



Is Southeast Asia a region geographically/culturally ?

I would like to make a few comments on Alice G. Guillermo's article "Theoretical concerns in a Southeast Asian perspective in aesthetics" (published in SPAFA Journal Volume 6 Number 2). In her 2nd paragraph she states: "... while the different countries of Southeast Asia indeed belong to one geographical region, their histories since the age of European expansion in the sixteenth century have diverged, developing their own distinct economic, political, and cultural structures." I both agree and disagree with this statement. While I agree that Southeast Asian countries have developed somewhat differing political and economic structures, I only partially agree that they have developed differing cultural structures; and I do disagree with the implication that Southeast Asia can only be considered a region on a geographical basis. I have tried to answer similar statements twice before and refer to those two circumstances:

A number of years ago I was at a UNESCO conference, in Kuala Lumpur I believe, which was organised to plan a history of Malayan Southeast Asia. After a few days of discussion on what should be included, the Director of a new Studies Programme (either Islamic or Malay, I do not recall which) at the University of Malaya, made a very passionate suggestion that instead of calling this a history of

Malayan Southeast Asia, it should be a history of Islamic Southeast Asia as Islam was the primary unifying element of Southeast Asia. There was a bit of a rumble in the audience, but no one spoke up. I felt I had to say something and was recognised. I suspect that my plea was a bit impassioned as well.

I explained that the only thing that made Southeast Asia anything more than a geographical region was its prehistory, and that its prehistory made it a distinct cultural region, not just an area that was geographically distinct from India and China. (Incidentally, it is not geographically distinct from either India or China prehistorically as previous to an indefinite time during the 1st millennium B.C., eastern India was culturally closer to Southeast Asia than to western India, and the Yangtze Valley and south of South China was culturally more directly related to Southeast Asia culturally than it was to North China.)

In a paper I had written earlier (Solheim 1969) I had divided Southeast Asia's prehistory and history into several periods, the last of which was the 'Period of Expanding Empires'. I explained that this included the time between roughly A.D. 1 to about 1466, with the coming of Indian and Chinese influences into Southeast Asia.

There, local and foreign political powers started expanding and contracting, with and without changing boundaries, which affected primarily the local elite and had relatively little effect on the culture of more than ninety per cent of the population. I also said that the coming of Euro-



pean expansion into the region had the same sort of effect as had the coming of Buddhism, varieties of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, India, or Chinese influence.

Southeast Asian culture has been united in part in its great diversity for thousands of years, and the coming of new ideas from many different sources during the end of the 2nd World War. Perhaps, when we look back on this in a thousand years, we will see something different happening. In the 1950s and 1960s, when I first started working in remote areas of different countries of Southeast Asia, I was much more impressed by the many similarities between the people of the different Southeast Asia countries than the differences. It was only when you were in the urban centres that



you did not notice this, finding instead how all the big cities in Southeast Asia were becoming much the same, particularly their traffic.

I had an other disagreement with an article that appeared in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (Emmerson 1984). This also concerned whether "Southeast Asia" was a real region or not. Emmerson, a political scientist, claimed that the title "Southeast Asia" was artificial, and had been made up as a military expedient during the 2nd World War when the "Far East" had been divided into a China-Burma-India Theater, and the area in between, without a name, became the Southeast Asia Theater. Emerson argues (pages 11-14) that political criteria became the deciding factor for defining the area covered by the term "Southeast Asia". He says, "By the late 1970s.. most observers, in the United States if not elsewhere, considered "Southeast Asia" to consist of ten political units: Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and to-be-independent Brunei" (page 13). This is fine for political scientists but would be awkward for geographers, geologists, biologists, and anthropologists, and simply wrong for archaeologists concerned with prehistoric Southeast Asia (Solheim 1985:142).

The Eleventh Pacific Science Congress, in 1966, passed the following resolution:

2.2 Resolved that for the sake of clarity, researchers be encouraged to designate areas in the Pacific as follows: Northeast Asia, Mainland Southeast

Asia, Island Southeast Asia, Oceania, Australia, and the American Rim. The ad hoc committee, that worked out the names of the areas suggested in resolution 2.2, also presented tentative boundaries for some of the areas. These are as follows: Mainland Southeast Asia would extend from the thirtieth parallel of latitude (approximately the Yangtze River) to the south as far as Singapore, and from the Irrawaddy River to the South China Sea; Island Southeast Asia would include all the island off the coasts of Mainland Southeast Asia, from Formosa around to the Andaman Islands..." These boundaries are not meant to be absolute, western Burma, Assam and portions of eastern India no doubt should be included in Mainland Southeast Asia for some time periods and western New Guinea very possibly should be a part of Island Southeast Asia for some periods. (Solheim 1967:3)

As recognised "real" cultural regions, both Mainland Southeast Asia and Island Southeast Asia should be capitalised. The words "Mainland", "Island," and "Southeast" are not adjectives in these cases but are proper nouns.

I closed my article (Solheim 1985:147) with the following needed reversal: Emmerson, in his conclusion, very adroitly reverses his field. He feels that Southeast Asian studies "... has become too "modern" in the sense of being politically focussed and limited.... It is time, I think, to revive and update the "traditional" anthropological holism that first enabled European writers to imagine seeing

a unicorn out there in the wilderness next to China and India" (page 21). While I have been riding the unicorn all the way (in Southeast Asia we call it a rhinoceros), I am in full agreement, but I do believe that some of us have felt Southeast Asia was there all along.

I return now to Guillermo. On page 15, she say: "These groups preserved the ancient Malay traditions..." The Philippines is not a Malay country, the great majority of Filipinos are not Malays and never were. When this term came into use, the word "Malay" was purely a word for the language, and at that time it was apparently thought that Philippine languages were a variety of Malay. Linguistic and archaeological research have since shown that the Philippine languages are not a variety of Malay, and no doubt developed at an earlier date than Malay. Filipinos are Filipino; not Malay.

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