

# Constructing ASEAN Identity Through Shared Cultural Heritage and Socio-Cultural Solidarity: A Proposal

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## [ *Abstract* ]

This paper explores how ASEAN Identity among Southeast Asia countries can be realized by applying the concepts of “shared cultural heritage” and “socio-cultural solidarity.” Guided by the official documents—the ASEAN Identity Narrative and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, this paper analyzes how regional cohesiveness can develop through common emphasis on historical, social, and cultural bonds among the ASEAN member states manifested through religiosity, nationalism, humanitarianism, cultural expressions, regionalism, and futurism. Moreover, initiatives and cultural policies that promote mutual understanding, respect for cultural diversity, and the building of collective projects that reinforce the notion of an ASEAN identity are considered within the analysis. By providing illustration as to how the concepts of “shared cultural heritage” and “socio-cultural solidarity” serve the foundation toward the construction of a conscious ethos geared toward establishing a common future based on diversity in the Southeast Asian region, this paper argues that the ASEAN identity is constructed via strong national selfhood and regional

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cultural ties. The implication drawn from this this paper's proposal is that having a common or shared identity, or a cultural consistency of the regional actors will most likely reduce conflicts or misunderstanding in the region, thus allowing them to achieve common goals.

**Keywords:** ASEAN identity, shared cultural heritage, socio-cultural solidarity, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

## I . Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) people are diverse, and so are its socio-cultural systems. While each member country is different and unique, their cultural norms and traditional values are deeply embedded in both their socio-cultural activities and government structures. In this light, it is to be expected that some ideas and conventions might make cultural interactions challenging. There is always a possibility that these may be influenced by ethnic tensions, political preferences, or religious intolerance. This paper asserts that diversity in language, religion, socio-cultural institutions, and so on should not be viewed as obstacles, but rather as a motivation to all member countries in developing multifaceted approaches to harmonious and peaceful coexistence. In fact, through ASEAN, member countries and their peoples are given various opportunities to learn about and respect each other's strengths and abilities. This opportunity is largely enforced by the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025. If one sees that there is an absence of common identity (i.e., cultural diversity) in the region, ASEAN as a regional body may formulate new ideologies and narratives on identity based on democratic principles, respect, and tolerance. In other words, it could be very much said that the ASEAN identity could assume a certain meaning wherein one of togetherness, unity and diversity, and understanding may be the contributing points to enshrine the mixture of cultures, histories, religions, and civilizations among each member state, thus referenced by ASEAN's slogan of "One Vision, One Identity, One

Community” (Concepcion 2022: 292-293).

As stated in *The Narrative of ASEAN Identity* (2020), identity is understood as who are ASEAN’s member countries, where they came from, and where they are heading. It is a process of social construct defined by a balanced combination of constructed values and inherited values. Since ASEAN’s establishment in 1967, it has achieved economic growth, social advancement, and cultural development that would later contribute to promoting regional peace, security, and stability by emphasizing cooperation among ASEAN member countries. In fact, the constructed values of ASEAN identity are expressed in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter, regarding Principles, which are: respect, peace and security, prosperity, non-interference, consultation/dialogue, adherence to international law and trade regulations, democracy, freedom, human rights promotion and protection, unity in diversity, inclusion, and ASEAN’s central role in external relations. These constructed values strive to depict ASEAN as a distinct entity in a “global community of nations” that adheres to international norms and international law; a community where every ASEAN citizen should associate with the ASEAN community and appreciate being a member of such community, which is recognized internationally. On the other hand, ASEAN member countries share inherited values that existed in Southeast Asian countries even before ASEAN was established such as Southeast Asia’s ideals, customs, traits, and rich traditions. ASEAN identity remains a work in progress (Maniam 2020: 8), it can serve as a reference to enrich conversations and practical activities on how it can promote integration, open chances for interstate interactions, and pave the path for better policy making among the ASEAN member countries. Using the concept of ASEAN identity, this will enable ASEAN peoples to make ASEAN more relevant in their lives and allow them to gain the benefits of being a member of the ASEAN community. In other words, ASEAN as a community needs to have a sense of togetherness, of a “we-feeling,” and so common characteristics and values are needed to bind its peoples (Agbisit 2023).

While there is a need to further intellectual discourse in constructing ASEAN identity, discussions on culture particularly

shared cultural heritage and socio-cultural solidarity must be emphasized. How should ASEAN identity highlight and amplify cultural diversity among its peoples to foster mutual understanding within the several nations that make up the region? How can ASEAN identity embody distinctive cultural nuances with respect to organizational identity? How can ASEAN identity avert the detrimental consequences resulting from the disparate objectives and regulations pertaining to culture? Guided by these research questions, this paper is a conceptual exposition on the essence of ASEAN identity. With the help of existing literature, the researcher analyzes the socio-cultural aspect of ASEAN and argues that shared cultural heritage and socio-cultural solidarity are significant key concepts in constructing and realizing such identity in the Southeast Asian region.

