

CREATING THE ASEAN COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING YOUR NEIGHBORS, UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF: UNDERSTANDING STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICE

Matthew Kosuta *

ABSTRACT

This article will focus on the importance of historical knowledge and real experience, as opposed to popular fiction and stereotypes in understanding and respecting Thailand's neighbors in the ASEAN Community and in understanding and respecting Thailand. It also looks at the place of religion within official ASEAN documents. Understanding is about being objective and not overly subjective. One must respect other people for who they are. A person must also know and respect oneself and one's own culture. A person must be able to see the world from another person's point of view and from another culture's point of view. A person must see the similarities of the other person as a fellow human being *first*, then see the differences – Burmese, Indonesian, or Filipino; a Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian – *second*. Similarities are what make us all human, differences are what make us who we are as individuals and as cultures. Understanding and respecting both the similarities and the differences of people and of oneself are of prime importance in creating successful relationships in the ASEAN

* Vice Dean Chair, International PhD Program College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, 999 Putthamonthon Road 4 Salaya, NakhonPathom 73170, Thailand
matthew.kos@mahidol.ac.th (66) 2 800 2630 ext 306

Community. Part One reflects on stereotypes and prejudice while the Part Two concentrates on religion in The ASEAN Charter and other documents.

Keywords: the ASEAN Community, Thailand's neighbors

INTRODUCTION

This essay is an adaptation of a talk I gave at Burapha University, Thailand in June 2015. The talk and this article are addressed to all participants in ASEAN; however, like the talk, the essay concentrates on Thailand and a Thai perspective. This is because the audience of the talk and the readership of this article are primarily Thai and I am far more knowledgeable about Thailand than other ASEAN countries. A great deal of this article is common sense, while some things like stereotyping and prejudice have been formally studied in the social sciences and humanities. This essay draws on both common sense and more formal study.

I have travelled to all of the ASEAN countries except Brunei. Of course I have not travelled extensively in each country, although I did spend at least a total of one month in most of them. However, because I am a scholar of Theravada Buddhism, and I live and work in Thailand, I know history and religious practice of the Theravada Buddhist countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand the best. Nonetheless, I am comfortable in speaking about ASEAN in general.

What Is Southeast Asia?

There are common elements that make people think Southeast Asia is one geographical and cultural community (this section draws primarily on Hall, King, and Osborne). Indigenous concepts of identity were, and in some cases still are, of *Suvarṇabhūmi* (Pali—*suvaṇṇabhūmi*) and *Jumbudvīpa* (Pali—*Jumbudīpa*). Both come from Sanskrit and Pali (Theravada) sources. Based

on a few passages mentioning an area east of India called *Suvarṇabhūmi* (golden land) Burmese, Mon, Thai, and even Malays have claimed that this title refers to their homelands. *Jumbudvīpa* denotes the continent to the south of Mount Sumeru and is described in Theravada scripture and literature, especially for Thais in the Tri PhumPhraRuang. The Theravadin countries of Southeast Asia thus frequently referred to their area as *Jumbudvīpa*, while at the same time claiming to be *Suvarṇabhūmi*. This is a contradiction because originally in Sanskrit and Pali texts *Jumbudvīpa* referred to India and *Suvarṇabhūmi* to an area east of India (*Jumbudvīpa*); thus one area cannot be both. For centuries this description of *Jumbudvīpa* was taken as an actual geographical description of the Southeast Asian world right up until the influx of Western science and technology in the early 1800s. In general there were a multiplicity of smaller ethnically based states usually dominated by one large multi-ethnic kingdoms centered on capital city (for example Ankor, Ayutthaya, Hongsawadee, etc.). There was a geographical separation between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia that limited, but did not exclude interaction between the two areas. By the beginning of the 1500s there was also a religious separation between Buddhist Mainland and Maritime Islam, but again this limited but did not exclude interaction between mainland and maritime.

