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Intercultural Theatre and Community in Southeast Asia: The ASEAN Puppet Exchange in Jakarta

Jennifer Goodlander

The Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is working towards creating a dynamic economic, political, and sociocultural community. As ASEAN works towards realizing the goals of creating a regional community, many cultural organizations are sponsoring artist exchanges, bolstering university arts' departments, and opening new facilities. This paper analyzes Water of ASEAN, performed in 2015 as part of the ASEAN Day celebration in Jakarta, Indonesia, as part of this effort. The performance combined puppets and artists from all ten ASEAN countries and offers an example of intercultural performance applying the principles of community to perform regional identity. Story, form, character, and style intermix within one performance to demonstrate the relationships between tradition and modernity, unity and diversity, and cities and villages.

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On 10 August 2015, puppet artists from the ten Southeast Asian countries represented by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, came together to give a performance that combined puppets and performance styles from around the region.¹ The performance, *Water of ASEAN*, was presented at the ASEAN Secretariat building in Jakarta, Indonesia, as part of a celebration of the forty-eighth ASEAN

Day. The ASEAN Puppet Exchange, or APEX, organizes artistic exchanges and collaborations with sponsorship from the ASEAN Foundation under the Japan ASEAN Solidarity Fund (JASF). The performance in Jakarta represents a significant attempt to develop intercultural theatre in the region as part of larger efforts to create an ASEAN regional identity.

Each puppet exchange is based around a theme—APEX’s organizers explained to me that water was chosen for this first effort to reflect the region’s diversity, because the countries of Southeast Asia are connected by seas and rivers, which enable cultural flows and sustain life. The performance was part of other recent efforts to create a stronger community of Southeast Asia, one of the most diverse regions in the world. Eleven countries contain multiple religions, hundreds of languages and ethnicities, various political systems, and distinctive cultural traditions.² Creating an entity that stressed interdependence and collaboration while maintaining strong individual national identity has been a core value since the original ASEAN charter in 1967. Thirty years later, ASEAN revitalized its original principles in a plan called “ASEAN Vision for 2020” (1997) based on three pillars: political security, economic cooperation and development, together with a strong regional identity grounded in shared heritage and culture. The most recent ASEAN Community was launched in December 2015 (AC15), where a new plan—“ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together”³—was developed.

As ASEAN works towards realizing the goals of creating a regional community, many cultural organizations are sponsoring artist exchanges, bolstering university arts’ departments, and opening new facilities. Developing intercultural performance as an expression of identity is not a new idea. Catherine Diamond writes about previous efforts to express an “Asian” identity in several performances that took place in the late 1990s, including *Realizing Rama* in 1998 and *Hotel Grand Asia* in 2003–2005. Diamond identifies several problems inherent in creating this kind of collaborative work as a representative of Asia:

(1) Choosing or creating an appropriate text; (2) creating a presentation style that either preserves cultural specificity, or is generically “Asian”; and (3) deciding on a language of performance that neither excludes or privileges any of the Asian cultures involved and is still comprehensible to a wide range of audiences. (Diamond 2013: 181)

Intercultural collaborations and festivals have made a resurgence—APEX is one of many events happening around the region: “The

current generation of collaborators is more cosmopolitan and curious, experience and agile in cross-art collaborations, hungry for enriching their practices and generating new expressive possibilities and linkages” writes Mathew Cohen (2014: 354–355). The ASEAN Foundation, a key organization for promoting regional awareness and identity, has selected puppetry as its main artistic vehicle to foster community because puppetry is a significant art form in almost every ASEAN nation; puppetry offers, “A presentation of people’s heritages, an experimental platform for contemporary cultures and stories, and for the personal and social development of its communities” (ASEAN Foundation 2015: 1).

In this paper, I examine intercultural performance as reflective of the ideals and difficulties of the ASEAN Community,⁴ following Fisher-Lichte, I believe it is “particularly promising to examine processes of cultural exchange in performance” (2009: 392). I prefer Ric Knowles definition of intercultural theatre because it emphasizes, “The contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces *between* cultures, spaces that can function in performance as sites of negotiation” (2010: 4). Likewise, the ASEAN community negotiates inequalities and cultural differences (Cabellaro-Anthony 2008: 81–83)—I argue that the goal of regional community offers a new lens to understand intercultural theatre and international collaboration. Since my experience in Jakarta in 2015,⁵ I have worked closely with the organizers and artists at puppet exchanges and have incorporated those conversations into this paper. First, I give an overview of the background of APEX and information about the participants. Next, I analyze the performance in order to understand how staging choices reflect issues relative to the ASEAN Community, specifically story, tradition and modernity, unity in diversity, and city and village. Finally, I detail some of the results and future plans for APEX in order to determine the impact of this kind of intercultural theatre on the artists and their practice.

APEX—Background and Participants

Intercultural performance, like other forms of cultural globalization, “Involves competition and negotiation as organizations and countries attempt to preserve, position, or project their cultures in global space” (Crane 2002: 4). Each exchange has different power dynamics involving funding, politics, and friendships, which shape the process and outcomes of the artistic work. The idea of puppet exchanges was the brainchild of Terence Tan, a Singaporean arts advocate, who attended the 2011 ASEAN Puppet Association (APA) Festival in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. APA was formed in 2006 to facilitate

cooperation and communication amongst puppet artists in Southeast Asia. APA strives to preserve and develop puppetry through conferences, festivals, and media. Tan wanted to offer further opportunities for the puppeteers to work and learn together. He developed a series of exchanges involving artists from two or three countries who would come together for workshops and performances. Each exchange has a different focus, or goal, depending on the artist involved—*Water of ASEAN* was the first effort to develop a long-term collaboration towards a cumulative product.