## **II . Harnessing Culture(s) in Constructing ASEAN Identity**

Culture is defined as the worldview, values, moral standards, and actual behavior—as well as the tangible and intangible artifacts and human symbols that have been passed down from one generation to the next and that, in one way or another, set them apart from other people who belong to another culture. Culture involves and relates to individuals; it is the basis from which all institutions are produced and organized. In other words, culture is the most essential distinction between peoples, defining them via genealogy, religion, history, values, rituals, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups such as tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the most general level, civilizations (Gullestrup in Dosenrode 2008: 2-3). Furthermore, culture is recognizable in two levels: the core-culture and the manifest culture. The first is the core worldview which is followed by the “not perceivable present,” such as the standards of solidarity, and the essential ideals, such as social responsibility. Conversely, the latter comprises the “immediately sensible layer,” which includes language, songs, laws, and rules; the challenging-to-perceive structural layer, which includes social and economic structures and administrative procedures; and the formalized morals and rules layer, which includes practical

guidelines for how to act or behave (77-78). This complex “iceberg” idea of culture includes and relates to people, the foundation from which all institutions are created and organized. As several scholars posited (Severino 2006; Aguas 2014; Igboanusi 2017; Concepcion 2022; Agbisit 2023), culture could be used as a solid foundation upon which “regional integration” in Southeast Asia may be developed. Therefore, putting culture at the center of this project implies that its people should build, or at least realize, a shared regional identity among the many socio-cultural characteristics of the region’s member countries.

According to the Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN identifies as a community, suggesting a feeling of solidarity among its participating nations. To achieve a variety of goals related to social advancement, economic expansion, cultural advancement, and peace and stability, ASEAN articulates the principles of “caring” and “sharing,” which are essential to building a community. Southeast Asia, now a region of ten nations that compose ASEAN, demonstrates a rich level of cultural diversity. Being at the crossroads between China, India, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, the region is constantly bombarded with foreign influences, making the concept of “identity” fluid and contested. Moreover, to build a resilient integrated regional society with a shared regional identity by 2020, ASEAN has been revitalizing its cultural development since 2003. This endeavor then paved the creation of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The ASCC guides ASEAN’s member countries to be people-centered and socially responsible, with the goal of achieving long-term solidarity and unity among ASEAN’s member countries and people by forging a common identity in the creation of a caring and sharing society that is inclusive and harmonious, and in which people’s well-being, livelihood, and welfare improve. A brief description of ASCC, in accordance with ASEAN Vision 2020, envisions Southeast Asia as “united in cooperation as a community of caring societies.” As such, the community will promote social development cooperation aimed at improving the standard of living of disadvantaged groups and rural populations by encouraging active participation from all sectors of society, particularly women, youth, and local communities. Furthermore, standing on fundamental

premises and taking a long-term perspective, one could deduce that the core of ASEAN is its socio-cultural community, conceived as a vehicle for developing a sense of what Southeast Asian identity is, creating regional awareness, and nurturing mutual understanding among the peoples of ASEAN (Severino 2006: 30-35).

On the other hand, while the political administration and cultural management of ASEAN member countries vary, ASCC asserts that managing the differences/uniqueness of each member country forges a sense of shared destiny of peace and prosperity for all ASEAN peoples based on common ASEAN values with an ASEAN identity. In other words, ASEAN must capitalize from the region's cultural richness and diversity, as key attributes to its identity. While ASCC and its blueprint provide a much-needed structure for the socio-cultural pillar, much of the development has been driven by member countries' internal policies and activities. Moreover, "culture" is only mentioned twice in the ASCC blueprint 2025: "*A community that embraces tolerance and moderation, fully respects the different religions, cultures, and languages of our peoples...*;" (14) and "*A dynamic and harmonious community that is aware and proud of its identity, culture, and heritage...*" (16). In other words, while culture is an important issue in identity and community-building or integration in the region, as stipulated together with "identity" and "heritage," ASCC blueprint 2025 is deficient in defining and advocating what it is (Concepcion 2022: 282-283).

