

South-East Asia: Unity in Diversity

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Abstract: *South-East Asia is probably the most unique place in the world for the region has been witnessing two opposite features since time immemorial. The entire region is multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural with diverse historical backgrounds. At the same time, there are elements that have accorded the region a contrasting feature. That is why, unity in diversity has been a common characteristic of the region. While South-East Asia is an example of diversity for its geographical, ethnic, linguistic, economic and historic considerations, the region is also a shining example of unity for several factors. The basis of looking at South-East Asia as such may be articulated in various approaches and the present article is a humble attempt to that end.*

Introduction

‘South-East Asia’ is a modern term and it is used to refer to both the vast archipelago, which includes Indonesia and the Philippines, and the areas of the eastern Asiatic mainland that make up the Indo-Chinese peninsula. In other words, the whole region which contains the countries of Burma or Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines, and East Timor is called South-East Asia. The term ‘South-East Asia’ first appeared in 1839 in Boston in a publication entitled *‘Travels in Southeastern Asia, Embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam, and China’* which was a two-volume travelogue of Howard Malcolm, an American Christian missionary. Then in 1847, the British anthropologist J. R. Logan inaugurated the scholarly usage of the denomination in the first of a series of articles in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*. It took a century from the time of Malcolm and Logan until the phrase ‘South-East Asia’ was widely used during the Pacific War of the Second World War which lasted from 1941 to 1945 (Hall, 1981: 3, Emmerson, 1984: 5). It has now been internationally accepted that the region which comprises the countries as just stated what are now ten members of the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations), plus East Timor is called South-East Asia. Of ten countries of South-East Asia, Indonesia’s current official national motto is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*—a phrase from fourteenth-century poem by Mpu Tantular and it is translated as Unity in Diversity.¹ The term ‘Unity in Diversity’ can equally and rationally be applied to South-East Asia as a whole for two opposing features were in the past and are at present seen to reflect on the region’s geography, history, language, ethnicity,

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religion and culture. Divided as mainland South-East Asians and Insular South-East Asians currently, the Indonesians, Malaysians and Filipinos are mainly of Malay origin while the ethnicities, languages and alphabets of the Vietnamese, Thais, Laotians, Cambodians, and Burmese are significantly different from one another. Such diversity is also reflected in geographical and cultural fields of South-East Asia. However, at the same time, the region is now a symbol of unity which is also reflected in several areas. This article attempts first to review the reasons for which South-East Asia is arguably called a place of diversity and then examine the factors for which it can also rightly be considered as a region of unity. In the process of doing so, the article also analyzes different aspects of the diversity and unity of South-East Asia. The discussion of the article, however, covers a period from ancient times to the preaching of Christianity by the Europeans in the area in the early modern period.

Diversity of South-East Asia

South-East Asia has never been in any sense an isolated or self-contained unit; rather the region is easily accessible by water. Because of its crossroads situation on the map of Asia and easily accessible by sea, South-East Asia has always been peculiarly exposed to external influences. For this very reason South-East Asia has become a meeting-ground of commerce, cultures and civilizations (Harrison, 1963: x). Early in the Christian era, when the commercial importance of South-East Asia was seriously felt, the Indians and Westerners used to call the region Golden Khersonese, the “Land of Gold”. Soon, the region became known for its aromatic woods, benzoin, pepper, pine resins, the finest and rarest of spices and the other products of its rainforests or Sumatran jungle numbering about 500 (Hall, 1981: 40, Wheatly, 1966: 144-145). With the establishment of the Srivijaya maritime empire in southern-eastern Sumatra in the latter half of the seventh century (650 A.D.) the communication of South-East Asia with the outside world rapidly increased which in fact began to bring wealth and new ideas to that region (Hall, 1981: 39-41). Hence, from the seventh to the tenth centuries, Middle Easterners and Chinese not only saw South-East Asia as an essential commerce route between India and China, but also as a source of spices and other items from the jungle with a high market value.

