SPAFACON2021

Papers from the SEAMEO SPAFA International Conference on

SOUTHEAST ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND FINE ARTS

13 - 17 December 2021

Editor: Noel Hidalgo Tan

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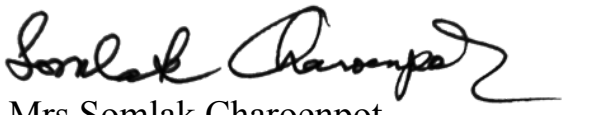
INTRODUCTION

This volume contains the extended abstracts from the papers presented at the SEAMEO SPAFA International Conference on Southeast Asian Archaeology and Fine Arts, which was held online from 13 to 17 December 2021. Also known as the SPAFACON2021, this conference was organised online due to the pandemic. Despite the disruption brought about by Covid-19 to our in-person events, training programmes and field research, it is heartening to see that archaeology and cultural heritage has continued under new modes of communication and collaboration.

This fourth iteration of the SPAFACON is also scheduled a year earlier than our usual triennial cycle to commemorate the 50th anniversary of SEAMEO initiating a centre dedicated towards archaeology and the fine arts. Over the past year, SPAFA has also been highlighting this legacy of international cooperation and capacity-building by sharing our photographic archives on our social media.

I am delighted by the high level of enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity brought by the participants to the conference. During our call for papers we received close to 90 submissions, but owing to the pressures of time and the online format, we were only able to accept 34 papers for the conference. The variety of papers present here, although a small set compared with our usual proceedings, reflects the breadth of the centre's ambit – covering not just archaeology, but also performing arts, visual arts, museum studies, and other aspects of Southeast Asian cultural heritage.

I would like to thank all the participants, without whom this conference would not be possible in its present form, in particular, our Governing Board members who represent every country in Southeast Asia, and to the Ministry of Culture, Thailand and the Ministry of Education, Thailand for their long-standing support of SEAMEO SPAFA and its activities.



Mrs Somlak Charoenpot
Centre Director
SEAMEO SPAFA

AS ONE WITH NATURE: SOUTHEAST ASIAN AESTHETIC EXPRESSIONS

เป็นหนึ่ง เดียวกับธรรมชาติ: การแสดงออกทางสุนทรียะของชาวเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

10.26721/spafa.pqcnu8815a-25
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Abstract

Given the many artistic manifestations in the region which range from architecture to wooden sculptures, one wonders whether there are some guiding aesthetic principles in Southeast Asia. Using food, tattoos, bas reliefs, paintings, textiles, pottery, and architecture, this article is concerned with the salient underpinnings of aesthetic displays in the region. Regional aesthetics manifests itself in many cultural practices ranging from royal traditions, spiritual rituals and practices and quotidian rites of passage. Aesthetic expressions drew their inspiration from nature, cosmic perceptions and religious beliefs.

ภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้เป็นภูมิภาคที่มีงานศิลปะที่หลากหลาย ไม่ว่าจะเป็นงานทางสถาปัตยกรรมไปจนถึงประติมากรรมไม้ หลายคนอาจสงสัยว่าอะไรคือหลักสุนทรียภาพที่เป็นตัวกำหนดการมองความงามของธรรมชาติหรืองานศิลปะของคนภายในภูมิภาค เพื่อตอบคำถามดังกล่าว บทความนี้จะใช้อาหาร รอยสัก ภาพนูนต่ำ ภาพวาด สิ่งทอ เครื่องปั้นดินเผา และสถาปัตยกรรม ในการแสดงถึงรากฐานสำคัญที่มีอิทธิพลต่อหลักสุนทรียภาพ นอกจากนี้บทความต้องการแสดงให้เห็นว่า สุนทรียภาพของชาวเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ยังรวมไปถึงข้อปฏิบัติทางวัฒนธรรมต่าง ๆ เช่น ขนบธรรมเนียมประเพณีของชนชั้นกษัตริย์ พิธีกรรมทางจิตวิญญาณ และพิธีกรรมเปลี่ยนผ่าน ซึ่งการปฏิบัติเหล่านี้ได้รับแรงบันดาลใจมาจากธรรมชาติ การรับรู้เกี่ยวกับจักรวาล และความเชื่อทางศาสนา

Keywords

borrowed traditions; cloth cultures; cosmic representations; Dongson drums; *genius loci*; Indianisation; *Krato*n culture

Introduction

Understanding aesthetics in Southeast Asia is complex and one is bound to run into many conceptual obstacles and cultural roadblocks. Five of these socio-cultural impediments are addressed here as part of the overall discussion of Southeast Asian aesthetic expression in the visual arts and crafts and folk traditions and practices.

First, the long colonial engagement in the region underscored the white stereotypical beliefs that 'savages' in the region could not have aesthetic expressions. In general, aesthetics is often seen as part of a higher order development, reflective of people who have attained civilisation. This view is often a debatable issue.