While the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 recognizes culture as a significant foundation in building the ASEAN community, this "culture" must reflect Southeast Asia's identity as the basis of ASEAN identity (Acharya 2017: 25). As a narrative of harmony and disparity within the Southeast Asian region (see, for example, Kim 2011; Aguas 2014; Thuzar 2014; Ma 2015; Igboanusi 2017, Concepcion 2022), culture and identity is seen as diverse and pluralistic in many ways. Identity for one, is a complex concept. In its simplest definition, identity refers to an entity's (e.g., person, group of people, state, or collection of states) "feeling" of being unique or distinctive because of physical and social characteristics, values, and patterns of behavior. Also, identity serves how an entity sees itself, and how others or outsiders see that entity. In the

context of ASEAN, identity is critical to forming a community, whether economic, socio-cultural, or political-security. In other words, an “identifiable” community must have something in common within them, whether its physical or cultural attributes, so that its peoples will “display” mutual responsiveness, confidence, esteem, and who self-consciously self-identify (Puchala 1984: 186-187).

In this light, one can ask the question: how can ASEAN peoples accept a regional identity when they do not know themselves? Guided by the notion that a community occurs when enough people perceive themselves as possessing substantive connections with others (Anderson 1991), one can see that geographical characteristic, closeness of residing in Southeast Asia, or mutual historical connections do not define ASEAN identity. While these elements could be used as circumstances that can aid in the development of ASEAN Identity, acknowledging the significance of expressing and expanding the narrative of ASEAN identity is necessary (Tan 2020). As response to this, scholars suggest “highlighting” cultural commonalities and longstanding ties, rather than cultural differences, (Aguas 2014, Acharya 2017; Maniam 2020; Concepcion 2022). In other words, the “shared identity” of the Southeast Asian peoples should be the basis or core in constructing ASEAN’s identity. As a caveat, if one will go back to the basic concept of identity, it is socially constructed by combining habit-forming behavior with instrumental reasoning in the contexts of institutions, customs, norms, and socialization. Furthermore, this “identity formation” is not totally separated from but strengthened by cultural and historical links (Acharya 2017: 2-3).

### **III. Forging ASEAN’s Shared Cultural Heritage**

As pointed out in the Narrative of ASEAN Identity, the complex attributes of varied but common historical, ancestral, and cultural traits, many of which predate ASEAN’s founding, combine to form the ASEAN identity. A deliberate effort must be made to identify which values are to be improved and carried into the future, and

which values arising from the globalizing processes need to be transformed for future use, while deciding what cultural traits and values would highlight ASEAN identity. For example, rather than concentrating solely on the decolonization experiences that formed the cornerstone of the national narratives of many of the region's nations, ASEAN's peoples must actively seek to advance and celebrate their shared story of the region's long and interwoven histories in cases where history matters.

To begin with, it is important to define what culture and heritage are. Culture is defined as a collection of unique spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional characteristics of a community or social group. These characteristics can be shown in works of literature, art, lifestyles, communal living arrangements, customs, and beliefs. Additionally, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) definition of "heritage" and classification of world heritage sites may contribute to a wider definition of cultural heritage. The designation for places on Earth that are of "outstanding universal value" is what UNESCO refers to as world heritage. Using this context, it offers a potential framework for defining what "cultural heritage" is in the first place. Monuments, town sites, archaeological sites, and artwork are all categorized as "cultural heritage sites" under the three categories of designated sites under the UNESCO convention. Cultural heritage as a relatively "fluid" and "contingent" concept, modern understanding of its components is vast and challenging to characterize. Nonetheless, the concept of cultural heritage is summed up in the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage (Bangkok, July 25, 2000). The term encompasses 1) significant cultural values and concepts; 2) structures and artifacts: dwellings, buildings for worship, utility structures, works of visual arts, tools, and implements, that are of a historical, aesthetic, or scientific significance; 3) sites and human habitats: human creations or combined human creations and nature, archaeological sites and sites of living human communities that are of outstanding value from a historical, aesthetic, anthropological or ecological viewpoint, or, because of its natural features, of considerable importance as habitat for the cultural survival and identity of living traditions; 4) oral or folk heritage:

folkways, folklore, languages and literature, traditional arts and crafts, architecture, and the performing arts, games, indigenous knowledge systems and practices, myths, customs and beliefs, rituals and other living traditions; 5) the written heritage; 6) popular cultural heritage: popular creativity in mass cultures (i.e. industrial or commercial cultures), popular forms of expression of outstanding aesthetic, anthropological and sociological values, including the music, dance, graphic arts, fashion, games and sports, industrial design, cinema, television, music video, video arts and cyberart in technologically-oriented urbanized communities. In the context of these locations, the transmission of “cultural heritage” is situated. Heritage therefore can refer to both tangible or the material remnants that pass on significant cultural and historical information from one generation to the next; and intangible ancestral inheritances like oral traditions, ties to the community, knowledge, language, and others that carry and transmit cultural (e.g., emotional, spiritual, material, intellectual, etc.) features of a society.