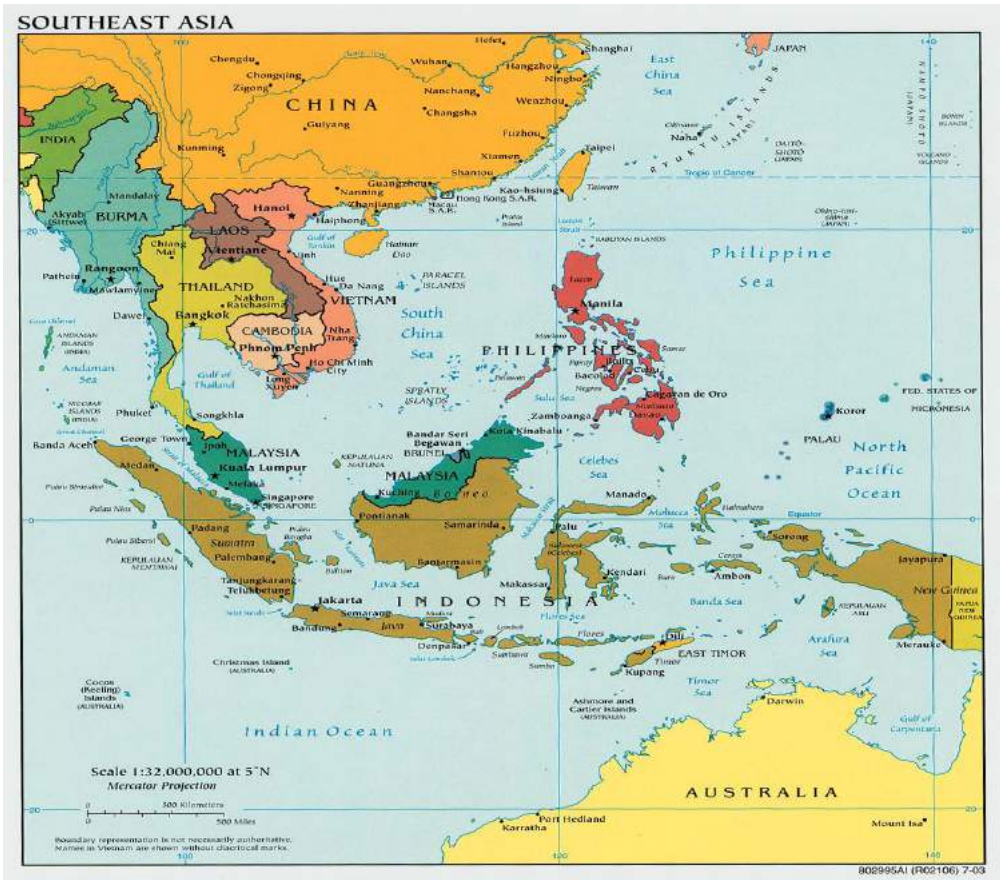
Knowing full well that South-East Asia was the spice center of the globe by the fifteenth century, sailors from ports on the Atlantic, on the other half of the hemisphere, would venture into unexplored and uncharted oceans in order to find these Spice Islands (Hall, 2011: 3). Considering the commercial significance of South-East Asia, people from various parts of the world, particularly from India, China, Bengal, Arabia, Persia and Europe, started migrating into this region even from the early times. Thus, distinctive geographical setting and the geographical crossroads position plus the economic value of South-East Asia have greatly contributed to the development of it as a fascinating region of diversity and this diversity of South-East Asia is evident in many areas ranging from geography to

ethnicity to language to economy and history to religion and culture. These are explained in the following sections.

Geographical Diversity of South-East Asia

A sub-region of Asia, South-East Asia covers 4.5 million square kilometres (1.7 square miles), or 10.5% of Asia and 3% of the earth's total land area. The region extends 4,500 kilometres from north to south and 5,500 kilometres from east to west (Chufrin and Mohzeiko, 1989: 2). Geographically, South-East Asia is fairly well defined; however, it does not form a natural unit of its own. A large part of South-East Asia is situated in the Northern Hemisphere, the equator dividing Indonesia approximately in half. Some of its islands are, therefore, situated south of the equator. In line with such diversity, South-East Asia comprises highlands, high mountains, lowlands, longest rivers (the Irrawaddy, Sittang, Menam, Mekong and Red Rivers) and intervening vast seas, stretch for nearly 5000 kilometers southeast from Myanmar to eastern Indonesia (Tarling, 1992: 55). The region also encompasses two broad geographical groupings or sub-regions namely, mainland South-East Asia and island South-East Asia. The series of mountains that stretches from the Himalayas eastward into southern China physically divides Mainland South-East Asia from the rest of the Asian continent. The mainland South-East Asia is also known as peninsular or continental South-East Asia while the island South-East Asia is also known as maritime or the Malay Archipelago or insular South-East Asia. Mainland South-East Asia consists of countries of Burma or present-day Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia. On the other hand, the island parts of South-East Asia are situated farther south and the areas are more isolated and these compose the huge archipelagoes of Indonesia and the Philippines. Island or insular South-East Asia comprises the countries of Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines and East Timor and the eastern part of Malaysia.

Below is a Map of South-East Asia that clearly shows its geographical diversity.



Source: https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/southeast_asia_pol_2003.jpg

Historical Diversity of South-East Asia

The historical diversity of South-East Asia is reflected on various names that had been used for the region before the very term 'South-East Asia' came into general use in the 1940s. History records that the name 'South-East Asia' got currency only since the Second World War when the region was placed as South East Asia Command or SEAC under the command of Admiral Lord Luis Mountbatten in 1941. Previously, with the sole exception of Thailand, all modern nations of South-East Asia had long formed parts of different imperial groupings of the British, French, Dutch and the Americans. Hence, the region was called in several names. Many British, French and Indian scholars called the region 'Greater India' or 'Further India' and the Hinduized or Indianized states (Funan and Champa). On the other hand, most Chinese literatures categorized the region as *Kun Lun* or 'Nanyang'

(‘Little China’ or region along the Southern Ocean). The Indians called South-East Asia ‘Suvarnabhumi’ and the Arabians named the region as ‘Zabag’ (Emmerson, 1984: 4). The region also has other names as well including Indo-China (for mainland South-East Asia), the Malay world² (together with the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian islands may be called the Malay world, an inverted half-moon), the Malay Archipelago which was known as ‘Netherlands India’ or the East Indies or the Netherlands Indies.³ The various spellings and usages of the current name of the region that have been widely used by the historians and scholars add further historic diversity to the region. In using the name of the region American writers have standardized the form ‘Southeast Asia’. Victor Purcell, E. H. G. Dobby and others have followed this form. During the Second World War when the name of the region came into use, the South East Asia Command used the unhyphenated form (i.e. South East Asia). However, Admiral Lord Luis Mountbatten who was the Supreme Allied Commander of South East Asia in his report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff specifically used the hyphenated form— ‘South-East Asia’. The British Royal Navy also uses the hyphen in using the name. In the field of history D. G. E. Hall and after him Paul Wheatly, Gennadi Chufrin, Igor Mohzeiko and others have popularized this form. Brian Harrison chose ‘South-east Asia’ style. Thus the different and significant names of South-East Asia used for the whole region or sometimes parts of the region in the past, and the various forms of the present term itself unequivocally show the region’s historic diversity.