This partly stems from the academic classifications in higher and lower order in human intellectual abilities. Lower order skills refer to remembering, understanding, applying, analysing and evaluating whereas higher order are defined by creativity which includes aesthetics. This distinction in higher and lower order skills is best exemplified in Benjamin Bloom's hierarchy of thinking skills (Brewster 2009).

Second, the strong spiritual beliefs in the region undergird the cultural, social and economic activities of communities (Ba Han 1965; Geertz 1969; Holt 2009). An integral part of tribal spiritual beliefs is the way aesthetics is manifested in rituals, offerings and public ceremonies (Benjamin 2002). Tribes and peasants often believe gods and spirits have similar human wants and desires (Benjamin and Lau 2002).

Third, in Southeast Asia, aesthetic expressions and indigenous folk culture are intimately intertwined in many aspects of dance forms, *wayang kulit* (puppet shadow play), architecture, paintings, wood engravings, tattooing, textile weaving, pottery and food displays (Geertz 1980; Soedarsono 1984; Maxwell 2003; Purananda 2004).

Fourth, archaeologists and historians are in continual debate as to whether Southeast Asian culture reflects the '*local genius*' or a '*borrowed tradition*' (Wales 1974). Based on prehistoric evidence (pottery, bronze, house-types), early communities clearly demonstrated visual traditions of geometric patterns, colours and forms.

Fifth, evidence from artefacts and pottery, textiles, tattoos and paintings show that Southeast Asian communities derive their inspiration and creativity from the ecosystem around them (Boomgard 1995; Bruun and Kalland 1995; Sitompul 1983). Given that different ecosystems are dominated by varying plants and mammals, communities

highlight these aspects of nature in their creative endeavours. Hence crocodiles and hornbills are manifested in many Iban artefacts. The Thais and societies in Myanmar use elephants (white elephants in Thailand) and mythical creatures like the *naga* (water serpent) and *garuda* (man-eagle) in their cultural manifestations. The Javanese are partial to the *beringin* (*Ficus benjamina*) or banyan tree in their creative artefacts.

Aesthetics Beyond the Expression of Primitive Peoples

Academics often assume, wittingly or unwittingly, that aesthetics is a product only of great traditions, high cultures and civilisations. Do primitive societies have a sense of aesthetics? In his travels in Timor Laut, the British naturalist Henry Forbes (1885) was so greatly impressed with the beauty of the native houses that he asked, "Can such artistically developed people be savages?" And the more difficult question for him was "what is a savage?" And more so, were their aesthetic traditions random and unstructured?

The Western definition of the 'savage' peoples in the tropics was best qualified in Bronislaw Malinowski's 1922 study of the Trobiand islanders in the Pacific when he noted that one could not classify such tribal people as savages. For him, many tribal people were organized communities that had their own laws, social system and religious beliefs. For Malinowski (1922), savages represented people without social organisation, boundless liberty and irregularity.

If primitive people did not value beauty, then why were the forest denizens of New Guinea using the feathers of the birds of paradise as a prized commodity for their headdresses? The Europeans for centuries traded the feathers of these birds for their hats because they appreciated the beauty in them (Spyer 2000). The capture of birds in the Aru Islands was both "emotionally and aesthetically satisfying" and created what Patricia Spyer (2000) believed was "the shifting gap between birds and men" that corresponds to "the fetishization of nature." Ironically, the use of feathers by Westerners demonstrated a reverse tradition in which primitive people dressed civilised Westerners.

There is a whole foray of research on creativity and the creative element demonstrating skills beyond basic survival. Paul Torrance, the American psychologist, described creativity as "a process of sensing difficulties, problems, gaps in information, missing elements, something askew; making guesses and formulating hypotheses about these deficiencies, evaluating and testing these guesses and hypotheses; possibly revising and retesting them; and finally communicating the results" (Shaughnessy 1998:442). In some ways, we might view aesthetics as the communication outcome of creativity.

Prehistoric Southeast Asia expressed its aesthetic traditions in pottery, wood, bronze, tattoos, jewellery and textiles. These artefacts narrate a rich tradition of Southeast Asian pre-Indianised cultural creativity. One of the early aesthetic manifestations of pre-Indianised communities is probably the design of tattoos. Given that tattoos were widespread among Pacific Islands (*tatu*) demonstrates that the idea of skin pigmentation was an early cultural diffusion from the region probably more than 4,000 years ago. The tattoo tradition, however, underwent changes in design and themes. They were more geometrical in pattern amongst the Dyaks and Ibans of Borneo but in the Pacific islands they developed into other aesthetic traditions such as those found among the Maoris in New Zealand, with their ornate and cuneiform patterns. There are many themes and designs that are used by people in the region for their body tattoos.