Paradoxically, cultural heritage can unite or divide. As noted earlier, the Southeast Asian region has diverse cultures and heritages arising from different languages, religions, and traditions among others. Subcultures, even within a nation, and the (inter-)mixing of cultures through intermarriages and other influences, including those of migrants, can complicate the roots of a cultural heritage. Coupled with multiculturalism, multiracialism, and multiethnicity present in some ASEAN member countries, and in the region, current debates about national rights and obligations regarding cultural heritage might present challenging issues. What if every race or group in a country claimed that a custom or other aspect of cultural history was unique to its own race and refused to accept the possibility of shared cultures across national borders?<sup>1</sup> Although there is a specific cultural heritage attributable to each ASEAN member country, cultural heritage, can be entwined, consisting of a fusion/merger of cultures from many communities or ethnic groups throughout the ASEAN member countries. In this context, there is

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<sup>1</sup> See for example concerning the *Tor-tor* dance controversy between Indonesia and Malaysia in 2012; and the *Preah Vihear temple* controversy between Cambodia and Thailand, which had to be settled by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2013.

a possible need to recognize two types of ASEAN cultural heritage: 1) territorial to a specific ASEAN member country, and 2) shared/merged culture that cut across two or more ASEAN member countries (Kheng-Lian 2014: 237-240). Situating this idea vis-à-vis Gullestrup's framework on core and manifest culture, common values permeate the diversity of cultures, and these common values can be instrumental in further harmonizing diverse cultures (Dosenrode 2008: 2-4). In this view, this paper asserts that cultural heritage is not confined to the past. It is "forgotten" and "obscured," if only it embodies historical knowledge of social organization, economics, architecture, engineering, design, craftsmanship, and religion. It may be "articulated" and "valued" in the present, if it represents how people think of themselves and others, including their predecessors and neighbors today. In this context, cultural heritage can be produced, developed, and practiced at a community or national level, and can further be recognized, sustained, and promoted through international and transnational recognition that exemplifies the image or identity of a region.

Considering the ASEAN community's goal of connecting culture to identity through ASEAN cultural heritage, the notion of metaculture (as used in sociology and anthropology) to encapsulate the concept of shared cultural heritage can be used. In essence, metaculture refers to the universal concepts that exist across all cultures. These shared norms, practices, and behaviors form a kind of general "cultural fabric" or common threads that connect ASEAN peoples across their richly varied human experiences. Thus, there is a paradigm shift from highlighting the uniqueness of a member country's culture (and identity) in the ASEAN community, to identifying the distinctive cultural heritage within the ASEAN community. Recognizing the significance of harmonizing national values as "pillars" towards the formation of an identifiable consciousness and ideology (Villacorta 1975: 40-42), vis-à-vis locating the "sources" of regional identity alongside the still distinctive national identities of Southeast Asian countries (Acharya 2017: 27-28), this paper puts forth recognizable shared cultural heritage as dimensions for constructing ASEAN identity.

### **3.1. Shared Cultural Heritage: Theism, Religion, Religiosity, Spirituality**

Several major religions are practiced throughout Southeast Asia: most people in Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar are Buddhists; Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam is prevalent; and Christianity (Catholicism) in the Philippines is predominant. While the disparities in religious beliefs and ethnicity of 691 million people make up the communal landscape of Southeast Asia, this should be understood as a common trait of being profoundly spiritual, recognizing affinity and closeness to the divine or spiritual being(s). Moreover, the deep spirituality and religiosity are complemented by the Southeast Asian peoples' inwardness shown in their inclination toward the spiritual than the tangible. Material items are important, but what's even more important is purifying one's spirit or inner self. As a matter of fact, they frequently engage in introspection, meditation, and communal celebration to explore, share, experience, and mediate their inner selves with the divine (Aguas 2014: 2-3). These strong religious beliefs permeate every part of their lives. While religion plays a significant role in national identities, significant interstate conflicts have rarely resulted from it. Instead, it has contributed locally to some extreme violence, ethnic conflict, and domestic separatist movements. The stability of the region is sometimes perceived, for example, as being threatened by Islamic radicalism, particularly in and out of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the southern Philippines. However, compared to Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, Islam in Southeast Asia is more moderate and accepting. In terms of religion, there is little evidence of any "clash of civilizations" in Southeast Asia (Acharya 2017: 28).

### **3.2. Shared Cultural Heritage: Nationalism**

Nationalism includes the discovery of a national identity, a sense of history, reinforcement of national unity, and a common medium of communication. Considered, these provide the moral and soul of a nation; while nationalism calls for appreciating and taking pride in one's history, society, and culture, this ideology must reinforce confidence in the people themselves. In other words, strengthening positive alternatives, constructive re-interpretation, cultural and historical consciousness erase the thinking of an "inferior race"

(Villacorta 1975: 41).