Ethnic or Racial Diversity

The diversity of South-East Asia is more pronounced in the field of ethnicity. South-East Asia is rightfully regarded as ‘an anthropologist’s paradise’ (Hall, 1981: 5) since it is a region of anthropological complexity and remarkable for the sheer variety of ethnic diversity. From time immemorial South-East Asia has become a melting-pot of diverse ethnic groups. It has been determined by genetic and biological data, such as tooth morphology and craniometric investigations that humans have lived in Borneo and the Malay Peninsula for at least 40,000 years (Hooker, 2003: 21). However, South-East Asia has a history of human settlement that dates back around a million years (Tarling, 1992: 61). Additionally, history reveals that a variety of prehistoric human species moved from continental Asia through mainland and island South-East Asia. The major human groups thus came to South-East Asia and settled themselves are of four types. According to R. O. Winstedt, they were: the Jakun (or Proto-Malay) and the civilized Malay, the Negrito, and the Sakai (Winstedt, 1934: 1). Brian Harrison in his *South-east Asia: A Short History*, however, classified these four types as Australoid or Veddoid, Negritos, Melanesoid and Indonesian. It is pertinent to state that the features of the Sakai type human race are similar to that of Australoid-Veddoid type while the Jakun type of people can be compared with the Indonesian type. A general description of these human groups of South-East Asia will clearly show South-East Asia’s ethnic diversity.

i) Australoid-Veddoid or the Sakai Type

According to Brian Harrison, the Australoid and the very similar Veddoid people were probably the first widespread human inhabitants of South-East Asia. The Australoid type of people survives in the aborigines of Australia and in the Sakai and Senoi hill-tribes of Malay. The Veddoid type (though generally with a Proto-Malay admixture) whom the anthropologists have categorized as such after the Vedda tribes of Ceylon, is seen in certain groups in the southern parts of Celebes, and on the Engano and Mentawai Islands off the west coast of Sumatra. The peoples of southern India also show a strong Veddoid type or admixture. The Australoid-Veddoid type is a dark-skinned race of small stature, with a depressed nose and curly but not woolly hair (Harrison, 1963: 4; Vlekke, 1965: 8; Hall, 1981: 6). They are taller and fairer than Negritos, with larger skulls and wavy hair, and have painted lines and designs on their faces (Winstedt, 1934: 2). These peoples' artifacts have been discovered in northern Anam, Luang Prabang, Siam, Malaya, and on Sumatra's east coast.

ii) Negritos

The next oldest group of human types who moved down into South-East Asia was the small (dwarf) woolly-haired Negritos (Harrison, 1963: 4).

According to R. O. Winstedt, Spanish writers invented the name 'Negrito' to refer to the dark-woolly-haired Aetas of the Philippines (Winstedt, 1934: 1). It is assumed that around 40,000 years ago they may have been predominant in South-East Asia. This group of people appears to be representative of contemporary Australo-Melanesian population. At present, only the Andaman Islands, portions of peninsular Malaysia and Thailand, as well as some areas of the central and northern Philippines, are home to them. (Tarling, 1992: 74-78). They survive in Malaya as the Semang people of Kedah and Perak and the Pangan in Kelantan, and in the Philippines as the Aetas (Harrison, 1963: 4; Sardesai, 1981: 8). Both Australoid and Negrito peoples spread southward as far as Australia.

iii) Melanesoid or Australo-Melanesoid

The third type of human race that followed the Australoid and Negritos and came to South-East Asia was the Melanesoid or Australo-Melanesoid people. Brian Harrison has stated that this type of people is no longer surviving in South-East Asia, but numerous in the Pacific islands to New Guinea and Australia; however, Cady has noted that frizzy-haired, black-skinned Melanesoid peoples were observed in the Mekong delta by Chinese visitors in the thirteenth and by French observers in the twentieth centuries (Cady, 1964: 14).

iv) Indonesian or Austronesian (the Jakun type)

Austronesian or Indonesian peoples were the last major group of people to descend into South-East Asia during prehistoric times. The rivers served as the migratory

routes for people from South-East Asia during both prehistoric and historic periods. The more developed Malay races, also known as Indonesian or Austronesian races, started their long southward migration from southwest China and arrived in South-East Asia between 2500 and 1500 B.C. after the Australoid-Veddoid, Negrito, and Melanesoid primitive peoples. According to historians, the descendants of these people make up the majority of the Malay and island populations of South-East Asia and are fundamentally of the same human genus as the remainder of the Indo-Chinese peninsula and southern China. The Indonesian type peoples who are the largest ethnic elements in today's South-East Asia and who are the brown-skinned Malay inhabiting Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines form two broad, though by no means exact, categories: the Deutero-Malay and the Proto-Malay (the elder) (the younger). The Proto-Malays with their clearer Mongoloid strains arrived in South-East Asia in about 2500 B.C. and they probably formed the first basic Indonesian population of South-East Asia (Harrison, 1963: 5; Winstedt, 1966: 14). They are represented in the Jakun of Malaya, the Torjas of Celebes (also known as Sulawesi), the Dyaks of Borneo, the islanders of Nias and the Bataks and the Minagkabau of Sumatra. The Proto-Malays also predominated in the population of the Greater and Lesser Sunda Islands to the east. The less homogenous but a more mixed type Deutero-Malays, known also as the Coastal Malays migrated to South-East Asia in around 300 B.C (Sardesai, 1981: 8-9; Vlekke, 1965: 9-10). The Deutero-Malays tended to settle in coastal areas and became more mobile, especially after traders arrived from the outside. They are found in the Malays of Malaysia and Sumatra, the Balinese, Javanese, Sundanese, and Madurese of Indonesia and the Bisayans, Tagalogs, Ilokanos, Bikols, and Pampangans of the Philippines (Bastin and Benda, 1968: 2; Harrison, 1963: 5). Sea-gypsy fishermen-pirates who long infested the straits of Malacca and the northern coasts of Java Sea, along with the Bugis of the Celebes north of Macassar, were of this group (Cady, 1964: 12).

