

THE NARRATIVE OF ASEAN IDENTITY

BACKGROUND

ASEAN has gained significant achievements since it was founded on 8 August 1967. ASEAN has established, secured and maintained peace and security in the region. ASEAN continues its work in enhancing the health, wellbeing and welfare of its peoples.

ASEAN has progressed in achieving regional integration. With the ASEAN Charter as its foundation, ASEAN is supported by three strong pillars of political and security, economy and socio-cultural communities. ASEAN has striven to build a community that is united; inclusive; resilient; sustainable; highly integrated and cohesive; competitive, innovative and dynamic; with enhanced connectivity and sectoral cooperation; and integrated with the global economy; engages and benefits all its peoples of ASEAN by 2025. ASEAN remains strongly committed to realizing a rules-based, people-oriented, people-centered ASEAN of “One Vision, One Identity, One Community”.

Given its strategic location of being situated between two continents, two ocean and major sea lanes in world trade as well as ASEAN’s growing importance to regional and global trade, Southeast Asia has transformed itself into the economic epicenter of the region.

ASEAN Community

In 2005, all ASEAN Member States affirmed their commitment to ASEAN by concurring with the ASEAN motto: “One Vision. One Identity. One Community”.

The term “One Vision” is enshrined in the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and its succeeding visions. It is a *top-down* approach determined by ASEAN leaders through extensive consultations with people in the region, an explicit push factor which implicitly contains visions, goals and targets that the ASEAN Community seeks to achieve by 2025.

The term “One Community” refers to the ASEAN Community which was formally launched in 2015 consisting of three pillars: the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

Cambridge dictionary (2020) defines community as people living in particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality.

In order to strengthen and seal the bond among ASEAN peoples, ASEAN needs to strengthen its Community. There is an urgent necessity to find common ground between national and regional interests. In a Community, the mindset of common beliefs and common goals are embedded in the soul of the ASEAN people. In order to achieve this, ASEAN will have to develop through a more inclusive and participatory process involving grass root societies. Only then, will the ASEAN Community achieve an optimal equilibrium to progress together.

ASEAN Identity shall strengthen the ASEAN Community. ASEAN Identity will enhance common values with a higher degree of *we-feeling* and sense of belonging and sharing in all the benefits of regional integration.

PURPOSE

This narrative shall serve as the basis for ASEAN Identity, a terminology familiar to ASEAN members, as it is mentioned and reflected in various outcome documents of ASEAN and ASEAN project activities. This narrative reminds ASEAN Member States of who we are, where

we come from, and where we are heading, both as an organization as well as a community. This narrative may also become a reference to enrich discourses and intellectual exercises which will further manifest in the community. And most importantly, it is a *down-to-earth* narrative where its implementation process will embrace all ASEAN citizens especially those at the grass root levels in ways to would better enable them make ASEAN more relevant in their lives, as well as allow them to reap the benefits of being part of the ASEAN Community.

THE ASEAN IDENTITY

What is ASEAN Identity?

ASEAN Identity is a process of social construct defined by balanced combination of “Constructed Values” and “Inherited Values” that will strengthen the ASEAN Community.

Constructed Values

Constructed values are defined as values that of a group of people or nations who associate themselves with, as a product of active and deliberate intentions in order to develop an allegiance with certain mindsets to achieve a specific objective of a community.

ASEAN's values converged and developed during the post-colonial era. During this period, the acculturation process was nourished by new values and ideas, against the backdrop of a new level of security, individual freedom and social welfare, as well as a new concept of growth, equality and competition. These planted the embryo of the mindset formation and the way of thinking which later developed and became part of the modern ASEAN people.

The ASEAN Identity was cognizant with the establishment of ASEAN in 1967. In the midst of the Cold War, and through the Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN envisioned to achieve economic growth, social progress and cultural development which would contribute to the establishment of regional peace, security and stability, by focusing on the aspect of cooperation among the ASEAN Member States.

ASEAN has undergone through many transformations and achieved numerous milestones through three stages of constructed values. The first stage of the constructed values is the shared political values that encompass most of the five founding countries of ASEAN stood for. After ASEAN has sustained its political objectives, it understood the importance of increasing the economic welfare of the ASEAN people. Accordingly, ASEAN progressed to the second stage of constructed values, which is the shared economic and trade benefits. After 36 years of practicing the above shared values, ASEAN committed to entering the third stage as reflected in Bali Concord II in 2003 to increase its allegiance by strengthening ASEAN based on the three pillars. When the ASEAN Community was formally established in 2015, aspiring to become a People-Centred and People-Oriented Community, it entered the third stage of constructed values, focusing on the social and cultural values. These transformations were formed from the ASEAN Member States' inward and outward looking as part of the dynamic global community.

The constructed values of ASEAN Identity are reflected in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter, regarding Principles, namely: respect, peace and security, prosperity, non-interference, consultation/dialogue, adherence to international law and rules of trade, democracy, freedom, promotion and protection of human rights, unity in diversity, inclusivity, ASEAN Centrality in conducting external relations. These principles are considered to be shared and common values. The ASEAN members agreed to uphold these principles which are identified as the ASEAN Way.

These constructed values seek to portray ASEAN as a distinct entity in a Global Community of Nations that adheres to international norms and international law; a community where every ASEAN citizen should associate themselves with the ASEAN Community and appreciate being part of the ASEAN Community that is recognized internationally.

Inherited Values

Inherited Values are defined as values that the people of Southeast Asia region ascribe to, which have been passed on for generations, through the natural process of human interaction that develops into various type of communities with much similarities.