When European peoples began to arrive in numbers in the Southeast Asian region it was usually called Greater India or East India. Indeed with its ancient Hindu and Buddhist temple complexes, and the Buddhist and Muslim culture overlaying a recent Hindu-Buddhist past the appellation seemed to hit the mark. The French who interacted with the Siamese, but predominately with the Vietnamese, saw the Chinese political and cultural influence on the region and dubbed mainland Southeast Asia '*Indochine*' (India + China). And after French colonization the area of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam would be known collectively as '*l'indochinefrançaise*'. The terms

South Asian and East Asia had been in use for some time, and around the turn of the 20th century the term 'Southeast Asia' comes into use, though still infrequently. With the advent of World War Two, in order to plan their military campaigns, the Japanese, Great Britain, and the United States all used the term 'Southeast Asia' to designate the approximate geographical area of current Southeast Asia; although each country differed in the exact geographical area designated. Since that time 'Southeast Asia' has become the primary term to designate this geographical area.

What links, if any, besides geography does this region have? Economic activity was a constant, not only within the Southeast Asia, but with India and China and as a conduit for long distant Chinese trade stretching as far as Africa and Europe. Maritime trade was a key manner in which religions spread throughout the Southeast Asia, but in the end, especially before global capitalism, commercial trade on its own does not necessarily require or create common culture. As already noted in the Western designation of the area as 'greater India', the area shows very early cultural influence from India. Four aspects are prominent:

1. Conception of Royalty Characterized by Buddhism and Hinduism
2. Literary expression in Sanskrit Language
3. Mythology based on *Ramayana* and other Hindu texts on royalty
4. Legal codes based on *Manava Dharmasastra* (Laws of Manu).

(Hall p.18)

These four aspects produced a recognizable Indianized cultural zone stretching from Myanmar to Java.

Another recognizable cultural trait within Southeast Asia has been the status of women. While women were by no means equal with men, historically Southeast Asian women have enjoyed a much higher level of equality and freedom than women around the world, especially in comparison to Southeast's cultural neighbors of India and China.

Thus there are some links both geographical and cultural; however, we must keep in mind that all geographic and culturally designated areas are somewhat arbitrary and for these similarities we can also find significant differences between all the peoples of Southeast Asia. (King p.17-19).

PART ONE:

UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING

I will open this by asking a series of questions. These questions are to make you the reader, think. The questions are not about who is right and who is wrong; in fact there might not be a correct answer. I say this because I will speak about prejudice and stereotyping in general, but also specifically about Thai prejudices and stereotypes concerning non-Thais. Part One is critical of some Thai behavior, but it is not meant to blame Thais, it is meant to point out this behavior which Thais themselves may miss because they are insiders in their own culture; much like any other peoples would.

- What's the best country in the world?
- More difficult, what's the best culture or best religion in the world?
- I am an American.
 - o Is my country the best?
 - o Is my government the best?
- Is Thailand the best?

Everyone in the world has his or her own personal way of viewing and judging the world. As an American I cannot help but view the world through my cultural lens. Even a born citizen of the United States who might be anti-American will not be so in the same manner as a non-American, such as a Russian, Iranian, or Thai. A person can critique his or her own country out of love or patriotic feeling where the desire is to improve one's country and not simply to look down on it.

And what is history? What is this history of ASEAN? Who writes history – usually the powerful and/or the victor in war writes history. We also write histories to make our own country look as good as possible. Most history has been written not only to record events, but also to make one's own side, country, religion, ethnic group look the best. No country claims to start a war, it is always the other people's fault and our country is innocently defending itself. Michael Jerryson states that assigning blame for violence is difficult "As perpetrators of violence rarely locate themselves as aggressors or see themselves as deficient in moral justifications..." (p.141). Thus we never blame ourselves, we blame the others. Interpreting historical events in one's own favor usually serves ethnic and nationalistic agendas, creating solidarity and sense of superiority and self-righteousness. Going hand in hand with writing history to suit one's agenda is demonizing the other people – the enemy. The other is inferior, stupid, uncivilized, and cruel, without religion and morality, even becoming evil and monstrous. Certainly this no effort to understand the other and generates misunderstanding.

How do we know what is good history verses bad history? For one, it is better to read primary sources rather than secondary ones, and when one reads secondary sources it is necessary to read several books on the subject and it may also be necessary to do some investigating of the author of the book in order to find if they are being objective or subjective. Understanding is about being objective and not overly subjective. Of course our emotions are important is urging us to act focus our attention, but emotions based on bias, false statements, and poor history will likely lead to us into hurtful and harmful ideas and actions.