Apart from the above-mentioned ancient ethnic groups of South-East Asia, the presence of various races including the Burmese, the Champs in central and southern Annam, the Khmers of Mekong delta, the Malays, the Mons in the Menam valley and lower Myanmar, the Pyus in the Irrawaddy and Sittang basins, the Thais and the Vietnamese in the mainland South-East Asia and the Javanese, the Bataks and the Dyaks in the island South-East Asia has also formed the region's ethnic diversity.⁴ The advent and presence of large minority groups of non-indigenous Asians mainly the Chinese and the Indians as immigrants in various countries of South-East Asia have also formed pluralistic society and multiculturalism in the region. The prevalence of these different human groups in South-East Asia since prehistoric times unequivocally proves the region's ethnic diversity.

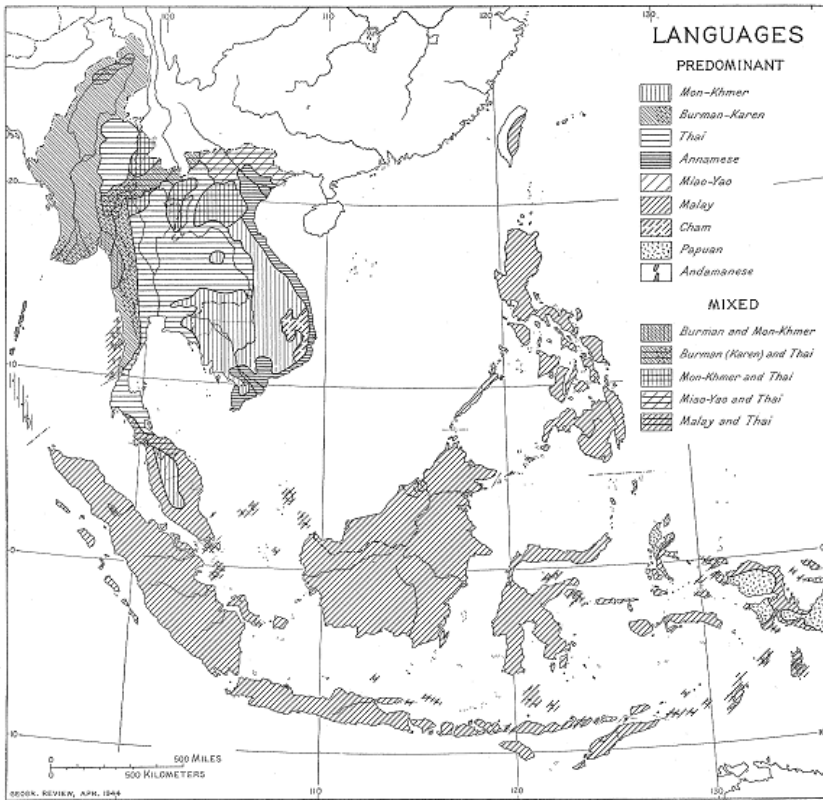
Linguistic Diversity

The profound diversity of South-East Asia is clearly evident when we look at the languages of the region. South-East Asia is a fine example of linguistic diversity

exhibited in terms of the existence of more than one major language family and, once again, it does not linguistically form a natural unit. Brian Harrison is of the opinion that three of the great linguistic groups or families of Asia are represented in the region. They are Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Chinese and Malayo-Polynesian (Harrison, 1963: xi). However, historians like Lea E. Williams and Nicholas Tarling claimed that people of South-East Asia speak in the following four language families: Austroasiatic, Tai-Kadai, Tibeto-Burman or Sino-Tibetan and Austronesian (Williams, 1974: 18; Tarling, 1992: 78, 108-109). Each of these language families, however, has its area of greatest diversity for the four, as distinct from one another as the Indo-Europeans from the Semitic family, are of course divided into many languages and sub-divided into innumerable dialects. Following is a brief discussion of the four great linguistic families in which the people of South-East Asia speak.

