

The Development of ASEAN Identity: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

ASEAN identity has been a mutual goal that ASEAN member states have in common. As the people are a crucial force in the establishment of regional identity, there have been a significant number of attempts by the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) to make people engage within the ASEAN community. However, these efforts are continuously challenged and they have not been successful. This paper aims to discuss on the issue of ASEAN identity and its development.

Keywords: ASEAN Identity, the struggle of achieving ASEAN identity and regional identity's mechanisms

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Achieving regional identity has been an unremitting goal of ASEAN, as identity is a key to build community (Acharya, 2017, p. 26). The achievement of regional identity reflects success of an organization (Acharya, 2012, p. 25). ASEAN identity is stated as one of the mottos of ASEAN, which is 'One Vision, One Identity and One Community.' The Declaration of ASEAN Concord conveys that ASEAN member states should develop an awareness of regional identity for strong community. ASEAN identity is, therefore, significant for the strength and success of ASEAN. With the development of ASEAN identity, any problems within the community can be resolved because of the 'we' mentality. An ASEAN single identity will also further lead to permanent regional peace (Indrawan, 2016, p. 147). In addition, the absence of ASEAN identity has led ASEAN to be perceived as a loosely-grouping organization which struggles to find its voice on the global stage (Abhisit Vejajjiva, 2017, p. 349). Moreover, the relevancy of ASEAN depends on ASEAN awareness and one solid narrative on ASEAN identity of the community (Maniam, 2020, p. 12).

ASEAN's way of diplomacy, which is commonly known as golf diplomacy or durian diplomacy, is too languid for the state-led ASEAN to achieve its unified identity. The leaders of ASEAN member states would play golf, have durian and talk about their wives and children altogether, wasting their time instead of discussing on important issues (Adriani, 2014, p. 160). Whenever they are unable to settle on certain matters, they would just leave the diplomatic setting and postpone the discussion. ASEAN identity will bring out a sense of collectiveness and establishment at the people level. These may lead to immediate response to addressing ASEAN problems by the people themselves. They would no longer wait for the government support that can be slow and ineffective (Leopairote et. al., 2017, p. 196). The endorsements from ASEAN people will also strengthen ASEAN to be a successful regional organization.

Searching for ASEAN Identity

ASEAN coined the term 'identity' for the first time in the Bali Concord II document in 2003 (Maniam, 2020, p. 12). The word has been employed periodically, which can be observed in both political statements and documents of the regional organization. At the 6th Meeting of the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA) in 2014, ASEAN ministers stated that they were determined to adopt a common identity (Igboausim, 2017, p. 4). Although ASEAN has been using the discourse of common identity as a goal of community building, the term 'ASEAN identity' has not been clearly defined by the regional organization. The former Prime Minister of Thailand, Abhisit Vejjajiva expressed about the ASCC blueprint that not stating what ASEAN identity is or should be is the most urgent issue for ASEAN (Abhisit Vejjajiva, 2017, p. 349).

Nonetheless, there is a certain description of what ASEAN identity is. When ASEAN discusses on its regional identity, the phrase 'unity in diversity' is often used to describe it. The principle of 'unity in diversity' was highlighted in Kuala Lumpur Declaration and the Bali Treaties in 1976 (Palmujoki, 2001, p. 36). In addition, the Bangkok Declaration of 1967, which is the first ASEAN declaration to reaffirm that the ASEAN member states would preserve their national identities (Acharya, 2012, p. 173).

However, ASEAN is exceedingly diverse in terms of religion and language. Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are Buddhist majority, whereas Islam is predominant in Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia. On the other hand, Christianity is significantly worshipped in the Philippines (Niphaphan Chensantikun and Chainattha Damdi, 2013, p. 65). In addition, the economic sizes of ASEAN member states are also distinctive, and Southeast Asians are also driven by a wide range of cultural values. The disparity of ASEAN member states serves as an obstacle for establishing one common identity and poses a challenge to ASEAN integration.

Yet, ASEAN has imposed a mechanism to alleviate the strain. The ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025 has noted that ASEAN aims to encourage promotion on cultural diversity of the regional organization with a realization of the region's long historical and cultural connections. This effort of ASEAN can lead to a greater sense of regionalism, as its civil society has a better understanding.

The study group led by Malaysian Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim has described Southeast Asia as a community of different peoples with their own identities and domestic arrangements. This demonstrates that ASEAN member states have their own characteristics and that they are independent with their own sovereignty and national governments (Niphaphan Chensantikun and Chainattha Damdi, 2013, p. 65). Additionally, the term ‘diversity’ is related to the regional principle norms of the ASEAN way and ASEAN Centrality, which highlight on the ASEAN-centric notion and the issue of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs are prioritized.