Another early aspect of aesthetic usage was probably the gender distinction between males and females. In the case of the Tanimbarese, the idea of creativity that governs their jewellery making comes from the "union of complementary opposites" (Rodgers 1985:221). It is this very "life giving process" in human creativity and the world that underlies marriage exchange. Hence jewellery is gendered as 'male' and 'female' and can marry one another (Rodgers 1985:221).

The weaving of cloth and clothing in the region, for example, reflects a host of cultural, economic and social traditions demonstrating an underlying organised society. At a basic level, clothing indicates gender, and in some communities, ethnic identity as well. Clothes and accessories serve as status markers and class signifiers which then become family heirlooms. Even today they are often used in gift exchanges. They have become lucrative trading items and have been the basis of wealth accumulation for merchants. Being such an integral part of life, they are used in spiritual offerings and as magical items to ward off evil spirits. Understandably the weaving of cloth is now considered as an art form which implies that skills have to be learnt and developed.

Mattiebelle Gittinger of the Textile Museum in Washington DC in her Foreword to Maxwell's (2003:3) book, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, declares that "Southeast Asia presents one of the richest and most varied textile regions in the world". The prehistoric use of textiles is a product of two important intersecting variables: i) there must be the vegetative raw materials for cloth making and ii) there must be compelling reasons for why indigenous communities need cloth. This implies the practical nature how textiles were derived and their utilitarian purpose.

Textiles in early tribal societies played a multitude of symbolic roles and applications. In Iban societies of Sarawak, the cloth called *pua* has multiple uses (such as door hanging, blanket). *Shamans* use the *pua* for various spiritual purposes: to re-establish cosmic order after a tragic occurrence, to transform the pua into objects of supernatural power, to invoke god's blessing at major celebrations, and to use the *pua* as a means of communicating with spirits (Maxwell 2003:119-127).

Indigenous Culture or Borrowed Traditions?

One of the ongoing debates by archaeologists and historians is whether the region lacked an indigenous culture of its own and its civilisational achievements were a product of borrowed culture (Coēdes 1968). While there is no doubt that Indian and Chinese civilisation did have an impact for centuries on the region's cultural development (Wheatley 2008), one must also accept that the development of civilisation in the region did not arise in a cultural vacuum. There were strong prehistoric traditions in mainland Southeast Asia (e.g. Hoa Binh, Bac Son, Dongson) that indicate the region's '*genius loci*', and its creative and innovative energies (Solheim 2006; 1972; Mus 1975).

Rather than see the monumental Indian cosmic traditions of Angkor, Pagan, Sukhothai, Borobudur and Prambanan as Indian outcomes (Coēdes 1968; Zimmer 1962), one might very well see them also as cultural developments and extensions of the region's strong prehistoric traditions. The historian Horace Quaritch Wales (1974) argues that the pre-Indian "*local genius*" was fused with Indian elements to produce a Burmese-Indian Pagan, a Khmer-Indian Angkor and a Javanese-Indian Borobudur or Prambanan. But more importantly as Ananda Coomaraswamy (1965) argues, East Javanese Hindu monuments were expressions of a "national Javanese culture", based not on an "old Indian tradition," but "Indonesian in essence, idiomatic in expression, and in the truest sense of the word, original".

The stone architecture that characterised the Indianised cosmic cities and civilisations of the region demonstrated a remarkable fusion of Indian and Southeast Asian aesthetic expressions, artistic abilities, cultural sensitivities and creative themes. In Buddhist Borobudur, one sees an exquisite demonstration of Javanese culture in the Kedu plain of Java. As Coomaraswamy (1965) states, Borobudur is a "monument of Sailendra culture, rather than of Buddhist devotion". Borobudur was extolled by the Indian art historian as "a ripe fruit matured in breathless air; the fullness of its forms is an expression of static wealth, rather than the volume that denotes the outward radiation of power".

Southeast Asia's strong prehistoric traditions, as pointed out by Wilhelm Solheim (1979; 1972), were not erased by Indianisation but fused and filtered through their Indian civilisational tradition. The Indian cultural diffusion, however, had distinctly different impacts in the cultural elevation of the region's societies. In the rice bowls of the region, sedentary agricultural communities adopted Indianisation by building monumental cosmic cities and mandala buildings (Angkor Thom, Borobudur, Prambanan). In these agrarian societies, Indian religious and ideological influences were fused with the skills and artistic abilities of native communities. Hence, we do not find comparable buildings such as Borobudur and Angkor Wat in India. Art historians often note that these buildings are unique to the region. It is thus not surprising that Wales (1974:6) observed that the "decorative motifs" of "central Java showed greater originality and freedom from Indian control than was possible to the Srivijayans".