- (i) **Austro-Asiatic:** This language family which includes approximately 150 languages is the most widespread and the most geographically fragmented in mainland South-East Asia (Tarling, 1992: 109). According to Brian Harrison, languages with a common Austro-Asiatic basis were and are seen to speak in parts of Burma or Myanmar, Siam or Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia (Harrison, 1963: xi).
- (ii) **Tibeto-Chinese or Sino-Tibetan:** This language family is also known as Tibeto-Burman and this subgroup includes such major languages as Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lolo and Naga. People of Burma or Myanmar, Laos, Siam or Thailand and Vietnam generally speak in this language family (Harrison, 1963: xi; Williams, 1974: 18).
- (iii) **Malayo-Polynesian:** Languages of the Malayo-Polynesian family which is a successor group of Austronesian languages family is one of the most widespread linguistic families in the world and the family members of this language in South-East Asia are located in seven of the ten (Laos and Burma are the two exceptions) present-day countries of the region (Williams, 1974: 19-20). This language family includes Malay, Minagkabau, Iban, Acehnese, Chamic, Javanese, Balinese and several other languages of Sumatra and western Borneo. Languages of Malayo-Polynesian family are spoken in parts of southern Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and all of Indonesia except for the Papuan Halmahera (Tarling, 1992: 110, 114).
- (iv) **Tai-Kadai:** The Tai-Kadai languages include Thai (with thirty to thirty-five million speakers), Lao, Shan of northern Myanmar and numerous lesser languages of scattered minority peoples in Burma, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam (Williams, 1974: 19).

Below is a map showing the distribution of languages families and major languages.



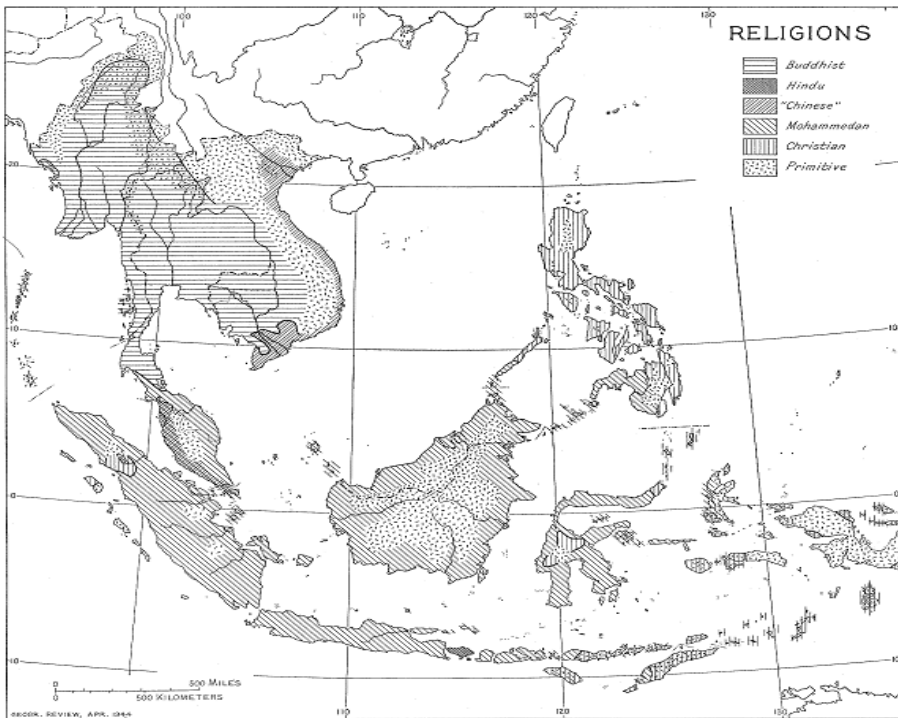
Source: Jan O. M. Broek, 'Diversity and Unity in Southeast Asia', *Geographical Review*, April, 1944, Vol. 34, No. 2, p. 184; *The Cambridge History of South-East Asia*, Vol. I (From early times to c. 1800), Cambridge University Press, Singapore, 1992, p. 108.

Religious and Cultural Diversity

South-East Asia has continued to be dominated by the intrusive forces of culture, commerce, and religion. While the geographical centrality of South-East Asia in Eastern trade and navigation has been of incalculable significance, the unique place of the region as a crossroads of peoples has been and remains even more decisive particularly in terms of religion of the region. Initially, South-East Asia had fostered an indigenous belief (animism), culture and civilization. The main elements of this primitive religion of South-East Asia were: the people's pantheistic belief that each and every living thing has a 'soul' or 'life-energy,' which is present in all things but may be more concentrated in some parts of the body than others (Vlekke, 1965: 15). However, as time progressed, Indian and Chinese cultural influences made their lasting imprint on the region and they impacted nearly every

section of life in South-East Asia for a long period of time. Following the Indian and the Chinese, Arab, Bengal, Persian as well as European contacts have also left an indelible imprint on the larger part of South-East Asia, thus making the region a unique example of religious diversity. The introduction of Hinduism in South-East Asia in first Christian Era was followed by Buddhism (Theravada and Mahayana) more or less about the same time or later by Indian merchants and religious preachers. Later on, from the seventh century A.D., Islam anchored its foothold in the region by the Arab, Indian, Bengali and Persian Muslim merchants and preachers.⁵ At last, Christianity spread to South-East Asia with the Portuguese conquest of Malacca entrepôt in 1511 and the Spanish conquest and occupation of the Philippines in 1571. Once introduced by commercial enterprises, each of these religions successfully retains its adherents in the region and thus prevents the region from forming a religious unit. Thus, South-East Asia has become the centre of four religions adding a new dimension to the region's religious diversity. The religious and cultural diversity of the region is a result of the absorption of various cultures and religions, including those of Indo-China, India, Islam, and Christianity, as well as their adaptation to or accommodation of local beliefs and customs. The religious and cultural diversity of South-East Asia is evident for the dominant religious traditions practiced in different parts of the region by classifying the region as Hindu South-East Asia (Bali island of Indonesia), Theravada Buddhist South-East Asia (Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia), Mahayana Buddhist and Confucian South-East Asia (Vietnam), Muslim South-East Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei) and Christian South-East Asia (the Philippines and East Timor).⁶

A map of South-East Asia showing the region's religious and cultural diversity:



Source: Jan O. M. Broek, 'Diversity and Unity in Southeast Asia' *Geographical Review*, April, 1944, Vol. 34, No. 2 p. 185.