Funding the exchanges is an ongoing process because most of the artists could not afford to travel without support. Time away from their home companies reduces revenue and APEX works to offer small stipends for participation. Much of the financial support for APEX came from the JASF, which exists to promote understanding between Japan and ASEAN. This money was administered through the ASEAN Foundation, which helped select locations for exchanges and secure logistics. *Artsolute*, an arts advocacy organization in Singapore, under the leadership of Tan, provides the logistical and intercultural leadership for APEX. Seeking support outside of ASEAN changes the nature of the exchange. Japan requires Japanese artists to be part of the process and performances,⁶ affecting the types of puppetry and possibly unintentionally creating a performance that reflects ASEAN's dependence on outside support. The hosting companies in each country also provide a great deal of organizational support and planning.

Intercultural collaboration is not easy—many of the puppeteers speak different languages and practice diverse styles of puppetry. [Table 1](#) shows the artists and companies participating in the exchange.

The performance did not have a program listing the names of the cast, rather it was emphasized that the artists represented all ten ASEAN countries. Here I have not listed the puppeteers by company, partially because I have not been able to find a definitive list (Tan was not sure of the exact breakdown), and many of the puppeteers often work with both groups when there are two companies listed. For example, PEPADI (the Indonesian Puppetry Union) is closely related to and works under the auspices of Sena Wangi (also Senawangi), the Indonesian national organization for preserving and promoting *wayang* around the country.

APEX, I believe, hopes to demonstrate how the “imagined community” (here I borrow the idea of Benedict Anderson) of Southeast Asia can be informed by the project by creating a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 2006: 6–7) through the collaborations amongst the artists. *Water of ASEAN* can be understood to have

Table 1. APEX in Jakarta—list of participants and performers

COUNTRY	PERFORMERS	PUPPET COMPANY(S)
Brunei	Pg Hjh Aliuddin, Pg Hjh Masquin	PeSTAB (Pegiat Seni Tanah Air Brunei, Brunei Art Enthusiasts Association), Bandar Seri Begawan
Cambodia	Mann Kosal, Sang Thorn Chek, Chomrouenroth Pin, Sopheavouth Vann	Sovanna Phum (Gold Mountain), Phnom Penh, Wat Bo (Bo Temple), Siem Reap
Indonesia	Dunung Basuki Kurniawan, Bagiyanto, Jumadi, Lasno, Sutendri, Bimo Sinung Widagdo, Muhammad Irawan, Santi Dwisaputri Tedjakusuma, Nanang Ruswandi, Sri Yanti, Wahyu Wulandari	PEPADI (Persatuan Padalangan Indonesia, Indonesian Puppetry Union) and Jakarta, Sena Wangi (Secretariat National Wayang Indonesia, National Secretariat of Wayang), Jakarta
Laos	Khemphone Sai Yavongsak, Touny Sommanivanh	Jampa Lao (part of the Vulnerable Youth Development Association, VYDA), Vientiane
Malaysia	Hooi Ling Goh	Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe, Penang
Myanmar	Khin Maung Htwe, Thet Thet Htwe Oo	Htwe Oo Myanmar, Yangon
Philippines	Roel Ramolete, Amihan Bonifacio-Ramolete	Teatrong Mulat (Mulat Theatre), Manila
Singapore	Adel Dzulkarnaen bin Ahmad, Benjamin Ho	Sri Warisan (Heritage Theatre)—Singapore and Paper Monkey Theatre, Singapore
Thailand	Natnalin Tanvorasupakorn, Aiyared Yangkhieosod, Chittakorn Klinsuea	Joe Louis Puppet Company, Bangkok
Vietnam	Nguyen Tien Dung, Tran Minh Toan	Nhà Hát Múa Rối Việt (National Puppet Theatre of Vietnam), Hanoi

harnessed imagination as a social practice—where “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labor and of a culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (‘individuals’) and globally defined fields of possibility. [. . .] The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, as itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (Appadurai 1990: 5). As Tan explained, “We come together because of one common thing—we have a common interest in puppetry and we wanting [sic] to tell stories. It’s really the human imagination that puppetry requires of us, that helps us come together. I think that’s why it’s a very, very good art form to bring ASEAN together” (Son 2016). The puppeteers had to negotiate different working styles,

traditions, and types of puppetry in a very short period of time. Imagination can be said to offer a technique to bridge differences and enforce the similarities of the members of the exchange. The artists learned to work together towards a performance given there was no one director for the group proposing a unifying vision or approach, developing a process that would be explored in future APEX meetings. For now, APEX emphasizes process rather than product, and Tan hopes that the artists will take inspiration from the exchanges and apply what they have learned to their own work.

Finding a Story

At the beginning of the performance, Pg Hjh Aliuddin a man, and Pg Hjh Masquin, a woman, from Brunei came to the center of the stage. Aliuddin⁷ greeted the audience and announced, “We are going to tell a story: this story is one of the stories of the marriage of Bima.” As Aliuddin spoke, Masquin held a painting of a boat at sea in one hand and a small cardboard stick puppet in the other (Fig. 1). Aliuddin continued:

Bima is a brave warrior—he is feared by many people because he is very strong and brave. But in Bima’s heart he feels quiet and alone; he longs for love. Bima therefore sets out on a journey to find love. Bima wishes to know who he is and what is his purpose in life.