In insular Southeast Asia where Indianisation took root in ports and trading towns, a different South Asian cultural influence was found. In the port-mandala communities of Sri Vijaya, the isthmian kingdoms of Thailand and to some extent the Passisir towns of north Java, Indianisation reflected the different periods of cultural influences (Gupta, Pallava, Chola). Hence many of the artefacts of figurines, deities and other spiritual paraphernalia carried by traders had mainly Indian aesthetic influences.

In such transient port populations, rulers were less able to impose monolithic cultural edicts and traditions because their successful art of governance lay in the democratic and transparent ability to attract peoples from all cultures, traditions and religions for trade and commerce. In the case of the civilisational efflorescence with the Sanskritisation of India, Sheldon Pollock (2006) argues that there was no distinction between India and the region. Sanskritisation had a pan spatial influence both in South Asia and Southeast Asia at the same time.

The Aesthetic Definition of Culture and Tribes

In Southeast Asia, visual arts and artistic expressions are not divorced from the existential life world. Expressions of aesthetics in Southeast Asian society had multiple meanings and uses. Art is not something that is hung on the wall. It is part of life and part of the cosmic expressions. Art and aesthetics are also functional and applied. Hence the arts of Southeast Asia are integrated into houses, tattoos, religious offerings, clothes and dances. Many places in the region, for example, became renowned for their creative wares. Bali is the consummate island of a variety of creative traditions of aesthetic notoriety, ranging from silverware to pottery. Craftsmanship in cottage village industries demonstrate that

the people are creative, innovative and skilled. The artistic creativity of tribal people has produced attractive handwoven textile traditions in Kalimantan, Sumatra, Laos and Myanmar (Roojen 1996; Dupaigne 2004; Maxwell 2003; Purananda 2004), a well-known lacquerware cottage industry in Myanmar and Thailand (Isaacs and Blurton 2000), a renowned silk-weaving tradition in Thailand (Maxwell 2003; Purananda 2004) and a lively bead culture in Borneo (Munan 2005).

An obvious attraction of these items would be the distinctive colours that carry with it significant subtle and overt symbolisms and cultural connotations. In textiles colour symbolisms are still used widely in the region. The colour symbols are used in four different ways.

1) They differentiate ethnic groups or sub-ethnic communities. The Hmong swidden groups, scattered over Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, still use coloured textiles (green and white clothes) to distinguish their tribal identity (Cooper 1984: 2). In Myanmar, there are about 100,000 Lahus and they have divided themselves into two sub-tribes by the colour of their clothing: Black Lahu and Red Lahu (Diran 1999:101-111).

2) They set apart royalty from the common people. Amongst the Malays, northern Thais, and Laotians, yellow is the colour of royalty (Maxwell 2003: 315). Though the regional ideas of royalty might have been derived from India, the idea of yellow relating to royalty came from China. It was during the visit of Zheng He to Melaka in the 15th century that the raja was told by the Chinese eunuch that only in China was the emperor allowed to wear yellow robes.

In China, yellow is the sacred colour of Daoism, a colour of soil. The Chinese emperors prayed to the god of soil in the ceremonial centre from whence they derived their mandate from Heaven. Even amongst Chinese geomancers, yellow was seen as the colour of that fertile wind-blown top-soil loess which they believed was the centre of China's geomantic origins (Yoon 2008).

3) Colours also represent religious symbols. After Islam increasingly diffused in the region, green became the colour of Muslim places of worship. Given that Middle Eastern countries, where Islam originated and developed, are dry, desert environments, green is the colour symbolising fertility, vegetation, an oasis, and food. Hence *keramats* (local spiritual sites) which formerly were painted in yellow are now expressed in both yellow and green.

4) Colour symbolisms have played a role in class distinctions in some ethnic traditions in the region. Women of the rich, upper classes often like to use fabrics with gold thread (Maxwell 2003). Gold is also often associated amongst Hindus and Buddhists as the symbol of god's world in the upper level of the cosmos.

Given the everyday utilitarian and consumer manifestations of food and textiles, aesthetic expressions have never been the preserve of elitists. They are holistic expressions of a human-spiritual relationship. As Thelma Newman (1977) suggests, the aesthetics in Southeast Asia is best summed up in the Buddhist ethos of "*oneness*". In short, art is "part of life and not a separate entity, in the same sense that religion is part of life. It is a way to explain the universe".

While World Religions might transcend ethnic differences, many creative expressions define cultural identity in Southeast Asia. Given the strong agricultural traditions for example, buffalo horns are common motifs in many art forms and house-types (Dumarcay 2003; Kusno 2000; Noobanjong 2013; Waterson 1990). Buffalo horns have diverse symbolisms: fertility and the bountiful earth as seen in the roofs of Lawa and Akha villages in Chiang Rai Province (Thailand), Assam, Batak villages in Sumatra, Buginese villages in Sulawesi and in Mindanao. The roofs of Minangkabau houses are shaped like the horns of a buffalo which in some way signify the Minangkabau as exemplars of a "victorious bull" (Newman 1977:16).