Political and Economic Diversity

South-East Asia experienced two types of states or political entities: land states and port kingdoms or maritime empires, formed on the basis of their economies. The first land states in South-East Asia, according to D.G.E. Hall, appear in three areas: the lower Mekong and its delta, north of Hue in contemporary Annam, and the northern section of the Malay Peninsula. The important land states were Funan, Champa, Lin-yi and Langkasuka. These states were based on agriculture economy. On the other hand, the port kingdoms or maritime empires developed in the coastal areas of the sea or along the Malacca straits or in the islands. The maritime empires of Srivijaya in south-eastern Sumatra (established in 650 AD), Mataram in central Java (established king Sanjaya in the eighth century), Majapahit in Java (established in 1293), and Malacca in the Malay Peninsula adjoining the Malacca straits (established in 1402) are some examples of these types. These port kingdoms were based on sea trade or maritime commerce. The early South-East Asians developed skills in navigation chiefly for sea trade and fishing, and throughout much of the region seaborne commerce was as important as agriculture (Cady, 1964: 6). A large part of the able-bodied population has been engaged in

farming, fishing, seaborne trade and the timber industry from time immemorial (Chufrin and Mohzeiko, 1989: 3). Thus, two clear distinct economies developed side by side in South-East Asia centering the two different political types of states and this is another example of the region's diversity.

The above account is a clear picture of the geographical, ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural, political and economic diversity of South-East Asia. However, there are many logical ways to demonstrate the unity and harmony of South-East Asia as well. In fact, the factors and aspects for considering the region as a unity are also numerous. At this point, we turn to examine the reasons and different aspects of the unity of South-East Asia. They can be summarized as being geographical, ethnic, linguistic, historical and political and cultural as well.

Geographical Unity of South-East Asia

As opposed to the exposed geographical diversity, there was an inherent geographical unity of South-East Asia. Geographically, South-East Asia is a huge and varied region; however, its components have much in common. 'It extends from the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, narrow mountain gorges overgrown with pine trees, from the cool and bright mountain forests and hilly plains covered with tall teak trees to flat valleys in which flow slow turbid rivers, to intended coasts with mango trees, mountain islands rising above the ocean surface, silent tropical jungles and waterfalls rolling from cliffs into the surf' (Chufrin and Mohzeiko, 1989: 3). South-East Asia must be considered a distinct region within the wider unity of the Monsoon Lands from a geographical standpoint (Fisher, 1964: 5). It was due to the geographical factors for which almost the whole of the region experiences a similar tropical climate which is hot and moist. That is, the weather of South-East Asia is characterized by strong downpours and violent sea storms. Its atmosphere is saturated with the smell of orchids and herbs growing on the plains (Chufrin and Mohzeiko, 1989: 3). The majority of South-East Asian nations, which are located between the Tropic of Cancer and twelve degrees south of the Equator, have considerable rainfall and consistently high temperatures, which have contributed to the growth of the region's extensive rain forests. As a consequence, peoples of the region concentrated on settling along the rivers and developed skills in navigation—an important means of movement and communication—a common phenomenon of the region (Bastin and Benda, 1968: 2). It is pertinent to state here that there is a truism regarding South-East Asia where 'land divides, water unites'. It is the widespread development of skills in navigation in the region that confers a significant meaning to that truism.

Ethnic or Racial Unity

As explained above, in the past mainly four major ethnic or racial groups lived in South-East Asia while at present hundreds of ethnic groups are living in the region. However, the matter of the fact is that the great majority of the people have a strong racial similarity. For example, Indonesian or Austronesian (also known as the Jakun) people are the majority in the region which shows a clear racial unity.

This uniformity of race is strongly demonstrated by different admixture of Negrito, Indonesian and Mongol blood people of South-East Asia (Purcell, 1965: 3). Back in 1992 *The Cambridge History of South-East Asia (Vol. I)* mentions that the great majority of the 400 million inhabitants of South-East Asia belonged to a biological grouping which may be termed Southern Mongoloid (Tarling, 1992: 73). Thus, peoples with different language and cultural background of South-East Asia may also be seen with strong physical similarities which support the proposition the ethnic or racial unity of South-East Asia.

Linguistic Unity

True, South-East Asia is a sheer example of linguistic diversity where people speak fine region of cultural diversity where people speak in several language families and each of these language families has its area of greatest diversity for these language families were and are divided into many languages and sub-divided into innumerable dialects. Interestingly, South-East Asian anthropological records show that people who seem biologically quite different speak languages belonging to the same family. That is, despite the fact that many different languages are spoken throughout this wide region, all of them are members of the Malayo-Polynesian or Austronesian language family (Tarling, 1992: 56, 276).

