တ် ဓာတ် (Yat Ywar A Chay Pyu Sate Dat) in Myanmar, and ជួយគ្នានៅក្នុងគ្រួរ (Chuoyoknea Knong Kreakr) in Cambodia. This sense of group unity at the grassroots level indicates a collective identity rooted in humanity. Celebrating this shared notion of valuing ´the other´ as part of ´the self´ may restore precolonial affinities that could strengthen the foundation for a regional identity.

Whither, ASEAN Community?

Even with its history of colonization, Southeast Asia remains a region of heterogenous cultures, which form part of its identity; and with this, the Philippines itself. Recognizing the distinctiveness of each culture is the first step toward embracing a shared regional home.

However, developing regional identity must transcend from a mere appreciation of the socio-cultural similarities and differences among Southeast Asian people to the fostering of fully functional interactions at the grassroots level. This way, ordinary citizens may ´imagine´ themselves more to be part of a broader community. A ´we-feeling´, hence, requires an effort to strengthen engagement in all areas possible of contact, including music, arts, language, literature, food, fashion, festival, film, dance, tourism, education, disaster risk management, environment and human rights protection, humanitarian assistance, youth exchange and volunteerism, and non-governmental initiatives, among others. To increase people´s identification with ASEAN, this process of socialization may start with a conceptual transformation about collective identities.

There must be a shift in the idea that collective identities are not mutually exclusive. Acknowledging the probability of interweaving collective identities may yield to an acceptance of possessing diverse cultural collective identities simultaneously: that of an ethnic minority, a country citizen, and an ASEAN kin. This recognition may come along with a new perspective about cultural symbols and traditions.

For instance, instead of disputing claims over cultural treasures, such as the *Batik*, embracing them as common heritage that requires preservation and protection, may enhance regional cooperation. Equally important, rekindling social bonds rooted in humanity, such as the *Bayanihan*, may raise the spirit of shared goodness among Southeast Asians. Recognizing these cultural traditions and symbols as shared identities will help foster true regional community ties and assuage cultural conflicts.

Celebrating precolonial people-to-people exchanges may also enhance solidarity sentiments among Southeast Asians. A profound recognition of precolonial Southeast Asian social bonds and understanding of the artificiality of nation-state boundaries may cultivate a sense of shared indigeneity, culture, and heritage. Considering this, it may be important to incorporate in the education system of each AMS the history of the intermingling of Southeast Asian collective identities. In this way, national histories may shift from hard-earned independence and state-centric narratives towards the incorporation of an understanding of regional connections and similarities.

The Philippines may highlight these underexplored impressions of interweaving cultural collective identities in its conduct of cultural and public diplomacy. To engage the widest possible Filipino audience, the government may consider incorporating these ideas in its digital culture platforms. The Philippines, as the prime proponent of the ASCC pillar,[34] must lead in innovating ways to foster the Socio-Cultural Community especially as ASEAN enters the age of technological transformation.

ASEAN is still far from becoming a genuine community. Realizing the goals of the ASCC pillar may be hindered by the absence of a regional identity that will help bolster people´s affinity with a wider community. The lack of appreciation of a shared culture, heritage, and history among Southeast Asian people must be addressed. Unless provided a solution, mutual mistrust and hostility will remain obstacles in integrating regional economy and fortifying the ASEAN politico-security pillar.

Endnotes

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1. Alexander Wendt (1992), Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics, pp. 391-425
2. Ibid.
3. Alexander Wendt (1999), Social Theory of International Politics, p. 231
4. Amitav Acharya (2017), "The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity," p. 26
5. Benedict Anderson (1983), Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism
6. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (1996), Questions of Cultural Identity
7. Fernando Zialcita (2005), Authentic Though Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity, pp.3-5
8. Karl Deutsch defined Security Community as "A group of states which have developed a long-term habit of peaceful interaction and ruled out the use of force in settling disputes with other members of the group.", as cited in Amitav Acharya (2001), Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Amitav Acharya (2017), The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity, p. 25
12. Ibid.

13. Guido Benny (2012), Is an "ASEAN Community" Achievable? A Public Perception Analysis in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore on the Perceived Obstacles to Regional Community

14. Sharing a borderless geographical space, precolonial Southeast Asians moved across the region and were unrestricted by any form of allegiance to a fixed locality. The seafaring Badjaos, for example, have repudiated any form of modern citizenship, and regard the waters of Sulawesi Sea and Palawan as their home.

15. Indigenous Peoples continue to bear the serious burdens of material poverty in today´s society. See report of Asia Development Bank (2002), Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Minorities and Poverty Reduction: Proceedings of a Regional Workshop

16. Amitav Acharya (2017), The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity, p. 29

17. Lloyd Adducul (2020), Hastening a Haze Solution: The Challenges to ASEAN Collective Engagement, *CIRSS Commentaries* (UNPUBLISHED)

18. A study suggests that Southeast Asian people have not yet satisfied the requisite levels of trust to form an ASEAN Community. See Christopher Roberts (2007), The ASEAN Community: Trusting Thy Neighbour?, *RSIS Commentaries*

19. International Crisis Group (2011), Waging Peace: ASEAN and The Thai-Cambodian Border Conflict; International Court of Justice, Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand) Case

20. Tanvi Pate (2010), Myanmar-Thailand Border Dispute: Prospects for Demarcation

21. The Belt and Road Initiative aims to link Asia with Europe and Africa through land and maritime connections to increase trade and economic growth.

22. Charles Hirschman (1988), Chinese Identities in Southeast Asia: Alternative Perspectives

23. The phrase Community with Common Destiny describes China's political commitment and determination to promote good-neighbor friendship and deepen strategic mutual trust with ASEAN. The phrase was initially used to describe the cross-strait relations as adopted in Hu Jintao´s 17th National Party Congress Report.

24. United Nations Development Programme Philippines (2013), Fast Facts: Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines

25. Nestor Castro (2018), Reflections on Philippines-Pacific Islands Shared Cultural Heritage

26. Nick Joaquín (1988), Culture and History: Occasional Notes on the Process of Philippine Becoming

27. Ibid.

28. Jorge Mojarro (2020), The Troubled Filipino Identity

29. *Mestizo* is a Spanish term for mixed racial or ethnic ancestry. Fernando Zialcita (2005), Authentic Though Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity

30. Ma. Cecilia Gastardo-Conaco (1993), Social Categorization and Identity in the Philippines

31. Felipe de Leon, Jr, Filipino Cultural Identity

32. Manuel Dayrit, et. al (2018), The Philippines Health System Review, pp. 147-150

33. Op. Cit.,

34. Former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino remarked that the "Socio-Cultural Community was apparently brought in almost as an afterthought, at the Philippines' suggestion, in the interest of rounding out the concept of a community." See Rodolfo C. Severino (2006), Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community, p.368

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