The values shared by ASEAN member states have existed in Southeast Asian countries long before the establishment of ASEAN. All characteristics, values and shared values as well as rich traditions in Southeast Asian is part of our future vision and culture, as we progress in strengthening the ASEAN Community. A continuing process of acculturation will further enrich and strengthen the ASEAN Community.

The traditions, customs and beliefs since the pre-historic era laid the foundation of the process of an ethnic community blending in Southeast Asia. Some of the local ethnics stayed in certain areas, and some migrated for survival. Those who migrated created a chain of interaction between ethnic groups. As a result, the process of acculturation of ethnics and cultures has continued throughout history. The introduction to the techniques and tradition of music, writing, dancing, sailing, trading, farming, rituals, ceremonies, culinary, healing practices and local traditions such as puppetry provided the opportunity to preserve these cultures. This process of interaction and acculturation continued to take place during the era of Ancient Kingdoms in Southeast Asia through alliances, marriages, barter, quests, migration, new territorial conquest, among others.

From the era of ancient kingdoms (ca 2 AD) until the age of discovery (ca 15 AD), missionaries and trading activities, especially from overseas merchants, triggered human interaction and social constructions. During that time, the Southeast Asian region was believed to be-receptive to foreign cultures, such as those from China, India, the Middle East and Europe. For a certain period of time, Southeast Asia was a periphery in which its cultures were formed and originated from all various traditions, customs, beliefs and religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

After centuries of being at the periphery, the process of acculturation is inevitably-forming new varieties of cultures and civilizations throughout Southeast Asian countries.

This acculturation later on facilitated the evolution of a pluralistic community in Southeast Asia that is not only adaptable and resilient but also appreciates and respects diversity. This acculturation enabled values such as spiritualism, kinship, communitarian/communalism, collectivism, tolerance, humility, social harmony, solidarity, humanity, among others.

Towards an ASEAN Community

From the myriad of unique culture to exquisite culinary delights, from shared history to acquiring DNA similarity, from intensive social cultural interactions to shared traditions, these are few examples of how Southeast Asian countries are so diverse and yet shared myriad of heritages, and are connected, united as one, in ASEAN.

The ASEAN community building process is a journey. The ASEAN Identity which embarked from a historical standpoint ought to be sustainable and flexible; open to selection, adopt and adapt; while being relevant in nature to ASEAN's context.

ASEAN Identity should transcend beyond geographic proximity. The ASEAN Identity is the path to a common dream of an ASEAN Community, which is encapsulated in the smart and balanced combination of all shared values, ambition and vision.

The ASEAN Identity shall strengthen and seal the bond of ASEAN people by strengthening the ASEAN Community.

ASEAN Community is an imagined community. It is defined as the ultimate goal of ASEAN Community building process; a community that is bound by the values that drive the people of ASEAN to achieve advanced citizenship and enlightenment; a community that has a regional perspective, which manages to have a balance between national and regional interests.

In an ASEAN Community, the peoples of ASEAN would have a deeper understanding of the ASEAN Identity in their hearts and minds. At such level of embracing and understanding the ASEAN Identity, individuals across all ASEAN Member States can better identify themselves as part of “ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities for All”, regardless of territorial borders and benign differences, without having to physically meet and interact with one another, aiming at regional stability and prosperity, while protecting human rights and respecting national sovereignty of each and every ASEAN Member States.

In order to be sustainable, ASEAN needs to maintain its relevance, both within ASEAN itself, and among the Global Community of Nations. People need to see and feel the benefit of ASEAN. As such, ASEAN needs to strengthen its identity by increasing ASEAN awareness and solidarity among its peoples including through the use of digital information while focusing on the appreciation of shared and common denominators, such as history, folklores, culture, tradition, food, among others.

The ASEAN Identity shall serve as catalyst to the blend of national and regional interests through economic process which in turn will strengthen overall ASEAN economic capacity which contribute to the achievement of ASEAN Community objectives, such as ASEAN commitment to reduce poverty and improve quality of life.

At the same time, diversity should be embraced and nourished as one of the unique characteristics of ASEAN, a strong investment that promotes unity in the region. The ASEAN Identity recognizes that the ASEAN people including the vulnerable, are born free and equal in dignity and rights. The ASEAN Identity becomes more important because the future of ASEAN lies in the hands of the younger generation, currently one third of the ASEAN population. It is critical to nurture the ASEAN Identity by maximizing the opportunities provided by information and technological advancement as well as social media.

The ASEAN Identity will be promoted by ensuring the integration of ASEAN and its people’s daily lives, by empowering epistemic communities and grass root society in the ASEAN development process, increasing people to people contacts, and emphasize in providing of ASEAN-related symbols and ideals in the community, among others.

The ASEAN Identity shall ensure the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration, public-private sector partnership, solidarity, community empowerment, as well as people’s safety and wellbeing. The ASEAN Identity shall increase communication and interaction between countries in our region and ultimately accepting new changes and adopt experiences in respond to challenges and threats to form a more sustainable and resilient ASEAN Community.

The parameters to measure the success of ASEAN identity are threefold:

1. **ASEAN Awareness:** the percentage of ASEAN peoples that can associate themselves being part of ASEAN;
2. **ASEAN Relevance:** the understanding of how people should benefit from ASEAN;
3. **ASEAN Appreciation:** the degree of appreciation of the people to be part of ASEAN and the acknowledgments of external parties of the unity and centrality of ASEAN Community.