While he was traveling, Bima’s enemies poured poison in his food, causing him to sleep. Bima was then placed in a raft that carried him away to sea. Finally, clean drinking water caused Bima to awaken. But what will happen to Bima? What is the purpose of his life?⁸

The questions in this opening reflect some of the issues faced by the artists in creating community, both onstage and in the region. The community desires to be strong and brave, but recognizes it must bolster ties between countries and people in order to compete in the global marketplace and to ensure peace and security. Like the people in Southeast Asia, Bima faces many hardships. In this story, Bima is saved by “clean drinking water” reflecting a concern with preserving the environment for future generations. The speech ends with uncertainty: “What is the purpose of his life?”

The opening demonstrated different ways artists must work together in the creation of a performance that represents many different cultures. For example, the largest number of participants came from Indonesia, the host of the exchange. These puppeteers represented companies based in Java (PEPADI and Sena Wangi) that specialize in Javanese *wayang kulit*, only one of many different kinds of puppetry from Indonesia. Each exchange spends time learning about



FIGURE 1. Puppeteers from Brunei begin the performance by summarizing the story. (Photo: Jennifer Goodlander)

the host culture and puppet forms. The story for *Water of ASEAN* loosely focused on the character Bima, a character in the *Mahabharata*. Even though many countries in Southeast Asia have influences from Hindu myths and culture, Indonesian *wayang* has a much heavier focus on the *Mahabharata*. The emphasis on Bima was likely influenced by the location of the exchange in Jakarta.⁹ The opening was in Malay (a language analogous to Indonesian), therefore most of the audience could understand the narration. Participants told me that future APEX performances would strive to be less dependent on language so that they might reach a more international audience.

Brunei is the only country in Southeast Asia that does not have an established tradition of puppetry, and today, puppet performance remains extremely rare in this increasingly conservative Muslim state.¹⁰ Even so, Brunei aspires to increase its involvement with puppetry viewing it as an important means for education, culture, and tourism (Hamit 2015).¹¹ The aspiring puppeteers search for methods to make

puppetry appropriate for Brunei's culture. One way is by creating a form of puppetry from a performance genre called *asyik*. These two-dimensional figures made from the cardboard of cigar boxes emerged as a kind of storytelling entertainment in the 1960s (Oi 2015). *Asyik* provides a foundation for the participants from Brunei to imagine what a Bruneian puppetry tradition might look like. In the performance, the puppet of Bima held by Aliuddin was a simple silhouette, cut from cardboard. It did not have any of the details, such a shrimp-tail headdress or large claw-like fingernail for Bima that in *wayang* make this hero recognizable to a Javanese audience. The story had Hindu connections, but as created by the artists from Brunei, the puppet iconography severed this connection.

The puppeteers from Brunei possibly associated the story of Bima with a more familiar tale, of an eponymous hero Nakhoda Manis. In this popular folktale a son has a devoted mother, but eventually he heads out on a boat in order to seek his fortune. He promises to return to the mother he loves so much. But years pass, and he does not return. Eventually his mother sets out to find her son and discovers that he has married a princess. When the mother confronts her son, he denies her and sends her away. Angry, the mother appeals to Allah and curses her son, who then turns to stone. The participants from Brunei explained to me that the moral of the story is that it is important to never forget one's mother. Both *Nakhoda Manis* and the story of Bima from the *Mahabharata* use a journey by boat as the means for seeking wisdom. The audience learns much about values for life within the story. Puppeteers from Brunei often emphasized the opportunity to teach religious and cultural values through the artistic work as a primary goal of their participation in the exchanges.

Tradition and Modernity

With a broad sweeping gesture, the two puppeteers from Brunei exited stage right. As they departed, four male actors came on from stage left carrying a large cotton cloth, each person was holding one corner. They stretched it across the stage, holding it at waist height and fluttering it up and down, light shining on the fabric changed it from shades of blue, to white, to green. The fabric, lights, and movement invoked the tumultuous waves of the ocean. The ocean then transformed into a shadow screen as the puppeteers stopped moving and stretched it across the stage.

Suddenly, a bright white light shone from behind the screen to reveal two large Javanese *kayonan* (tree) puppets. A *kayonan* puppet is shaped like a large leaf and on it is carved the tree of life, symbolizing the entire universe. Several genres of puppetry in Indonesia and

Malaysia use *kayonan* puppets, connecting *Waters of ASEAN* with some of the oldest puppet traditions in Southeast Asia. In Balinese *wayang*, for example, the puppeteer uses the *kayonan* to bring the world of the performance to life. As the music increased in tempo, the two *kayonan* puppets started briefly at the sides of the screen and then swung to the center. They crossed, separated, and crossed again, uniting to form one figure in the center for a moment before shifting and meeting again.

Finally, the *kayonan* puppets split one last time to form a boat (Fig. 2). The flat leather Javanese version of the puppet for Bima appeared within the boat. Brunei's realistic puppet and background were replaced with the stylized imagery of *wayang*. The ancient world of *wayang* was doubled with the development of television technology indexed by the staging of the first puppets and the use of video in the performance. Aihwa Ong notes that typical models placing local (here the puppet) in contrast or against global (video technology) "does not quite capture the *horizontal* and *relational* nature of the contemporary economic, social, and cultural processes that stream across space" (1999: 4). Diversity and unity are in constant flux—community is depicted as a dynamic relationship. In Southeast Asia, elements of modernity and tradition are constantly connecting and flowing in order to articulate identities.