Perspective

The ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes (c.570 – c.475 BCE) said:

"The Ethiops say that their gods are flat-nosed and black,

While the Thracians say that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.
Yet if cattle or horses or lions had hands and could draw,
And could sculpt like men, then the horses would draw their gods
Like horses, and cattle like cattle; and each they would shape
Bodies of gods in the likeness, each kind, of their own.” (Good reads).

Though Xenophanes was primarily critiquing religious belief, this statement is at the same time an obvious and profound statement on personal, ethnic, and cultural perception. Throughout history local gods look like the local people both in physical features and the clothing they wear. This shows how bound we are by our own ethnicity and local culture, from the food we eat and the clothes we wear to religious beliefs and morals. Truth and what is good is relative to your place, to your perspective.

A person must respect other people for who they are. One must be able to see the world from another person’s point of view and from another culture’s point of view. A person must see the similarities of the other person as a fellow human being *first*, then see the differences – Burmese, Indonesian, or Filipino; a Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian – *second*. Similarities are what make us all human, differences are what make us who we are as individuals and as cultures. Understanding and respecting both the similarities and the differences of people and of oneself are of prime importance in creating successful relationships in the ASEAN Community.

However, I am not saying one must necessary like other cultures, in fact the clothes, food, behavior, politics, and possibly religion of other cultures may be of no interest or even disliked by someone. Yet, that same feeling might be held by the other person – you don’t like their food, but they don’t like yours. A Thai might criticize or make fun of a Khmer, but a Khmer might criticize or make fun of a Thai. A Muslim might criticize a Buddhist, but a Buddhist might criticize a Muslim. Who is right? By this I do not advocate a type of relativism where all beliefs and behaviors are equal and acceptable.

I myself have my own ideas on what is best for people. Rather what needs to happen is a recognition that each person is born and raised in a specific culture that will impart from birth behavior and morals; nearly always drawn from a specific religious system. We do not and cannot chose into which country and culture we are born (Though if you believe in Tibetan Buddhist masters you think some people can). What is needed then is tolerance of other people, cultures, and religion. A person must understand and respect oneself and one's own culture, but also understand that the other person respects his/her own self and culture and thus agree to be tolerant of each other.

One of my main fields of study is military history and within that I study the relationship between religion and war. One thing you learn in studying military history is that most people in history want to be free..., but most people also want to conquer and control other people. Cambodian people are proud of the Khmer Empire during its Golden Age when they were strong (c.12th– 13th centuries), Burmese people are proud of the period of Byinnaung (บุเรงนอง, r.1550-1581) when they were strong. And Thai people are proud of the reigns of Kings Rama I, II, and III when Siam was at the height of its power (1782-1851).(I invite the reader to do an internet search for maps of these Khmer, Burmese, and Thai states in order to see the regions being talked about). Who has a right to claim this land? Can Thailand claim it because Thailand held these areas most recently, or Cambodia because the Khmers held it first? Of course there is no answer to this question, the question is better asked as “who holds the land *today*?” In the end, these empires fell and today the borders of modern Mainland Southeast Asia roughly follow geographical patterns of ethno-linguistic groupings.

Similar situations occurred around the world, and in this essay I will make a comparison with Europe because it is better known by Thais. Italians are proud of the ancient Roman Empire, Spaniards are proud of the Spanish

Empire of the 16th& 17th centuries, the French are proud of Louis XIV and the Napoleonic Empire, and the English are proud of the British Empire. In the end these empires fell and the contemporary European borders, like Mainland Southeast Asia, basically follow geographical patterns of ethno-linguistic groups. And when we think of it, all these European and Southeast Asian Empires were built on the conquest and suffering of various peoples of Europe, Southeast, and the world.

As I had said, all peoples and their countries desire to be free and both England and France have fought to maintain their freedom; yet, they have also fought to subjugate other peoples and create colonial empires. This is obviously contradictory, except when we realize the depth of prejudice one ethnic group or nation can have towards other peoples. Most people think their culture is the best and thus it is acceptable to conquer another people in order to 'guide' and 'help' them progress. Siam always justified conquering and subjugating the Lao and Khmer people because Siamese people were said to be superior. In fact, this is still a common central and southern Thai attitude towards the Lao and Khmer.