Amitav Archaya has suggested that ASEAN identity emerged from the five major sources. These include nationalism, religion, cultural norms and modes of interaction, modernist development state orientation and approach, and regionalism (Acharya, 2017, p. 27). But the fact is ASEAN member states share nothing in common in the above mentioned sources. Moreover, these sources paradoxically prevent the success of identity building, which emerges when ‘the self’ defines themselves with the characteristics of ‘the others’ (Acharya, 2012, p. 25). Therefore, the roots of ASEAN identity are obstacles for ASEAN identity, as they object to one another.

Nationalism among ASEAN member states is an origin of tensions in Southeast Asia. Nationalism in Southeast Asia made an appearance in the political movement after the Second World War, in which countries in the region possessed a strong will for their national independence (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 80). Additionally, as colonies, Southeast Asian states were divided and ruled by colonial authorities. Building national identity was therefore crucial in the nation-building process after they were decolonized. National identity is emphasized in national educations of the region. As for example, education in Malaysia is designed to ensure that every student has Malaysian identity (Hassan et. al., 2019, p. 114). Moreover, the characteristic of nationalism in ASEAN member states is portraying neighboring countries to be national enemies in order to create a sense of national unity. The Fall of Ayutthaya was employed to make people of Myanmar an enemy of Thailand. Similarly, Thailand was symbolized in Cambodian historical textbook as the great thief (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 80). This issue is a consequence of Cambodian dependence on its past culture to uphold national identity of the country’s citizens (Yok et. al., 2019, p. 40).

Common culture is also a significant requirement for successful regional

integration because it enhances a sense of belonging, which would further lead to a feeling of safety within the community (Igboausim, 2017, pp. 1-2). Still, Southeast Asia has a characteristic of cultural diversity. Trade instigated Southeast Asia to be culturally influenced by India and China (Acharya, 2012, p. 59). Adopting and adjusting cultures from these two civilizations led Southeast Asia to be a cultural pluralistic society. It has been argued earlier that ‘diversity’ is vital and related to the national interests of ASEAN member states due to the importance of sovereignty. ASEAN celebrates the region’s cultural diversity as a part of ASEAN identity. The foundation of ASEAN City of Culture has a goal to strengthen ASEAN identity through means of encouraging people to appreciate the regional diversity in terms of culture.¹ In addition, ASEAN cultural heritage is aimed to be preserved and used to promote ASEAN cultural diversity.² Yet, only small number of people of ASEAN recognize that there is such policies of cultural preservation and attempts (Soavapa Ngampramuan, 2015, p. 2000).

However, Southeast Asians do possess cultural sharing attributes in a great extent. The state system of Southeast Asian states in the pre-colonial era was exceedingly different from the West under the Westphalian system. Clear and defined territories and borders were not in the concept of states in Southeast Asia before (Acharya, 2012, p. 60). Southeast Asian states before colonialization did not identify themselves with the national identities that they do today (ADDUCUL, 2020, p. 2). This has led to common cultures and cultural sharing in Southeast Asian states.

Cultural and historical connections can reinforce identity building. However, these cultures are perceived to be national heritage, not a regional one. This also creates a conflict between the people of ASEAN who are a crucial force for the development of ASEAN identity, since they are a part of the process (Abhisit Vejjajiva, 2017, p. 351). Cultural conflict is an obstacle for ASEAN identity, in which the quarrels tend to escalate faster than others in the rest of Asia (Croissant and Trinn, 2009, p. 25). ASEAN member states often claim to be an owner of certain cultures, and this has an impact on the people whose unity is essential in the building of ASEAN identity.

1 See 2015 ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Scorecard.

2 See ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint.

Culture was strategically used by the governments of ASEAN member states to build their nations after they became independent. Thus, other countries declaring the common culture that they signify as their own leads to anger. Losing national culture denotes losing national prestige (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p.21). For example, Thailand and Cambodia have had a cultural conflict over the Ramayana performance. In 2016, Thailand prepared to submit the performance as a national cultural heritage to the UNESCO. This caused an immediate response from the Phnom Pehn Post to publish an article saying that Cambodia was the actual founder of the culture. The anger occurred from the people of both nations (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 22). However, the fact is that both own and co-construct it. The Thai performance was influenced by Khmer Empire. It was adjusted into the country's authentic style, and was brought back to Cambodia when there was an attempt of restoring Cambodian arts and cultures after the Khmer Rouge (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 26).