Historical and Political Unity

Since South-East Asia took shape as a definite geographical and geopolitical entity (more than 2000 years ago), the region has passed through a series of historical stages of development which were similar for the various parts of the region. The exposed position of South-East Asia to the outside world has created for the region an opportunity to welcome fairly large minority groups of non-indigenous peoples. Therefore, historically immigrants like Chinese and Indians in the region (chiefly in Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia) have created similar social and political problems in each, the problems of the 'plural society', a society in which 'distinct social orders live side by side, but separately, within the same political unit' (Harrison, 1963: xi). That is, from ancient time the non-South-Asian immigrants in South-East Asia have formed pluralistic societies in the countries of the region where they are living and they have also created similar social orders and problems; however, they have been living side by side under the same political unit of the region. Additionally, all the South-East Asian land states and port kingdoms or maritime empires shared common characteristic features, which highlight the fact that the prevailing inner processes and trends of development were also similar. One important feature was that these former states shared common hierarchical systems. The land and all the subjects belonged to the head of state. The rulers of these states were both secular and spiritual leaders while their thrones were regarded as the centres of the Universe and the palaces as the homes of living god (Chufrin and Mohzeiko, 1989: 16-17).

Economic Unity

As discussed above, due to the two kinds of states formation South-East Asia witnessed two different economic systems in the past. Despite these

differences, there was a common feature of the economy of the region and the life-style of the people of the region. Because of the geographical factors, the mass of over 681 million inhabitants of South-East Asia share broadly similar methods of food-production and ways of life. The region has been inhabited for many centuries and the people of the region have become adapted to it and have been adapting it to their needs. In the early period, the peoples of South-East Asia also shared a mostly similar physical terrain, with plenty of readily accessible productive land to provide the basic economic requirements of the local community. Men and women worked together to produce food in early South-East Asia's traditional households, which involved clearing trees, planting, weeding, harvesting, cooking, feeding pigs and poultry, and fishing (Tarling, 1992: 187). Since early time, the cultivation of irrigated rice-fields has become a common feature in the life of the people of South-East Asia while rice is the basic or staple food of the inhabitants of the region. The early economy of South-East Asia was initially completely self-sufficient and focused mostly on hunting and fishing. Over time, however, it slowly expanded due to the adoption of primitive agricultural practices that involved shifting dry farming on progressively cleared forest lands. This method of farming, which is still prevalent in South-East Asia, was finally replaced by wet rice production (called sawah) in permanently irrigated fields (Bastin and Benda, 1968: 3). Hence, the principal means of livelihood of the South-East Asian people at the early stage was agriculture (Vlekke, 1965: 12). Therefore, though the mode of life of the peoples of the region differs, their main occupation has been and still is agriculture (Chufrin and Mohzeiko, 1989: 3).

Cultural Unity

More important than the geographical, racial, linguistic or religious diversity of South-East Asia is cultural affinity or cultural unity. That is, culturally, too, there is an underlying concept of the unity of South-East Asia despite the astounding diversity of the region in almost every aspect. To demonstrate the cultural unity of South-East Asia we may sum up the characteristics of the region in the manner:

- a) On the material side, despite ethnic variety, the early peoples of South-East Asia shared a fairly common pattern of material culture including wet rice cultivation or the cultivation of rice on irrigated fields, the domestication of the cattle (ox) and buffaloes, the preparation of stone adzes⁷, the rudimentary use of metals chiefly bronze and iron, pottery making, weaving, the use of batik work or the painted ornamentation of textiles, skills in navigation and the use of outrigger canoes (Purcell, 1965: 3; Cady, 1964: 12-13).

Of them, wet rice farming, ox and buffalo domestication, the use of metals, primarily bronze and iron, and navigational skills are acknowledged as the distinctive material traits of South-East Asian civilization prior to the period when it was influenced by outside forces. Nicholas Tarling

explicitly stated that beautiful large bronze ceremonial drums from Dong-son (present-day Vietnam) may be found all over South-East Asia. Tarling also gives a detailed description of how farmers, metallurgists and mariners South-East Asia developed their skills in their areas during the process of developing their own profession (Tarling, 1992: 185). Two general conclusions emerge concerning the cultural unity of South-East Asia from this analysis: (i) the mass cultures of South-East Asia based on the growing of rice by irrigation and agricultural resources were obviously basic and similar; and (ii) the early South-East Asians developed similar profession either in weaving or in pottery making or in navigation (Cady, 1964: 6).

- b) On the social sector, the high status of women or the importance of women and descent by the maternal line was and is a common practice evident everywhere in South-East Asia. Victor Purcell categorically stated that the unity of South-East Asia is significantly demonstrated by the high status of women throughout the region as contrasted with that in some adjacent civilizations (Purcell, 1965: 3-4). Additionally, the organizations arising from irrigated cultivation is another manifestation of social unity of South-East Asia (Harrison, 1963: x). Archeological researches have claimed that everywhere in South-East Asia (particularly in Indonesia) there remain many traces of the original social organization and the most remarkable one, is the joint responsibility of all members of the community for the common welfare. This includes the obligation to help each other in time of distress and to bear jointly the responsibility for crimes and offenses committed on village soil if the actual perpetrators are not detected. According to Bernard H.M. Vlekke, in the later period the Netherlands colonial administration tried to introduce the principle of individual responsibility but the old system was never wholly destroyed (Vlekke, 1965: 13-14).
- c) On the cultural side, the early people of South-East Asia were accustomed to fishing, agriculture, sea trade, hunting and gathering, as one moves inland from the coast and river into the forests and hills. This pattern had been largely established over 2000 years ago in prehistoric times (Hill, 1984: 86-87). Throughout the monsoon lands of South-East Asia there were also different seasonal festivals including the *wayang* or puppet shadow theatre and the gamelan orchestra. Victor Purcell concludes that the ancient shadow-play is still performed in the east-coast states of Malaya (Purcell, 1965: 3).
- d) On the religious level, the common belief that widely was practiced in early South-East Asia was animism or the attribution of a soul to natural objects as mentioned above. South-East Asians shared the belief in the existence of a personal soul that guides a person through life. They also held the belief that the soul lives on after death and is required to stay