Like textiles, creative bead endeavours are mainly the preserve of women. They demonstrate that women in Borneo are rather skilled and anchor the cottage industries of the tribal communities. The beads of Borneo, based on the colours, designs, motifs and the way they were strung together, provide the identity of the tribal group that made them: Bidayuh beads, Bahau beads, Maloh beads, Lotud beads, Kayan beads, Kenyah beads, Iban beads, Melanau beads, Rungus beads, and Selakau beads (Munan 2005).

The Spiritual Manifestation of Aesthetics

Given the anthropomorphic depictions of the supernatural world, offerings made to the spirits were carried out to aesthetic perfection. As offerings to the gods, deities and ancestors rather than mortal human beings, art and aesthetics had a higher form, symbol and responsibility: "Images were made to be worshipped; objects to be used. Form is the way something is made. Its purpose is its meaning" (Newman 1977:2).

Since the supernatural world is unseen, non-sensual, omnipotent, omnipresent, the translation in human terms of this spiritual presence relies on symbolisms and aesthetic depictions. The aesthetic measure in the region is based on the degree of invigorating and exciting the human senses (seeing, hearing, touch, taste, smell). Seeing (vision) is the most powerful means of appraising an aesthetic tradition. Through sight, people see the shapes, forms, colours, movements, ornateness, simplicity, energy, liveliness, and composition of their aesthetic appreciation in dances, sculptures, masks, paintings, bas reliefs, textiles, and architectural edifices.

The sense of hearing, however, is stimulated by the type of instruments and composition of sounds. Besides music derived from flutes and various kinds of string instruments, the most pervasive audible sounds come from drums. Like other cultural artefacts, drums had multiple functions. The oldest of the drumming tradition is probably the bronze Dongson drums which were important trading items that carried much prestige and value. There are many theories about the application of the Dongson drums but given their antiquity, there are only educated guesses and speculations about their origin.

One such view is related to the Hung Kings' culture which used Dongson drums not only as musical instruments but also weapons and sacred items. "Designs on the surface and body of the drums represent the people's respect for the Sun, and their wishes for peace, favourable weather, and abundant crops. People displayed their communal strength by beating the drums on the battlefield to encourage their soldiers," said Nguyen Thi Nhan, a curator at the Hung Kings' Museum (Solheim 1988). The Dongson drums are characterized by spirals, curvilinear figures, trees of life and ships for dead souls. The themes are metrical, repeated rhythmically (Newman 1977:9). Not only did drums move across land and sea but in Sumba, their influence is still found in Sumba textiles.

The tribal and agrarian societies in Southeast Asia do not see religion as a dichotomy between good and evil in which the good conquers evil. In the region, good and evil spirits are accepted on equal terms similar to the Chinese concept of *yin* and *yang*. One of the common spiritual concerns is managing malevolent and evil spirits. Hence evil spirits are pacified and given offerings to ensure no harm befalls households. Two overt manifestations of managing evil spirits are in tattooing and textiles.

Tattooing in mainland Southeast Asia is seen as a way of warding off evil spirits which is common amongst the hill tribes (Terwiel 2012). The tattoo is thus seen as a form of body armour, capable of defending the tattooed person from evil spirits entering his body. In some cases, it is also seen as a defence against one's enemies.

Similarly, clothing and cloth were powerful expressions of spiritual power. The cloth weaving tradition seems to be influenced by both the Indian cloth tradition and the Chinese silk weaving tradition. Stanley O'Connor has typified the region in mandala times (Indian cosmic cities) as "cloth cultures" (Wolters 1999:127). Textiles amongst tribal people have very strong spiritual motifs and symbols that play different roles in the communication with spirits. In some cases, they are meant to ward off evil spirits and in other cases, they provide a door to communicating with the spiritual world.

In fact, a wide variety of artefacts in Borneo, for example, are employed in communicating with supernatural spirits. *Shamans*, medicine men and healers use imported materials for beads to communicate with ancestors, spirits, deities and underworld entities (Munan 2005). In their natural state, purely imported raw materials (glass, carnelian, onyx, semi-precious stone beads) do not carry spiritual prowess. However, once women made bead necklaces, bags, hand bracelets, earrings, baby carriers, belts, garments and other artefacts from imported materials, these manufactured items were imbued with supernatural powers (Munan 2005).

The Aesthetic Simulation of Tropical Nature

The relationship to tropical nature and landscape was one of the most dominant themes in cultural expressions. Whether in Dongson bronze drums, textile patterns, pottery designs, straw mats, house-type decorations, wooden carvings or bas relief on various monuments, there is a clear recognition that societies and communities in the region engaged with the environments around them (McNeely and Wachtel 1988). Tropical nature in pre-Indianised Southeast Asian communities came from the immediate ecosystems that tribal communities lived in. They found inspiration in the cosmos that they conceived and the immediate environment that they lived in. In various artefacts, tribal communities mirrored nature around them from abstract symbols to realistic representations.