Citing the rich but rather complex histories that make up Southeast Asia, one can see that nationalism endured among its nations in the region's pre-colonial past. Unlike in Europe where violent nationalism was experienced by its nations, Southeast Asian nationalisms are focused on a common external danger because they originated from anticolonial struggles. All the nations in Southeast Asia were formerly part of Western colonial empires, except for Thailand, which gave colonizers territory in exchange for severe limitations on its ability to act independently. Additionally, in Southeast Asia, nationalism and regionalism were more complimentary than competitive, and anti-colonial feelings served as a solid foundation for both movements. While nationalism can trigger tensions on security and domestic politics, it can reinforce consciousness and unity within the socio-cultural communities of nations. By providing psychological and social guidance, and ideological motivation, nationalism contests integrity of ASEAN member countries, issues on public policies, collective representation, and distribution of resources (Acharya 2017: 27-28).

### **3.3. Shared Cultural Heritage: Humanitarianism, Service**

While theism and nationalism are both significant ideologies, these must also be tied to practical actions in alleviating the peoples' conditions. The nations and region's institutions must obligate themselves towards the peoples' liberation from ignorance, poverty, and exploitation. Administrative institutions and agencies should adhere to humanitarian necessities. If all humanitarian safeguards and conditions are met, "universally acknowledged" popular goods as envisioned in the "ASEAN way" such as decent existence, national pride, and cooperative spirit can be realized. Moreover, leaders should have selfless service to the national community. National and regional efforts should instill civic consciousness and ethics within the population. To date, progress has been slow due to policies and initiatives at the domestic level of member countries, thus explaining why several regional tensions remain unsolved.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See for example the nascent case of the Rohingyas as a regional humanitarian

### **3.4. Shared Cultural Heritage: Cultural Expressions, Modes, Norms**

Southeast Asian region's distinctiveness is not predicated alone on a shared identity that citizens of all member nations must currently share. The region is distinct because it is a blend of ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity which is very natural in its geographical area. In fact, centuries of long-established people-to-people contact contributed to "significant connections," thus paving the cultural awareness of what is Asian, and what are the attributes of Asian-ness. While each nation takes pride on their individualistic identity—sure, they can debate over the provenance of cultural items such as fried noodles and chicken rice, as well as music genres and tangible cultural artifacts like textiles, religious images, food preparation, etc.—these are not "trivial things," but rather "identifiable" cultural products formed from the centuries Southeast Asians were in constant conversation with one another, exchanging and sharing vocabularies, languages, idioms, geographies, technologies, and epistemologies.

Southeast Asian people are conscious of the region's diversity—they recognize that Filipinos are different from Thais and other Southeast Asian people in terms of religions and languages and other practices. However, they all value close family ties and relationships, respect for the elderly, strong spiritual orientations, adherence to social order, strong sense of personhood, and a strong connection to the traditional past. Rather than being centered on policies, politics is deeply personal, and Southeast Asians are typically more devoted to individuals rather than organizations. Alliances are formed through economic incentives, which are the hallmarks of political leadership and the attraction of followers. Recognition of personal debts and debts of gratitude are still significant and crucial in social interactions. Southeast Asians have a strong sense of appreciation and the desire to reciprocate a favor. While not "uniformly" present in all Southeast Asian nations, these cultural expressions, modes, and norms expressed and manifested in the social, political, and financial spheres of life can be understood

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problem that did not produce any effective regional or united response from ASEAN.

as “mutual experiences” inherent in the region.

### **3.5. Shared Cultural Heritage: Pan-Asianism, Regionalism**

Whether “destined” or “manifested,” the geographical location of Southeast Asia proves that its nations are members of the Third World sharing proximate interests. Political and economic dynamics in the region further highlight the need for interdependence of Southeast Asian nations. To foster regional knowledge and respect, it is important to expose its peoples to many cultures and customs, as well as educating them about regional issues. Good relations, diplomacy, and interfaith dialogues should be strengthened. While there is no absolute know-it-all, emulating each nation’s strength on values and state-of-the-art practices, formation of what is Asian/ASEAN can be realized.