What makes an ethnic group or country superior? Usually it is military might, "if I can conquer you then I am superior". Another common measure is wealth, "I am wealthier than you so I am superior to you. This is common human behavior and it is expressed in our competitive sports. It sometimes seem that the Olympic Games do more to increase nationalism than to bring nations together.

Movies, Stereotypes, and Religion

I will end this section and transition into the next by referring to a popular Thai movie released last year and promoted by the military government just after the 22 May 2014 coup d'état – *The Legend of King Naresuan 5: Elephant Battle* (ตำนานสมเด็จพระนเรศวรมหาราช ภาค 5 ยุทธหัตถี).

We can ask the question about historically based movies “do these movies present history accurately?” There have been several discussions on the H-War Daily Digest website about ‘war movies’ and how they nearly always misrepresent history. Movie directors frequently invoke poetic license and creating a mood as excuses for changing history. Another question about movies is how much are the characters presented real people or as simple stereotypes. Movies typically present the home people and army as the ‘good guys’ while portraying the enemy people and soldiers as the ‘bad guys’. In the last 20-30 years this has changed somewhat where a few movies offer a more balanced treatment of ‘us and them’. But it must be said that King Naresuan 5 has a problem with both history and stereotypes. In fact, the entire movie series of King Naresuan has these same problems. In an online movie review of the first King Naresuan movie (*The Legend of King Naresuan: Hongsawadee’s Hostage*) Thanong Khanthongm states “He [the director MC Chatrichalerm Yukol] got it right from the beginning with the title - “legend” being a compromise between reality and the imagination. Like it or not, we can’t separate Thai history from legend. Sometimes history is mixed with legend and becomes more real than reality.” (Thanong). The problem is not that the movie is drawing information from Thai and Burmese chronicles, rather the problem lies in the imaginings of the movie director and writers. One of the most troublesome cases concerns the myth of Princess Suphankalaya which is drawn from the visions of a Thai monk staying in Burma during the 1940s; 350 years after the event and not based on a single document or even on oral history. In fact Princess Suphankalaya is only very briefly mentioned in Burmese chronicles as the consort of King Bayinnaung and not discussed in Thai chronicles at all (Taylor p.4). Thus, except for her being a consort of Bayinnaung, *everything* in the King Naresuan movies about Princess Suphankalaya is *fiction*. This is important because the inclusion of her myth, built on the visions of a modern era monk, serves to strengthen the Thai

stereotype of the evil Burmese and create Thai animosity towards the Burmese.

MC Chatrichalerm Yukol in another interview said “We can't approach the story of King Naresuan with a sense of Thai nationalism, because there was no concept of a unified country in those days.” (Kong). In the movie then the countries of Thailand (as the good guy) and Myanmar (Burma – as the bad guy), are not presented; however, the movies show ethnic Thais as the good guys and ethnic Burmese and Mon that are the bad guys. Practicality speaking there is no real difference between presenting Thailand or Thais, or Myanmar or Burmese. So in essence *The Legend of King Naresuan* movies present Thais as wonderful freedom loving people and Burmese as hateful cruel invaders. No doubt soldiers in an invading army are frequently cruel and so there is truth in presenting some Burmese soldiers this way. Yet, have you ever thought of how the Burmese think of themselves or what Burmese think of Thais? Or perhaps more appropriately in this context, how the Lao or Khmers think of Thais? What if the Cambodians make a movie about the numerous Thai invasions of Khmer territory? (yes, I am aware that Khmers also attacked Thai territory). Would the Khmers represent themselves as bad guys and the invading Thai soldiers as good guys coming to save the Khmers from their own wickedness? Of course not, Thai soldiers would naturally resemble Burmese soldiers in Thai movies.

Charles Keyes commenting on *The Legend of Naresuan 5* in an article published this year says “[...] the film is understood by most Thai to present a nationalist triumph of the Thai over the Burmese. [...] but the very anti-Burmese sentiment that the film conveys could well undermine efforts by the junta to have good relations with Myanmar.” (p.18). Thus in the context of this essay writing about building cooperation within ASEAN, it seems *The Legend of King Naresuan* movies are far more concerned with playing to Thai stereotypes and building up Thai patriotism as opposed to any thought