Next the lights faded to a dark blue and the actors gathered up the cloth and crossed stage right. The cloth transformed into a boat and the men, now visible, became its crew. A Cambodian song, like the singing-narrative style used for *sbek thom* (large shadow puppetry),



FIGURE 2. The two *kayonan* puppets come together to form a boat. (Photo: Jennifer Goodlander)

accompanied their slow movement across the stage. The figure of Bima now was placed at the center of the configuration; he was riding a boat and the cloth suggested water. But the visible actors were also moving their arms in rowing motions, a leader encouraged them in their work with calls of “Ha-yup.” The rowing motion was both a literal reenactment of rowing, but it also contained the graceful hand movements common in many dance forms around Southeast Asia. The actors slowly crossed to the other side of the stage, and then turned their bodies to face center. Bima did not shift his position and the puppet still faced stage left. The image on the two screens at either side of the stage focused tight in on Bima, excluding the human actors.

The scenes of Bima in the boat, performed in shadow and live, brought together performers of two of the most ancient traditions of shadow puppetry in Southeast Asia—performers from both Sovanna Phum and Wat Bo from Cambodia and PEPADI and Sena Wangi from Indonesia. These four groups represent how tradition has power and value within modernity. Today, in these two countries, puppet genres, Indonesian *wayang* and Cambodian *sbek thom*, have been declared Intangible Cultural Heritage by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), shoring up their social value and political relevance. The UNESCO designation perhaps limits or makes “fractious the plan of another country to support a closely related art as part of their heritage” (Foley 2014: 372), since for example *wayang* exists in Malaysia and the Khmer art has an analogue in Thailand. Both *sbek thom* and Indonesian *wayang* are well-represented in APEX projects, but these forms always appear together with other genres that are not part of the UNESCO list.¹² However, in *Water of ASEAN*, shadow puppets reappeared throughout the story suggesting their dominance as key examples of ASEAN heritage and identity.

As the boat waited stage right, a young boy, Roel Ramolete—one of the members of Teatrang Mulat from the Philippines—entered, carrying a small rod puppet of a green turtle. The turtle bobbed its way across the stage, as if it was swimming in the waves of the ocean, up to the bow of the boat and perched on its end, lifting his head up high to peer at Bima. The turtle looked young and playful—an effect enhanced by having a child as puppeteer. After a quick exchange between Bima and the turtle, the turtle fell backwards and began swimming stage right. Slowly the music, played by a small ensemble of mostly Javanese musicians, began again and the lights dimmed to blue—the performers vocalized the call and response common in *sbek thom* as they followed the turtle.

The turtle has a powerful history as a key symbol in Asia’s past that resonates with the goals of the production. Michael A. Rappengluck writes that since the Bronze Age:

The motive of the tortoise/turtle, bearing the whole cosmos with its body, is derived from the hard and protective shell of the animal together with its strong and short legs, which show perseverance, solidity and strength as well as invulnerability. In addition a tortoise' slow movements and indolence led to the idea that the reptile is responsible for the "stability" and "immovability" of the world and guarantees space and time. (2006: 224)

The puppet turtle invokes strength, stability, and wisdom—all desired qualities within the formation of the ASEAN community. The turtle sought Bima out and provided him with direction, leading him from being lost at sea. Likewise, tradition, as enacted through cultural performances like puppetry, provides guidance for people wishing to come together as one.

Roel Ramolete was the youngest puppeteer, and part of a legacy of Filipino puppeteers. His grandmother, Amelia Lapena-Bonifacio, founded the country's first contemporary puppet troupe, Teatrong Mulat in 1977. Her inspiration for the group came after several years of fieldwork learning about the traditional theatres of Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand—Lapena-Bonifacio dreamed of creating a strong children's theatre in the Philippines that would promote education, teach morality, and instill a strong Filipino identity. Lapena-Bonifacio wanted to create a distinctly Filipino tradition, because for most people in the Philippines, theatre is something "Western" (Tiatco and Bonifacio-Ramolete 2015: 53–55). Roel's mother, Amihan Bonifacio-Ramolete, now serves as the primary artistic and executive manager of the company. Roel's performance in *Waters of ASEAN* with the turtle could be understood as a "co-presence" (Piris 2014: 30), connecting the diversity of puppetry in Asia because of his grandmother's legacy, invoking larger global spheres through the cosmic symbol of the turtle, and looking towards the future through the body of the young boy.

City and Village

After Bima's boat exited—the music changed and various types of rod and hand puppets from Vietnam, Laos, Philippines, and Singapore took the stage to depict village life in Southeast Asia. The characters represented everyday people—catching fish, working in the rice fields, and other tasks that involve water in Southeast Asia, showing how "specific modes of contemporary modernity in Burma [and the rest of Southeast Asia] are channeled through long-standing relations between villages and towns" (Skidmore 2005: 9). Urban identity depends on an ideal of village life in order to connect to nation and region.

First, entered two rod puppets from Vietnam operated by Nguyen Tien Dung and Tran Minh Toan from the National Puppet Theatre of Vietnam, the characters were women wearing the typical triangular hat worn to shield workers in the rice fields from the sun, simple dresses, and carrying baskets for fishing on long poles. They danced around the stage—their movements reminiscent of the Vietnamese water puppetry, or *mua roi nuoc*. As in *mua roi nuoc*, these dry-puppets¹³ “enchant the eye and entice the mind to dream of idyllic days in rice paddies and on the waterways of the Red River Delta” (Foley 2001: 131). Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy, the Deputy Head of Arts Division for the National Puppet Theatre, explained that water puppetry is mostly performed for tourists and school children, while dry puppetry draws a local audience and tours to the villages.