Though diverse in many ways, Southeast Asia has perhaps established a stronger sense of regional identity than either Northeast Asia or South Asia. In fact, the very concept of Southeast Asia as a separate region from China and India is largely attributed to the role of ASEAN. Regional and national identities coexist and, in certain cases, enhance one another. See for example ASEAN’s initiative on “harmonizing” and “integrating” its member countries in terms of regional communities or pillars, covering economic, socio-cultural, and political-security concerns. Even with some internal tensions and limitations brought about by strong power presence and influence seeking, ASEAN is nevertheless one of the most vibrant and cohesive regional blocs in Asia and the world today. The concept filters the flow of ideas in and out of Southeast Asia and can actively reconstitute national identities, making such a phenomenon less exclusive and contentious within the region. The “ASEAN way” has increasingly become a salient source of regional collective identity relevant for the rest of the world (Acharya 2017: 29). This orientation, then, reinforces and further captures the psyche and environment of the peoples of Southeast Asia, which ascribes an “oriental” and “indigenous” essence that could withstand aggressive competitive and acquisitive approaches from the West.

### **3.6. Shared Cultural Heritage: Development State Orientation,**

### **Modernism, Futurism**

Having begun in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, the developmental state viewpoint, which prioritizes economic development over ideology and identity politics and demands that the state play a significant role in providing an anchor for development, albeit to varying degrees, is now prevalent throughout Southeast Asia (Acharya 2017: 28-29). In this view, for ASEAN to know where it is heading, clear initiatives and policies should be made to bridge the conflicts that exist between Southeast Asian nations on a cultural, political, and security level. This forms a vital foundation for ASEAN as an organization and community. Taking into account the significance of the ASEAN peoples, it must be fully aware of the requisites and priorities in the process of development. It needs to understand its goals and the consequences of their actions before engaging in development building with enthusiasm. Long range objectives, costs, benefits, and ideals should be properly laid, explained, and implemented.

As noted earlier, this paper puts forth recognizable shared cultural heritage as dimensions for the ASEAN identity. Using this proposal, ASEAN identity is seen as both manifested (i.e., distinctive identities) and constructed (i.e., consciousness and ideology). In essence, six dimensions are offered: 1) Theism, Religion, Religiosity, Spirituality; 2) Nationalism, 3) Humanitarianism, Service; 4) Cultural Expressions, Modes, Norms; 5) Pan-Asianism, Regionalism; and 6) Development State Orientation, Modernism, Futurism. These encompass the Narrative of ASEAN Identity in terms of who composes ASEAN, where they came from, and where they are heading. In explaining the past, Theism, Nationalism, and Humanitarianism form the foundation of ASEAN identity. On the other hand, in describing and guiding the present, Theism, Nationalism, Humanitarianism, and Cultural Expressions provide image and motivation. While Pan-Asianism, and Futurism embody direction. Taken together, these dimensions constitute an encompassing identity that would explain the narrative of ASEAN identity. However, it should be noted that enhancing and fortifying this ASEAN identity cannot be achieved only by natural processes. Conscious policies and initiatives need to coexist with organic

development. For instance, the ASEAN member countries should actively explain and demonstrate to the average people what ASEAN represents. Fostering strong collaboration and mutual support at the local, national, and personal levels are likely to result in the development of a developing sense of identity.



<Fig 1> Proposed Dimensions of Manifested and Constructed ASEAN Identity through Shared Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia

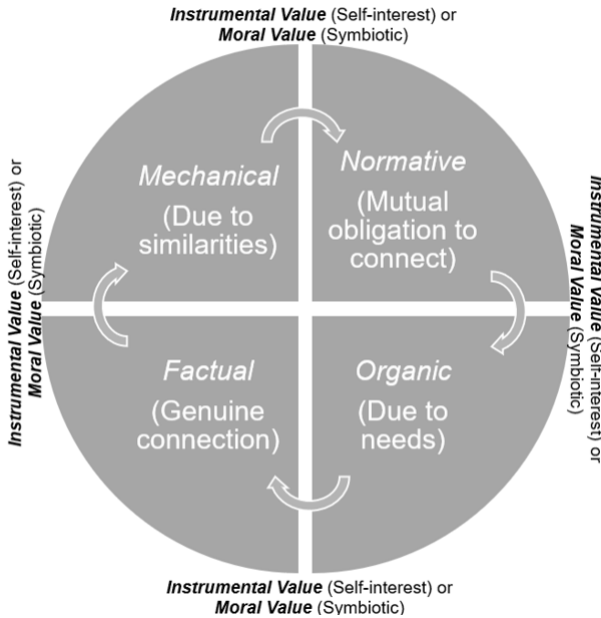
#### IV. Fostering Socio-Cultural Solidarity

To begin with, solidarity in the theory of the French social scientist Émile Durkheim posits two kinds: the social cohesiveness of small, undifferentiated societies (mechanical) and of societies differentiated by a relatively complex division of labor (organic). The social integration of individuals who have common ideas and views is known as mechanical solidarity. These shared ideals and convictions form a collective conscience that persuades each member to cooperate on an internal level. Durkheim borrowed the phrase “mechanical solidarity” from physical science because, in his

perspective, the forces that lead members of society to cooperate were like the internal energy that led molecules to cohere in a solid state. In contrast, organic solidarity is social integration that results from people needing one another's assistance. There is comparatively more division of labor in a society that embodies organic solidarity, where people perform similarly to the distinct yet interconnected organs of a living body. Instead of enforcing uniform regulations on all individuals, society places more emphasis on regulating the interactions between various groups and individuals, frequently via increasing the use of contracts and laws (Paugam 2020: 40-42).