The Cosmos in Aesthetic Representations

Representations of the cosmos in urban planning, architecture, house-types, body representations, spiritual and magical manifestations and in social and cultural systems were the prevalent themes in Southeast Asia. It is debatable whether the idea of a three-tier cosmos (upper heaven, lower demonic and middle human environment) predated Indianised influence. There is sufficient evidence to show that the prehistory of the region had some conceptions of the cosmos. And these conceptions were represented by symbols of the upper (birds, stars, sun, sky) and lower (dragons, demons) worlds.

With the Indianisation of the region, conceptions of the cosmos took on religious significance especially for devotees of Hinduism and Buddhism. Both religions adhered to a sacred geography with Mount Meru in the centre of the universe (Dumarcay 2003; Eliade 1959). This sacred geography and cosmic conceptions were manifested in many artistic and creative expressions: dance, architecture, paintings, theatre and urban design (O'Connor 1983; Heine-Geldern 1942). The first conceptions of cosmic influence were found in the Indianised cities of the region and continue in the modern cities of Bangkok, Jakarta and Yangon (Nas 1992).

The cosmic influence was not any represented and static display but became a dynamic influence in the Indianised cosmic court culture. With the *devaraja* (god-king) as the greatest patron of the arts, the flowering of the arts, dance, music, bas reliefs and architectural forms and styles developed within stable social and political *kraton* systems (Robson 2003). Each *devaraja* wanted to stamp his own civilising identity and so buildings were erected with new architectural forms encouraged. The *kraton* or court culture was essentially the centre of a thriving cottage industry (blacksmiths, weapon manufacture, textile weaving) (Pigeaud 2003a; 2003b; Robson 2003). The most creative people in the kingdom were thus centred around the court and hence a style of indigenous creative expression was reinforced.

Indigenous Nature and Mythical Nature

The earliest prehistoric aesthetic displays were developed among the many tribal societies in the region. Localised nature was symbolised in many artistic creations especially in sculpture, textiles, mats, jewellery and tattoos. This early prehistoric aesthetic manifestation is best seen among the Melanesian societies in New Guinea and Melanesia (Meyer 1995, vols 1 and 2). Inspired by their complex ecological environments, the diverse tribal groups show their creative and artistic skills in the manufacture of utensils, spiritual totems and bodily adornments. Volcanic lava, basalt, obsidian and jade were natural materials used for tools and ritual and ceremonial carvings (Meyer 1995, vol.1:10).

The development of early aesthetic manifestations has given us clues to the diffusion of people across the Pacific Ocean as there were similar aesthetic manifestations between those of New Guinea and the islands of Melanesia and Polynesia. We find artefacts on mainland Southeast Asia and also in the island world which were probably products of trade (Meyer 1995, Vol.1:14). An abundance of evidence on these Pacific Islands demonstrates that prehistoric Southeast Asians had a strong aesthetic tradition before the diffusion of Indian and Chinese culture (Meyer 1995, vols 1 and 2). The oceanic voyagers

around 4,500 B.P. created their own identity through pottery-making which prehistorians call Lapita (Bellwood 1979). Evidence of this pottery tradition was found on the site of the Lapita beach near Kone in west New Caledonia.

Over the centuries, we see a repetition of many designs coming from landscape features (mountains, rivers) plants, fruits, leaves and flowers, and the diversity of birds, amphibians, snakes, mammals, marine life and insects of the varied tropical ecosystems as well as mythical creatures (Pedersen 1995; Boomgard 1995). The relationship between nature and creative expressions was manifested in four areas.

First, the cultural artefacts be it cloth, pottery, glass or jewellery had to have a natural resource base. Mats, textiles, wooden carvings, leather products, pottery, house-types, and utensils (Waterson 1990) drew on natural resources such as timber, leaves, fruits, leather, bones, marble, teak, insects, fishes, shells.

Second, foreign cultural influences were modified to suit local customs, traditions and spiritual beliefs. Great traditions (Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern and European) and World Religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity) morphed with local cultures to create the region's aesthetic traditions. Court dances, shadow plays and pantomimes based originally on Hindu and Buddhist epic stories were modified to include local heroes, ancestors and legendary figures (Geertz 1980; Sweeney 1972). From the Indian cultural and religious influences came notions of the sacred mountain (Mount Meru), water (oceans), the monkey (Hanuman), lotus, *naga* and *garuda*. From China, the region developed an interest in the mystical symbolic diagrams or *yantra*. The earliest known *yantra* is the Pa Kua or Eight Trigrams created by the Chinese Emperor Fu Hsi (Fu Xi) around 2852 BCE (Conway 2004:114). The Eight Trigrams was used as a means of channelling positive power in nature and protecting one from negative power. The yantra is a common tattoo amongst Thais, Burmese, Laotians and Cambodians.