Southeast Asian economies are heavily dependent on tourism, from which national heritage and culture are sources of people's income. Consequently, people have to protect their national cultures from other countries to claim, with the purpose to secure their well beings. There is a profound cultural dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia over the batik. In 2009, UNESCO announced that the technique of producing the fabric was the world heritage of Indonesia (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 41). Yet, Malaysian economy relies on batik market. In 2003, Malaysia exported batik to the United States, France and England. UNESCO's announcement was therefore upsetting to a large number of Malaysian citizens. At the same time, the Indonesian government was criticized for allowing other nation to use "Indonesian culture" for its own financial gains (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 42).

However, it is widely believed that the Batik technique originates from Egypt or Persia (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 42). Batik is a common culture which came to appear in the Malay Peninsula through trade (Acharya, 2012, p. 76). Besides the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture 2016-2025 aiming to promote cultural diversity, cultural understanding is also a mechanism that makes people of Southeast Asia aware that they were a shared community in the past (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 54). When cultural understanding is enhanced, ASEAN identity can be hopefully

developed.

The second major source of ASEAN identity is religion. Although religion in Southeast Asia is diverse, religious diversity never leads to interstate conflicts in the region. It only remains limited at the domestic level, which can be seen for example in the conflict in Myanmar between the Buddhist extremist and Muslim minority. Religious diversity therefore does not have a major impact on regionalism in Southeast Asia.

As one of the main objectives of the ASCC is to form ASEAN single identity, where the instrumentations include promoting ASEAN awareness through education, communication plans and promotion of ASEAN languages (Indrawan, 2016, p. 148). In 2009, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) has developed two platforms. The first one is the ASCC Council, which is supported by the Senior Officials Meeting on the ASCC, and the Coordinating Conference on the ASCC.³

The ASCC has put a great effort to make people engage with one another within the ASEAN community by organic volunteering.⁴ In order to create ASCC, there are a significant number of people to people groupings that have been developed. The associations include the ASEAN Accredited Civil Society Organizations, ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organization (ACWO), ASEAN Fisheries Federation (AFF), ASEAN Cosmetics Association (ACA) and ASEAN Arts Festival. From this it can be seen that the ASCC has made an attempt to include people as much as possible. The bodies cover a great range of interests that people are keen on.

Recognizing that education is a form of socialization, ASEAN Social Development in 2003 recommended that the primary education curriculum of ASEAN member states should include for the notion of ASEAN identity (Igboausim, 2017, p. 31). Moreover, the ASCC aims to ensure that education of ASEAN countries are able to enhance ASEAN awareness of the youth, who are the focus group of ASEAN to develop ASEAN awareness. The ASCC has thus established a significant number of youth focused programs with a purpose to build ASEAN identity. These include the ASEAN Youth Volunteers' Program (AYVP), the ASEAN Young Professionals Volunteers Corps and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization

3 See <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-socio-cultural-community>.

4 See ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025.

(SEAMEO).⁵

However, all of those mentioned above are all top-down mechanisms for building ASEAN identity, but the fact is that identity requires a conscious from the people to engage and interact in the regional community. Therefore, the approach should be bottom up (Acharya, 2017, p. 33). The former ASEAN Secretary General, Surin Pitsuwan suggested that the germ of ASEAN identity comes from the development of ASEAN awareness. Alexander Wendt has argued that “an actor cannot know what it wants unless it knows what it is”. An awareness should be achieved first so that the interests can be pursued (ADDUCUL, 2020, p. 2). The civil society must be able to identify themselves as both citizen of their own countries and citizen of ASEAN. However, most citizens in Southeast Asia do not associate themselves with ASEAN or recognize themselves as Southeast Asians (Chanintira na Thalang, 2020, p. 14).

The modernist state orientation is the only commonality that ASEAN member states share. Mutual interests for regional development has led to regionalism as an outcome. ASEAN has identified some common goals that the leaders of ASEAN member states believed they can be achieved through regional cooperation. These goals include economic growth and regional peace and prosperity. Still, joining regional organization is a decision made by the states. Even though ASEAN has intended to be people-orientated organization, the decision-making process in ASEAN is exceedingly state-centric. ASEAN community in the state level is vigorous. It can be argued that there is a sense of collective identity at this level. When Sri Lanka applied for the membership, it was rejected on an account of it not being ‘Southeast Asia’ enough (Acharya, 2017, p.30). However, at the people-level, regional integration is relatively weak. The civil society never has a chance to participate in the matters of the regional organization (Adriani, 2014, p. 160).

Originally, Southeast Asia was recognized as a whole united region before. The regional concept of Suvannabhumi Empire was accepted as a region by the Chinese, Egyptians and Romans (Kamontip Dueathong, 2017, p. 18). However, it was a long time ago, and people are no longer aware on how they used to connect to each other like the ancient times. However, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 can resemble this. This scheme is able to deepen a great sense

5 See 2015 ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Scorecard.

of community for ASEAN citizens through people-to-people connectivity.