Additionally, solidarity is seen to be a reciprocal bond between people that includes two levels: a normative level of mutual obligations to support one another when needed and a factual level of genuine shared ground between the people. It has frequently been assumed that factual common ground is sufficient justification for normative obligations, without making explicit how the two levels differ from one another or how they relate to one another. This assumption has been made easier by the presumption that genuine common ground is emotional in nature rather than merely objective. In turn, common ground leads to a feeling of obligation that at least supposedly, brings the distance between being and ought to be (Bayertz 1999: 5-10). In these lines of thought, solidarity as a social phenomenon may modify character in terms of instrumental values and moral values. Solidarity as an instrumental value is solidarity of self-interest, which individualistic tendency motivates to incorporate the self to others; while solidarity as a moral value motivates people to take care and look for each other. It is therefore imperative to ask about solidarity within nations: what drives it (similarities or needs), how it is done (mutual obligation or genuine connection), and how it is envisioned (self-interest or symbiotic). Applying this theoretical re-presentation of solidarity in the ASEAN context, the ASEAN key documents are praiseworthy in highlighting significant terms integrated with solidarity. "Awareness" and "collaboration" are always mentioned as requisites in making ASEAN a "community of caring societies" that is inclusive and harmonious, and where people's well-being, livelihood, and welfare

are improved.



<Fig 2> Constructed Theoretical Representation of Solidarity

Southeast Asian history has been shaped by socio-cultural interactions in the region. These conversations originate in the early centuries, during the time of the ancient kingdoms. Through frequent contact, trade, alliances, and intermarriages, people throughout Southeast Asia started to learn about and integrate each other's cultures. Common values and even shared customs, including those related to music, dances, rituals, literature, and culinary arts, have emerged from these processes. Culture has a major part in developing ASEAN solidarity. The peoples of Southeast Asian countries are exposed to a variety of lifestyles and worldviews through artistic and cultural exchanges. They enable ASEAN citizens to recognize both cultural similarities and distinctions. For many years, the arts and culture community for example, has been at the forefront of numerous biennales, festivals, dialogues, and other cooperative endeavors in the arts and culture have united artists, scholars, and practitioners from various Southeast Asian nations.

These initiatives have raised the bar for artistic expression and produced a wide range of artistic creations that are displayed and shared throughout Southeast Asia. While it is the duty of governments to support these kinds of initiatives within the framework of ASEAN, the public should assist a bottom-up process of creating a sense of regional solidarity.<sup>3</sup> The socio-cultural community's actions have been efficiently led by the ASCC Blueprint and are considered extremely successful pertinent to accomplishing the strategic goals of strengthening mutual understanding, fostering a sense of belonging, and uniting the ASEAN member countries. It has also advocated for the conservation, preservation, and protection of the cultural heritage of the ASEAN community through the goals established by the ASCC Blueprint (ASEAN Secretariat 2022). In promoting ASEAN awareness and sense of community through culture, ASEAN seeks to instill a sense of belonging as well as shared understanding of heritage, folk arts, folk traditions, crafts, and other artistic expressions. In this context, it is clear why ASEAN aspires to regional cooperation and solidarity in matters of culture as seen in actions, policies, and sustained initiatives embedded in ASCC culture and arts sector key documents. The proposed framework for ASEAN integration serves as an alternative paradigm, and a pragmatic endeavor for its member countries to be “culturally united” with each other while being “true” and “unique” in their actuality (Concepcion 2022: 298).