Third, the development of certain cultural and material artefacts was done as adaptations to the environment. The widespread use of cloth as blankets must have been responses to cold and chilly nights even in the equatorial jungles (Maxwell 2003). Similarly, textiles and clothing were used in response to windy weather experiences in mountain areas, at night and during the rainy season (Maxwell 2003; Purananda 2004).

And fourth, the variety of tropical nature and local ecology served as a constant source of aesthetic inspiration, motifs, designs and symbols in various material artefacts ranging from pottery to jewellery, and from cloth to bronze products. Prior to Indianisation, the inspiration for aesthetics in the region came principally from the region's natural ecosystem. Animals (tigers, elephants), insects (lizards), reptiles (snakes), amphibians (toads), birds (hornbills, eagles), mythical animals (dragons) and vegetation (Tree of Life; Cosmic Tree) were spiritual symbols in many creative products.

The native manifestations of physical geography were not only found in cultural artefacts but also in the consumption of food. In Java, public feasts and family meals have deep religious significance and symbolisms. In 1932, processions of rice are carried into the a*lun alun* (square), in front of the sultan of Jogjakarta, and the many royal and administrative dignitaries in celebration of Garebeg Mulud Dal (communal feast in remembrance of Prophet Muhammad) (Tirtakoesoema 2003:107-129). In the region, ancestors, gods, and spirits were usually depicted in anthropomorphic form (Cooramaswamy 1965). Hence offerings of food, drink and other material goods are offered to them for their consumption.

The most significant aspect of this food parade were the "smoking rice-mountains" (*gunungan kutug*). The rice-mountains are cone-shaped and in the centre, an incense container is placed on top of the cone, making the rice mountain resemble a smoking volcano (Tirtakoesoema 2003:119). The mountain symbolism evokes once again the power of the sultan, and draws links to former animistic beliefs and Hindu-Buddhist sacred geography (Mount Meru).

Prehistoric communities without antecedent cultural influences used their ecosystems as a source of inspiration and creativity in their various artefacts and house-types. In some ways, the environment and supernatural beliefs transcended ethnic differences. Despite the plethora of tribal groups, many supernatural motifs and designs were often represented by various aspects of nature that were found in the immediate ecology of tribal living. For example, the figures in the handwoven silk textiles of black Khmers and Chams have motifs of animals, crabs, birds, dragons, the Tree of Life, white elephants, snakes and *nagas* (Audric 1972; Ringis 1996). In west Kalimantan, Maloh women use stylised human water serpents (*naga*) on their jackets and skirts. Amongst the Kodi of west Sumba (Indonesia), python patterns are found on male clothes in the marriage gift exchanges (Maxwell 2003; Conway 2004). Reptiles are featured in Kodi legend as ancestral deities and the afterlife because the pythons' ability to change its skin is "a powerful analogy for rebirth" according to Robyn Maxwell (2003).

Indianisation

Indianisation which essentially involved Indian culture and World Religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) had a profound impact on the cultural heritage in Southeast Asia over 14 centuries. So much had been written about this South Asian diffusion and its pervasive influence in the region that it often overwhelms the native traditions and societal norms. As the French historian, George Coedès underscores, in *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, the profound impact of Indianisation in the culture, societies and traditions of the region. Paul Wheatley (2008; 1971), the historical geographer, believed that Indianisation was an important catalyst in the change from culture to civilisation, from *kampong* to city and from village chief to god-king (*devaraja*).

In Southeast Asia, the artistic standards for dance and theatre, for example, were highly maintained for the following reasons. First, the well-developed choreographies and religious stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were 'Indian imports'. Second, given that the patrons of the arts were the royal courts and *kratons*, the performers were full-time artistes who had rigorous practice to perfect their performances. Finally, nearly all performances were offerings to deities and gods, and hence the highest standards were expected. Court dances and theatrical performances were used as another form of communication and expression of gratitude to deities, ancestors and heavenly spirits.

There is no doubt that the Indianised court cultures in Pagan, Pegu, Mandalay, Angkor Thom, Luang Prabang, Sukhothai, Ayutthia, Majapahit and Bali have all played a role in institutionalising Indian aesthetic traditions in dance, music, art, sculpture, bas reliefs and architecture. Furthermore, to show that their court was a heavenly domain, many *devarajas* also surrounded themselves with celestial nymphs, who were also involved in dancing. We might see in Angkorian ruins (Bayon, Bantei Srei, Angkor Wat) numerous sculptures of celestial nymphs adorning the many sacred temples and monuments. Thus following the Indian palace tradition of a concert hall or theatre (*samgita-sala* or *natya-mandapa*) (Coomaraswamy 1965:84) such dances could be performed for royalty in the region (Mandalay, Bangkok, Phnom Penh, Jogjakarta, and Surakarta) that had similar halls.