close to the regions where the body had previously resided. According to them, the soul does not withdraw from the community of the living but continues to take an interest in communal life. Consequently, the souls of the deceased may be angered when their descendants give up the old traditions or fail to fulfill their duties towards the spirits, they believed. Given this belief, the early burials of the dead bodies of the region took place in Jars or at dolmens (stone graveyards or grave of unhewn stones) and the worship of ancestors were maintained dutifully. In fact, ancestor worship was always one of the strongest forces in the maintenance of old customs and traditions of South-East Asia (Vlekke, 1965: 15). Other common beliefs that were practiced in the regions were the worship of the God of the soil, the location of shrines in high places, a mythology imbued with dualism of mountain versus sea, winged beings versus water beings, and men of the mountain versus men of the sea coast, haruspicy or taking of omens from the entrails of animals, a God-king, respect for the number 7 and the incantation (Purcell, 1965: 3; Bastin and Benda, 1968: 4). Although subject to considerable local variation and to subsequent modification by Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, these cultural elements still survived (particularly haruspicy or taking of omens from the entrails of animals, a God-king, respect for the number 7 and the incantation or magic) and today provide the essential justification for the religious unity of South-East Asia.

Conclusion

Indisputably and unquestionably, South-East Asia is a unique example of unity in diversity. While it is a region of diversity on its own, it is at the same time a region of unity as well. The basis of viewing South-East Asia as such may be enunciated in different approaches and the above analysis is a humble attempt to that end. South-East Asia is a region which contains a group of countries (mainland nations and island nations) and whose social structures were and are much in common and whose past history and present politics show many similarities, although the diversity of the region was and is still an obvious and well-established fact. While geographical factors have given the region a clear feature of diversity, the similar climatic, natural and economic conditions of the region have been hugely determining the lives of the people of the region. Although the people of South-East Asia were influenced by external factors and influences from India and China, they never compromised on the question of the basic structures of their societies. This has prevented the region from forming a complete unity in the sphere of culture. The people of South-East Asia shared in the past and so do at present similar tastes of lives in different fields despite their ethnic and linguistic dissimilarities. Thus, these two opposite features of their lives as well as the geographical landscapes of South-East Asia have given the unique and logical surname to the region: unity in diversity. The region of South-East Asia thus could be thought of as a unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation.

Endnotes

1. In the 14th century, during the Majapahit Empire, when tensions between the two major religions of the time, Hinduism and Buddhism, had increased, poet Mpu Tantular coined the Old Javanese term *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. Chiara Logli, “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity): Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Religion in Indonesian higher education*”, A Doctoral Dissertation, University of Hawai‘i, 2015, p.55
- 2 . “An area stretching from Sumatra in the west to the Spice Islands in the east, and from the island of Java in the south to the plains of Kampuchea in the Indo-Chinese Peninsula in the north, is identified as the Malay world, or sometimes fondly referred to as *Nusantara*, or the world of islands.” Mohd. Taib Osman (ed.), *Islamic Civilization in the Malay World*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1997, p. xxv.
- 3 . The Malay Archipelago was known as ‘Netherlands India’ to the Dutch and since its independence it became known as Indonesia. East Indies was used for the Malay Archipelago as opposed to the West Indies, the name given early explorers to islands in the Atlantic Ocean which they believed to be off the coast of India (the Indies). See: also Victor Purcell, *South and East Asia since 1800*, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain, 1965, p. 2.
- 4 . A modern scholar has claimed that peoples of South-East Asian culture are now-a-days also found in the eastern hills of India (Assam, notably Nagas, Garo, Khasi, Mizo) and Bangladesh [Kuki in Chittagong (now Chattogram) Hill Tracts], and in the southern part of China (notably Tai-speakers and Miao). Lewis Hill, ‘South-East Asia’, Newsletter (Museum Ethnographers Group), No. 15, February 1984, p. 86.
- 5 . To be more clear, in mainland South-East Asia Theravada Buddhism, disseminated from Myanmar, came to predominate while Mahayana Buddhism flourished in Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and western Kalimantan. Hinduism made its way in Java. Bali is still a Hindu Island. Islam appeared in the region in thirteenth century and the process of Islamization was at first slow. However, following the conversion of the ruler of Malacca at the beginning of the fifteenth century was Islam soon firmly established in northern Sumatra, the peninsula, northern Java and western Kalimantan. Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of South-East Asia, Vol. I (From early times to c. 1800)*, Cambridge University Press, Singapore, 1992, p. 54.
- 6 . Today, about half the total population of the region is Muslim, the main concentrations being in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei and the southern Philippines. The people of Burma or Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam and most Chinese in all parts of the regions are Buddhists. Most Indians throughout the region—mainly in Myanmar and Malaya) are Hindus. Indonesian Bali Island is a Hindu majority region in South-East Asia. In the Philippines about 95 percent of the total populations are Christians. Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *Op., cit.*, p. 13.
- 7 . The quadrangular adzes of the Neolithic or New Stone Age historically supplanted the Mesolithic societies that produced the Baconian semi-polished chisel-edged stone tools of Tonkin and comparable objects discovered on sites in Thailand, Malaya, and Sumatra.

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