Touny Sommanivanh and Khemphone Sai Yavongsak from the Vulnerable Youth Development Association (VYDA) in Vientiane, Laos, entered next, carrying *epok* (also *ipok*) puppets. These are a type of three-dimensional rod/doll puppetry that had almost disappeared in Laos. The court of Fa Ngum (1316–1374), the founding father of the Laos nation, in Luang Prabang is thought to have created this style of puppetry for performance at important royal celebrations. 1975 marked the end of the last royal court in Luang Prabang, and with it the support for *epok* puppetry (Diamond 2012: 259–260). Today few artists remain who remember the art form, but since the declaration of Luang Prabang as an UNESCO World Heritage Centre in 1995 there has been a resurgence of interest in Lao arts and culture including puppetry. Even so, development of the art form has been slow and difficult (Amphonephong 2015). In spite of its royal heritage, *epok*'s current practice reflects ideals of the folk within Lao identity. The *epok* puppets used in the performance were not made of the traditional wood, but rather these puppets were made from recycled trash, such as paper and water bottles. The puppets depicted a man playing a *saing*, a traditional conch shell instrument, and a woman dancing to the music. The man was simply dressed, but the female puppet is often used to represent a princess character in performances by the company, thus mixing low and high status, royalty and peasants, together onstage.

These puppets from Vietnam and Laos represent the complex relationship between city and village in constructing ASEAN identity. The Vietnamese water puppets began as a village art that is now used by the Vietnamese government as an elite expression of identity. For Laos, *epok* puppetry was supposedly only performed in the court, but today it is used for outreach to rural communities. For many Southeast Asians, the village represents an ideal that the city ought to seek. In 1982,

Indonesian architect Rivai Gaos writes about the *desa*, village, in Indonesia as:

Let's imagine we go back to the "desa". We will be welcomed not only by the small bridge made of coconut trees, but also by pieces of rock in the river which seem to enthusiastically appear on the surface to greet us. Every house we passed seems to invite us to sit and rest as their open verandah. No thorny gates and aggressive dogs could be found. Not only are we greeted by people, but also by the stone that supports the houses. They are all components of life that makes us feel alive. We feel acknowledged as part of the big family. (Quoted in [Kusno 2002: 125](#)).

Gaos believed that the disconnected, chaotic city could be overcome by following the principles of the *desa*, rather than copying Western urban development trends. Gaos' attitude is reflected in the glorification of the countryside and nature within the performance. As the villagers gathered together Bima entered again, seeking guidance on his journey. The villagers pointed in the direction he should go. Even though ASEAN and the ASEAN community primarily speak to and address urban concerns ([2014 report by the United Nations](#) notes that by 2020 populations of all countries are likely to be more than 50 percent urban, p. 8), the village remains an ideal for constructing community.

Unity in Diversity

The idea that Southeast Asia embodies "unity in diversity"¹⁴ has a long history both within and outside the region. This notion emphasizes how Southeast Asia's languages, religious practices, culture, geography, and history are similar to each other and distinct from its neighbors, especially China and India ([Acharya 1990: 57–58](#)). The ASEAN 2007 Charter, reflecting the principles of the Bali [ASEAN Concord II \(2003\)](#), affirmed that ASEAN would act with "respect for the different cultures, languages and religions of the peoples of ASEAN, while emphasizing their common values in the spirit of unity in diversity" ([ASEAN Charter 2007](#)). ASEAN Secretary General Le Luong Minh of Vietnam echoed this by declaring that "unity in diversity" forms the basis for shared identity within ASEAN ([Vietnam Breaking News 2015](#)). Culture, especially as expressed through the performing arts, has played a key role in achieving the goal of a strong regional identity, as described in ASEAN's motto, "One Vision, One Identity, One Community."

Monkey characters, popular around the region, demonstrate how APEX foregrounds connections across different puppet practices. The first monkey character was Sun Wukong or the Monkey King as dramatized by artists Hooi Ling Goh, from Malaysia and Benjamin Ho, from Singapore. Each of these artists are committed to rejuvenating a

diasporic tradition within their countries. In the first half of the scene, Goh used a table-top rod puppet to show the martial antics of this popular character. The monkey danced, spun, and landed in splits on the small table held aloft by two people. Goh performs with the Penang Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe, a group that seeks to revive Teochew (a Chinese minority ethnic group in Southeast Asia) opera and puppet performance in Malaysia.¹⁵

After the monkey danced alone for a few moments, Bima appeared on the shadow screen and continued to grunt and roar. At that moment, Goh spun out of place to be replaced by Benjamin Ho from Singapore performing Monkey King with a hand puppet (*budai xi* [Mandarin]/*po te hi* [Southeast Asia Chinese]). It was interesting to see a similar sequence of fighting actions translated into a completely different style of puppet. Ho performs with Paper Monkey Theatre, a group that presents performances and workshops for children and families to tell, “stories from Asia based on Asian values, stories of adventure, fantasy and mystery, stories where children are transported to a different space, stories where adults can rekindle the child within, stories where families create and share memories that last a lifetime” (Paper Monkey Website 2016).