However, cultural identity cannot be only ASEAN single identity (Indrawan, 2016, p. 148). The European Union is usually perceived as a model of successful regional integration (Bial, 2007, p. 3). Its identity is not also exclusive to cultural identity, but political values are just as important. Additionally, it can be seen from the emergence of the European Diversity Month that the organization embraces the populations that are not neither Caucasians nor Christians. African descents and Jewish European citizens are included to be a part of European citizens.⁶ The citizens of the European Union are integrated through the EU values which highlight on political concepts of democracy, equality and human rights.⁷ Therefore, political aspect needs to be taken into consideration for ASEAN to be a successful regionalism and achieve regional identity as well

In this case, ASEAN countries have also agreed to strengthen democracy and freedom. Human rights protection is also a key component of the vision of ASEAN as a regional organization.⁸ There are 18 principles regarding this matter, and it has been mentioned in many ASEAN documents including ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (Morada, 2017, p. 21). However, the domestic factors of ASEAN member states have prevailed the commitment for mutual political objectives. Almost all ASEAN countries have an internal struggle to fully achieve democracy, and some ASEAN members such as Myanmar are still in the process of nation building (Morada, 2017, p. 29). Democracy and human rights promotion were usually distorted to serve the conflicting groups' interest. So, it is often hard for ASEAN member states to find their common interest.

Although interaction cannot be achieved when people in the community has no common interests (Hettne and Soberbaum, 2000, p. 10), ASEAN can utilize the mechanisms that have been developed and adopt them to be a part of establishing regional identity, which successfully transit from state to people level. For instance, with the 'Responsibility to Protect at 10' which grounds a principle

6 See <https://ec.europa.eu/info/european-diversity-month-2022>.

7 The EU values were stated by the European Commission. See <https://ec.europa.eu/component-library/eu/about/eu-values>.

8 See ASEAN Charter, 2007.

from local values and cultures to stop hate crimes, and the emergence of ASEAN climate change report, ASEAN can have an identity of being an advocate on stopping hate crimes and environmental protector. These identities are directly to the people themselves and a large number of them have already been aware on the matters. They can be the ‘shared values and common vision’, which Minister Marsudi stated in the Cross Pillar Consultation on the Narrative of ASEAN Identity which took place at the ASEAN Secretariat in 2020.⁹

ASEAN’s religious diversity can also be turned into opportunities to develop a regional identity. ASEAN can pursue a common goal to eradicate religious extremism and terrorism (Abhisit Vejjajiva, 2017, p. 355). This course can lead to a correlation among the sources of ASEAN identity, which are religion and cultural norms and modes of interaction. Moreover, certain group of citizens of ASEAN member states that have cultural conflicts do possess a sense of belonging and attachment. The borderland communities including the Dayak communities in Sarawak, Malaysia and Kalimantan, Indonesia have a strong sense of cultural and linguistic solidarity and identity, even though they are in different nation states. Additionally, despite the territorial conflicts between Thailand and Cambodia, Thais and Cambodians who live in the border areas do not perceive each other as enemies (Noor, 2017, p. 255). Therefore, the borderland community should be a key in the development of ASEAN identity that is people-centered. Still, this group of people tends to be neglected by the governments, and regarded as ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

Regionalization is a process. Therefore, it does take time for ASEAN to officially identify the definition of ASEAN Identity. The European Union took 36 years to disregard the members’ sovereignties and obtain European Community. It has been not two decades yet after ASEAN Charter was signed. ASEAN member states just became legally bound to the regional grouping. Additionally, it was the first time when people-oriented community was encouraged. Moreover, political regional structure of ASEAN is also exceedingly complex and more than any other regions. The remnants of colonialism have endured, leading ASEAN countries to individually prioritize their national interests, while aiming to strengthen regional

9 See <https://asean.org/asean-holds-virtual-consultation-on-asean-identity-narrative>.

cooperation for common goals. However, we are witnessing ASEAN's journey of achieving its regional identity. The efforts have been challenged, but it is undeniable that ASEAN has made progress in identifying what the definition ASEAN Identity is.

ASEAN has been striving for its regional identity. However, its definition is unclear expect the statement of unity in diversity. Achieving regional identity takes time. It has to be socially constructed that the combination of inherited values and constructed values should be balanced. The inherited values can derive from historical connections and shared cultures among Southeast Asian states, whereas the constructed values can come from goals that ASEAN member states have in common including poverty reduction and being an environmental activist. However, it is impossible for both values to be achieved if there is a lack of ASEAN awareness within the community of ASEAN citizens. Therefore, education plays a vital role and people should understand how they can benefit from ASEAN, so that they can have an appreciation for the ASEAN community.

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