On a practical level, how can culture foster community building and solidarity? Basically, it is imperative to respect and comprehend a wide range of cultural practices, form bonds with individuals from diverse backgrounds, and forge powerful coalitions with disparate cultural groupings. This paper posits some arguments: 1) Every cultural group has special qualities and viewpoints that the greater community can make use of. Diverse perspectives, traditions, and knowledge are essential for resolving issues and enhancing communal life. Including marginalized groups in civic life can open people's eyes to new ideas and help solve difficult issues. 2) Racial and ethnic divides can be avoided and resolved with the use of

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<sup>3</sup> Examples are film festivals, cultural expos, and art conventions that entail attendance and participation from the wider public.

cultural understanding. Disparities in race and ethnicity lead to miscommunication, missed opportunities, and occasionally violent incidents. Communities lose money and human resources because of racial and ethnic disputes, which also prevent different cultural groups from working together to resolve their main problems. 3) The inclusion of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in decision-making processes is necessary for the success of policies or initiatives. Participation of those impacted by decisions in the formulation of remedies is a fundamental democratic value. There is a considerably lower chance of decision-making, execution, and follow-through in the absence of feedback and support from all the relevant parties. 4) In order to have a just and equal society, one must value cultural diversity. For instance, individuals feel more welcomed and accepted to a wider community if others are aware and conscious of, and value their respective culture. 5) Learning and accepting about the influences that cultural communities have had on history and culture provides an accurate view and understanding of the region's overall image.



<Fig 3> Proposed Dimensions of Socio-Cultural Solidarity

## V. Conclusion

Going beyond ambition and symbol, the ASEAN identity is a result of conscious efforts in constructing community and regionalism. As embodied in the ASCC blueprint, ASEAN's socio-cultural dimension is not an alternative of economic and political-security priorities in the region. Culture, as shown in this paper, has a direct concern and importance to ASEAN peoples and implies a significant need for legitimation—the harnessing of such in a regional level of discourse clearly serves a pragmatic imperative. A careful balancing act between substance and motivation determines a symbiotic solidarity, between the national publics, national governments, and the longevity of ASEAN through a constructive narrative. By consciously formulating ideologies and narratives on shared cultural heritage based on democratic principles, respect, and tolerance, socio-cultural solidarity means fostering a sense of belonging, strengthening unity in diversity, and developing mutual understanding among member countries regarding their culture, heritage, religion, and civilization. Socio-cultural solidarity in the form of preserving, promoting, protecting, and raising public awareness of cultural heritage is a critical first step in tackling the issues of prejudice and ignorance. Additionally, by promoting the conservation and preservation of ASEAN cultural heritage to guarantee its continuation, people will become more conscious of the region's distinct history as well as the cultural parallels and divergences among ASEAN member nations.

On the other hand, while a shared cultural heritage is both “frozen” and “living,” the vitality of constructing and acknowledging an ASEAN identity, needs to encompass both top-down and bottom-up discussions and initiatives for it to be used as a catalyst for socio-cultural solidarity. For ASEAN to manifest its identity, it must win the peoples' morals and consciousness. This solidarity should be understood as a collective responsibility for the preservation, protection, and promotion of culture. While tensions within the proposed dimensions of shared cultural identity can emerge (e.g., local nationalism vs regionalism; theism vs modernism), regional efforts should be made to ameliorate cultural

dilemmas. From the above discussion, this paper underscores that ASEAN identity through shared cultural heritage, and socio-cultural solidarity is constructed via strong national selfhood and regional cultural ties. The implication drawn from this paper's proposal is that having a common or shared identity, or a cultural consistency of the regional actors will most likely reduce conflicts or misunderstanding in the region, thus allowing them to achieve common goals.

ASEAN identity and Southeast Asian identity should complement each other while remaining distinct. Compared to the latter, which is more of an institutional, political, and strategic phenomenon, the former is more based in historical and socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, even though each identity has its limitations, Southeast Asian identity has a better chance of being stronger and more resilient than ASEAN identity. To maintain ASEAN's unity and neutrality in the great power competition, policymakers and civil society in the region must ensure the convergence of the two identities. Thinking, feeling, and acting within the construct of the ASEAN identity goes beyond socio-cultural considerations. Proper and appropriate means should be implemented so that its major stakeholder, the local populace, will put into practice the presence and significance of ASEAN in their everyday lives.

This research only explored a small component in constructing the ASEAN identity through shared cultural heritage and socio-cultural solidarity. Assuming the shifting geo-political dynamics in Asia and Southeast Asia today, ASEAN's identity-constructing project is now being contested and challenged by both internal and external factors (e.g., intra-ASEAN conflicts, the growth of China and India as superpowers, economic globalization, transnational dangers, possibility of renewed great power rivalry between US-China, etc.). Maintaining and reinforcing regional identity is, hence, an important task that will determine ASEAN's continued significance.

## Acknowledgements

The researcher extends gratitude to the Cultural Heritage Administration, Republic of Korea, for providing grant support in presenting this research in the *International Conference on ASEAN-ROK Cultural Heritage Cooperation*, held at Novotel Ambassador Seoul Dongdaemun Hotel, Republic of Korea, on June 26, 2024.

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Received: June 13, 2024; Reviewed: November 17, 2024; Accepted: January 3, 2025