Both Ho and Goh perform for companies that demonstrate the complex relationships that exist in the past and present between China and Southeast Asia. China is recognized as a crucial partner for the success of a strong ASEAN, especially for economic and political security (Leong 2005). China has had a long history of mutual influence in Southeast Asia, and large numbers of migrants have moved from China into parts of Southeast Asia during various historic and recent periods. The relationship between these ethnic-Chinese peoples and others in Southeast Asia has not always been peaceful, and ethnic-Chinese have been the targets of violence (the 1998 riots in Indonesia, for example, victimized Chinese Indonesians). In Malaysia, traditional Chinese performance offers a powerful marker of ethnic heritage and identity for the Chinese minority living there (Loo and Loo 2016: 134). The Malaysian majority of ethnic Malay has a shadow puppet form in *wayang kelantan*, and it is not possible to guess why it was not selected to represent Malaysia in the *One ASEAN* performance. Availability, interest in the project, and support from the government played some role in each group that participated in APEX. Whatever the reason, the inclusion of these puppet styles might remind the audience of the importance of China to the ASEAN Community and the cultural identity of many Southeast Asian countries.

Hanoman is the general of the monkey army—a beloved character around Southeast Asia. The Thai puppet version of this

character, as performed by members of the Thai Joe Louis Puppet Company, has the ornate appearance of a *khon* (mask) dancer. Hanuman was brought to life by three puppeteers, dressed in black, who move like dancers to synchronize the movements of the head, arms, and legs of the puppet. Hanoman is a fierce warrior, but in Thai puppet performance he is often depicted as a lovable trickster. In these performances Hanoman often traveled through the audience stealing hats from boys and kisses from girls. In *Water of ASEAN*, Hanoman returned to his warrior roots, and in a short scene agreed to help Bima with his quest. Hanoman then called forth his army of monkeys. These monkey puppets showed another layer of similarity to foster community—the army of monkeys were depicted by Indonesian shadow puppets held aloft by Sang Thorn Chek, a Cambodian dancer moving like a monkey character—a key character-type in Cambodian dance.

After the monkeys exited, Thet Thet Htwe Oo, a young female puppeteer from Myanmar came out with two small *naga* (snake/dragon) marionette puppets. The *naga* often appears in performances of *yokthe thay*, or traditional Burmese string puppetry. The artists in APEX each brought with them a variety of puppets. Tan announced the theme and sometimes spoke with the puppeteers about which puppets might be best to bring to the exchange. Khin Maung Htwe, the founder and director of Htwe Oo Myanmar, explained that Tan thought the *naga*, or serpents, would work well with the theme “water”, but in retrospect, he wished he had other puppets that better showed the technical abilities of the Burmese marionettes. *Naga* have simple stringing and limited movement capabilities.

The *naga* demonstrate how the performance emphasized universality to dramatize “unity in diversity.” During a traditional performance of *yokthe thay* the *naga* appears in the first section that features animals and mythical creatures. Mr. Htwe explained that this part of a show was meant to entertain the children in the audience and that the main story would happen after midnight for the adults. Like in the performance, the *naga* is often shown in combat with the *galon*, the Burmese equivalent of the mythic *garuda*, a fantastical bird. In Burma:

The Garuda-Naga symbolism also had other meanings. In Eastern mythology, the Garuda represents the sun-force or solar energy, in natural opposition to the liquid quality of the earthly waters. The Naga is an earth symbol that, in its embodiment in serpentine form, partakes of magical symbolic properties of liquids. The liquid of the serpent is especially fascinating because it is a poison. (Solomon 1969: 213)

The *naga* symbolizes the earth and the *garuda* might offer a better representation of water, since in myth they fetch the water of life.



FIGURE 3. Two puppeteers from Thailand create a triangle with the eel puppet, operated by Thet Thet Htwe Oo from Myanmar. (Photo: Jennifer Goodlander)

APEX aspired to reach an international audience—they currently collaborate with the JASF to bring Japanese puppeteers to participate in the exchanges. In the future, the artists hope to tour the *One ASEAN* performance to international festivals and venues. The *naga* appearing as a water eel, therefore, potentially offers a more universal symbol of water than the mythical bird. In collaborations, the artists must negotiate a desire for wide understanding with the wish to accurately represent their cultures.

Puppeteers from Thailand entered carrying ornate fish puppets that they brought to life by moving the tails with their hands. These

simple puppets darted around the stage and with the *naga*, creating an underwater fantasy world. After moving around the stage the puppeteers came to pose center-stage—the *naga* from Myanmar were in the center and the fish created a triangle around them (Fig. 3), causing the audience to applaud enthusiastically. As the applause died down Mr. Htwe from Myanmar came out with a single large *naga* puppet who broke up the grouping of puppets and rushed around, separating them further. The playful action within this scene demonstrated the rich diversity of water and puppets in ASEAN.

Resolving Conflict

The ASEAN Concord II, signed in Bali in 2003 marked an important coming together for the ASEAN nations after a period of economic instability and political unrest at the time of the Asian Monetary Crisis of the late 1990s, even so, there is concern amongst scholars and leaders of ASEAN that the diversity of Southeast Asia could possibly become one of its greatest liabilities—it provides great potential for conflict amongst neighboring countries and makes Southeast Asia vulnerable to exploitation by other world powers. “Although ASEAN has come a long way in cultivating mutual trust amongst its members, some mutual suspicion, never far below the surface, still needs to be overcome. This requires a deeper sense of regional community and regional identity, which means a stronger identification of the country’s and its leadership[’s] interests within the progress of the region” (Severino 2009: 255).