The philosophical expressions of Hinduism and Buddhism were also reflected in the court music of the region. Hence Balinese music is viewed as never-ending cycles of circular music which expresses the Hindu idea of *karma* and the transmigration of the soul, which refers to the cyclical series of births, deaths and rebirths. In "Dance in Bali", Colin McPhee (1949:196) sums up best the significance of Balinese music when he states:

> In this continually recurrent music, with no conclusive ending, no true beginning, the oriental conception of timeless, endless melody is revealed, revolving in smaller or larger cycles but never advancing to a climax.

Cosmic kingdoms across various areas in the region thus provided a cultural commonality that hitherto was marked by diversity. While one cannot deny the impact of the Indianised Great Tradition in the region as advocated by classical historians, revisionist historians have been cautious in overplaying the Indian influence in Southeast Asian culture.

Most of the classical palaces in the region provided a "picture gallery" (*citra-sala*) where there was a hall with frescoes (Coomaraswamy 1965:84). While paintings in temples and palaces in Pagan, Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, Bali, Angkor, Phnom Penh and Bangkok demonstrate that such art traditions were in place, they were not widespread and well developed. The best examples of these wall paintings are found in Klungkung Royal Palace in Bali, the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh (*Preah Barom Reacheaveang Chaktomuk Serei Mongkol*) and the Grand Palace in Bangkok. One explanation could be that the humid tropical climate was a major disadvantage for the preservation of paintings. Invariably the most consistent theme of all the wall paintings have been based on religion (Buddha, Indian gods and deities) and the epic stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and in the case of Java, the Panji (Buddhist) tales. Given that local artists and artisans had no prior knowledge of what Indian deities, gods and demons look like, much of the paintings and sculptures reflected to some extent personal interpretations and the skills of the artists.

Reflections

Southeast Asian aesthetics reflects personal creativity, cultural identity and a style of civilisation. Hunting and gathering and swidden societies with their propensity for mobility were less able to invest in a tradition of creative expression. By and large, artefacts were products of individual creative expressions. Swidden societies, however, use aesthetics as a form of tribal identity especially in clothing, tattooing and women's personal adornments.

Sedentary communities with their interest in accumulated riches, valued gold and precious stones, jewellery formed the major public display of wealth, status and tribal identity. Prehistoric exchanges through trade, barter trading, bride price and diplomatic exchanges provided a diffusion of aesthetic patterns, motifs and designs across a wider spatial area. Compared to other cultural regions, Southeast Asian societies have demonstrated artistic

abilities, creativity and personal talent. Given the region's heterogeneity of ethnic groups and linguistic diversity, prehistoric Southeast Asia did not have a monolithic aesthetic tradition. At various periods of prehistory and in different geographical locations, regional creativity and innovation surface. This effervescence of artistic and creative energy provided the scaffoldings for the flowering of Indianisation and its cosmic cities. There were strong traditions like the Dongson bronze heritage which emanated from Vietnam and spread across the region but it was not an aesthetic tradition that had other creative centres. Similarly, the Ban Chiang pottery tradition had a unique design based on red colour which defined the sedentary tradition in northeast Thailand. Different societies also had strong wooden traditions, such as the Minangkabaus, Bataks, Balinese, Javanese, Ibans, Thais and Ifugaos, that characterised their tribal and cultural creativity.

The most pervasive cultural catalyst for the region came with 14 centuries of Indianised diffusion where aesthetics was institutionalised in the region. This South Asian culture provided both the artistic and architectural techniques and the themes for bas reliefs, architecture, and urban planning. The tales of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* formed the sediment for much of court or *kraton* culture especially in dance and theatre. They were also the stories that were diffused to the masses through the *wayang kulit*. With Indianisation, there were sub-cultural regions that developed artistic and aesthetic traditions that covered large geographical areas which do not follow the current state boundaries of the region. The Angkorian tradition covered Cambodia, Vietnam and east Thailand (Groslier and Arthaud 1966) while the Lanna tradition is found in northern Thailand, Laos and eastern Myanmar (Freeman 2001).

With cultural exchanges, trade, external religious impacts, and foreign cultural diffusion, the motifs and designs expanded to include external influences; the dilution of designs, motifs and patterns became a means of tracing complex spatial diffusion and trading patterns. Tribal women who perfected their artistic skills and aesthetic abilities, brought fame to their tribe and village and set a regional demand for textiles, clothing and bead-making. This economic demand for manufactured cottage products (such as pottery, textiles) made by women, elevated their role, and their status in the community.

Throughout the region, there is a gender distinction in the cottage industry. Females are in textile weaving, males are in jewellery making, while beads are done by both males and females. Metal wares (e.g. weapons, utensils) are male preserves.

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