Building a strong community has not been easy. One factor hindering the formation of a single ASEAN community is that almost all ASEAN countries are former colonies of one or more countries—and often identify more closely with their former colonizer than with one another (IBON International 2015: 6). Individual ASEAN nations are also at very different stages of development and industrialization—Brunei is one of the richest nations in the world and Laos is one of the poorest. Neoliberal privatization makes this disparity worse as basic services, such as water and electricity, become more expensive and limited. Also, in spite of efforts to educate and inform people about ASEAN, a 2013 survey showed that 76 percent of people in the region still lack a basic understanding of ASEAN and what the organization is trying to do (p. 5). The artists and supporters of APEX hope that their programs will help create awareness of ASEAN and provide a platform for creating interest.

Critics worry that ASEAN only exists for the elite—and the puppet performance given only one time for a select audience in a government building in Jakarta perhaps reinforces that perspective. Communities are

understood through people's similarities and differences, making boundaries, or the places where the community starts and ends important. Anthony Cohen notes that a boundary, "encapsulates the identity of the community and like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction" (2013: 12). The performance used objects that pointed to tradition (a specific kind of identity marker), such as Javanese *wayang*, and members of other groups manipulated those objects. The bodies of the performers traversed the boundaries of national identity in order to make community—imagination became social practice. Boundaries emphasize the relational identities between individuals and communities—to create a community is to create relationships with some and to exclude others. As Cohen continues, the "consciousness of community is, then, encapsulated in perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction" (p. 13). *Water of ASEAN* dramatized boundaries of diversity and unity to create community.

In many *wayang* the battle featured in the final section offers the most exciting moments of the performance. The battle in *Water of ASEAN* illustrated that the sea might both divide and unify the region. As the music increased in volume and tempo the different sea creatures gathered to the left side of the stage as Bima entered on the right. Bima was shouting and growling at the creatures. One after another the fish swam up to Bima and attacked him. Each moment of combat featured spinning and twirling of the puppets while the stage lights flickered and flashed different colors, creating a strobe-like effect. Each attack seemed more vicious than the last, but Bima remained strong. The battle between Bima and the sea creatures ended in transformation. As the creatures clustered together two new puppets appeared and the sea creatures stopped their aggressive attack and exited the stage. The new puppets were warriors—one female and one male.

The many different sea creature puppets in the final moments of the performance could be understood to represent the victory of unity over the diversity. Maritime security is a key issue for the region, "Threats such as piracy, illegal fishing, and maritime terrorism in Southeast Asia have attracted greater attention and concern" (Liss 2013: 141). Countries must work together and within the international community to address these problems. In the performance, Bima brought peace and calm to the turmoil caused by the creatures of the sea. Nine of the ten member nations of ASEAN border the sea, and their economies depend on the waterways for food, transportation, and trade. Bima, in this performance, offered a character that might connect the imagination of peoples around Southeast Asia, just as their cultures and histories are connected through water.¹⁶

Conclusions—One ASEAN

In the final moments of the performance, the two narrators from Brunei who began the performance entered one last time. They alternated, offering different proclamations of identity. When I spoke with Jodi Thiele, one of the organizers, about the performance, she explained that their voices were for the characters of the two warrior puppets on stage. Even so, because of the many bodies and puppets in the final tableaux, their voices seemed to speak for the production in its entirety (Fig. 4). Back and forth they proclaimed:

We are one with nature.
We are filled with life and will open our minds.
We protect and defend our lands.
We are one region.
We move with the water.
We are all part of the same biosphere.
We all share one society and one culture.
We are all one group.

And finally, the entire cast shouted in unison, “We are all together the ASEAN Community.” The actors came on stage for this final proclamation without any puppets. Rather the physical objects as markers of community and identity were completely replaced with human bodies. After this last announcement, the lights went to black as the audience clapped and cheered.



FIGURE 4. *Waters of ASEAN* featured puppets and puppeteers from all ten ASEAN countries. (Photo: Jennifer Goodlander)

APEX continues to develop as a project. In November 2015 artists met in Cambodia, and during and after the program local people in the audiences at puppet performances rose significantly. Sovanna Phum Art Association, one of the companies involved, experienced a 25 percent increase in attendance ([ASEAN Foundation 2015](#)). There was an educational focused exchange in Brunei in January 2016. Artists from Laos, Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Japan learned from each other and taught workshops at a local school. Young college students from Brunei explained that puppetry might provide a means for youth to express their feelings about the high religious and social expectations from parents and society that caused feelings of stress and isolation. The VYDA in Laos has increased its educational outreach by 20 percent and now presents performances on television.

The ending of *Water of ASEAN* reinforced the different values expressed throughout the show and within APEX. Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy, of the National Puppet Theatre of Vietnam said of January's puppet exchange, "Most recently last week, as one ASEAN Community, we reached another significant milestone here in Brunei Darussalam, that is to create and learn together, not only for ourselves but to teach the next generation of the ASEAN way. We also had wonderful friends Akihiro and Erina of Japan to join us and inspire us. In return, we plan to help enrich fellow Asians from Japan with the ways and culture of ASEAN" ([ASEAN Puppetry Festival and Exchange 2016](#)). The leaders of ASEAN and of the puppet exchanges see the community as a way to not only strengthen Southeast Asia as a region, but to foster connections with the rest of Asia and beyond. Whether it might be artists coming from China to collaborate or Thai puppets exhibited in Japan—the organization is vibrant and active. Even though APEX is centered in Singapore, the most economic and politically powerful country in ASEAN—the group strives to represent a variety of perspectives.

The organizers hope the final show, *One ASEAN*, will someday tour around Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. There are many obstacles to overcome, specifically funding and logistics. APEX has found support, but much of it has come from Japan, which is outside ASEAN. This provides the advantage that no one country has a primary voice in the project, but it also means that ideas and artists outside of ASEAN must be accommodated. Logistically, travel between countries is still often difficult and expensive. Artists also must balance their work in the APEX project with work and family demands at home. It can be hard for an organization to function if several of the most talented performers are working on a project away from home.

The advantage APEX has over the productions and attempts that Diamond described in her 2013 article critiquing various intercultural projects she had seen is the longevity of the project. APEX has met with different combinations of the same core groups in various locations and has plans for more meetings in order to tackle these very real obstacles to the creation of a “successful” production—one that might represent the ASEAN community for both the artists and their audiences. At the end of the recent APEX in Myanmar (May 2016) artists were reimagining the ways they might collaborate together. Ngo Than Thuy from Vietnam explained that bringing back new ideas and innovations was a key reason members from his theatre participated in the exchanges. He expressed the opinion that puppet artists in Southeast Asia have much to learn from each other and that will strengthen art and culture for the entire region. *Water of ASEAN* initiates an exciting possibility for the arts in Southeast Asia and their possible relationships to regional economy and security. As the artists continue to collaborate at future APEX events and develop the performance for a larger, global audience, only time will tell if puppetry can find a way to represent and inspire the ASEAN Community. Like ASEAN Community itself, the art is a work in progress.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the Program for Southeast Asia and ASEAN Studies at Indiana University for providing funding so that I was able to attend the performance in Jakarta and meet with some of the artists. I was not able to watch the rehearsal process for *APEX Water*—but have since attended the entire workshops and performance for *APEX Light* in Brunei, January 2016 and *APEX Earth* in Myanmar, May 2016. I was able to conduct follow-up interviews and gain further insight into the creative process used both in Jakarta and overall. I wish to acknowledge funding from The College Arts and Humanities Institute, the Martha and H.A.R. Tilaar Faculty Support Fund for the Study of Global Issues of Women’s Empowerment and Education in the Asia-Pacific Region, and the Indiana University’s New Frontiers in the Arts and Humanities Program. I also wish to express my sincere gratitude to Terence Tan and the rest of the APEX team and artists for their generosity and enthusiasm for my research.

2. The ten countries of ASEAN are: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. There are eleven total countries in Southeast Asia, but Timor-Leste (East Timor) has not yet been made a member of ASEAN.

3. I have provided a brief introduction to ASEAN and its goals of community. For more information on ASEAN’s history see [Severino \(2008\)](#).

4. The analysis of the performance here represents my own ideas and does not necessarily represent the intentions of the artists. This performance, like other artistic products, presents many unarticulated ideas that are in circulation amongst the artists and their context.

5. After Jakarta there have been exchanges and performances in Cambodia (November 2015), Brunei (January 2016), and Myanmar (May 2016). Additional exchanges are planned for 2016, but the dates and locations have yet to be finalized.

6. *Water of ASEAN* did not use any puppeteers from Japan, but while in Jakarta select artists developed a longer piece based on the *Ramayana* that included puppeteers from Japan.

7. Names in Southeast Asia do not conform to the usual first and last name construction of Western names. In this paper I use the full name and title, if commonly used, on first reference. After that I use the person's preferred shortened name—sometimes adding "Mr." or other titles, depending on how that person was typically addressed.

8. References to the performance are from my notes, photographs, and a video recording of the performance (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFCChbYb2w0w>, accessed 12 November 2016). The performers spoke in Malay—which is comprehensible to an Indonesian audience. The translations are mine.

9. For example, the later exchange in Brunei focused on a local story from that country and organizers are currently planning for the exchange in Laos and discussing how to incorporate local stories in that performance.

10. Most of the population in Brunei are Muslim—the official religion of the government. In 2014 the Sultan issued an edict to the nation to follow Sharia law.

11. Several APEX events have taken place in Brunei (2014 and 2016) and have focused on increasing awareness and skill with puppetry in arts organizations and schools.

12. *APEX Fire* took place in Cambodia in November 2015 and focused primarily on shadow puppetry. The groups that participated were: Sovanna Phum Art Association (Phnom Penh, Cambodia), Wat Bo Puppet Troupe (Siem Reap, Cambodia), Sena Wangi (Indonesia), Anino Shadow Play Collective (Philippines), Sri Warisan Som Said (Singapore), Yaikabtaa Group (Thailand), and Kyo-gei Puppet Theatre (Japan).

13. Water puppets are the kind of puppets most often associated with Vietnam. Because of this, the representatives from Vietnam would differentiate other kinds of puppetry from the water puppets by calling the "dry puppets." I use their term here.

14. Readers familiar with Indonesian culture and history will note that "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika," or Old Javanese for "Unity in Diversity" is Indonesia's national motto. But the idea has been adapted both by scholars and politicians inside and outside of Southeast Asia as a way to express the goals of the ASEAN Community and regional identity in Southeast Asia.

15. Race relations in Malaysia are complicated and overtly political in their social construction. For more on race in Malaysia, including the Teochew see [Milner and Ting \(2014\)](#).

16. For more on how Southeast Asia is historically connected through its waterways see [Gaynor \(2013\)](#).

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